UNIVERSIDADE DE LISBOA
Faculdade de Letras

Queering the Body of Desire: The Male Form and Homoeroticism in New Queer Cinema and the New Queer Cinema Renaissance

David Klein Martins

Orientador: Prof. Doutor José Duarte

Tese especialmente elaborada para a obtenção do grau de Doutor no ramo de Estudos Artísticos e na especialidade de Estudos do Cinema e Audiovisual

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Resumo

Apesar das suas origens relativamente recentes, a teoria queer é hoje em dia vista como uma disciplina académica em crescimento, principalmente graças ao seu diálogo inovador com outros campos de estudo. No entanto, no meio académico português esta é ainda invisível, em especial dada a sua relevância teórica e social. E mesmo a nível internacional, as pesquisas realizadas sobre identidades queer em estudos de cinema permanecem relativamente escassas. Embora os trabalhos inovadores de críticos como Vito Russo, Alexander Doty, Harry Benshoff e Sean Griffin, ou Kylo-Patrick Hart tenham sido profundamente influentes em apontar questões queer no cinema, e apesar do crescimento verificado nestes discursos, estes são ainda insuficientes.

Além disso, embora abordadas pelos estudiosos mencionados, as análises teóricas e críticas em relação a sexualidades e corpos queer no cinema americano também são recentes no meio académico. Contribuições de estudiosos como Linda Williams, Douglas Keesey, Nick Davis, Rodrigo Gerace ou Maria San Filippo abriram o debate sobre as representações da sexualidade no cinema, mas muitos desses estudos limitam-se a uma pequena seleção de leituras específicas ou surgem como uma visão geral da sexualidade ao longo da história do cinema sem haver necessariamente um foco queer. A maioria dos estudiosos também não considerou uma nova ascensão digital do cinema independente queer americano, que vem crescendo desde o final dos anos 2000, e que requer agora um olhar mais detalhado. Infundida com uma nova vitalidade, a área de estudos de filmes queer fornece novos terrenos para pesquisas cujo limite ainda é desconhecido.

Este projeto de doutoramento, intitulado "Queering the Body of Desire: The Male Form and Homoeroticism in New Queer Cinema and the New Queer Cinema Renaissance", visa seguir esse raciocínio explorando as representações do corpo masculino sexualizado e do desejo homoerótico no cinema independente americano entre 1986-2016. Reconhecendo a ausência de retratos de intimidade queer e a contínua deturpação do mesmo no cinema americano mainstream durante a maior parte do século XX, este estudo pretende explorar o modo como a sexualidade masculina gay se empoderou face a uma discriminação contínua.

Tendo em mente que retratos queer vanguardistas diminuíram no fim do milénio, o projeto desenvolverá especificamente uma abordagem comparativa entre o New Queer Cinema (NQC), um movimento subversivo na história do cinema queer que ganhou força no final dos anos 80/ início dos anos 90, e uma nova onda de filmes independentes queer transgressivos, o New Queer Cinema Renaissance (NQCR), que surgiu no final dos anos 2000/ início dos anos

2010, enfatizando como os domínios entrelaçados da estética, do sociocultural e da política se manifestam nos corpos masculinos e no desejo queer e evoluíram ao longo de um período de 30 anos.

A escolha do título "Queering the Body of Desire" tem por princípio duas perspetivas fundamentais: por um lado, o título faz uma clara alusão à discussão de retratos cinematográficos preocupados com sexualidades, desejos e corporeidades queer que serão essenciais neste projeto. Por outro, o título também fala sobre o silenciamento contínuo das expressões sexuais queer no cânone cinematográfico mais amplo ou corpus (*body* em inglês) fílmico que lida com o desejo. Afinal, e como mencionado, o meio cinematográfico heteronormativo ignorou repetidamente reflexões necessárias sobre identidades sexuais e de género não conformes durante a maior parte do século XX. Ainda hoje, em tempos de maior diversidade no cenário sociopolítico e cinematográfico americano, a intimidade e o sexo queer continuam a ser assuntos tabu nas grandes produções cinematográficas, provando que o afeto entre indivíduos LGBTQIA+ é ainda muito disruptivo para ser retratado em tela.

No entanto, se mudarmos o nosso foco para o cinema underground e independente, descobrimos que esses filmes ofereceram maneiras mais subversivas de lidar com a sexualidade desde o seu início, servindo como pioneiros de uma voz e estética queer cinematográficas únicas. Por isso mesmo, torna-se relevante que este projeto reflita sobre queerness no contexto do cinema independente americano, centrando-se em questões de visibilidade queer, bem como representações do olhar desejante, performatividade de género e corporalidade, que estão, por sua vez, todas ligadas ao ato de olhar, a base de toda a visualização de filmes. Ao considerar uma ampla variedade de filmes queer subversivos, pretende-se entender particularmente como a sexualidade queer masculina foi capaz de se reconstituir diante do ressurgimento persistente da discriminação homofóbica que atingiu o auge na década de 1980 com o surgimento da crise da SIDA, que resultou na patologização e discriminização imediata da comunidade gay masculina. Ao longo deste projeto, são destacadas também as várias tentativas de desconstruir a ênfase persistente em retratar o homoerotismo masculino como insalubre e mortal no contexto da SIDA, além de explorar como novas ondas de cineastas foram capazes de oferecer representações abrangentes das realidades sexuais masculinas e o físico masculino sexualizado.

O vasto campo dos estudos de sexo e género obrigaram a uma escolha consciente de uma exclusiva atenção do corpo e das experiências masculinas: reconhecer que a sexualidade masculina e feminina (e outras facetas fluidas da sexualidade) representam diferentes paradigmas que foram tratados de formas muito distintas no cinema é fundamental para permitir uma análise mais profunda das representações do homoerotismo no cinema. Enquanto os corpos

femininos geralmente são explorados no meio fílmico para agradar o olhar masculino (como analisado, por exemplo, no ensaio "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" de Mulvey), os discursos cinematográficos normativos geralmente desconsideram uma exploração mais profunda do físico masculino e o reconhecimento de uma projeção de experiências sexuais masculinas.

Ao restringir o vasto conceito de queerness ao estudo mais especificamente detalhado das masculinidades queer, este projeto pretende olhar para a desconstrução dessas tradições e, simultaneamente, contribuir para uma subárea inovadora dos estudos de género, o crescente campo dos estudos de masculinidade. Com isso em mente, não é intuito deste projeto reforçar a separação essencialista entre géneros, sexos ou orientações sexuais. Esta escolha foi feita por razões de pura precisão metodológica. Além disso, como os muitos exemplos teóricos e cinematográficos encontrados ao longo deste estudo irão revelar, os discursos sobre sexualidades masculinas, femininas e não-binárias nunca podem ser totalmente separados uns dos outros.

Considerando que o cinema independente queer se tornou de forte interesse comercial e, portanto, sujeito por vezes a limitações comercializáveis, é fundamental reconhecer não apenas diretores independentes famosos, mas também cineastas vanguardistas. Apesar de alguns dos primeiros filmes queer underground e de vanguarda pioneiros, de *Fireworks* (Kenneth Anger, 1948) a *My Hustler* (Andy Warhol, 1965), serem considerados brevemente nesta discussão, o principal foco de análise assenta em quatro exemplos de longas-metragens que representam questões específicas relacionadas à sexualidade, e que simultaneamente também definem profundamente cada onda cinematográfica. Ao escolher esses filmes, também houve o cuidado de que estes fossem simbólicos dos momentos iniciais de cada movimento (*Mala Noche* [1986] de Gus Van Sant e *Shortbus* [2006] de John Cameron Mitchell) e outros dois que representassem os movimentos já no auge da sua influência (*The Living End* de Gregg Araki [1992] e *Spa Night* de Andrew Ahn [2016]).

Por fim, este projeto visa representar a investigação europeia de uma forma inclusiva e inovadora. Embora fundamentado nos Estudos Americanos, este estudo constituirá uma abordagem interdisciplinar que atravessa fronteiras ao reconhecer a profunda inter-relação entre o cinema americano e o europeu. Reconhecendo as questões LGBTQIA+ como características definidoras da vida do século XXI, este projeto irá ainda envolver-se numa investigação fundamentada sobre os desafios da sociedade contemporânea, ao mesmo tempo que reduz a exclusão social de identidades marginalizadas no panorama académico português.

Palavras-chave: homoerotismo; o corpo masculino; New Queer Cinema; New Queer Cinema Renaissance; SIDA.

Abstract

This study aims at analyzing the various representations of the sexualized male body and homoerotic desire in American independent film from 1986-2016. Acknowledging the absence of portrayals of queer intimacy and the continuous misrepresentation thereof in American mainstream film throughout most of the 20th century, this project will address the ways in which gay male sexuality has gained agency in the face of continual discrimination. Bearing in mind that radical queer portrayals decreased towards the turn of the millennium, I will specifically engage in a comparative approach between New Queer Cinema, a subversive movement in queer film history that gained momentum in the late 1980s, and a new wave of transgressive queer independent films, the New Queer Cinema Renaissance, that emerged in the early 2010s, emphasizing how the intertwined realms of the aesthetic, sociocultural, and political play out across male bodies and queer desire and have evolved over a time span of 30 years.

By considering a wide variety of subversive queer films, I aim to understand how male queer sexuality became empowered in the face of persistently resurging homophobic discrimination that gained its peak in the 1980s with the emergence of AIDS and the immediate scapegoating and pathologizing of the gay male community. This study will thus document the fight against a lack of visibility concerning the male queer body and sexuality in film, while stressing the various attempts at deconstructing the persistent emphasis on depicting male homoeroticism as unhealthy and deadly in the AIDS context, besides scrutinizing how new waves of filmmakers were able to offer diversity-embracing representations of male sexual realities and the sexualized masculine physique.

Keywords: homoeroticism; the male body; New Queer Cinema; New Queer Cinema Renaissance; AIDS.

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Introduction

Despite its relatively recent beginnings, queer theory is now seen thriving as an academic discipline, not least for its groundbreaking dialogue with many study fields. However, in Portuguese academia it still lacks the visibility warranted by its theoretical relevance and social urgency. In film studies, even at an international level research carried out on queer identities remains relatively scarce. Although seminal works by critics such as Vito Russo, Alexander Doty, Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin, or Kylo-Patrick Hart have been profoundly influential in foregrounding queer issues in film and are slowly but steadily growing in numbers, they still constitute a very limited amount of scholarly work.

Furthermore, though addressed by the mentioned scholars, the theoretical and critical analysis of queer sexualities and queer bodies in the American cinematic landscape are also recent in academia. Contributions by scholars such as Linda Williams, Douglas Keesey, Nick Davis, Rodrigo Gerace, or Maria San Filippo have opened the debate concerning representations of sexuality in film, yet many of these studies have been either limited to a small selection of close-readings or have served as an overview of sexuality throughout film history without a queer focus. Most scholars have also failed to consider a new, digital rise of American queer independent moviemaking that has been growing since the late 2000s, requiring closer analysis. Infused with new vitality, the area of queer film studies thus provides fresh ground for research that has yet to be fully assessed.

This PhD project, entitled "Queering the Body of Desire: The Male Form and Homoeroticism in New Queer Cinema and the New Queer Cinema Renaissance," aims to follow this reasoning by exploring the representations of the sexualized male body and homoerotic desire in American independent film from 1986-2016. Recognizing the absence of portrayals of queer intimacy and the continuous misrepresentation thereof in American mainstream film throughout most of the 20th century, this study will describe how gay male sexuality has gained agency in the face of continual discrimination.

Bearing in mind that trailblazing queer portrayals decreased towards the turn of the millennium, the project will specifically engage in a comparative approach between New Queer Cinema (NQC), a subversive movement in queer film history that gained momentum in the late 1980s/ early 1990s, and a new wave of transgressive queer independent films, the New Queer Cinema Renaissance (NQCR), that emerged in the late 2000s/ early 2010s, emphasizing how

the intertwined realms of the aesthetic, sociocultural, and political play out across male bodies and queer desire and have evolved over a time span of 30 years[1].

Given the topic at hand, I have chosen the title *Queering the Body of Desire* as it refers to two general issues: on the one hand it clearly alludes to the discussion of cinematic portrayals concerned with queer sexualities, desires, and corporealities that will take center stage in this project. On the other hand, the title also speaks about the continual silencing of queer sexual expressions in the filmic body of desire – as in the larger cinematic corpus or canon. After all, as above broached, the heterosexually driven medium of film has ignored healthy reflections on non-conforming sexual and gender identities for most of the 20th century. Even today, in times of a greater diversity within the American sociopolitical and cinematic landscape, queer intimacy and sex continue to be taboo subjects in major movie productions, proving that affection between LGBTQIA+ individuals is still too disruptive to be portrayed on screen.

Yet, if we shift our focus to underground and independent filmmaking, we find that these film forms have offered utmost subversive ways of handling sexuality early on, serving as pioneers of a unique cinematic queer voice and aesthetic. For this very reason, it becomes relevant that this project engages with queerness in the context of American independent film by centering on issues regarding queer visibility as well as representations of the desiring gaze, gender performativity, and corporeality, which are, in turn, all linked to the act of looking, the base of all film-viewing. By taking into account a wide variety of subversive queer films, I particularly aim to reveal how male queer sexuality was able to reconstitute itself in the face of persistently resurging homophobic discrimination that reached its peak in the 1980s with the emergence of AIDS and the immediate scapegoating and pathologizing of the gay male community. Throughout this project, I will thus also highlight the various attempts at deconstructing the persistent emphasis on depicting male homoeroticism as unhealthy and deadly in the AIDS context, besides scrutinizing how new waves of filmmakers were able to offer diversity-embracing representations of male sexual realities and the sexualized male physique.

After all, as will become apparent throughout this study, sexual and corporeal discourses are utmost powerful and influential in guiding our everyday thoughts on a number of seemingly unrelated issues, beliefs, and interests, which, in turn, entrench them with narratives that can lead to crippling anxieties, conflicts, inequalities, and forms of oppression and discrimination

[1] The 30-year span was particularly influenced by the NQC and NQCR movies that constitute the main corpus of this study, beginning with Gus Van Sant's *Mala Noche* (1986) and ending with Andrew Ahn's *Spa Night* (2016). This does not mean that films that fall out of this period will not be considered – but it rather serves to provide a rough timeframe for my analysis.

on various intersectional levels. Sexual values, then, can have long-lasting discriminatory effects, ranging from "a deep imprint on attitudes about sex, medical practice, child-rearing, parental anxieties, police conduct, and sex law" (Rubin 144) to life-threatening political decisions – as best seen during the AIDS pandemic. Looking into these questions thus becomes an utmost urgent endeavor.

Yet, so as to narrow down the seemingly endless field of sex and gender studies, I have chosen to almost exclusively focus on the male form and experiences: acknowledging that male and female (and other, fluid facets of) sexuality represent different paradigms that have been handled very distinctly in cinema (Russo *The Celluloid* 4-5; Lehman 5) is pivotal to allow for a deeper analysis of representations of homoeroticism in film. While female bodies have long been exploited in the filmic medium to please the male gaze (see Mulvey "Visual Pleasure"), normative cinematic discourses usually disregard a deeper exploration of the male[2] physique and the recognition of a plurality of sexual masculine experiences. As Lehman notes,

> film theory from the mid-1970s through most of the 1980s perpetuated the dominant cultural paradigm wherein women's bodies are displayed and men's bodies are hidden and protected. Countless pages have been devoted to analyzing how women's bodies are fetishized and controlled via the star system, fashion, lighting, camera position and cutting patterns, narrative structure, and so forth. […] Women's bodies have occupied the critical spotlight in a way analogous to which they have been center stage as a spectacle in the culture in which we live. (5)

By narrowing down the vast concept of queerness to the more specifically detailed study of queer masculinities[3], this project will hence engage with the deconstruction of these traditions and simultaneously contribute to the flourishing field of masculinity studies – a cutting-edge sub-area of gender studies. With this in mind, I do not wish to reinscribe the essentialist separation between genders, sexes, or sexual orientations. This choice was made for reasons of pure methodological precision. Besides, as the many theory-based and cinematic

[2] During my research I came to the conclusion that the experience of trans men (who should be represented more vastly in both queer and masculinity studies) is quite seldomly reflected on screen, *Boys Don't Cry* (1999) being one of the very few American movies that would come into question, which, however, falls in-between both the New Queer Cinema and New Queer Cinema Renaissance film waves, and whose discussion becomes unfeasible in the context of this study. Additionally, though none of the characters in the films I will ultimately analyze openly identifies as nonbinary or genderqueer, an example like *Shortbus* (2006) nonetheless features individuals that greatly cross the gender binary, while a variety of other films I will discuss also feature gender-fluid moments (seeing that a monolithic gender experience does not exist to begin with).

[3] I would like to note that the focus on the male naturally implies a deconstruction of the male as well as of normative ideas around masculinity, its inherent privileges, flaws, and the oppressive forces at work when speaking of it as an institutionalized power.

examples found throughout this study will reveal, discourses on male, female, and non-binary sexualities can never be fully separated from one another.

This journey thus begins with the chapter "*Queer Is… Queer Ain't*: Defining Queerness" in which I lay the theoretical foundation for the further course of this project. Its title is an allusion to Marlon Riggs' *Black Is... Black Ain't* (1994), a New Queer Cinema short film that deconstructs certain binary tropes associated to queer black identities. Bearing in mind the fluidity of the concept of queerness and the radical break with traditional boundaries found in queer theory – which represent the central focus of this chapter –, the appropriation of the title makes perfect sense. Chapter 1 is then further divided into two subchapters.

Chapter 1.1's title "*We Were Here*: A Brief Overview Regarding Queer-Related Issues throughout the 19th and 20th Century," in turn, refers to an eponymous 2011 documentary by David Weissman and Bill Weber that not only addresses the havoc the AIDS crisis caused in San Francisco, but also, and more importantly, speaks about the well of activist forces that arose as a consequence thereof. While this subchapter explores a completely different context by concentrating on early discourses regarding LGBTQIA+ identities, the empowering stance and demand for visibility the title evokes nonetheless matches its content, especially because early queer history has long been silenced and is often forgotten. This theory-induced subchapter thus engages with the emergence of sexuality as a modern discursive production in the 19th century that, eventually, led to the creation of a homosexual and heterosexual identity as a marker of a person's entire being. Different currents of thought regarding these matters that particularly developed throughout the 20th century will thus be closely examined, with special emphasis being placed on questions around essentialist and constructionist points of view – the ladder being of utmost importance as it represents one of the forebears of queer theory.

The second subchapter "*Reaching for the Moon*: A Cautious Attempt at Defining *Queer,*" then again, alludes to Bruno Barreto's 2013 biopic that retells American poet Elizabeth Bishop's lesbian love affair with architect Lota de Macedo Soares in 1950s Rio de Janeiro. Though the movie's narrative has no direct bearing on the content of the chapter, I have nonetheless used the title as it perfectly encapsulates the impossibility of capturing a concept as fluid and ever evolving as *queer*. In this specific subchapter, I will thus attempt to define the emergence, essential meaning, and forms of application of queerness as well as of its academic counterpart queer theory, both of which form the basis for all future analytical exploration within this project. Key concepts such as sex, gender, gender performativity, or postmodernism will thus be integral to this discussion.

To further contextualize the wider subject of this project, I will next develop an introductory framework regarding the history and definition of independent cinema that explores the various different branches and shifts within the independent film sector through time. Hence, chapter 2, "'I wish I knew how to quit *defining* you:' Towards a Definition of Independent Cinema", again serves as a preparation for the chapters to follow, seeing that the movies addressed in this project all fall under the umbrella of independent filmmaking. In this regard, it will also be essential to engage with the history of Hollywood seeing that independent cinema has always stood in direct relation to the studios.

Similar to the previous chapter, the title – itself a variation of the popular quote "I wish I know how to quit you" taken from *Brokeback Mountain* (Ang Lee, 2005) – already suggests the enormous length to which we must go to grasp some general ideas regarding the elusive concept of independent cinema. To guarantee more clarity, I have decided to divide this discussion into two subchapters: while the first ("*A Home at the End of Hollywood*: A Historical Exploration of Independent Cinema (from its Beginnings to the 1970s)") focuses on independent filmmaking and its relation to the mainstream from the early beginnings of film history until the 1970s, the latter ("*Indie Buyers Club*: The Commercialization of Independent Cinema from the 1980s to the 2020s") takes up the timeline and discusses profound and far-reaching developments within the independent film industry that happened since the 1980s and have continued until the time of writing (including the creation of Indiewood, the digitalization of cinema, and the rise of VOD, amongst many other topics).

Though historically speaking it is problematic to draw direct lines between certain periods, I have nonetheless chosen to make a division between pre- and post-1980s independent moviemaking for a variety of reasons that will aid in the understanding of this study. Considering that with the 1980s a new era of "indie flicks" was initiated that was particularly characterized, amongst many other factors, by the mainstreaming of a previously marginalized form of filmmaking, the proposed separation becomes valid. This division is further reinforced by developments that will be discussed in chapter 3, including the emergence of queer independent cinema during the same decade. Both titles are again borrowings from queer-themed movies, i.e. *A Home at the End of the World* (Michael Mayer, 2004) and *Dallas Buyers Club* (Jean-Marc Vallée, 2014). Although, again, no narrative similarities between these films and the ideas discussed in the subchapters exist, they have been chosen to hint at the marginal position of independence cinema since the inception of the filmic medium (as opposed to Hollywood's centrality) as well as the commodification of independent cinema after the 1980s.

Next, as the title of chapter 3 "*Different from the Others*: Marginal Queer Cinema(s) (1890s – 1970s)" suggests, this specific part will take into consideration the historic beginnings of queer-related cinematic texts while underlining the homophobically constructed association between queerness and villainy or monstrosity that was continually perpetuated during most of the 20th century. To better understand the foundations of these stereotypes and clichés, I will begin by exploring their historical roots. To this end, it is necessary to start at the inception of the constructed idea of homosexuality as an identity in the 19th and early 20th century – a historical time that the title of the chapter (*Different from the Others*) also alludes to as it references a queer German movie by Richard Oswald from 1919 bearing the same name (*Anders als die Anderen*). Not only did these early notions regarding homosexuality result in a culture of condemnation, persecution and silencing as well as numerous pathologizing discourses, but they also overlapped with the birth of the cinematic medium, which soon adapted many of those negative and harmful views.

To get deeper into the subject matter, the first subchapter "*Flaming Pictures*: Queer Cinema Under Fire from its Beginnings to the Underground Rebellion" (the title being another reference, this time to the 1963 queer classic *Flaming Creatures* by Jack Smith) hence draws an overview regarding these discriminatory actions on celluloid, comprising a time span that includes pivotal film historic markers like the Production Code, marginal cinemas (such as exploitation film or the American avant-garde), and, finally, American underground cinema. As will be revealed, all of these movements exemplify pioneering safe havens for marginalized queer identities on screen and led the way for the future of sexually charged queer independent cinema. In this context, I will engage more closely with Jean Genet's *Un Chant D'Amour* (1950), Kenneth Anger's *Fireworks* (1949), and, finally, Andy Warhol's *My Hustler* (1965), all of which very openly dialogue with utmost queer ideas around homoeroticism, voyeurism, and sexual power plays. They thus not only represent direct precursors to New Queer Cinema and the New Queer Cinema Renaissance, but also form the groundwork for my later film analyses.

Chapter 3.2 "'Not All Faggots Bump Themselves off at the End of the Story:' The Rise of Gay Liberation Filmmaking" then continues this historical journey by considering the rise of gay and lesbian activism in postwar America: though starting with 1950s homophile groups that laid the groundwork for other movements, my discussion of this activist moment within queer filmmaking will particularly find its height with the Stonewall Riots that ushered in a more radical and politically assertive chapter in the fight for LGBTQIA+ rights. The quickly changing paradigms and different forms of perceiving queerness at the time will be exemplified

through a brief look at the filmic example *A Very Natural Thing* (Christopher Larkin, 1974), a landmark movie in terms of gay liberation cinema. Finally, the title of this subchapter is a quote taken directly from *The Boys in the Band*, a 1970 film by William Friedkin that I will also briefly discuss in this context.

As previously mentioned, I have chosen to end this chapter at the dawn of the 1980s since I deemed it necessary to highlight the incredibly deep-cutting and rupturing events happening in LGBTQIA+ communities at the turn of the decade that would, in effect, have an enormous influence on queer independent moviemaking. Hereby, most significantly, the emergence of HIV/AIDS was central to the further development of LGBTQIA+ history and, therefore, of queer filmmaking. After all, even the early stages of the New Queer Cinema movement can be found in this era. All of the above thus emphasizes that a break between pre- and post-1980s LGBTQIA+ filmmaking is indeed required to guide a thorough analysis of the immediate subject matter of this project.

To better grasp the changes in American queer film history starting in the 1980s, it will thus be crucial to first get a more profound understanding of the sociopolitical landscape of the time. Chapter 4 "*Some of my Best Friends Are…Dying*: The 1980s and the Struggle around HIV/AIDS" consequently dives deeper into queer issues that arose during this period, an utmost pivotal moment in American history. Not only does the title of this chapter complete the open-ended film title *Some of my Best Friends Are…* by Mervyn Nelson (1971), but it also simultaneously hints at the disastrous health hazards associated with the then emerging AIDS crisis.

Subchapter 4.1 "My Hateful Gazette: Reactions to HIV/AIDS in Media, Politics, and Society" again uses a slight alteration of a film title to reflect on the chapter's content by referencing the UK box office hit *My Beautiful Laundrette* (Stephen Frears, 1985). While it first and foremost points to the viciousness of the media regarding HIV/AIDS-related stories, the chapter, however, goes even further: it will namely additionally provide an outline of the way misinformed ideas concerning AIDS invaded the American consciousness as a disease that allegedly *only* affected male homosexual demographics. Therefore, the reckless reactions of and measures taken by the right-wing government, various scientific fields, and overall American society that led to the silencing of the magnitude of the epidemic and the stigmatization of those affected by the disease will be closely inspected. After all, the general atmosphere of homophobia pervading the United States stemmed from a return to ultra-conservative ideologies under the presidency of Ronald Reagan.

The next subchapter "*Love! Valour! Anger!*: From Victimized Victims to Resisting Rebels" (a pun on the filmic adaptation of the stage play *Love! Valour! Compassion!* [Joe Mantello, 1997]) will directly engage with AIDS activism, which gained momentum in the mid- to late-1980s as a response to the queer-opposing sociopolitical context in America, forming an outlook to fight the silencing and the abuse gay men as the main targets of scapegoating suffered on an everyday level in American society. Issues that will be tackled in this regard include, but are not limited to, the emergence of both moderate and radical HIV/AIDS activist groups due to a lack of governmental initiative as well as the rise and non-judgmental propagation of safe sex to curb HIV transmissions. These debates, in turn, are pivotal to the subject matter of the study at hand, seeing that the intersections of AIDS activism, debates around the empowerment of sexual and corporeal autonomy and liberty, and the change towards radicalism are all paramount to the establishment of New Queer Cinema and many queer independent cinemas that followed in its wake.

Even though Hollywood's homophobia peaked in the 1980s, several peculiarities within the mainstream and independent film market were nevertheless produced against all odds that appealed to and centered on queer individuals – a development that chapter 5 "*To Die Like a Man?* Queerness in 1980s American Cinema" closely investigates. According to custom, it again adapts the name of a movie – more precisely the Portuguese *To Die Like a Man* (*Morrer Como Um Homem*, João Pedro Rodrigues, 2009), turning the original title into a question so as to interrogate the challenging of gendered sexual norms at the heart of this chapter, while also underlining the excessive use of the trope of dying gay men in HIV/AIDS-related cinema of the time.

The curious dynamic between Hollywood's vast queerphobia and its cautious advancing towards queer-embracing scripts during a short period in the early 1980s is examined in the first subchapter named "*Hollywood's Cautious Gay Screen Kiss*: 1980s LGBT Cinema," which suggests the gay-themed 1998 romcom *Billy's Hollywood Screen Kiss* (Tommy O'Haver). As becomes apparent, the title already indicates that, indeed, a small wave of positive queer portrayals (at least when examined superficially) tentatively stormed American big screens in the 1980s with very subdued and timid explorations of queer intimacy. Hereby, I will particularly draw attention to *Making Love* (Arthur Hiller, 1982), a romance that paved the way for mainstream LGBTQIA+-themed movies of the future. Yet, as will be explored, this mainstream queer celluloid bubble was short-lived and was soon destroyed by the mounting AIDS crisis.

Despite acknowledging queer trends in studio-produced cinema, this chapter will also highlight how images of male sexuality in independent films have consistently been at odds with those seen in mainstream movies, thus engaging in a constant dialogue between both film forms, a challenge that subchapters 5.2 and 5.3 will further develop. Independent cinema furthermore becomes of greatest importance when considering the 1980s due to several groundbreaking revolutions in technology and the consequent boom of the independent sector. Subchapter 5.2 "*Postcards from Europe*: Imports that Changed the Game" thus takes us on a journey overseas and dives deeper into imports that dealt with queer sexual content in a mature, explicit, authentic, and natural way, besides exploring more intersectional approaches incorporating the pluralism of queer experiences. This chapter thus also engages with the question of how European transgression soon reached and impacted US cinematic texts, proving that NQC did not exist in a bubble but was influenced by all types of international cinemas. The title, then again, alludes to the rather unknown 1994 film *Postcards from America* by Steve McLean that concentrates on a gay hustler amid the AIDS crisis.

Though European cinemas clearly left their stamp on NQC, it is fair to say that the impact of AIDS cinema was just as important, a matter of fact closely dissected in chapter 5.3 "'It's My Party and I Die if I Want to:' Independent AIDS Features and Proto-New Queer Cinema." The title, a quote borrowed from the 1996 dramedy *It's My Party* (Randal Kleiser), straightforwardly proposes that this chapter will engage with several HIV/AIDS movies that were actually directed by LGBTQIA+ filmmakers and/or catered to queer audiences – consequently embodying a reclamation of the subject matter and of agency by the communities. This discussion, then, will become another fundamental building block in our understanding of the 1990s film wave. In this respect, movies like *An Early Frost* (John Erman, 1985), *Buddies* (Arthur J. Bressan Jr., 1985), *Parting Glances* (Bill Sherwood, 1986), and *Philadelphia* (Jonathan Demme, 1993) will be scrutinized to show the differing facets of AIDS film as well as the many lenses through which these stories can be constructed. Lastly, a quick dive into AIDS video will follow, a radical filmmaking practice that was often shot on the frontlines of AIDS activism and further influenced NQC.

As has already become more than apparent, one of the main focuses of this study will be New Queer Cinema. Chapter 6, "*Queers in Revolt*: New Queer Cinema and the Subversion of LGBTQIA+ and AIDS Cinema," hence jumps right into the late 1980s and early 1990s to take a more profound look into this phenomenon, while tracing its entire life cycle. It furthermore adopts another movie title, this time taken from Paul Morrissey's *Women in Revolt* (1971), underlining the rage as well as the rebellious and transgressive energy permeating the

film wave. First starting with the emergence of NQC, this chapter will then seek to look deeper into the ways it can be categorized. While I will ultimately settle on NQC as both a film wave and a film movement, this debate will simultaneously also allow me to dig deeper into the characteristics defining NQC – including, amongst others, its aesthetic and narrative choices, political ambitions, or the cumbersome delineation of its historical timespan.

Most significantly amongst these features, however, might be the break with traditional boundaries and cinematic conventions as well as the transgressive energy that determine the film movement and simultaneously already hint towards its deep roots in queer theory, a fact that will as well be examined within this framework. Ensuing from this discussion, I will next embark on a journey regarding the queering of past LGBTQIA+-themed cinematic texts and traditions, an undertaking that also takes center stage in NQC filmmaking. Indeed, as will be delineated, the film movement is notorious for having reappropriated negative and harmful tropes found in LGBTQIA+-based mainstream media productions, allowing for more honest, broad-ranging, and empowering depictions of queer narratives. After all, NQC mainly focuses on politically charged movies by centering ostensibly on taboo issues that had long been withheld from cinema altogether, granting access to and agency of queer sexuality.

At its core, however, NQC was born as a response to the silencing, abuse, and oppression queer individuals suffered as the main targets of scapegoating in light of the AIDS crisis. As will be inspected in this context, NQC must therefore also be deemed AIDS cinema. This section consequently will particularly aim at taking a more detailed look at the ways NQC filmmakers were struggling and trying to make sense of a world that had been utterly shattered by the AIDS crisis. As will be discussed in detail, HIV/AIDS is always lurking beneath the surface of NQC even when not directly or obviously addressed, thus informing its diegetic worldview through allegory and metaphor. To further illustrate this point, I will particularly take into consideration the postmodern aspects and devices present in a variety of NQC films. As will be shown, all of these are ultimately crucial to portray a reality marked by unraveling ideas regarding the linearity and reliability of time as well as to highlight the fragmentation of subjectivities in the face of AIDS as a marker of an impending death (at least prior to the discovery of an effective antiretroviral therapy in 1996).

Having created the theoretical framework regarding NQC in chapter 6, the next chapter will implement the conclusions drawn by presenting and dissecting two NQC films[4]. Without

[4] To my regret, I had to leave out some important films that could certainly benefit and contribute to my discussion (such as the short film *Tongue's Untied* [1989] or the documentary *Paris is Burning* [1990]) as I have chosen to focus on feature-length movies for methodological clarity and to keep a certain balance and harmony to this comparative study. They will, nonetheless, be briefly explored.

meaning to feed the illusion that my case studies (both in chapters 7 and 9) even remotely represent a comprehensive study or, much less, a complete list of films comprising NQC, I have nonetheless chosen two examples to represent specific issues related to sexuality that simultaneously also deeply define the NQC wave as a whole. When choosing these representatives, I was furthermore careful to settle on a movie that represents the early stages of NQC (Gus Van Sant's *Mala Noche* [1986]) and another that stands for the full-blown movement at the height of its influence (Gregg Araki's *The Living End* [1992]). The same method will be also adapted to my analyses of New Queer Cinema Renaissance films in chapter 9. Furthermore, I have chosen the overall title "*Keep the Motor On*: Sexualized Queer Drifters in NQC" (inspired by the film title *Keep the Lights On* [Ira Sachs, 2012]) for this chapter seeing that I will particularly engage with transient and hyper-sexual queer outsiders in both movies.

The title of chapter 7.1, "'He Rode the Rails, Hopped the Freights:' The Eroticized Transient Body in Van Sant's *Mala Noche*," uses a citation from the film since it perfectly encapsulates both the exploration of sexualized queer outsiders through innuendo and the dimension of transience that will take center stage in my analysis. Based on the eponymous 1977 memoir by Walt Curtis, Gus Van Sant's debut feature film *Mala Noche* (1986) takes up the challenge of exploring the complex intricacies of sexual power struggles by focusing on a love triangle – or rather, a triangle of desire and rejection – between two male illegal Mexican immigrant teenagers and a lower-class American man. In this discussion, I aim to focus on the sexual relations between the three characters (regardless of whether they are actually consummated or only remain in the realm of pure fantasy) in order to uncover how sexuality can be profoundly defined by the interplay of issues of class, economics, the culturally constructed binary of sexual orientations, citizenship, and ethnicity. As will be shown, by presenting a variety of hegemonic discourses on power, Van Sant simultaneously creates a space for subverting and questioning their boundaries. Ultimately, this breaking of traditional hierarchies is made possible by the introduction of Johnny Alonzo, the film's main object of desire, as a transient or moving body, unable to be captured by traditional borders of various forms.

Next, chapter 7.2, "'Suddenly I Realize, We Got Nothing to Lose': Regaining Queer Agency in Araki's *The Living End,*" will take a closer look at Gregg Araki's 1992 landmark movie that masterfully captures the anger and despair felt by the gay community during the AIDS crisis. Just as was the case in the previous subchapter, it again uses a citation taken from the movie at hand that excellently reflects on the direction my analysis will take: a close study of the film will namely not only highlight the subversive elements introduced by the New Queer

Cinema movement, but also describe how queer sexuality found a way to empower itself against all expectations amidst the incredibly homophobic context of the AIDS crisis. To this end, it will be shown that Araki is able to achieve an empowerment of gay male sexuality, while also deconstructing notions of homosexual weakness and the pitiful AIDS-infected queer through the postmodern subversion of road movie conventions. More precisely, this discussion will highlight the intersections between the characters' marginalized queer sexuality, their HIV status, and their journey on the road. By deliberately opposing the lack of visibility concerning the queer male body and sexuality in cinema, this queer-embracing film thus presents these ostracized individuals as an integral part of the American landscape. Araki, however, takes the break with movie conventions further by introducing characters with a strong death drive, which, in turn, serves to represent a rebellion against oppressive norms directed at queer individuals. To further highlight these controversial ideas, I will dive deeper into questions around seropositive barebacking included in the movie – or rather, the deliberate act of having anal intercourse without a condom.

Taking up the timeline where chapter 6 left off, chapter 8 ("*The Bloom Generation*: Homonormative Tensions in 21st Century Queer Cinema") will engage with LGBTQIA+ culture in the 2000s and 2010s through the lens of homonormativity and adopts an altered version of Gregg Araki's 1995 film *The Doom Generation* so as to convey the blossoming of queer mainstream and independent cinema. As will then be disclosed in its first subchapter, "*Appropriate Behavior*: The Queer 2000s," this rising and intensifying trend has been at the center of various social injustices: the title is hence not only a nod to the eponymous 2014 movie by Desiree Akhavan, but also a commentary regarding the fact that homonormative developments have created tame, desexualized, and homogenized LGBTQIA+ media and cultural products that have helped queerness to become more visible, policed, and, simultaneously, more marketable – even on a political level. As I will further develop, the commodification of queer culture, then again, has greatly replaced activist tendencies, in the process creating apolitical and tame LGBTQIA+ citizens and culture. Naturally, all these trends stand in complete opposition to the subversive sensibilities of NQC, a fact that will become even more apparent when looking at the cinematic landscape of the early 2000s, an exploration chapter 8.2 ("*Touch of Pinkwashing*: Homonormative Queer Filmmaking in the Early 21st Century") will undertake.

Just like the title of the previous subchapter, it again functions as a critique of homonormativity by proposing a variation of the movie title *Touch of Pink* (Ian Iqbal Rashid, 2004) to comment on the act of "pinkwashing", or rather, the depoliticized appropriation of

LGBTQIA+ culture by a state, institutions, businesses, or corporations so as to radiate an image of tolerance. Indeed, NQC was only of short duration, and was brought to an end by a surge of assimilationist and tame approaches to queer storytelling in film in the mid-1990s. While these cinematic artifacts highly mirrored the sociopolitical aspirations discussed in the previous subchapter – particularly on an independent stage –, further into the 2000s the Hollywood majors would soon become involved in the LGBTQIA+ market as well, producing their own Indiewood queer-themed pictures, even if only for a short-lived period.

The last subchapter (8.3), then, is a key discussion within the larger context of this project as it aims to define the New Queer Cinema Renaissance. It's title "*And NQC Played On*: The New Queer Cinema Renaissance" hints at the filmic adaptation of *And the Band Played On* (Roger Spottiswoode, 1993) and simultaneously describes the NQCR as a direct continuation of NQC. As I will delineate, after a long drought of subversive queer filmmaking, a wave of politically charged queer texts eventually returned, coinciding with a rising political consciousness concerning marginal LGBTQIA+ matters. Since the late 2000s, queer moviemaking has thus experienced a renaissance that matches radical works of earlier queer filmmakers. Throughout this chapter it will become utmost apparent that this movement exhibits various parallels to NQC while simultaneously representing its very own, core ideas. It is therefore of importance to dive deeper into this wave/movement, to explore its aesthetic, sociocultural, as well as political investments dedicated to the male body and homoerotic desire.

While first embarking on an investigation regarding the question of how the NQCR surged in the first place, subchapter 8.3 will then plunge into the defining characteristics of this film wave. Specific emphasis will be placed on aesthetic matters, particularly the use of realism – a visual and narrative choice that runs through a large portion of movies belonging to the movement. With that said, and even though this trend is commonly highlighted as *the* defining element of the NQCR, I will subsequently ponder on the question of the stylistic evolution of the movement throughout the 2010s. In this context, increasingly experimental and fantastic facets – characterized by moody neon lights and pastel colors – that function alongside the realistic strain will be presented. Finally, the question pertaining progressive issues such as intersectionality or a sexual openness that even transgress the limits of NQC will be taken into focus – all of which are also deeply embedded in the renaissance film wave.

The film analyses of chapter 9 will benefit from the debate initiated in the previous chapter, substantiating its theoretical background by analyzing two movies belonging to the NQCR. The title of this chapter "*Happy Together*: On How to Create Connection Through Sexual Intimacy in NQCR Filmmaking" is again a borrowing from a movie, namely of the

eponymous 1997 film by Wong Kar-Wai. Chapter 9.1, "'Desire that Travels All Over the World. That Touches You. That Touches Me:' Communitarian Healing through Sexual Permeability in *Shortbus*," next deals with a movie (from 2006) that inhabits an utmost unique place in film history as it exists in a liminal space between NQC and the NQCR, being, consequently, characterized by elements informing both waves. As the title of this subchapter – a direct quote taken from the movie – indicates, the film tells a story of an alienated and isolated group of New Yorkers in need of finding connections to themselves and to others to become more open, happier, more *permeable*. Seeing that all the diverse sexual identities and expressions are deeply interconnected within *Shortbus*' larger narrative, this filmic text will open up a space to go beyond a dialogue centered on gay male identities and sexualities, allowing us to explore a deeply intersectional cinematic approach instead. To this end, the setting of 9/11 America as a symbol for the broader *malaise* afflicting the characters in the film as well as the entire nation will inform my reading of this movie. *Shortbus*, as will be suggested, thus looks deeper into the heart of a hurt nation, trying to find forms of healing through connection, queer sex, and intimacy.

Lastly, the title of Chapter 9.2, "'Dude, Can You Stop Looking at My Dick?': Identity-Building Through Voyeuristic Pleasure in *Spa Night*" not only steals a direct quote from the movie it focuses on, but, furthermore, exposes the main focus of this coming of age tale: *Spa Night* namely centers on the story of a teenager who is torn between a variety of seemingly opposite dualities, including his Korean American upbringing, the tug of war between Korean traditionalism and his queer desires, and, ultimately, his loyalty to his community, which stands in stark contrast to his arising sense of self.

As will be discussed in depth, the character must thus explore liminal forms of being to bridge these seemingly oppositional parts of his identity. Indeed, as suggested by the title, David's journey is guided mostly through his gazes that not only reveal much about his arising sexual desire and exploration, but also serve to give us a deeper understanding of his day-to-day life as a minoritarian identity struggling with a double sense of erasure in America. Though scopophilia is a theme pervading the entire corpus of this thesis, in this context it will also help to challenge issues regarding the homoeroticism inherent in homosociality. To get a better understanding of the young adult's character arc, this subchapter will furthermore consider wider issues within cinematic representations of Asian/ Asian American identities and the stereotyped tropes attached to them – which director Andrew Ahn deconstructs thoroughly in his film to enable new forms of perceiving queer Asian American desire on screen.

1) *Queer Is…Queer Ain't*: Defining Queerness

Queer theory is known to be an utmost organic and ever-evolving research area in need of constant revision. Consequently, the term still causes different degrees of confusion and contestation. This is mostly attributed to the fact that, though it is related to and interconnected with the idea of LGBTQIA+, queerness is essentially not synonymous or interchangeable with the acronym (as shall be demonstrated throughout the following discussion). Accordingly, in order to be able to fully understand and grasp the concept of queer, we first need to look at the history of popular discourses on LGBTQIA+ individuals during the 20th and 21st centuries as well as the different movements that derived from those.

1.1) *We Were Here*: A Brief Overview Regarding Queer-Related Issues Throughout the 19th and 20th Century

For the purpose of engaging with the emergence of queerness at large, it is expedient to go back to the late 19th century, seeing that it was during this time that not only the construct of sexuality as such came into being, but, as a result thereof, ideas around sexual deviancy, homosexuality, and heterosexuality also emerged. With this in mind, pioneering queer scholar David M. Halperin reasons that sexuality is indeed a modern discursive production of western societies and thus neither inherent in human biology nor in any way consistent and uniform across societies at large. More precisely, sexuality

> represents the *appropriation* of the human body and of its erogenous zones by an ideological discourse. Far from reflecting a purely natural and uninterpreted recognition of some familiar facts about us, sexuality represents a peculiar turn in conceptualizing, experiencing, and institutionalizing human nature, a turn that (along with many other developments) marks the transition to modernity in northern and western Europe. (25)

The above does not invalidate the fact that prior to the emergence of the modern sense of sexuality, same-gender (as well as different-gender) sexual acts, behaviors, desires, affinities, and sexual preferences existed. What suddenly changed was the way in which these were interpreted, labeled, and now treated as indicative of someone's entire being. This then implies that, as will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 3, the concepts of homosexuality and heterosexuality as separate identities or personality types with specific, innate character traits

were, indeed, only able to surface after the invention of discourses on sexuality. Heavily basing himself on Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*, Halperin thus goes on to explain:

> The invention of homosexuality (and, ultimately, of heterosexuality) had therefore to await, in the first place, the eighteenth-century discovery and definition of sexuality as the total ensemble of physiological and psychological mechanisms governing the individual's genital functions and the concomitant identification of that ensemble with a specially developed part of the brain and nervous system; it had also to await, in the second place, the nineteenth-century interpretation of sexuality as a singular "instinct" or "drive," a force that shapes our conscious life according to its own unassailable logic and thereby determines, at least in part, the character and personality of each one of us. Sexuality, on this latter interpretation, turns out to be something more than an endogenous principle of motivation outwardly expressed by the performance of sexual acts; it is a mute power subtly and deviously at work throughout a wide range of human behaviors, attitudes, tastes, choices, gestures, styles, pursuits, judgments, and utterances. Sexuality is thus the inmost part of an individual human nature. It is the feature of a person that takes longest to get to know well, and knowing it renders transparent and intelligible to the knower the person to whom it belongs. Sexuality holds the key to unlocking the deepest mysteries of the human personality: it lies at the center of the hermeneutics of the self. (26)

We should not disregard the fact that, while ideas around sexuality have been revealed to be cultural and discursive constructs, they are nonetheless very real and important to most people living in modern day societies. Yet, what critics like Halperin try to warn us about is that these constructs are, after all, "not positive, natural, or essential features of the world, outside of history and culture" (28) and can, consequently, be both beneficial and/or harmful to the individual being. For our discussion at hand, the constructed nature of sexuality and the diverse associations ascribed to its different forms, then again, harbor a variety of essential paradigms that aid us in better comprehending the nature of queerness and of queer sexualities as such: it namely follows that (I) the diverse categories attached to specific sexual identities and the meanings behind them would determine much of LGBTQIA+-related thought (in all its variations, developments, and contradictions) for the rest of the 20th and the 21st century, and that (II) these fabricated categories can actually be deconstructed and challenged – an idea I will closely discuss in the next subchapter in the context of the sex and gender binaries.

As has become apparent, the modern sense of homosexuality finds its origins at the end of the 19th century[5] (Richardson & Seidman 4; Jagose 11; Foucault 43). Hereby, I mean to clarify that when speaking of a "modern" sense, I refer to the idea that from the turn of the century onward, same-gender love and desire were suddenly considered a unique human

[5] Depending on the account, it might have been earlier than that. Again, I would like to refer to my discussion in chapter 3 for further information regarding these questions.

identity[6] – a reasoning that, to varying degrees, holds true in western societies until today and had not existed prior to that time. This is not to say that *fin de siècle* ideas around LGBTQIA+ matters were static and are nowadays still used in the same way. Instead, it is crucial to comprehend that these stereotypes, though greatly influenced by early pathologizing medical and demonizing religious discourses, varied, evolved, and mutated over time, depending much on various sociopolitical and ideological positions and points of view.

Most important to the discussion at hand is the fact that through a variety of developments, frictions, and stages in LGBTQIA+ history, two main competing (yet not necessarily oppositional) currents of thought regarding ideas about what constitutes homosexuality[7] emerged in the 20th century, i.e. essentialist and constructionist points of view. For the most part, essentialism was born out of the discovery that homosexuality (as in same-gender attraction, desire, and relations) had existed in many eras and cultures, thus transcending history as such (Adam 18; Freedman 53; Rubin 149; Jagose 8-9). It was thus concluded that homosexuality must reside in the psyche and/or biology of a human being (Rubin 149; Duggan "Making" 16) – a homosexual identity, consequently, being "natural, fixed, and innate" (Jagose 8).

While I need to point out the constructed nature of such beliefs, I do not wish to diminish or critique their significance without taking into consideration the highly discriminatory context of the time in which these ideas first emerged and blossomed (roughly between the 1950s until the mid-1970s [Seidman Difference 139]), which ultimately warranted these attitudes. After all, creating and believing in an identity that was separate to that of heterosexuality had its

[6] These developments are, in truth, utmost peculiar, particularly when reflecting upon the fact that a random factor (same-gender partner choice) was chosen to create a separation into two different "species" (Foucault 43) (i.e. homosexuals and heterosexuals), despite the fact that it is but one of many constituents of human sexual behavior (Halperin 26-7).

[7] I have deliberately chosen to use the word homosexuality in this context to highlight that prior to the emergence of queer theory, lesbian and gay identities were the main focus of LGBTQIA+-related discourses. I do not intend to downplay the importance of other identities belonging to the wide spectrum of individuals the initialism stands for, but due to a lack of understanding of gender- and sexuality-related issues, they were not yet discussed in the nuanced way in which contemporary scholarship seems to be able to demarcate them. Thus, generally speaking, discourses would not consider transgender, intersex, or even bisexual individuals (except for a few oddities, such as the studies of Alfred Kinsey). Sadly, even within the already marginalized groups of gays and lesbians, these identities were also greatly ostracized and ignored, further perpetuating the silencing of the same. We need to recognize that these are reductive notions when considering the wide array of sexualities and sexual expressions that actually exist. However, since this study mainly considers individuals that self-identify as gay men, a look into these discourses is of importance. Furthermore, these gay-centric attitudes can be, partially, deemed precursors of queer theory, as I will demonstrate throughout the course of this chapter.

sociopolitical and cultural benefits[8]. More precisely, the decision "to align lesbian and gay populations with racial, ethnic, and religious minority groups and women" was, ultimately, very helpful in "a quest for full economic, political, and cultural participation in U.S. Life" (Duggan "Making" 13).

Essentialism, however, did not remain undisputed; its flaws soon becoming all but too obvious. The crux of the matter was that throughout the 1970s, the struggles for gay rights were fought at the cost of a silenced and ignored portion of LGBTQIA+ communities, including (amongst others) women, people of color, bisexuals, or transgender and non-binary folks (Duggan "Making" 16, 18; Richardson & Seidman 3; Gamson "Sweating" 344). As a result, the exclusionary gay and lesbian center – consisting of a privileged few – was attacked by its margins, its fragile nature soon becoming more and more apparent. During these debates, approaches based on frameworks of intersectionality came to the forefront, divulging an awareness about the fact that individuals are not characterized by a single but a whole plethora of traits and that their privileges and forms of oppression therefore oftentimes reveal several overlapping layers. More precisely, towards the late 1970s and early 1980s these approaches were increasingly applied to demonstrate "how a variety of forms of oppression intertwine systemically with each other; and especially how the person who is disabled through one set of oppressions may *by the same positioning* be enabled through others" (Sedgwick *Epistemology* 32), which further underlined that activists were dealing with a "diverse, shifting, often divided community in tenuous coalition rather than a fixed, unified 'gay minority'" (Gamson "Sweating" 345).

Constructionist theorists consequently surged, putting forth the claim that, though homosexual behavior is a transhistorical natural given, the concept of homosexuality (as well as heterosexuality) is a construct that was developed relatively recently in human history[9]

[8] When approaching essentialist views, it is also important to note that these certainly fall under the rubric of identity politics, an approach that "has assumed that a politic can be erected on the presumption that all individuals who have in common a certain trait (e.g., a particular gender, sexual orientation, race, or ethnicity) share something essential and defining about themselves, something which marks them off from others and which can serve as the basis for creating a community of interest" (Seidman *Difference* 136-7). Yet, as Seidman goes on to explain, despite its positive appeal in creating inclusivity and a sense of group solidarity and belonging, there is always the downside that certain identities are excluded by this "normalizing, disciplinary force" (137).

[9] Some activists and theorists would thus, at least partially, return to some radical ideas that were forged during the times of gay liberation when sexuality was declared fluid and volatile (Duggan "Making" 20). During a short period right after the Stonewall riots, gay liberationists turned towards more radical viewpoints, embraced fluidity in terms of gender and sexuality, and discouraged assimilationist tactics to comply to heteronormative standards of living and being (Seidman *Difference* 115,117). These ideas were consequently not groundbreaking, they yet gained new momentum during the 1970s, being greatly reworked by scholars such as Jeffrey Weeks, Jonathan Ned Katz, John D'Emilio, Carrol Smith-Rosenberg, or Lillian Faderman (Duggan "Making" 22; Seidman *Difference* 128; Eaklor 190). Unfortunately, these voices, in turn, would remain in the stigmatized fringes of academic circles until the 1980s and 1990s, hence needing to "f[ind] audiences and sources of support elsewhere" (Duggan "Making" 22).

(Rubin 149). We can thus discern the following parameters that give meaning to constructionist theory: firstly, seeing that conceptions and comprehensions around homosexuality and same-gender love depend on cultures and a specific sociohistorical time, they are not objective descriptions of a monolithic and universal identity, but much rather represent an arbitrary characteristic of a human being (existing amongst many others) that is instilled with culturally-specific meaning. This also means that the roots of these ideas (homosexuality as well as heterosexuality) can be traced, analyzed, and ultimately deconstructed. Finally, this rationale illustrates that we tend to force western views onto other cultures and onto our understanding of history at large (Seidman *Difference* 128-9, 188; Adam 18; Jagose 9; Rubin 149-50).

As will be discussed in chapter 1.2, it is precisely with the help of these insights that oppressive norms and binaries can be ultimately tackled and deconstructed. Naturally, as the act of *deconstruction* already implies, constructionism is, then again, very much rooted and influenced by poststructuralist thought as well as postmodernism at large. As a matter of fact, the work of scholars belonging to the poststructuralist school gave these emerging trends a voice and "a language to deconstruct the category of a gay subject and to articulate the dissenting voices in a postmodern direction" (120).

Poststructuralism, in turn, emerged out of the structuralist movement, though the lines between both are, at times, blurred. Structuralism began as a critical linguistic movement that primarily engaged with language in order to determine "the fundamental structures of human consciousness that all human beings possess, and that enable them to make sense of the world" (Mease 5). Poststructuralism, in turn, went a step further by declaring that these structures are not merely "*reflected* in language and social interaction, poststructuralists have come to believe that structures are *constituted* through language and social interaction" (6). This ultimately means that

> their existence is embedded in everyday life – a result of everyday use of language and practices of social interaction. Structures exist only to the extent that people interact and communicate in compliance with the structures. Thus, the analytical project for poststructuralism shifts from discerning the structures *behind* language and social interaction, and focuses instead on the mechanisms by which structures are produced and maintained *through* language and social interaction. (Mease 6)

These structures, however, are, in turn, unstable, volatile, and prone to shifts due to their constructed nature. This becomes particularly obvious when considering that structures can change if people merely stop to follow certain practices, but also in the fact that structures are never universal to begin with as human interactions are by nature heterogeneous and commonly

susceptible to exceptions (Mease 6). Ultimately, their deconstruction is essential as within these very structures we can detect specific social hierarchies embedded in common discourses, as noted by Seidman:

> Deconstruction aims to disturb or displace the power of these hierarchies by showing their arbitrary, social, and political character. […] It is this rendering of literary analysis into social analysis, of textual critique into social critique, of readings into a political practice, of politics into the politics of knowledge, that makes deconstruction and the queer theory inspired by it an important movement of theory and politics. (*Difference* 147)

All of this, as the author already insinuates, forms the basis of queer theory – a fact that will become most apparent later on in this chapter when I address ideas around gender performativity, gender and sexual fluidity, and the deconstruction of patriarchal and heteronormative conventions and norms.

Indeed, it was in large part due to poststructuralist scholar Michel Foucault that constructionism was rescued from oblivion: in his work Foucault not merely revived these theories but also, by doing so, legitimized the stigmatized academic work on sexuality to be taken seriously (Duggan "Making" 22). In a nutshell, his work engages with the ways in which "present circumstances are contingently and precariously predicated on discursive conditions and discontinuities of the past" (Mease 7). When applied to queerness or sexuality at large, we can thus determine that the way we perceive, see, judge, and, as a consequence thereof, police and censor specific sexual acts, identities, desires, and bodies nowadays has specific roots in past and geographically-specific discourses[10] that were widely spread, promoted, and nurtured through time. In point of fact, the study of sexuality was one of Foucault's main interests and focal points in his scholarship, best seen in his four-volume[11] study *The History of Sexuality* (1976-2018), in which he promotes the theory that our socially restricted understanding and grappling of sexuality is actually not natural and innate, as described by Rubin:

> Foucault criticizes the traditional understanding of sexuality as a natural libido yearning to break free of social constraint. He argues that desires are not pre-existing biological

[10] In essence, Foucault's concept of discourse "refers broadly to the socially circulated ideas connected by a particular topic" (Mease 7) and therefore represents all of "the heterogeneous collection of utterances that relate to a particular concept, and thereby constitute and contest its meaning" (Jagose 81). Hereby, Foucault deems it essential to always take into consideration the specific context in which discourses are circulated, by whom they are disseminated, as well as their inherent value judgements and the ulterior motives that may lie behind the spreading of the same. Ultimately, the study and deconstruction of certain widely spread discourses is of high importance, as "they both enable and constrain our processes of understanding and interpreting the world. This is because they offer us tools for interpretation, but those tools are limited, and may constrain sensemaking in ways that sustain existing power structures" (Mease 7-8).

[11] *The History of Sexuality* is commonly considered a three-volume series. Yet, the fourth volume *Confessions of the Flesh* was published posthumously years after Foucault's death in 2018.

> entities, but rather that they are constituted in the course of historically specific social practices. He emphasizes the generative aspects of the social organization of sex rather than its repressive elements by pointing out that new sexualities are constantly produced. And he points to a major discontinuity between kinship-based systems of sexuality and more modern forms. (149)

In sum, Foucault declares sexualities to be created through discourse, thus representing "not an essentially personal attribute but an available cultural category" (Jagose 79). In this regard, I would like to refer to chapter 3, in which these issues will be outlined in more thorough detail.

Returning to the common practice of counterposing essentialism and constructionism, it would be remiss to appoint one view as standing above the other, as, in the end, both are prone to criticism and can be deemed fragile and easily exploitable: on the one hand, the essentialist idea that people are born homosexual takes away the fluidity and mutability of sexuality at large, which, then again, as previously addressed, has often ended in exclusionary tactics in sociopolitical struggles. On the other hand, pure constructionism, though not as immediately obvious, does also feature some points of contestation. More precisely, the idea that queerness is a construct is commonly misinterpreted and abused to suggest that homosexuality is indeed acquired and, consequently, curable and able to be "corrected" (Jagose 9).

Additionally, constructionists' avoidance of matters related to identity politics leads to further issues: by denying certain constructed identities overall as well as the significance they bear for specific minorities, difference is turned into "an undifferentiated oppositional mass" (Seidman *Difference* 135) or is even able to be undone altogether in the process. To put it more clearly, when speaking of an LGBTQIA+ or queer community for instance, the vast abundance of identities that comprise the initialism (a lesbian *vs*. a pansexual individual e.g.) and the diversity of overlapping factors forming these identities (a transgender gay man e.g.) can be eradicated in approaches and discourses that lack nuance. Furthermore, identity politics are not necessarily destructive or restrictive, nor do they essentially have a negative impact on people. Instead, we should recognize that "they are also personally, socially, and politically enabling," a point that all too frequently remained "untheorized in the poststructural critique" (135). Indeed, Seidman goes on to describe constructionist (or poststructural) viewpoints as being, at times, too theoretical and too abstract for their own good (136). He thus suggests that "[q]ueer intellectuals need to imagine a politics of resistance that is guided by a transformative and affirmative social vision" (138).

Following this reasoning, I will assume a similar position by acknowledging that, depending on specific contexts, both essentialism and constructionism can be valuable: at its

core this project serves the purpose of deconstructing certain cinematic discourses around queerness throughout the 20th and 21st century in the vein of poststructuralist and postmodern rationale. Yet, it would be negligent to completely disregard the importance of identity politics within queer communities and studies, especially seeing that they are anchored in many political struggles and have been key for community building.

Furthermore, I undoubtedly recognize that the concepts of LGBTQIA+ or of an LGBTQIA+ community can, at times, be faulty or misleading, especially because these often-praised communitarian ties are not always a given. This is complicated by the fact that, as Warner suggests, queer individuals are mostly not born into a queer community (as opposed to other ethnic minority groups). Instead, he argues, "much of lesbian and gay history has to do with noncommunity […] because dispersal rather than localization continues to be definitive of queer self-understanding" (Warner xxv). This, nonetheless, does not discredit that these chosen communities do not exist at all. As a variety of struggles such as the one around HIV/AIDS have shown, there have been times of shared battles in which "queer politics br[ought] very differently sexualized and differently politicized people into a movement that, despite its heterogeneity, must address broad questions and common identifications. Much depends on how the common ground is defined" (xvi).

While ostracization still exists within these communities, queer identities have multiplied over time[12] and become more nuanced. I will therefore refer to the initialism LGBTQIA+ while always bearing in mind that a community is made out of endless unique identities and respecting that identities are fluid and intersectional. My usage of the term thus recognizes its contested nature, never representing a unitary group, but one that has the potential to contest homogenization, disciplining norms and represents a sight of resistance, just like queerness and queer theory do.

1.2) *Reaching for the Moon*: A Cautious Attempt at Defining *Queer*

While it is widely known that the term queer has been used in derogatory ways to address LGBTQIA+ individuals throughout most of the 20th century before being reappropriated by activists[13] in the late 1980s and early 1990s, it is far less acknowledged that

[12] Instead of speaking of an LGBTQIA+ community I will refer to LGBTQIA+ communities in the following to underline their plurality and diverse nature.

[13] As Kemp notes, while the term "queer" had been around for decades (itself going through several etymological changes), "queer theory" was first coined in 1991 by scholar Teresa de Lauretis "when she guest edited the feminist journal *differences* and titled it 'Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities'. It had yet to take on the full cadence and colour of later theorizations, but this was its birthplace" (3).

the term already circulated as a self-identifier in small American gay communities during the 1910s and 1920s. Back then, it was mostly used with the intent of highlighting one's status as being different from other individuals, while no stigmatized connotation was attached to the descriptor at that point in time (Chauncey 101).

Generally speaking, queer – which can be used as a noun, an adjective, or a verb – is an elastic, utmost organic, and ever-evolving concept in need of constant revision, further characterized by its ambiguity and resistance to definition (Jagose 1, 96; Spargo 8-9; Doty *Making* xvi). A set of crucial qualities can nonetheless be discerned in an attempt to define it: first and foremost, queerness is an inclusive category that seeks to dismantle and transform that which is prescribed as normative, in the process broadening a variety of possibilities and categories of thought, while exploring alternative, more wide-ranging ways of living, being, and of self-determination (Jagose 2, 101; Cohen 445). Hereby, a great focus is placed – but should not be exclusively limited to – questions and problematizations around "normative consolidations of sex, [desire,] gender and sexuality" as well as "all those versions of identity, community and politics that are believed to evolve 'naturally' from such consolidations. By refusing to crystallise in any specific form, queer maintains a relation of resistance to whatever constitutes the normal" (Jagose 99).

Queer politics' struggle for the recognition of a plurality of existences based on difference, fluidity, and hybridity, not only opens up identities to their multifaceted nature, but simultaneously encourages a debate regarding a whole range of intersectional systems of oppression (Richardson & Seidman 3; Seidman *Difference* 157, 194-5; Cohen 442). As becomes apparent, the concept of queer, though often reduced to issues of LGBTQIA+ communities, is thus as much embedded in intersectionality and its aim to go against the exclusion of individuals on grounds of race, ethnicity, class, gender identity, sexuality, nationality, or even their serostatus – all of which "interact to regulate and police the lives of most people" (Cohen 441).

At the expense of a short digression, so as to better understand the issue of intersectionality (which will be returned to time and time again in my discussion of a variety of movies), we might turn to Michael Warner's description, which perfectly encapsulates the core idea, while also making clear its vast and endless intersections:

> Every person who comes to a queer self-understanding knows in one way or another that her stigmatization is connected with gender, the family, notions of individual freedom, the state, public speech, consumption and desire, nature and culture, maturation, reproductive politics, racial and national fantasy, class identity, truth and trust, censorship, intimate life and social display, terror and violence, health care, and

> deep cultural norms about the bearing of the body. Being queer means fighting about these issues all the time, locally and piecemeal but always with consequences. It means being able, more or less articulately, to challenge the common understanding of what gender difference means, or what the state is for, or what "health" entails, or what would define fairness, or what a good relation to the planet's environment would be. Queers do a kind of practical social reflection just in finding ways of being queer. (xiii)

Although I certainly agree with the above quoted, it is, again, important to not mistake these debates as being limited to LGBTQIA+ individuals, lest we spur the binary vision that queerness aims to deconstruct. Therefore, though Warner tackles the question of intersectionality from a queer point of view, we need to remember that *each and every* individual is made of different layers of interlocking features and subject to interlocking forms of oppression.

With this said, the term queer is nevertheless commonly associated with gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, intersex, pan- or asexual culture (or any other identity formation that belongs to the LGBTQIA+ acronym). This is best seen in the fact that queer is nowadays commonly used as an umbrella term or shorthand for LGBTQIA+ individuals (Jagose 98; J. Roberts 4; Seidman *Difference* 192). As the following discussion will show, however, queer and LGBTQIA+ are not essentially synonymous, as queerness indeed attempts to go beyond restrictive and limiting definitions of identity or identity politics to begin with, while, furthermore, not every LGBTQIA+ person necessarily identifies with the politicized concept. Not only does this hold true due to the political discrepancies between individuals but also largely because of the troubled and hurtful past connotations associated with the term (Doty *Making* 4).

After all, one of the distinguishing factors that characterizes queerness as such is its transgressive, rebellious, and activist nature. Seeing that queerness as well as its academic counterpart queer theory work "against all normalized hierarchies" (Seidman *Difference* 141) and are, as a result, often perceived as disruptive forces transgressing heteronormativity, patriarchal structures and other oppressive forms of power[14], Seidman contends that "[q]ueers disrupt and subvert in the name of a politic of difference which moves back and forth between anarchism and a radical democratic pluralism" (141). Simultaneously, queer does not seek to adapt or to assimilate (as opposed to certain fractions of LGBTQIA+ rights activists), while it also refuses to stay ostracized, silenced, and marginal (Richardson & Seidman 8). Therefore,

[14] Queerness can moreover be disruptive and subversive in more literal senses as it also claims public spaces that are traditionally queerphobic and reserved for the exhibition of heteronormative relations. This particularly serves the purpose of breaking the silence and invisibility surrounding non-straight identities, desires, bodies, behaviors, and ways of living.

"to identify as a queer means to be politically radical and 'in-your-face' […]. Part of what is being rejected here are attempts to contain people through labeling, so 'queer' is touted as an inclusive, but not exclusive, category, unlike 'straight,' 'gay,' 'lesbian,' or 'bisexual'" (Doty *Making* xiv).

When taking into account this propensity for disrupting and for deconstructing oppressive norms, it already becomes apparent that constructionism is evidently at the root of queer theory, best seen in the ways in which the two fields of critical theory display a certain proclivity for deconstructing hegemonic and normative exclusionary practices and representations: these include concepts such as the idea that no primordial sexual orientation able to define a minority actually exists, sexuality instead ultimately representing a discursive construct. Simultaneously, queer theory also adopted many aspects of poststructuralism[15].

From this it follows that one might perceive queer theory as a natural extension of constructionist leanings, which were, however, re-articulated and adapted to new, rupturing problems queer communities faced during the 1980s. The crucial differences between constructionist points of view and those of queer theorists can be found in the fact that the latter movement came to the realization that constructionism had its limitations, especially when it comes to the sociopolitical landscape and actual real-life struggles of queer people. As Warner wrote in 1993, "[t]he major theoretical debate over constructionism seems exhausted. Partly because that debate resulted in a more historicized and localized view of gay interests" (x). Accordingly, for many, constructionist theory lacked a practice-oriented dimension, an important point I will revert to further below.

In fact, queer theory transcends constructionism in manifold ways: in its strife for LGBTQIA+ rights, constructionism – just as essentialism – treated "homosexuality as a condition of a social minority" (Seidman *Difference* 148) seeing that in its discussions it usually places homosexuality in direct opposition to heterosexuality. Queer theory on the other hand, criticizes these former points of view for proceeding on the assumption that a binary between homosexuality and heterosexuality does exist to begin with. Instead, it is claimed that the premise of a heterosexual center and a marginalized LGBTQIA+ minority does simply not reflect the reality of human sexuality. This is not to say that LGBTQIA+ oppression and discrimination are illusionary, but rather that by acknowledging such divisions these constructed hierarchies and imbalances are further reinforced. The focus of study should thus be shifted towards the deconstruction of the binary in the first place, as Seidman puts it:

[15] Poststructuralism, ultimately, also shares a strong connection to constructionism, as earlier mentioned. Most prominently hereby are assertions such as the one that identities (including gender, sexuality and others) are not stable but in constant flux (Jagose 3).

> A theoretical and political project which aims exclusively to normalize homosexuality and to legitimate homosexuality as a social minority does not challenge a social regime which perpetuates the production of subjects and social worlds organized and regulated by the heterosexual/homosexual binary. Minoritizing epistemological strategies stabilizes a power/knowledge regime which defines bodies, desires, behaviours, and social relations in binary terms according to a fixed hetero/homo sexual preference. Such linguistic and discursive binary figures inevitably get framed in hierarchical terms, thus reinforcing a politics of exclusion and domination. (*Difference* 148-9)

As becomes apparent, queer theory therefore declares homosexuality to be an intrinsic part of society.

*

With this general definition of queer in mind, we might now move on to discuss the birth of its scholarly variant, queer theory: out of the conservative backlash scarring the US during the 1980s and 1990s with its queerphobic and serophobic discourses and actions, the idea of queer and its academic *pendant*, queer theory, arose within the humanities and amidst activist circles (Roseneil 28). Beginning with works such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990), or Diana Fuss's *Essentially Speaking* (1989), "a wave of innovative, critical publications" (Adam 18) stormed the US in the late 1980s and early 1990s, quickly being introduced "into conferences, departments, and bookstores" (Rand 30).

Queer theory did not emerge as an academic field primarily concerned with theoretical critique, but rather as one with a social and political responsibility. Most prominently, the influence and sociopolitical changes this branch of the humanities was able to wield became particularly obvious in queer theorists' "placement in prestigious universities, their growing prominence in gay intellectual culture, and their influence in the radical politics of Queer Nation and HIV/AIDS activism" (Seidman *Difference* 141).

In this regard, I would like to mainly highlight the strong activist dimension present in queerness and queer theory, particularly since many queer theorists were, to some degree, inserted in activist groups and movements of the time, "queer theory [thus] representing a sort of academic arm of activism, wherein the work of theory production might be understood as an explicitly political project" (Rand 6). In an at times almost symbiotic relation, academics and activists were able to counterbalance and support one another, as Rand further details:

> Recognizing that queer theory's emergence and early development is intimately connected to concurrent intellectual and ideological shifts, many histories of the field map its association with activist practices and cultural changes. Likewise, because the queer activism of this period, with its performative, spectacular, and confrontational tactics, represented a departure from earlier gay and lesbian activism, there is no shortage of texts that document its groundbreaking interventions. (6-7)

To further highlight the ways in which queer scholarly work is closely wedded to queer activism, Duggan hints towards the writings of authors "such as Gloria Anzaldua, Kobena Mercer, Douglas Crimp, and Gayle Rubin" ("Making" 26), all of which abstain from complex academic jargon in order to become more accessible and to cater to a wider public[16]. This detail is utmost crucial to the merging of academic work and activism, not least because it aids in "open[ing] up possibilities for coalition across barriers of class, race, and gender, and to somehow satisfy the paradoxical necessity of recognizing differences, while producing (provisional) unity" (26).

Queer theory, however, also wielded great influence in more direct and graspable ways: throughout the 1980s, actual radical political queer activism on American streets and other sites of unrest was primarily provoked by the US government's careless handling of the AIDS crisis. Hereby it is utmost curious that the various forms of activism and protest indeed already comprised many aspects that would later on largely define the academic field of queer theory. That being the case, we might retrospectively declare that queer theory-induced activism already emerged prior to its academic counterpart – and thus influenced its emergence. In this sense, the connections between the two can be best comprehended when considering the ways in which the AIDS crisis was handled discursively during the 1980s.

In a nutshell, AIDS was frequently publicly labeled as a "gay disease", which, consequently, resulted in a negative stigma around LGBTQIA+ individuals. AIDS activists loudly contested these developments, particularly by creating counter-images and -practices to those prejudice- and hate-filled representations, thereby distancing the homosexual from monstrous signifiers, and instead pointing out that difference as well as the challenging of norms was something to be celebrated. To this end, as will be closely discussed in chapter 4, AIDS activists laid emphasis on the fact that HIV/AIDS did not solely occur within a single group of people but was in fact transmitted through certain sexual practices and through specific bodily fluids. Again, a parallel to queer theory can be found in this aspect, inasmuch as specific

[16] While these tendencies and approaches certainly exist, this is not necessarily an overarching feature of queer theory at large. One only needs to look at Judith Butler's utmost complex work to understand the variety of forms queer theorist writing can assume.

identities (or identity politics) became less of a defining focus as these issues were recognized to transcend normative, culturally established identity formations.

The various dimensions and the scope of political activism were instead broadened to include a whole range of individuals living on the margins, including, amongst many others, "not only lesbians and gay men but also bisexuals, transsexuals, sex workers, PWAs (People with AIDS), health workers, and parents and friends of gays" (Jagose 94) – all of which found themselves in as much of an unstable, precarious, and fragile position. In conclusion, the described developments clearly reveal a certain disposition towards deconstructing dominant discourses, representations, and depictions found in both AIDS activism and queer theory. In the same vein, hierarchies of power and oppression in science, epidemiology, or public health work were challenged and held accountable, just like other institutions that are supposed to work in ways that should not discriminate against any type of identity[17] (Jagose 94).

Ultimately, all of the above led to a demand to re-evaluate traditional lesbian and gay politics and identity struggles (95). Jagose thus concludes that

> AIDS activism […] has been one of the most visible sites for the restructuring of sexual identities. The relationship between the new and decentralised activism, and the coming into prominence of queer as a term that can direct attention to identity without solidifying it is contextual rather than causal. Certainly debates (in what were once lesbian and gay contexts) about how to refigure subjectivities and identities differently have been partly reinforced and partly provoked by the new urgency generated by the AIDS crisis. (96)

Just as queer theory took inspiration from AIDS and LGBTQIA+ activism, it was simultaneously greatly stimulated by postmodern scholarship. Similar to queer theory, postmodernism is a term that is rather difficult to fully grasp. Different approaches regarding its meaning co-exist in view of the fact that it stands for a fairly slippery, mutable concept that blurs traditional boundaries. Harking back to its beginnings, we recognize that postmodernism evolved from modernism and the failings thereof. Yet, no clear break exists between both, leading many to therefore speak of postmodernism as an evolution that questions aspects of

[17] Perhaps less obviously, queer individuals also took (and still take) a stance by choosing to consciously demonstrate and enact their queerness in everyday life, like this further expressing and exhibiting their sociopolitical point of view and personal right to exist and to live authentically. These practices can take a variety of forms of intervention: from open and public debates about questions concerning queerness at large, the conquering of mainstream and mass media, participating in parades, marches, or sit-ins, to an actual open display of queer affections, expressions, desires, behaviors, and identities. These forms of protest ultimately reveal that through "our existence and everyday survival we embody sustained and multisited resistance to systems (based on dominant constructions of race and gender) that seek to normalize our sexuality, exploit our labor, and constrain our visibility" (Cohen 440). Certainly, even the type of work this study represents seeks to reflect the very same deconstruction and transgression of normative spaces (as found e.g. in American film and film studies) in which queerness as a whole was long disregarded, ignored, and silenced.

modernism, yet also co-exists with it[18] (Pinedo 18; Seidman *Difference* 10). Therefore, it would be unreasonable to examine postmodernism without briefly considering the characteristics of modernist rationale.

Western modernity[19] finds its Eurocentric beginnings in the Enlightenment. Accordingly, one of its main principles lies in the fact that the world can be scientifically understood and explained in unbiased form, an approach and attitude that greatly challenged prevalent religious worldviews. Over time, this supposedly neutral way of describing the natural and social world was then employed to answer questions regarding the existence of different cultures and their different habits and customs on our planet. In doing so, the non-European Other was quickly (and falsely) deemed inferior, primitive, and less evolved on an evolutionary scale, a reasoning which was, in turn, used to legitimize the global spreading of western culture. Ultimately, to put it briefly, this modern perception of the world claimed that colonialization and westernization reinforced the inevitable progress that humanity as a whole was striving towards (Mease 2-3; Seidman *Difference* 6) so as to create "a highly ordered, unified world that can be objectively known and described" (Mease 3).

Humanity, however, was soon faced with the discovery that it was not necessarily evolving towards a form of progress that brought prosperity, happiness, health, rationality, compassion, and an overall better future, nor that, after all, a uniform worldview or transcendent truth could help bring upon these idealized imaginations. Indeed, the world as it found itself in the 20th century was rather one of unraveling certainties. Isabel Pinedo thus calls attention to the fact that the shift towards a postmodern outlook was occasioned by a "cumulative outcome of repetitive historical stresses, including the Holocaust, the bombing of Hiroshima, the Cold War, the war in Vietnam, the antiwar movement, and the various liberation movements associated with the 1960s" (18). As if this instability did not already cause enough profound ruptures in people's minds and their ways of living, the awareness of the existence of atomic bombs that had the power to instantly eliminate humanity further impacted people and their uniform worldviews.

As a result of these clashing and destabilizing events – many of which were brought upon by scientific and technological progress –, a postmodern sensibility emerged, rejecting

[18] This already becomes apparent in the use of the prefix "post" – signifying a temporal sequence, just as is the case of *post*structuralism –, as Jennifer J. Mease clarifies: "'[p]ost' movements are not so much absolute rejections of, but extensions born out of the failing of structural and modern attempts to adequately describe the world" (1-2).

[19] While modernity speaks about the larger time period that I delineate in the following, the concept of modernism alludes to *fin de siècle* artistic, cultural and social currents that are both a result of and a grappling with events within modernity.

"an ordered and unified reality that could be objectively discovered and described through science" as well as those hierarchies that "reinforc[e] power held by those who share that particular perspective" (Mease 3). In detail, this means that

> [t]he postmodern world is [...] an unstable one in which traditional (dichotomous) categories break down, boundaries blur, institutions fall into question, master narratives collapse, the inevitability of progress crumbles, and the master status of the universal (read: male, white, monied, heterosexual) subject deteriorates. Mastery is lost, universalizing grand theory is discredited, and the stable, unified, coherent self acquires the status of a fiction. (Pinedo 17-18)

Instead of a forced, transcendent, or unitary truth, postmodernists turn towards the idea that every individual constructs their own, legitimate subject position without the claim to universality. Ultimately, this enables "the creation of social spaces that encourage the proliferation of pleasures, desires, voices, interests, modes of individuation and democratization" (Seidman "Identity" 106). The postmodern outlook thus also turned out to be of incredible importance to LGBTQIA+-identified individuals, especially when it came to the questioning of heteronormative and cisnormative structures as well as of science, one of the main players in pathologizing queer individuals and in spreading preconceived notions and prejudice since the late 19th century.

Bearing in mind the deep sociocultural and -political shift that happened throughout the 20th century, American everyday life and, consequently, the arts were also greatly affected. Fear and paranoia were spurred by constant news of doomsday, including the ones about scientific nuclear experiments in the southwest deserts of the United States, the mounting nuclear arms race with the Soviet Union, or the endless images of Armageddon popular media and cinema focused on. Every layer of society was ultimately affected by these anxieties: practicing drills became the order of the day for schoolchildren, while families built "tiny concrete bunkers located in basements and backyards" (Badore 2).

The arts as such responded to these developments by blurring traditionally stable boundaries: most strikingly, the modernist "distinction between high (art world) culture and low (mass) culture" (Pinedo 18) started to crumble, as traditional hierarchies and binaries became more and more shaky. Seeing that each individual truth and subjectivity was now considered to be valid in its own right, the arts began to turn their backs on traditional artistic conventions and instead favored a more playful style, "borrowing […] familiar images and recombining them in unprecedented or seemingly ironic ways" (Mease 4) in order to represent a confidence in smaller, diverse, and more individualized narratives. This was particularly achieved "by emphasizing suspicion, irony, pastiche (borrowing and piecing together), tension,

irrationality, and vulnerability to demonstrate the inadequacy of any particular structure or order for understanding reality"[20] (5).

Returning to my discussion of queer theory, many of the mentioned postmodern tendencies also re-emerge in this context, especially those dealing with the fragmentation of master narratives, amongst which the separation of human beings into heterosexuals and homosexuals might be one of the primary influences structuring 20th century living. As previously proposed, with a conscious effort to tackle these questions, queer theory shifted focus from the study of homosexuality as a minority and its inherent identity politics towards the deconstruction and questioning of the origins of certain constructed binary divisions that sort human existences, sexualities, and subjectivities according to hierarchical value systems (Adam 19).

The questioning of a hetero- *vs*. homosexual binary that is of "primary importance for all modern Western identity and social organization[21]" (Sedgwick *Epistemology* 11) was introduced and particularly made popular by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, a pioneer queer theorist. As Sedgwick hence proposes in the introduction to *Epistemology of the Closet*:

> many of the major nodes of thought and knowledge in twentieth-century Western culture as a whole are structured - indeed, fractured - by a chronic, now endemic crisis of homo/heterosexual definition, indicatively male, dating from the end of the nineteenth century. […] [V]irtually any aspect of modern Western culture must be, not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition" (1).

The heart of the matter lies in the fact that these constructed binaries sustain certain hierarchies, in turn disclosing and nourishing, while simultaneously being sustained by a whole range of binary associations connected to the homo- vs. hetero divide, among which we find

> the categories secrecy/disclosure, knowledge/ignorance, private/public, masculine/feminine, majority/minority, innocence/initiation, natural/artificial, new/old, discipline/terrorism, canonic/noncanonic, wholeness/decadence, urbane/provincial, domestic/foreign, health/illness, same/different, active/passive, in/out, cognition/paranoia, art/kitsch, utopia/apocalypse, sincerity/sentimentality, and voluntarity/addiction. (Sedgwick *Epistemology* 11)

[20] As becomes apparent, there are many overlapping qualities between postmodernism and poststructuralism, which is particularly obvious in their tendency for underlining "ruptures, disjunctions, tensions, instabilities, and other inconsistencies as a part of everyday organizational life" (Mease 1) as well as a rejection of a belief in a transcendent truth (2).

[21] Hereby, clear comparisons to feminism can be made, particularly to the feminist critique of a dominant and oppressive gender binary separating the masculine from the feminine, as both dualities structure "the ordering of desires, behaviors, and social institutions, and social relations – in a word, the constitution of the self and society" (Seidman *Difference* 150).

This exclusionary system ultimately perpetuates specific points of view that are harmful, domineering, and oppressive: in other words, while married, heterosexual individuals hold associations of health, innocence, the natural, and desirable, homosexuality is commonly perceived as deviant, marginal, or as an illness that is undesirable and thus needs to be kept in the realm of secrecy. Not only does queer theory seek to deconstruct and contest this dualistic perspective, but in doing so, it also opens up a debate that questions heterosexuality at its core and its influence in structuring political and social life (Gamson "Sweating" 346).

When engaging in this discussion, it is furthermore imperative to realize that without one category the other would not be able to exist: "the hetero/homo presuppose each other, each is elicited by the other, contained, as it were, in the other, which ultimately accounts for the extreme defensiveness, the hardening of each into a bounded, self-protective hardcore and, at the same time, the opposite tendency toward confusion and collapse" (Seidman *Difference* 153). Though both identities are ultimately constructs, heterosexuality nonetheless puts forth the claim of embodying a natural and undisputable given fact while homosexuality is commonly perceived as an inferior consequence or byproduct of heterosexuality (Jagose 16-7). Herein lies the great obstacle for queer activist work, seeing that "[i]t is particularly hard to denaturalise something like sexuality, whose very claim to naturalisation is intimately connected with an individual sense of self, with the way in which each of us imagines our own sexuality to be primary, elemental and private" (17).

Furthermore, as earlier proposed, another issue arises when dealing with this binary system, insomuch as sexuality cannot be limited to sexual orientation but features an endless plethora of dimensions and expressions. This realization not only destroys any idea of a binary sexual system to begin with – just as the mere existence of bi- or pansexuality does – but also makes us ponder why sexual orientation was chosen as the decisive factor for defining a human being in the first place. In fact, a whole range of elements exist that distinguish people's sexual behaviors from one another – which "include preference for certain acts, certain zones or sensations, certain physical types, a certain frequency, certain symbolic investments, certain relations of age or power, a certain species, a certain number of participants, etc. etc. etc." (Sedgwick *Epistemology* 8). This once again stresses that the preferred gender of one's sexual partner is a completely random factor after which identities are molded, while other possible identities such as the masturbator/ the non-masturbator or the gerontophile/ the non-gerontophile never received as much attention, meaning, and importance.

*

As previously argued, the binary division between hetero- and homosexual identities, creates certain hierarchies of privilege. At the top we find the dominant heteronormative system in which heterosexuality holds "privilege, power, and normative status" (Cohen 445), which implies that non-heterosexual orientations are excluded and bear opposite associations. The concept of heteronormativity – first coined by Michael Warner in *Fear of a Queer Planet* (1993) (see Warner xxi; Castro Varela et al. 3) – thus entails that "institutionalized heterosexuality constitutes the standard for legitimate and expected social and sexual relations. Heteronormativity insures that the organization of heterosexuality in everything from gender to weddings to marital status is held up as both a model and as 'normal'"[22] (Ingraham 76).

Warner warns us that the perks of heterosexuality are manifold and reach into the deepest structures of society: "[h]et[erosexual] culture thinks of itself as the elemental form of human association, as the very model of intergender relations, as the indivisible basis of all community, and as the means of reproduction without which society wouldn't exist" (Warner xxi). Building on Warner's notions to illustrate the depth to which heterosexual privilege is engrained in society as a guiding principle, Ingraham provides us a variety of everyday examples in which these claims hold true, describing heterosexuality as "a highly regulated, ritualized, and organized set of practices" (Ingraham 74) – all of which are based on the notion that they entail the union of a man and a woman (in the traditional sense of a binary gender system). As a result,

> heterosexuality as an established order made up of rule-bound-and standardized behavior patterns qualifies as an institution. […] Heterosexuality is much more than a biological given or whether or not someone is attracted to someone of another sex. Rules on everything from who pays for the date or the wedding rehearsal dinner to who leads while dancing, drives the car, cooks dinner or initiates sex, all serve to regulate heterosexual practice. What circulates as a given in western societies is, in fact, a highly structured arrangement. As is the case with most institutions, people who participate in these practices must be socialized to do so. (Ingraham 74)

In a culture in which heterosexuality becomes a desired ritualistic given and a norm, people who participate in it are rewarded correspondingly (Ingraham 75).

Hereby, however, we need to remember that heteronormativity and heterosexuality are not synonymous – the former describing a system of oppression abusing different-gender love and desire to dominate others, while the latter describes a sexual orientation that by itself does not necessarily hold such power and intentions (Cohen 452). It is also key to understand that

[22] To an extent, we can, again, discern certain similarities to feminist ideas and discourses that understood oppressive patriarchal forces as an inherent and damaging guiding principle of western society.

there is no unitary heterosexuality, just as there exist a multiplicity of queer, fluid, and ever-evolving identities. While in our society heterosexuality usually "results in some form of privilege and feelings of supremacy" (459), it is not a uniform or monolithic descriptor that necessarily grants the same privilege to everyone or needs to be perceived as anti- or contra-queer (452). Cohen accordingly recognizes certain "spaces of shared or similar oppression and resistance that provide a basis for radical coalition work" (453) found in examples such as the reality of the long-lasting prohibition of interracial marriages (454).

We might therefore conclude that heteronormativity interlocks with a variety of other systemic oppressors and features a number of nuanced layers of power. Debates about heterosexuality and heteronormativity should thus be able to recognize the existence of

> heterosexuals on the outside of heteronormative privilege, in particular those perceived as threatening systems of white supremacy, male domination, and capitalist advancement […]. An understanding of the ways in which heteronormativity works to support and reinforce institutional racism, patriarchy, and class exploitation must therefore be a part of how we problematize current constructions of heterosexuality. (Cohen 455)

In this respect, queer theory acknowledges the pain and oppression inherent in heterosexuality as a systemic institution. It aims at disrupting it so as to allow for wider possibilities of acceptance and respectful co-existence of difference and individuality (Seidman *Difference* 157), besides "releas[ing] possibilities for bodily, sexual, and social experiences which are submerged or marginalized by the dominant regime. Queer theory's social hope is allied to proliferating forms of personal and social difference" (157) (an idea that the movie *Shortbus* will take up e.g.). These struggles are, furthermore, not only directed towards marginalized minorities, but also serve to break open possibilities for heterosexual-identified persons, who are just as oppressed by the same reductive hierarchies, enabling them to explore and traverse the same margins and limitations forced upon them.

In a similar vein, Judith Butler's work vastly advanced scholarly studies regarding the opening of possibilities of sex and gender as well as the deconstruction of oppressive institutions such as the one of heteronormativity. However, before diving deeper into these ideas, it is necessary to define, distinguish, and to deconstruct a few basic, yet crucial, terms related to these topics, in particular the concepts of sex and gender. Sex is commonly understood as biological markers that differentiate human beings into men and women, amongst which we find "genital formation, hair growth (in populations that have body hair), fat distribution, hormonal function, and reproductive capacity" (Sedgwick *Epistemology* 27). Although these physical features are often referred to as being intrinsic markers that are defined

by human biology (27-8), Butler contradicts these notions by arguing that they are not as immutable as they seem.

In her work, the author thus provides ample evidence for this argument through a post-structuralist approach, explaining that our physical bodies and their diverse features have been given significance and have been marked through language and discourse. Butler thus imagines the existence of alternative, possible realities in which "these features could be named in a way that would not reproduce the reductive operation of the categories of sex" (Butler *Gender* 155). Indeed, the central issue in this respect lies in the fact that the attributes that ultimately determine sex – or rather what should and should not be a distinguishing factor between the supposedly homogeneous classifications of men and women – are selected in a rather arbitrary manner (Butler *Bodies* xiv; Butler *Gender* 155). Butler thus speaks of a random fragmentation of the human body and a limiting of the erogenous to certain, limited parts of it. From this it follows that "the 'unity' imposed upon the body by the category of sex is a 'disunity'" (Butler *Gender* 156).

That being said, Judith Butler does in no way reject nor does she try to deny specific and graspable physical facts of the human body. The decisive point hence lies not in denying that bodily processes, attributes, compositions, anatomy, and conditions are indeed facts, but rather in the implication of "what it might mean to affirm them and through what discursive means" (*Bodies* x). Simplistic cultural interpretations are thus at the center of this debate as well as the fact that "those categories have a history and a historicity, […] [and] that relations of discourse and power produce hierarchies and overlappings among them and challenge those boundaries" (36). As will become most obvious in chapter 4, these matters would become of high importance in the deconstruction of HIV/AIDS and its metaphoric meaning during the AIDS crisis.

Butler's argument of a fraud binary sex system can be further supported when turning towards those individuals who do not fall into either category. These naturally include individuals whose hormonal levels do not correspond to the norm of their given sex or whose chromosomal or other physical attributes (such as genitalia) do not comply to the same. Hereby, even biologists gradually adopt the opinion that "a binary view of human sex is overly simplistic and that sex should be viewed as a spectrum rather than a dichotomy, in terms of anatomical, hormonal, and even cellular sex" (Morgenroth & Ryan 2).

Intersex people might be the most apparent example in this regard as their non-normative physicality clearly reflects this reasoning: "intersex is the circumstance in which the harmony between the sexual chromosomes, sexual hormones, genitalia, gonads (testicles and

ovaries) and secondary sexual characteristics evades the criteria stipulated for the categorization of a person as male or female, which makes it impossible to determine their overall sex" (Santos 127). Due to the strict sex binary that is culturally engrained and deeply institutionalized, intersex children for the longest have been forced into living as either men or women, despite the fact of their bodily truths. In most cases doctors and parents thus opt to force their children to go through invasive surgery even before they have any sense of self. This, in turn, proves that an individual is treated as in need of being fixed (often without legal backing), as abnormal, non-human, and abject as long as they do not belong to either one of the culturally determined sexes. The force behind this clinging to a strict two-sex system, as Santos goes on to explain, is intrinsic to upholding our society:

> When a body has an ambiguous appearance, everything will be done, technologically and otherwise, to fit it into the normal pattern of sexual difference, thereby preventing that body from destabilizing the organization of society. Sexually ambiguous bodies are controlled by medicine and subjected to socialization procedures so that sex, body, behaviour, sexuality and secondary characteristics will function in harmony with each other and conform to the ideology of a heterosexist society. (Santos 128)

Ultimately, as has been presented, the sex divide serves several purposes "of domination and compulsion" (Butler *Gender* 157), especially when keeping in mind that "'sex' not only functions as a norm, but is part of a regulatory practice that produces the bodies it governs, that is, whose regulatory force is made clear as a kind of productive power, the power to produce— demarcate, circulate, differentiate— the bodies it controls" (Butler *Bodies* xi-xii). The reality that human beings exist that do not comply to these culturally defined categories is correspondingly completely disregarded.

Having outlined the difficulties in defining sex, it is imperative to recognize that it is also closely connected to a second concept I would like to delve into, namely that of gender. Traditionally the understanding reigns that sex correlates to physical and biological elements able to demarcate men and women, whereas gender represents the cultural and behavioral dimension thereof, in turn producing and marking ideas about femininity and masculinity:

> Gender, then, is the far more elaborated, more fully and rigidly dichotomized social production and reproduction of male and female identities and behaviors —of male and female *persons*—in a cultural system for which "male/female" functions as a primary and perhaps model binarism affecting the structure and meaning of many, many other binarisms whose apparent connection to chromosomal sex will often be exiguous or nonexistent. (Sedgwick *Epistemology* 27-8)

As becomes apparent, amongst scholars, sex and gender are hence conventionally perceived as separate (yet connected) entities – sex being an immutable, corporeal fact, whereas gender is perceived as a more fluid cultural construct.

Nonetheless, the relation between sex and gender is usually deemed an almost synergetic one, as they depend on and strengthen one another so as to appear more natural. Bearing in mind the constructed nature of both categories[23], this, then again, produces further issues: as has been established, there is a general belief in western society that sex is a natural given upon which gender, the cultural dimension of sex, is built upon. Yet, if we presuppose that sex in itself is a construct, then gender suddenly lacks any type of stable basis to support it. This basis, in turn, is necessary to define and justify the existence of a corresponding two gender system to begin with: because there is a male and female sex, respective male and female genders must exist. Hereby, "gender emerges, not as a term in a continued relationship of opposition to sex, but as the term which absorbs and displaces 'sex'" (Butler *Bodies* xv). We might therefore conclude that the continuous counterposing of sex (as a natural given) and gender (as a cultural construct) ultimately serves to veil sex's constructed nature.

As also becomes apparent from this discussion, both the normative sex and gender binaries work in similar ways, being based on the principle of exclusion which separates people into conforming (and therefore human) and nonconforming (inhuman) ones, leading to "radical erasures" and the disavowal of "the possibility of cultural articulation" (Butler *Bodies* xvii). Most obviously, transgender or gender non-binary individuals are frequently the ones suffering discrimination and inhumane treatments due to these hierarchical categorizations. Considering these realities, Butler warns us that by keeping discourses around gender exclusively attached to masculinity and femininity, we inherently abide by a two-gender system that ostracizes large groups of people who do not fall into a dichotomous system – i.e. people, who are actually "as much a part of gender as its most normative instance" (Butler *Undoing* 42).

We might now ask ourselves to what effect the discussed binaries are upheld and what possible benefits lie behind these means of oppression and regulation. It is necessary to remember that gender creates "a *unity* of experience, of sex, gender, and desire" (Butler *Gender* 30) by displacing these very same categories into a binary division of male and female. In this regard, I would like to specifically highlight that *desire* (which includes sexual orientation) also falls under this category: after all, society tells us that two opposite genders (male and female) are "meant" to belong together and to form a heterosexual union – which brings us back to the

[23] As I have already carefully delineated, sex is not as determined as it might appear and does not fit into a binary mold, hence, in point of fact, being just as much of a cultural construct as gender (9-10).

topic of heteronormativity. Like a seemingly well-oiled machine, the heterosexual union, in turn, namely strengthens the gender binary:

> The internal coherence or unity of either gender, man or woman, thereby requires both a stable and oppositional heterosexuality. That institutional heterosexuality both requires and produces the univocity of each of the gendered terms that constitute the limit of gendered possibilities within an oppositional, binary gender system. This conception of gender presupposes not only a causal relation among sex, gender, and desire, but suggests as well that desire reflects or expresses gender and that gender reflects or expresses desire. The metaphysical unity of the three is assumed to be truly known and expressed in a differentiating desire for an oppositional gender—that is, in a form of oppositional heterosexuality. (Butler *Gender* 30-1)

In conclusion, it can therefore be affirmed that the two-gender and -sex system exist as instruments to uphold "a patriarchal system of compulsory heterosexuality in which women serve as a means of reproduction to men, as their mothers and wives. These power structures are both *prohibitive* (i.e., proscriptive), repressing deviating gender performance, as well as *generative* (i.e., prescriptive), creating binary, heteronormative gender performance" (Morgenroth & Ryan 3). In this way, a coherence between sex, gender, and desire is established, maintained, and falsely naturalized (Butler *Gender* 31). To illustrate this point, I would like to draw attention once again to the fact that heterosexuality is constantly advertised and performed in the majority of daily situations and practices, thus appearing to be ever-present and ubiquitous, as previously exemplified. In effect, heteronormativity has long been enforced as the one and only way after which we need to orient our lives and the only acceptable form of behaving, living, and thinking.

Though it permeates almost every corner of societal living, dismantling this system as a charade (at least theoretically) is not much of a hassle: most noticeably, this is a system that excludes and marginalizes a wide variety of forms of desire that *actually* exist and that are just as much of a graspable reality as the one that heterosexuality represents. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that sexuality is indeed fluid, which also implies that "there are structures of psychic homosexuality within heterosexual relations, and structures of psychic heterosexuality within gay and lesbian sexuality and relationships" (Butler *Gender* 165). This leads us to the conclusion that a system built on the idea that heterosexuality is a ubiquitous given is but a farce: "heterosexuality offers normative sexual positions that are intrinsically impossible to embody, and the persistent failure to identify fully and without incoherence with these positions reveals heterosexuality itself not only as a compulsory law, but as an inevitable comedy" (166).

Similar practices of debunking culturally defined norms become evident when further engaging with Butler's writing. More precisely, returning to my discussion of gender, in her

work Judith Butler finds ways to demonstrate through which means cultural gender norms can be easily contested and dismantled. Butler thus puts forth the claim that gender is performative, which already insinuates that it is not determined in biology or within a human being in any other way. Instead, "acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body […]. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means" (Butler *Gender* 185-6).

The idea of performativity in specific harks back to J. L. Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* (1962), a work "on performative utterances, [in which Austin] refers to speech acts or behaviors which create the very thing they describe" (Morgenroth & Ryan 3) and was originally not expressly linked to ideas of gender. For clarification, we can take Morgenroth and Ryan's example of performativity, in which they explain that pronouncing someone man and wife, for instance, is not only used to describe the actual act of speaking (or rather, pronouncing), but simultaneously this act features a second layer, namely that of creating the actual marital bond (3). When applying this to the idea of gender, Butler is thus not speaking of theatrical performances or a show an individual puts on and is able to end at any moment. Her idea of performativity does not represent a deliberate or willful act, but, as will be closely explained in the following, Butler rather believes that through unconscious everyday repetition, every dimension of gender can find expression and confirms and strengthens the gendered sexual identity of a subject (Jagose 86-8).

Seeing that gender is performative, Butler determines that gender is also an "activity" (*Gender* 152) or "a doing" (34) that is not performed and realized by the subject consciously (34). Rather, it is a repeated, ritualized public action, one "that endows the subject with sexual identity, and this identity is a category that results from the effect of institutions, practices and discourses" (Santos 131) – all of which have already been "socially established"[24] (Butler *Gender* 191). Correspondingly, certain ways of behaving, of expressing, and representing

[24] Here, Althusser's concept of interpellation comes to mind, which denotes ongoing acts that are implemented by authorities so as to name and reenforce certain character traits "through a compelling mixture of recognition and identification" (Jagose 78).

ourselves are generally either attached to masculinity or femininity and, in the process, believed to form "an internal essence of gender"[25] (xv).

Lastly, I would like to clarify that gender performativity, despite being a construct, is utmost relevant in people's lives and even represents "an important domain of pleasure for many" (Butler "Gender Performance" n.p.). In an interview with *The TransAdvocate*, in which Butler looks back at *Gender Trouble* twenty-four years after the publication of its first edition, the author reveals this general misconception about her work, explaining that:

> I sought to expand our sense of what gender realities could be. But I think I needed to pay more attention to what people feel, how the primary experience of the body is registered, and the quite urgent and legitimate demand to have those aspects of sex recognized and supported. I did not mean to argue that gender is fluid and changeable (mine certainly is not). I only meant to say that we should all have greater freedoms to define and pursue our lives without pathologization, de-realization, harassment, threats of violence, violence, and criminalization. I join in the struggle to realize such a world. (Butler "Gender Performance" n.p.)

Ultimately, as the scholar already mentioned in *Gender Trouble*, "[g]enders can be neither true nor false, neither real nor apparent, neither original nor derived" (192-3). The bottom line of this discussion thus lies in the fact that all positions on and types of gender need to be recognized.

With a more thorough awareness of the performativity of gender, we can now turn towards the deconstruction of the hierarchical gender binary, which, in effect, allows for the opening and transformation of gender norms. The basis for this assumption lies in the idea that although we are always engaging in repetitive performative practices – even if unwillingly –, we can still choose to repeat different variations of these acts, which can, in turn, become naturalized in their own right. Indeed, to a certain degree, these resignifications already happen on a daily basis, seeing that gender norms can never be fully enforced and are always prone to failure (Butler *Gender* 192; 198-200), thus enabling "the possibility of a complex reconfiguration and redeployment" (199). As can be deduced from this, these transgressive strategies can be deliberately enabled "through participating in precisely those practices of repetition that constitute identity and, therefore, present the immanent possibility of contesting them" (201).

[25] Butler furthermore reflects that performativity might have become naturalized and might have received the status of an unquestioned, innate "interior and organizing gender core" (Butler *Gender* 186) in western society due to its seemingly ubiquitous nature, the ways it permeates culture and cultural discourses, and, just as importantly, due to the respective punishments that are enforced whenever one fails to comply to these restrictive gender norms (*Gender* 190). This is especially seen in the hate, violence, and oppression directed towards women, the LGBTQIA+ communities, and, above all, transgender individuals who represent a highly vulnerable demographic.

The subversion of gender, moreover, has a variety of positive outcomes: first and foremost, bearing in mind its close-knit ties to sex (sex being a gendered category in itself) and to heteronormativity (a system based on a two-gender illusion), the dismantling of gender as a binary can, in turn, lead to a deconstruction of these oppressive institutions and systems. Above all, the subversion of gender also bears political value, which is especially perceptible in its power to deconstruct identities and to, simultaneously, prove that politics built around identities can be – but do not have to be[26] – harmful:

> If identities were no longer fixed as the premises of a political syllogism, and politics no longer understood as a set of practices derived from the alleged interests that belong to a set of ready-made subjects, a new configuration of politics would surely emerge from the ruins of the old. Cultural configurations of sex and gender might then proliferate or, rather, their present proliferation might then become articulable within the discourses that establish intelligible cultural life, confounding the very binarism of sex, and exposing its fundamental unnaturalness. (Butler *Gender* 203)

Yet, it is also important to understand that gender subversion is not about eradicating gender altogether, but to a greater degree about opening up possibilities of self-expression and ways of living and breathing one's life, as Butler states in an interview:

> No matter whether one feels one's gendered and sexed reality to be firmly fixed or less so, every person should have the right to determine the legal and linguistic terms of their embodied lives. So whether one wants to be free to live out a "hard-wired" sense of sex or a more fluid sense of gender, is less important than the right to be free to live it out, without discrimination, harassment, injury, pathologization or criminalization – and with full institutional and community support. (Butler "Gender Performance" n.p.)

Furthermore, when it comes to gender subversion, Butler makes clear that ultimate, specific distinctions and value judgements between acts that can be deemed subversive or non-subversive are impossible to make, precisely because gender norms are volatile and can change through time as well as from context to context (Butler *Gender* xxii). She nonetheless gives examples of methods with the help of which today's gender norms can be dismantled, further demonstrating how the fragility of the gender binary is prone to change. As a means to achieve

[26] As earlier mentioned, uniting as an identity group can be quite important, particularly when having an objective to achieve change. Furthermore, it can foster group solidarity and a sense of belonging, which are imperative and valid, particularly for individuals that find themselves ostracized within the general population. In her preface to *Gender Trouble* that was added in 1999, Butler herself confesses that she learned about the importance of identity politics after the publication of her book through her political engagements with diverse groups, describing it as follows: "I came to understand how the assertion of universality [or rather essentialism] can be proleptic and performative, conjuring a reality that does not yet exist, and holding out the possibility for a convergence of cultural horizons that have not yet met. Thus, I arrived at a second view of universality in which it is defined as a future-oriented labor of cultural translation" (Butler *Gender* xviii).

this, Butler therefore suggests parody, a postmodern device that will also be used time and time again in New Queer Cinema, as will become apparent in later chapters. Since there is no gender core to begin with – which implies that no original and imitation can exist – parody always reveals that the

> failure to become "real" and to embody "the natural" is […] a constitutive failure of all gender enactments for the very reason that these ontological locales are fundamentally uninhabitable. Hence, there is a subversive laughter in the pastiche-effect of parodic practices in which the original, the authentic, and the real are themselves constituted as effects. […] As the effects of a subtle and politically enforced performativity, gender is an "act," as it were, that is open to splittings, self-parody, self-criticism, and those hyperbolic exhibitions of "the natural" that, in their very exaggeration, reveal its fundamentally phantasmatic status. (Butler *Gender* 200)

Butler then goes on to suggest drag as a more direct example, i.e. "not precisely *an example* of subversion" (Butler *Gender* xxiii), but rather one that serves as another instance to substantiate the fragility of the gender binary[27]. To begin with, it becomes crucial to look into the way drag completely disrupts the sex-gender relation: if we take, for instance, a cisgender male drag performer[28] (a person that thus might bear male primary and/or secondary sexual characteristics), who is, however, dressed in ways that are traditionally attributed to the female gender, while also performing accordingly,

> we are actually in the presence of three contingent dimensions of significant corporeality: anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance. If the anatomy of the performer is already distinct from the gender of the performer, and both of those are distinct from the gender of the performance, then the performance suggests a dissonance not only between sex and performance, but sex and gender, and gender and performance. (Butler *Gender* 188)

Our compulsion to identify gender through superficial signifiers, such as a person's anatomy or clothes, can be broken once we encounter a drag performer. According to Butler, drag thus shows how misleading the idea of a gender reality or origin can be: "[t]he moment in which […] one cannot with surety read the body that one sees, is precisely the moment when one is no longer sure whether the body encountered is that of a man or a woman. […] When such categories come into question, the *reality* of gender is also put into crisis: it becomes

[27] Though drag can visualize the constructed nature of gender and even though a performer can parody or 'play' with normative gender roles, they are not necessarily able to overthrow these norms. Hate crimes committed towards gender-nonconforming individuals very much stress this point, as they are commonly committed so as to police any divergent forms of gender expression. Hence, "Butler in fact is suggesting that the very displacement of gender norms can lead to a strengthening of those norms" (Contreras 123).

[28] I would like to clarify that the art of drag is not restricted to cisgender gay men, as is often supposed. Indeed, a whole variety of female, transgender, or gender-nonbinary drag artists exist, proving that neither sex, sexual orientation, nor gender are variants in defining a drag performer.

unclear how to distinguish the real from the unreal" (Butler *Gender* xxiv). We come to understand that our perception of a primary gender identity is mutable, that it is not fixed, and that it is based on shaky ground, or rather, "[i]*n imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency*" (Butler *Gender* 187). In the end, similar to the idea of the simulacrum, gender identity can be reduced to "a fantasy of a fantasy" (Butler *Gender* 188) that perpetuates the myth of an original that never existed to begin with.

Bearing in mind Butler's writings and the above-stated, we also gather that queer theory very much engages with issues related to the body and desire, including, amongst many others, matters such as queer bodies in public spaces, hierarchies of desirability, (mis)representations and the pathologizing of queer love and desire, issues of corporeal transitioning and its politization, or politics regarding the normative ordering of bodies. Queer theory thus goes beyond a tight gripping onto ideas around homo- vs. heterosexuality, and instead wants to explore all those pluralistic corporeal and sensual experiences that are usually disregarded and silenced in these reductive debates:

> If gender preference is authorized as *the* master category of sexual and self identity, so that bodies, desires, and identities are organized and framed chiefly as heterosexual or homosexual, a wide range of experiences that pertain to the body and desire - but not chiefly to gender preference - are marginalized, pathologized or simply de-politicized in public culture e.g., S/M, transgendered practices, multiple partner sex, butch-fem eroticism, intergenerational, interracial intimacies, public sex, erotic play between children and between teens, or intimacies that depart from the norm of long-term, cohabiting, nuclear units. […] Queer politics presses for a transgressive politic of the body, desire, and identity against the normalization of "sexuality" enforced by the straight and gay mainstream. (Seidman *Difference* 196)

Accordingly, issues pertaining to the realms of the body and desire will be taken up over and over again in this project, while more insight into these matters will be unfolded throughout the next chapters.

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With this discussion in mind and so as to conclude this chapter, I would lastly like to address the question of how the previous definitions and reasonings will apply to my own usage of the terms LGBTQIA+[29] and queer throughout this project. While, as established, the idea of

[29] Occasionally, shorter or alternative versions of the acronym such as LG, LGBT, or LGBT+ might show up in my writing when quoting a source material that refers to individuals in such manner or when referring to contexts limited to these initials.

homosexuality[30] can be deemed a construct, it still holds personal meaning and an important place to a large part of people and society as a whole, which is a fact that needs to be cherished and respected. Seeing that a variety of people self-identify as such, I will not shy away from using these descriptors of self-identification. The same certainly applies to the other identities forming the acronym LGBTQIA+. As such, I will always bear in mind that terms such as homosexuality, bisexuality, or even intersex are in themselves not coherent or monolithic, as my discussion in this chapter has proven.

Though the incredibly complex meaning of queer has already been established at large throughout this chapter, I nonetheless choose to occasionally use it as an umbrella term or as a shorthand for LGBTQIA+ communities. I decided to do so as both, the acronym[31] and queerness as such, speak of a diversity of individuals without clear borders, while also giving voice and highlighting the intersectionality found within the community. Yet, hereby my intent is not to conflate the terms queer and gay or to use them as interchangeable synonyms. Exceptions are therefore carefully made in certain moments when I speak of persons who limit themselves to a specific identity.

Mostly, queer will, however, be used to address positions that subvert and destabilize (hetero)normative and binary identities, practices, and ideologies. Hence, "[q]*ueer* is more likely to deconstruct labels like GLBT than to unite and essentialize them" (R. Jones 767). Lastly, queer will be used as an adjective, a noun, as well as a verb, seeing that it is not only possible for someone to identify as queer or as *a* queer, but queering something can also be an action. Hence, an individual or an object, a situation or a moment can be queered through subversive acts, including, for instance, straight-identified individuals or heteronormative spaces. In this respect, Alexander Doty offers a perfect example by explaining that "[y]ou might identify yourself as a lesbian or a straight woman yet queerly experience the gay erotics of male buddy films such as *Red River* and *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*" (*Making* 15). Queerness thus lurks everywhere, while everyone can experience moments that fall out of the compulsive heterosexist order.

Most importantly, grounding my analyses on the theory discussed in this very chapter, every filmic artifact in this study will be examined from a queer point of view, thus already demarcating, critiquing, and reviewing (the lack of) queer representations within each film. Furthermore, this endeavor will be facilitated and enabled through so called queer reading-

[30] I will use homosexuality interchangeably with gay and lesbian, just in the same way in which straight and heterosexual will be used in undifferentiated manner.

[31] LGBTQIA+ not only already hints towards a plethora of identities, but it also includes the category-defying *queer*, while the + further indicates that many more, infinite identities belong to this category.

practices. Considering my discussion of queer theory, it becomes plausible that these subversive practices are indeed already part of the academic discipline. In other words, queer theory namely also "describes a diverse range of critical practices and priorities: readings of the representation of same-sex desire in literary texts, films, music, images," which include "analyses of the social and political power relations of sexuality; critiques of the sex-gender system; studies of transsexual and transgender identification, of sadomasochism and of transgressive desires" (Spargo 9). Looking closer, we understand that these academic developments and endeavors are related to a shift towards respecting audiences' autonomy and authority regarding film watching, as Dhaenens, et al. explain:

> Film theory in general initially tended toward conceptualizing the audience as a textually constructed, passive spectator, in contrast with the cultural studies approach of considering audiences as individual active viewers, although this tendency began to change in the 1980s […]. An active viewer implies that a text no longer can be seen as signifying identity and class and that sex, ethnicity, and nationality are incorporated into the concept of identity. (339)

Following the pioneering queer re-readings of literary works, perhaps first popularized with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Between Men* (1985) (as well as those of scholars disclosing queer subtexts in movies such as Doty's *Flaming Classics: Queering the Film Canon* [1993]), queer theory very much engages with mass media in ways that "uncover homosexual meanings and desires in what are considered straight contexts - in television sitcoms, in disciplinary knowledges and literature, in concepts of citizenship and nationalism as well as in the operation of the state" (Seidman *Difference* 192-3). Though most of the movies I chose to focus on in this study do not necessarily play with queerness through subtextual form, but are rather very explicitly queer, these moments of queer readings of supposedly heteronormative texts will nonetheless emerge from time to time. Simultaneously, queer audience reception practices are not only about the disclosure of underlying queerness within filmic texts but also critique open portrayals of queerness in movies, which are often one-sided, highly stereotyped, and fraudulent representations (Dhaenens, et al. 341).

As becomes apparent, these visions go hand in hand with that of Judith Butler whose previously elaborated statements revealed that queer sensibilities are present in supposedly strictly straight realms. Finally, it is of importance to note that these reception practices are not necessarily a recent development, nor that they emerged with the rise of queer theory. To a greater degree, it is fair to say that they have been part of queer audiences' engagement with media for a considerable time, even when these readings were mere interpretations of certain subtexts that could be deemed queer in one way or another. After all, as Doty informs us,

"'queerness' [is] a mass culture reception practice that is shared by all sorts of people in varying degrees of consistency and intensity" (*Making* 2). After all, even film might be deemed "a social practice for its makers and its audience; in its narratives and meanings we can locate evidence of the ways in which our culture makes sense of itself" (Turner 3).

Due to a lack of representations of queerness in film for most of the 20th century, audience members developed their own, personal readings that "necessitated the strategy of selective and carefully chosen identificatory practices" (Benshoff *Monsters* 37). This, then again, proves that these practices are not necessarily restricted to the realm of academia, but rather, in a much wider sense, "queer reception is often a place beyond the audience's conscious 'real-life' definition of their sexual identities and cultural positions—often, but not always, beyond such sexual identities and identity politics, that is. […] Queer reception doesn't stand outside personal and cultural histories; it is part of the articulation of these histories" (Doty *Making* 15). Therefore, we might conclude that queer readings – inside or outside of the academic realm – are as valid as those formed through heteronormative lenses, or rather, "[q]ueer readings aren't 'alternative' readings, wishful or willful misreadings, or 'reading too much into things' readings. They result from the recognition and articulation of the complex range of queerness that has been in popular culture texts and their audiences all along" (Doty *Making* 16).

2) "I wish I knew how to quit *defining* you:" Towards a Definition of Independent Cinema

Many scholars have stirred up a hornet's nest in the attempt of finding a conclusive definition of independent cinema. The root of the matter is that although nowadays there seems to be a general consensus regarding the meaning of independent film, the concept has consistently mutated throughout the course of film history in accord with numerous transitions that occurred inside as well as outside the film business (be they due to changes in the studio system, the introduction of new technologies, shifting trends in viewership and in society at large, or more general industry-related factors). As a result, the notion of independent film has become increasingly vague and more complex to delineate.

In order to get a grasp of what cinematic "independence" entails, it is helpful to start by looking at the way it is commonly understood and used in common parlance. Indeed, there is a widespread romanticized idea of what characterizes independent filmmaking: an autonomous, young and preferably yet-unknown individual creates a low-budget film without any interference from a second-party producer, distributor or other industry-related entity. Furthermore, this idealized form of moviemaking is supposedly made with no commercial viability and thus represents the most straightforward way in which an *auteur* is allowed to express his subjective vision without succumbing to any type of restraint. In doing so, the reasoning goes, a filmmaker can set himself/herself/themselves apart from commercialized and corporate-driven Hollywood productions and thus becomes enabled to explore more "realist", "honest", and "authentic" methods of creating films (Levy 2-3; Berra 16; Tzioumakis 1; Ortner 1). This does, however, not imply that independent cinema is a mere narcissistic indulgence of a movie buff. Instead, it is claimed that a specific demographic of moviegoers exists, yearning for subversive pictures; an elitist audience, critically aware of the alleged inferiority of mass media texts, finding refuge in the complexities and the intellectual challenge that independent cinema holds (Ortner 12; Newman "Indie Film" 28).

These oversimplified ideas have been diffused by critics and audiences alike, mystifying independent movies as a rebellious anti-establishment cinematic form. Most paradoxically, the same discourse is often used by industry members themselves as an advertising and marketing tool to reach niche audiences. The noncommercial dimension of the artform which independent aficionados often cherish is therefore commonly exploited by the main industry players as a commercial strategy to generate profit, as seen, for instance, in the well-known case of

"Indiewood"[32]. Ultimately, while the above-presented description of independent filmmaking – or the many analogous variations thereof – has become firmly entrenched in our cultural imaginary, on closer examination of the historical development of the concept we find that limiting independent cinema to a picture-perfect form of rebellious moviemaking contradicts the reality of the movie industry as well as of independent filmmaking practices on various levels. In point of fact, these generalized ideas represent but a fraction of the scope of cinematic independence. As will be illustrated over the course of this chapter, the central idea of an independent *auteur* with unrestrained-control over his work is greatly at odds with the actual workings of the industry and only very few have ever been able to find widespread distribution without any type of outside interference.

Despite its oversimplification, the above-described characteristics of independent features are nonetheless useful in sorting out in which ways and from which entities a film can actually gain "independence". More precisely, overall, there are two types of independence that can be distilled, namely (1) an independence on a financial as well as (2) an independence in form of artistic expression opposing more commercially viable forms of filmmaking (Levy 3; Lewis 1). At the heart of this debate thus lie the independence *from* the major players in the business and the independence *of* the artist to freely follow his/her/their subjective vision, two aspects deeply interrelated as will be shown in the following.

When speaking about the commercial independence a movie can hold, we usually consider a distancing of a film from the corporate-sponsored Hollywood market where filmmaking generally first and foremost serves commercial interests. Accordingly, independent film usually appears to be standing in opposition to the mainstream in economic terms as it commonly features lower budgets and minor advertising campaigns, reaches smaller audiences in smaller venues and is therefore less profit-driven. As a result, at first glance, making an independent film without major support seems almost like a more authentic choice, like a love letter to the art of moviemaking rather than out of ulterior financial motives. As Sherry Ortner explains, there is a common idea that the further a production distances itself from Hollywood financing, the bigger its independence becomes (6, 10-12).

However, as will be explained further below, seeing that independent film still holds on to certain mainstream molds and in fact represents a profitable market on its own, independent cinema should not be necessarily perceived as opposing the Hollywoodian norm, as it rather

[32] The concept of indie films or "indies" describes Hollywood-produced independent hybrids that particularly emerged with the boom of independent filmmaking during the 1990s. Accordingly, Indiewood denotes specific divisions within Hollywood focused on independent filmmaking (see chapter 2.3 for a more detailed discussion of the terms).

inhabits a space in-between Hollywood (as the most commercial branch of the film industry) and the avant-garde (as the less commercially-viable and most experimental way to make movies) (Ortner 2; Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 191).

Certainly, a multitude of issues arise when trying to pinpoint the exact industrial position of independent film. Indeed, between the camps of "Hollywood" and the "avant-garde" lies a plethora of utmost diverse movies: from blaxploitation films such as *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (Melvin Van Peebles, 1971), to the horror mockumentary *The Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick & Eduardo Sánchez, 1999), to the extremely low-budget mumblecore[33] feature *Hannah Takes the Stairs* (Joe Swanberg, 2007), up to the studio-financed Oscar-winner *Moonlight* (Barry Jenkins, 2016), independent filmmaking represents an amalgam of different styles, aesthetics, (sub)genres, ideological settings, as well as production-related, financial, and personal backgrounds (Holmlund "Introduction: From the Margins" 3; King *American* 2). Considering to what extent some of the above-mentioned movies differ in style and content, it also becomes a challenge to determine a specific and homogeneous target audience of independent cinema: the idealized smart, elitist, and progressive moviegoer is hence revealed to be wishful thinking.

The act of defining independent film in terms of commercial or industrial freedom is additionally aggravated by the fact that, particularly since the 1990s, Hollywood has found an interest in independent features, thus further blurring the boundaries between the two camps by creating independent-mainstream hybrids (Levy 2-4) – a development that will be closely discussed in chapter 2.3. Indeed, many well-known independent companies, such as New Line Cinema or Miramax, have become subsidiaries of entertainment conglomerates. This development within the movie industry thus opens up the question whether big-budget projects such as *The Lord of the Rings* franchise (which was produced by New Line already under the entertainment conglomerate AOL Time Warner) indeed still rank among independent productions or whether a former independent studio/ production company can in fact lose its claim to being an independent business by becoming part of the mainstream (Tzioumakis 3). Following this reasoning, however, opens up a Pandora's box of further issues: were all studio-related independent companies to be taken out of the equation, studio-produced or -financed productions with a vast independent aesthetic or spirit (a concept that will be discussed further below), as e.g. the films of Wes Anderson, could consequently not be deemed independent anymore (4-5).

[33] Mumblecore is a low-budget film form emerging in the mid-2000s that took advantage of the low-key aesthetics and sound of the early digital film format as well as of improvisation by non-trained actors and thus established a subtle and distinguished type of independent cinema (King "Independent" 201-2).

As becomes clear, drawing a dividing line between independent cinema and non-independent cinema is of utmost complexity if not impossible: in point of fact, the idea of complete independence within the film industry is an almost utopian vision, as virtually no filmmaker – with the exception of a privileged few – is ever truly able to find wide distribution outside the tight grip of the workings of the business, or, more specifically, as John Berra explains, "from the field of economic power, in this case represented by studios, distributors, exhibitors, and promotional media" (15). Berra goes on to describe that while there are numerous opportunities for an independent filmmaker to raise funds for a project that grants him/her/them total creative freedom, when it comes to the idea of self-distribution, chances are near to impossible to remain self-sufficient since "the majority of cinemas in the United States are part of chains that programme their outlets nationally rather than individually, with even most art house cinemas being part of smaller chains or reliant on corporate sponsorship" (15). Thus, nationwide or even international distribution in most instances remains a compromised deal "between the needs of the artist and the demands of the market, and its most prominent suppliers" (10).

Furthermore, studios are generally keen on keeping control over the most profitable branches of filmmaking by securing their hegemony over the greatest parts of the movie market. In the end, this means that "[a] degree of independence is possible only when films make so little money they simply are not worth the studios' time or effort to own or control" (Lewis 1-2). Similarly, it also needs to be stressed that both Berra (2008) and Lewis (2007) addressed these issues in the 2000s and that (at the time of writing) the possibilities of film distribution have changed, particularly through online platforms and streaming services. While generally speaking, the studios' supremacy still holds true today, the majors[34] are not ubiquitous or omnipotent. Though they attempt to keep a firm hold on the industry, nowadays there are more and more ways for filmmakers working outside the system to find financing, distribution as well as means of exhibition (see chapter 2.3 for further details). Essentially, with the advent of increasingly handy and affordable moviemaking equipment, the means and numbers of independently-made movies have steadily increased, having reached a point where award-winning features, such as Sean Baker's *Tangerine* (2015), can be shot on mobile phones.

As already broached, the definition of independent cinema exceeds market-related factors. Although the majority of independent movies are not necessarily a commercial success on a grand scale – not least due to the sheer amount of films that are being produced each year

[34] The majors (or rather major studios) consisted of five large and three smaller Hollywood studios that, particularly during the first half of the 20th century, held almost absolute control and power over the American film industry (see chapter 2.2 for a more detailed account).

–, their comparatively lower sales figures do not lessen their value. Indeed, the question of their relevance should not be reduced to issues of quantity (in terms of viewership, exhibition, budgetary means or profit drawn) but can be shifted towards matters of artistic expression and experimentation. As earlier implied, a self-financed or low-budget project usually guarantees more autonomy and thus more margin to creativity due to the fact that by appealing to certain niches more experimentation is permitted as lesser monetary losses are at stake.

Yet, once again, caution should be advised. As alluring as the idea of the self-sufficient independent filmmaker might appear, it is paramount not to fall into the trap of romanticizing independent filmmaking and, no matter the circumstances of production, see a movie for what it is. Working outside the mainstream does not guarantee a creative and subjectively unique movie and, vice versa, studio productions and *auteurism* are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, a big budget production can, after all, contain or radiate a certain "independent spirit", even if production- or marketing-wise it is not located outside the studio system. Berra attributes the independent spirit to "film-makers who are considered to be true to their own cinematic visions, whilst also seeking sponsorship from corporate organizations" (10-1). Even though a definition of something as intangible as an "independent spirit" becomes quite vague the deeper we delve into the matter, there are nevertheless guidelines that can aid in grasping the core of the concept.

Overall, the independent spirit can be divided into three categories, i.e. aesthetics, narrative structure, and ideologies. In terms of aesthetics and formal characteristics, independent films are known to, at times, contain a conscious rejection or deconstruction of normative Hollywood productions. This is most perceptible in the 'harsher' and more unconventional style of independent film, which can be attributed to a large variety of techniques, amongst which we often find "[u]nsteady, hand-held camerawork, inexact framing, restricted views and sudden zooms." Furthermore, independents show a tendency towards the "use of real people and/or real locations" (King *American* 108) as well as of "non-professional performers in place of actors or stars" (109) and a leaning towards improvisation (110).

However, this should not be taken as a general rule as, on the other hand, there is a wide array of independent movies that contain visuals that represent the exact opposite to the gritty and unfocused offbeat indies, as movies such as *The Terminator* (James Cameron, 1984) or *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (Wes Anderson, 2014) also incorporate special effects and hyper-stylized settings. While recognizing that independent films have a diversified aesthetic that often sets them apart from mainstream productions, it needs to be taken into consideration that many singularities often attributed to independent cinema actually stem from budgetary restrictions and a lack of professional equipment, as perceived in the "small-ensemble casts,

limited use of exterior and location shooting, and an emphasis on conversation over action and exciting special effects" (Lewis 1).

Similarly, in terms of its narrative form, independent movies often choose to defy the mainstream mold, in particular the "cause-effect logic; goal-oriented, psychologically motivated characters; an equilibrium-disequilibrium-new equilibrium structure; the transformation of the main characters by the end of the story; the formation of the heterosexual couple (or, alternatively, of the family unit); and narrative closure" (Tzioumakis 7) are often subverted. Instead, one frequently finds non-linear, disjointed and structureless storylines, as well as character's lacking motivation and a defined arc. A film like David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* (2001) perfectly encapsulates the idea of non-continuity editing and fragmented storytelling, as seen in its jumping between different realms or parallel universes, its lack of distinction between dreams and states of being awake, a rejection of a logically traceable chronological storyline, the non-existence of a heterocentric happy ending, as well as the use of actors to play different roles.

Notwithstanding the fact that these apparent differences to Hollywood conventions exist, the transgressive nature of independent film in terms of its narrative form should not be overstated, as in this regard "indie cinema tends to occupy a place closer to Hollywood than to the outer experimental margins, although a range of alternative approaches has been explored, including some quite significant departures" (King *American* 60). Yannis Tzioumakis therefore concludes that narratively independent cinema should be perceived as hybrid, occupying a space in between Hollywood and more marginal and radical types of filmmaking (267).

Finally, it is also important to address the ideological differences between independent and mainstream moviemaking. As earlier established, seeing that independent projects are oftentimes freed from pressures to appeal to broader audiences, they are more commonly able to speak about themes and ideas usually underrepresented in big budget productions. Indeed, still today a plethora of subject matters are deemed too provocative or scandalous for the common moviegoer and are consequently perceived as representing a risk in terms of marketing. Accordingly, more direct and radical sociopolitical critiques as well as the portrayal of taboo issues are frequently detected in non-studio financed and -produced movies. This is certainly of direct importance to the study at hand as even today matters related to an honest approach to or depiction of queerness in its various forms and its countless sexual expressions continue to be ignored in the mainstream or are treated with utmost discretion. While the tendency towards more liberal subject matters generally holds true, we nonetheless need to put certain sentimentalized ideas into perspective by recognizing that the label "independent

cinema" does not necessarily convert a motion picture into a progressive or socially aware critique. After all, "[i]ndependent cinema is certainly not immune to implication in the reinforcement of dominant ideologies (including those of patriarchy, capitalism and racism)" (King *American* 199).

As if all of the above does not already turn the attempt of defining cinematic independence into an utmost complicated endeavor, when it comes to pinpointing the national aspect characterizing *American* independent cinema, further problems surface. As will become apparent in the historical overview of independent film in chapter 2.3, in an increasingly globalized world "many US studios happily distribute both foreign and American independent features, while foreign monies often help bankroll American independent productions" (Holmlund "Introduction: From the Margins" 3). The question of what constitutes an American movie nowadays thus has even further implications: when looking at blockbusters and their basic prerequisite to have the widest international appeal possible, it becomes of interest to consider the industry's choices regarding the funding of different projects as well as the limiting of artistic freedom. After all, it is important to consider that countries like China represent an immense buying power and therefore are becoming more and more influential in Hollywood. Keeping the focus on the actual topic of this study, we might hence ask ourselves whether big budget productions such as *Philadelphia* (Jonathan Demme, 1993) or *Moonlight* (Barry Jenkins, 2016) deliberately opted to leave out any implications of the protagonists' queer sexual desires to deter supposedly "progressive" audience members internationally from watching a film about gay men without having to grapple with actual homoeroticism.

Ultimately, although there is no definitive answer to the riddle of American independent cinema, and even though independence within the cinematic landscape represents a vast territory to tackle, we should not invalidate its existence. I therefore propose a more nuanced approach to the topic matter that enables a basis for the further course of this study. As such, I aim to follow Geoff King's proposition on how to assess the independence of a movie according to three distinct degrees: "the industrial-economic (budget level, sources of finance, type of distributor, manner of distribution, box-office/home-viewing revenues/expectations), the formal-aesthetic (stylistic dimensions such as narrative structure, camerawork/photography, editing or use of sound) and the social, cultural, or political/ideological implications that might be drawn" ("Independent" 191). Though these categories serve as guidelines in determining the degree to which a movie might be called independent, this does not imply that every independent film needs to necessarily comprise all three categories as

> [a]t each level, a range of possibilities exists, from the radically alternative to something much closer to the qualities associated with the Hollywood mainstream, as does a variety of combinations of different degrees in each dimension. In some cases, indie status may be clearly apparent at all three levels, but what can result is a complex and nuanced balance of qualities: a complexity seen by some as a muddying of the waters, but one that I would argue only adds to the richness of this part of the cinematic landscape as an object of study. (King "Independent" 191)

While adopting King's three degrees of independence, I would, however, like to propose a fourth dimension to defining the independence of a movie: bearing in mind that the meaning of independent moviemaking has suffered many alterations since it first came into existence, the historical context in which a film was made becomes a further defining factor. We therefore always need to look at the framework in which each production was created to further assess its levels of independence. In the next subchapters I thus provide a brief overview of the historical evolution of ideas surrounding independent film that will facilitate the further course of this study.

2.1) *A Home at the End of Hollywood*: A Historical Exploration of Independent Cinema (from its Beginnings to the 1970s)

As I have attempted to demonstrate, trying to find a conclusive definition of American independent cinema is extremely difficult. Different conundrums, which, in turn, lead to more questions, surface the deeper we devote ourselves to finding a correlation between independent movies as a whole. Yet, I would suggest that a starting point to gain more clarity regarding the various different branches and changes within the independent film sector is to engage in a historical evolution of the term, starting as early as in the late 19th century. By going back in time, I will reveal the artificiality of certain simplistic ideas regarding independent cinema, while simultaneously further illustrating many of the above-described ambiguities that make finding a conclusive definition of the concept a highly challenging task.

Therefore, it is crucial to understand that since its inception independent cinema has always stood in relation to Hollywood and to the wider film industry. Thus, when talking about American independent film history we are always simultaneously looking at the history of Hollywood as one is tightly linked to the other. After all, as King points out, independent cinema "only ever really has an [sic] meaning as an essentially *relative* quantity" ("Introduction" 1), seeing that without the mainstream margins are unable to exist.

Independents have been a part of film history ever since its beginning. Indeed, during the 1890s when film pioneer Thomas Edison first developed the Edison Kinetograph and Kinetoscope (the first apparatuses to either capture or exhibit film through a peephole) and the later Vitascope (the first projector to screen movies for a larger audience), he patented his inventions to fight off the quickly rising competitors in the emerging silent motion picture market. Most prominent were the roles of Biograph and Vitagraph – arguably one of the first independents – that sought to threaten Edison's leading position by providing different forms of filmic attractions, such as presenting their film stock at carnival shows. In order to keep the exponential growth of competitors at bay, in an ironic turn of events, in 1909 Edison would choose to form a trust with nine of his former rivals called the Motion Picture Patents Company (MPPC) to ensure his preeminence in the industry. In this way he attempted to keep authority over film production, distribution, and exhibition by upholding complete control over the technical equipment as well as the raw film stock necessary for filmmaking (J. M. Davis 170; Lewis 2-3; Tzioumakis 21).

This trust, however, was built on shaky ground and would soon collapse due to the unforeseen influence of a third party: despite the arrangement, in 1911 film stock seller Kodak began supplying independent film companies with raw film material (Lewis 3). It is at this point that the official discourse on "independence" within cinema was born: as Tzioumakis describes, though technically not the first recorded independents working outside the mainstream film production, MPPC's rival companies actually were the first to become known as 'independents' at the time (21) and soon formed "an *independent movement* which directly opposed the plans of the Trust to dominate the market" (23). In fact, this goal was quickly achieved through the introduction of a distinguishing factor to attract wider audiences, namely the feature-length film in 1911, an innovation that completely ruined the MPPC by 1914 (Lewis 3). As history proverbially tends to repeat itself, these independents, in turn, would not content themselves to living on the margins but began to dominate the movie market by creating the first major studios: "Laemmle founded Universal, Fox founded Twentieth Century Fox, and Zukor founded Paramount" (3).

As becomes evident, early independent film history already illustrates the unstable and easily mutable place in which independent moviemaking exists. Indeed, both of the above-described struggles of independent companies to secure their place in the market go hand in hand with the earlier addressed issues of defining independent cinema: those outside the mainstream can easily become leading industry members while trying to prevent other

independents to raise to popularity – a tendency that is, to some extent and in different forms, continuously repeated throughout film history.

Eventually, in the 1930s the studio system was formed. More precisely, the five main studios, often referred to as the "Big Five" (consisting of 20th Century Fox, RKO Pictures, Paramount Pictures, Warner Bros., and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer [MGM]) as well as three smaller yet still successful studios (the "Little Three" – Columbia, Universal, and United Artists) had assumed almost absolute power over vast aspects of the movie business. Their authority ranged from matters regarding the production of movies, up to full control over stars, and was extended as far as exhibition and distribution deals seeing that the studios even owned the theater market. As often proclaimed, this was the golden age of the vertically integrated studio system, as the moguls[35] controlled all three fundamental aspects of the business (production, distribution, and exhibition).

The self-sufficiency of the studios was, however, soon challenged. With the emergence of a new trend in the world of cinema, i.e. the rise in popularity of the so-called "double bill", the majors were prompted to quickly revert to the help of independents, which resulted in a new surge of independently produced features. Indeed, the newly-popularized double bill had already existed prior to the 1930s and was a cinema-going experience consisting of a screening of two feature films: a big budget movie called the A feature was usually followed by the exhibition of a low budget film, called the B feature. Due to the immediate success of double billing, the demand for b-movies rose exponentially and low-end independent studios, often referred to as the "Poverty Row" (most prominently represented by companies such as Republic Pictures or Monogram), were contracted to provide inexpensive genre films that were quickly produced to meet the high demand (Lewis 3; Holmlund "Introduction: From the Margins" 4; Tzioumakis, 2006: 10, 64, 66). Though these films were produced independently, low-rank independent studios nonetheless remained highly subjected to the majors as the only possibility for finding wide distribution was by collaborating with and following the norms of the studios who owned most theaters in the American market.

Having opened up a loophole for independent companies to thrive, the double feature craze, however, started to dwindle during the 1940s and early 1950s, causing the studios to once again drop their close cooperation with independents. Not only was a steadily rising cost of filmmaking turning movie productions more and more expensive, but the film market as a whole was losing its audience due to mass movements of Americans into suburban settlements.

[35] The term Hollywood moguls describes the (at times overlapping) categories of "studio founders, production executives, and studio producers" (Bernstein 154), all of which were linked to the big studios during Hollywood's golden age.

These socio-geographic shifts had a heavily rupturing effect on the film industry since potential movie-goers now lived further away from urban cinemas, leading to a severe drop in audiences. To complicate matters and probably most harmful to the industry was the nation-wide induction of television screens into American living-rooms after the Second World War, further keeping people away from movie theaters (Tzioumakis 88-9).

As if a crisis in viewership was not enough to handle, the majors had to face another heavy blow in 1948, an eventful year often referred to as ending the Classical Hollywood era. More specifically, in order to fight the monopolistic practices of the film industry, a US Supreme Court ruling (often referred to as the Paramount Decision) deemed the studios' full power over film production, distribution, and exhibition illegal. From then on, these three aspects had to be separated, which implied that the Big Five as well as Little Three were forced to sell their theaters. All of the above completely changed the landscape of the movie industry (Monaco 109-10; Tzioumakis 104-5). Although indeed both, studios and independents, at first struggled to find a footing during this deep crisis, over the course of the 1950s the big studios slowly changed their business model by almost solely focusing on the financing of high-rank independent pictures and the distribution thereof. This development is of utmost importance to this study, as it gave rise to a new form of independent cinema, besides simultaneously challenging the meaning of what "independence" within the movie business meant up to this point, as Tzioumakis notes:

> [T]he discourse of post-1948 independent cinema expanded greatly to include all films that were financed and distributed by the ex-studios but which were physically produced by a different production entity. [...] By 1956 over half of the films (53 per cent) distributed by the ex-studios were deemed 'independent' as the major Hollywood companies were not physically involved in any aspect of those films' production process. Three years later the figure was as high as 70 per cent, signalling the overwhelming success of this model of film production. (102)

As Tzioumakis' quote illustrates, this development once again puts into question a concrete meaning of "independence" within the film industry: though a huge percentage of productions released after the implementation of the Paramount Decree were made independently (at least in terms of their production site outside the major studios), from a financial point of view they nonetheless represented huge hits and thus became part of the mainstream. Herewith the hybridization of big studio and independent productions was first initiated as "[i]n the period between the late 1940s and the late 1960s, the terms top-rank independent and mainstream Hollywood filmmaking became virtually interchangeable" (Tzioumakis 103).

Parallel to these rupturing events, seismic cultural shifts were occurring in US culture, which would eventually also leave a deep imprint on American film. In his seminal work *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991* (1994), Eric Hobsbawm addresses this world-wide cultural revolution that particularly gained momentum in the second half of the 20th century and led to drastic reformulations regarding the traditional structuring of families, communities, and social as well as economic structures, besides also introducing new standards of living. Hobsbawm explains that the Cultural Revolution affected fundamental institutions, or more precisely the family and household, by causing a breakaway from traditional relations between the sexes and generations, centered around formal marriage that cherished the patriarch and the superiority of seniors, and, particularly since the 19th and 20th century, in Western societies was further centered around the idea of the nuclear family (320-1). This crisis of the family, which specifically gained momentum in the 1960s and 1970s, was intrinsically linked to new public standards concerning sexuality, partnership, and procreation. As a result, these changing paradigms were soon legally recognized by the implementation of laws permitting hitherto forbidden acts, in effect leading to a steady increase of divorce rates, a falling birth rate, as well as the slow disintegration of the nuclear family as the social standard (322).

Hobsbawm argues that these major changes were further spurred by a growing crisis between generations. In turn, this phenomenon was particularly propelled by the rise of a specific and incredibly powerful youth culture that introduced new ways of perceiving adolescents (324-5). "Youth" not only gained the status of an own social stratum, or, more precisely, a stage between childhood and adulthood but it also became a crucial and concentrated target audience in developed market economies (325-6). As a consequence, this newly-defined demographic was soon heavily targeted by the entertainment industry. As a matter of fact, these cultural changes also had a deep impact on independent film productions. Detecting a business opportunity in the way in which the growing youth culture was ignored by the conservative and culturally deadlocked majors and top-rank independents, less affluent and influential independent studios took the chance to cater to younger moviegoing demographics by addressing teenage trends, lifestyles, and anxieties (Tzioumakis 137-8). Particularly exploitation film, a form of film production existing on the fringes of the industry, would find a specific interest in teenage audiences starved for representations of subject matters closer to their personal experiences and lives.

The first known records of exploitation film go as far back as to the 1910s, when the term "exploitation" was associated with ultra-low-budget movies "dealing with controversial or taboo subjects, they were created on the fringes of the mainstream film industry but played

in regular theaters that were unaffiliated with the majors – often to sell-out crowds" (Schaefer 24). Yet, exploitation filmmaking began to truly thrive in the 1950s, though the idea of "exploitation" was now another. Central to these films was the tendency towards promoting movies as containing scandalous, illegal, or taboo subject matters. A large portion of exploitation films were directed towards youth audiences and exploited issues that not only interested the young, but often had made headlines in the media and were not usually portrayed in common motion pictures. Perhaps most renowned and able to create an entire business around exploitation, production company American International Pictures (AIP) celebrated successes with specialized subgenres such as the teenage horror film, as for instance *I Was a Teenage Werewolf* (Gene Fowler Jr., 1957) or *I Was a Teenage Frankenstein* (Herbert L. Strock, 1957); the "beach party" series including *Beach Party* (William Asher, 1963) or *Muscle Beach Party* (William Asher, 1964); as well as biker flicks like *The Wild Angels* (Roger Corman, 1966) (Lewis 6; Schaefer 26, 28). Yet, due to certain restrictions imposed by censorship, the promised images of scandal and indecency were only rarely actually delivered on screen (Tzioumakis 140). As will be discussed in closer detail in chapter 3, exploitation cinema also had an interest in exploring queer themes and imagery from an early stage on, turning it further into a cinema of dissidents.

The customs of youth not only affected American society in terms of its pop culture and entertainment industry but also had deep political impact. Indeed, a profound change Hobsbawm addresses in terms of personal conduct is the rise of antinomianism, or rather a world defined by the personal pursuit of individual desires. The author exemplifies this change by illustrating the way in which, particularly from the late 1960s onwards, political commitment began to be largely motivated by personal interests (as seen, e.g., in the feminist slogan "the personal is political"), which consequently led to the merging of personal and social liberation.

Simultaneously, this rise of individualism went even further into the social texture by giving rise to a liberalization regarding the question of what constitutes acceptable public behavior, not because certain acts (such as sexual ones or the illegal use of drugs) suddenly became less morally objectionable but because the liberation of individual desires demanded them (332-4). In the United States context, these shifts were strongly felt as out of supposedly stable and conformist mid-decade American culture arose an unprecedented tumult that would turn the subsequent decade, particularly the late 1960s and early 1970s, into a negative image of the American suburban dream. Certainly, these dramatic and far-reaching occurrences did not appear out of thin air but were the culmination of diverse and growing dissatisfactions within varied groups suffering under a discriminatory government and society.

Appropriately enough, though only perceptible in retrospect, the 60s set off with a sentiment of political change when the young and Catholic democratic candidate John F. Kennedy was elected President of the United States in the year 1960, introducing the arising spirit of upheaval that would, in turn, characterize the still-unfolding decade. Certainly, the need for change was a feeling deeply shared by many Americans: epitomized by McCarthyism and the growing pressure of the Cold War, the inherent fear of nuclear attacks from "*the* communists", as well as a rising anxiety regarding the immediate effects of nuclear testing and radioactive toxicity afflicting American society, the suffocating 1950s had left a bitter aftertaste in many mouths. Though in stark contrast to his actual political agenda during his short presidency, Kennedy embodied a beacon of hope to a younger generation and its political demands (Gair 122-3; Lazerow 94). These expectations were, however, soon shattered, not only by the President's warmongering (particularly when taking into consideration his interest in keeping the country involved in the Vietnam War as well as the notorious Bay of Pigs invasion) and premature death, but also by the rapid unearthing of layers of discontent within large strata of American society.

One of the most discriminated against demographics were black Americans whose (still ongoing) strife for equal and humane treatment under systemic racism would serve as a flagship movement for following generations of political activists[36]. Various youth-oriented countercultures started taking up similar forms of dissent. Amongst these were student groups that, while fighting a variety of issues, are today best remembered for their protests against the growing mobilization of US troops in Vietnam as well as the growing cruelty of the war witnessed in US homes through media coverage. Generally speaking, the mounting political awareness and proactivity of sections of younger generations had far-reaching effects and would eventually even leave its mark on New Hollywood. Another highly important youth counterculture arising at around the same time were hippies, who challenged and rejected confining moral and societal codes, as well as "economic, militarist, consumerist, sexual, and gender assumptions deeply embedded in U.S. culture" (Eaklor 116) by fostering alternative communal lifestyles as well as a romanticized worldview centered on "free love" and "flower

[36] Although the groundwork for the modern black Civil Rights Movement was laid a decade earlier – arguably with Rosa Parks' refusal of giving up her bus seat in 1955 –, this form of black protest gained particular momentum in the year 1960 when sit-ins were becoming a common practice of protest. Eventually numerous events led to greater and, at times, more violent forms of unrest, culminating in the passing of the Civil Rights Act that outlawed segregation in 1964 as well as the Voting Rights Act in 1965, assuring black citizens their unhampered right to vote (McKay n.p.; Lazerow 90). Though far more complex and diverse than can be described at this point, the black Civil Rights movement was undoubtedly deeply impactful for the further course of the many struggles comprising the Civil Rights era, providing a blueprint for the manifold ways to achieve change through protest (Belgrad 240; Gair 124). Indeed, the legacy of the movement and the many battles fought and endured by black communities in America are still greatly felt to this day.

power" (Belgrad 241; Eaklor 116). Though gender politics were not a priority for the movement and homophobia prevailed amongst these dissidents (Eaklor 116), the hippies' revolt against mainstream culture became a fashion statement, most perceptible in their gender-bending attire, which was especially groundbreaking when it came to the somewhat queering feminization of men, even if only on a superficial level.

While by far not encompassing all the diverse countercultural movements, the questioning of gender norms nonetheless played an utmost important and deeply transgressive role at the time as the women's rights movement pushed it into the public discourse. Though historically seen it is impossible to pinpoint a single pivotal moment in time, the resurging wave of American women's rights struggles is often attributed to the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) – a book that was widely received as a groundbreaking revelation as it addressed the white heterosexual American housewife's feeling of entrapment in the controlled and restrictive domestic sphere (Eaklor 111; Belgrad 237).

Being aware of the fact that it is fallacious to generalize second wave feminism due to its various facets and branches, in a consciously summarized form its main challenges lay greatly in the ways in which women were able to regain control and autonomy over their bodies and sexuality as well as in the questioning of gender roles and the inequality stemming thereof. Ultimately, not only were feminist demands for equal rights and equal opportunities as well as the deconstruction and critique of hegemonic masculinity and the patriarchy of utmost importance in laying the foundation to the thriving field of gender studies, but, of even more immediate relevance to the study at hand, it also provided the groundwork for its later-evolving (sub)branches, such as queer or masculinity studies. Most importantly, the subsequently emerging diverse queer rights struggles were highly influenced by the various above-mentioned civil rights movements, a development that is more thoroughly discussed in chapter 3.

To conclude, as Geoff King reasons, the most historically and socially groundbreaking value of this time period "is the sheer number of crises and upheavals. Their cumulative impact in a relatively short period of time is what gives grounds for assuming a further-reaching challenge to some American values and assumptions. Images of America as a place of freedom and democracy were dented, if not more seriously damaged" (*New* 15). As a matter of fact, the general American was bombarded with media images of violence of diverse types on a daily basis – including footage of the Vietnam War, the Cuban missile crisis, the Charles Manson murders, the assassinations of John F. and Bobby Kennedy as well as Malcolm X and Martin Luther King –, besides being confronted with rupturing mores and ideals, as seen in the introduction of the birth control pill and all its inherent potential, the sexual revolution, the

summer of love, LGBTQIA-individuals coming out into the public sphere, open discussions on drug use, to name but a few occurrences.

While these media images made people aware of the sociopolitical state of the nation and thus inspired a variety of forms of revolt, they paradoxically also caused the general public to get used to images of violence, resulting in a certain degree of callousness towards this type of imagery. As a result, not only were American values uprooted in subsequent years, but also American film was deeply challenged and changed as depictions of violence and sexual behavior grew to be staples within the cinematic world – a tendency that movies such as Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* (1969), or John Schlesinger's *Midnight Cowboy* (1969) perfectly encapsulate. These changes, however, did not emerge unexpectedly but were further motivated by outside factors that created the legal basis for portraying hitherto undepictable subject matters. At the expense of a short digression, it is thus paramount to address the workings of the Production Code to get a better understanding of the possibilities created for moviemaking after its abolition.

Contrary to popular belief, the Production Code was not initially introduced because of the film industry's own moralistic attitudes towards its productions, but rather due to increasingly vehement external pressure by religious groups. In order to prevent governmental interference into the workings of the trade that could tighten the majors' control, the moguls decided to take matters into their own hands. By developing the so-called Motion Picture Production Code, The Motion Pictures Producers and Distributors of America (later renamed Motion Picture Association of America [MPAA]) created a means to monitor almost any product within the American movie market deemed too immoral for exhibition due to depictions or the mention of sexual, criminal, violent, or other taboo subjects. Most importantly, amongst the indexed taboos was the ban of so-called "sex perversion", which included the depiction or naming of queer identities in movies, a matter that will be further scrutinized in chapter 3.1. The implementation of self-regulatory guidelines ultimately meant that a film could only be distributed and exhibited in major American theaters if it carried the seal of approval provided by the Production Code Administration (PCA). Although already created in 1930, the code was particularly and most thoroughly enforced from 1934 until 1968 (King *New* 8, 29**;** Monaco 31; Bordwell & Thompson *Film History* 216).

Though prevalent and powerful for over two decades, the code's necessity was started to put into question came the 1950s due to rising outside pressure from filmmakers who felt that censorship limited their craft. Particularly successful were the rebellious undertakings of director Otto Preminger, who released the movies *The Moon is Blue* (1953) and *The Man with*

the Golden Arm (1955) without the seal of approval by the Production Code administration due to depictions of taboo subjects such as adultery or drug addiction. Since both movies proved to be considerable successes, even though they never got a green light from the MPAA and, consequently, found smaller theatrical distribution, the obsolescence of the Code became more than clear to the industry (Russo *The Celluloid* 118).

The pressure was aggravated when despairing majors found themselves compelled to develop new forms of moviemaking to extend their target audiences due to box office slumps and an industry in crisis (King *New* 30). Studios were spending immense amounts of money on impressive productions in the hope of having even bigger revenues. However, this strategy backfired as a string of commercial flops almost brought the downfall of some of the majors. One of the best-remembered disasters was *Cleopatra* (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1963) a movie that cost 20th Century Fox about $44 million and only returned approximately $26 million in rentals, forcing the studio into a deep crisis. This was, however, only the beginning of the majors' downfall as many further box-office debacles of utterly expensive productions followed, as seen in *Dr. Dolittle* (Richard Fleischer, 1967) or *Star!* (Robert Wise, 1968) (Monaco 169; Kokonis 181; Nystrom 89-90).

As a consequence, the Production Code was successively updated over the following years, starting as early as in 1956 with the approval of "treatments of drug addiction, prostitution and inter-racial sexual relationships" (King *New* 31). In point of fact, the ban of depicting or mentioning queer identities was one of the last prohibitions to be lifted in 1961 (Russo *The Celluloid* 120-2). Eventually, in 1968 the long-obsolete code was replaced by a rating system, which meant that more sexual, violent, and polemic material was allowed to be shown on American screens without the fear of prosecution.

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Indeed, and as previously implied, Hollywood faced a conundrum of immense magnitude during the 1960s. Its proclivity to make family-friendly and "clean" entertainment did not induce younger audiences, who represented the largest demographics of moviegoers in America, to seek out movie theaters (Berra 32). In fact, the sociopolitical tumults happening all over America and taking over large portions of the world were continued into the 1970s when scandals such as the Watergate Break-In were unveiled. Ultimately, these occurrences were too profound as to be further ignored on screen and a demand arose within viewership to exchange obsolete cinematic conventions with fresh approaches that embraced the changing sociocultural

paradigms of the time. The majors hence needed to quickly adapt to the viewing sensibilities of younger generations and to reinvent themselves lest they faced doom.

Though reluctant at first, out of this emergency situation flourished a form of Hollywood filmmaking that still today is seen as a curiosity in American film history as it would never happen again in this form and dimension: "New Hollywood" was a specific period of Hollywood moviemaking that arguably began in the late 1960s with *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn, 1967) and *The Graduate* (Mike Nichols, 1967) and ended sometime in the mid- to late 1970s with movies such as *Nashville* (Robert Altman, 1975) and *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese 1976). The distinguishing factor of this time period was an unusual leaning towards experimental filmmaking with a vast independent spirit, social and political criticism, and the hiring of young and new filmic talents (Nystrom 88).

In this discussion it is paramount to stress that studios were not acting out of generosity when granting creative control to new filmmakers but that investing in low-budget movies represented a relatively low risk. It should also be noted that the majors never fully stopped working on commercial productions and continued to have financial successes during the time, as seen in the box office hit *Love Story* (Arthur Hiller, 1970). In the end, it all came down to the fact that "[t]his was a cinematic revolution that came from economic necessity" (Berra 13). As Hollywood found itself stuck in a financial crisis it was unable to get out of, new strategies to appeal to audiences needed to be explored. Seeing that teenagers in particular continued to be the strongest cinema enthusiasts while independent films were turning into a new *vogue*, attempts were made to accommodate their interests in cinema.

It soon became clear that the baby boomer audience was very aware of and well-versed in Hollywood film history as it was the first generation to grow up watching classics on television. In other words, these youngsters "were more prepared to recognize certain film conventions *as* conventions, and thus less ready to embrace yet another uninspired recapitulation of them" (Nystrom 91). Simultaneously, European influences such as the French New Wave or Italian cinema were finding a respectable audience amongst American youngsters, while arthouse cinemas were slowly growing in number (Monaco 169). These drastic changes within viewership and audience taste meant that a deep rupture in the way films had been produced up until this point was necessary.

Similar to the developments we will encounter when addressing New Queer Cinema, eager to represent their respective countercultural roots, these young Hollywood mavericks had to find a new, personal filmic language in order to adapt to the fluctuating cultural framework and to be, ultimately, able to speak about a rapidly shifting world:

> In a short span of time, a large number of cinematic techniques, mainly associated with art-house filmmaking in Europe and Japan, were imported to American cinema. These included: improvisational acting, repeated actions, camera zooms, jump-cuts, freeze frames, telephoto shooting, hand-held camerawork, split screen, more frequent use of extreme close ups and extreme long shots, image-sound mismatches and many others. (Tzioumakis 179)

Even though new forms of visual storytelling were undoubtedly developed during this time, Tzioumakis relativizes his argument by explaining that New Hollywood was not quintessentially subversive as "American cinema continued to operate as a narrative cinema where all the above elements of a potentially new aesthetic system were assimilated gradually into the powerful classical aesthetic" (180). Nonetheless, what ultimately arose from this amalgam of films characterized by different budgets and made by filmmakers from varied backgrounds and levels of experience were "stylistically diverse and narratively challenging films that were much more tuned in to the social and political climate of the era than the films made for the majors by top-rank independents" (170).

The need for new moviemaking recipes became even more apparent to film moguls with the unexpected successes of *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn, 1967) and *The Graduate* (Mike Nichols, 1967), which were followed by the enormous biker-movie hit *Easy Rider* (Dennis Hopper, 1969). While the former two were especially shocking as well as pioneering for depictions of high degrees of sexuality and violence hitherto only rarely seen on American screens, *Easy Rider*[37] represented an even greater break with formal and narrative conventions with its gritty visuals and unfocused camera work, its disjointed storylines including flashbacks, ellipses and jump cuts, as well as a leniency towards improvisation. In the end, by transgressing moralistic traditions, all three films "struck the final blow to the already weakened Production Code, which was replaced in 1968 with the Ratings classification system" (Tzioumakis 178).

[37] John Berra goes as far as to recognize the movie as "the film that is widely, if not correctly, credited with ushering in a more experimental form of American film-making", mostly because it "affected the industrial structure and creative process of the 'dream factory' itself, prompting a brief move towards producing films that were reflective of society's often grim realities as opposed to projecting its overly simplified fantasies" (30). Indeed, director Dennis Hopper wanted to see the countercultures he was a part of represented on screen and, consequently, created a movie within the studio system that stylistically and content-wise was closer to what the independent sector was creating at the time (39).

As a matter of fact, these movies are furthermore often considered as ranking among a selection of films created by *auteurs*[38] whose career was initiated or otherwise taken to another level during the New Hollywood era. Most notable are directors such as Robert Altman (*MASH*, 1970), Terrence Malick (*Badlands*, 1973), Martin Scorsese (*Taxi Driver*, 1976), Brian De Palma (*Sisters* 1972), Steven Spielberg (*Duel*, 1971), and George Lucas (*American Graffiti*, 1973), to mention but a selected few. What changed during this era, as Nystrom explains, was a certain transference of the most privileged position during filmmaking from producers (the chief authorities in Classical Hollywood) to the *auteurial* director as the main player in molding a movie's sensibility (93).

As above described, while a certain independent spirit was, to some extent, able to infiltrate Hollywood, this happened particularly due to financial reasons (a development that can be paralleled with the mainstreaming of "indies" beginning in the 1980s). Despite the common glorification of New Hollywood, what needs to be remembered is the fact that giving high levels of control and increasingly rising budgets to auteur projects lacking any generic mold in the end was a hit-or-miss maneuver for the studios, as without formulaic films each production became a gamble. Hence, as soon as the studios found a way to regulate viewership and, as a result, to end the great recession endured, they slowly went on to gain full control over the machinery by replacing subversive projects with more commercially successful ones.

The failure of Michael Cimino's *Heaven's Gate* (1980), a movie that went highly over budget only to become a box office disaster, in turn leading to the bankruptcy of United Artists, represented the final straw for Hollywood to return to form. Moreover, the immense success of the two high-budget genre pictures *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, 1975) and *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977) showed studios that turning towards formulaic and less complex family-friendly

[38] The *auteur* theory, or in its original form "*la politique des auteurs*", harkens back to the French New Wave and its founding members. The French New Wave (or *Nouvelle Vague*) was a movement largely comprised of a close-knit group of film critics that had worked for the magazine *Cahiers du Cinéma* and ventured on to prove themselves as film directors. Devoted to the *politique des auteurs*, these young and audacious filmmakers gained critical as well as financial success with feature films that were characterized by their offbeat and experimental nature, such as François Truffaut's *The 400 Blows* (1959) which was awarded the director's prize at Cannes, or Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless* (1960) (Bordwell & Thompson *Film History* 443). Most importantly, "*Cahiers du cinéma*'s guiding editorial principle was that directors were the authors of their films. Generally speaking, an *auteur* nowadays is understood as a director who is able to communicate his very subjective and unique artistic point of view throughout his *oeuvre*, regardless of the fact that the production of a film is usually a collective endeavor. However, as Nystrom points out, *auteurism* is also often romanticized and even used as a marketing tool to sell movies that do not fit into a single mold (94). This statement can be taken even further as when it comes to the attempt of trying to limit a certain product to an easily marketable base core, the label "*auteur*" has taken up a similar role to the ones that genres inhabit. "Quentin Tarantino," for example, is thus not only used as a directorial name, but also as a marketing strategy able to create certain audience expectations about a filmic text (in Tarantino's case, a highly referential, action-packed, and violent movie with a fondness for long takes and witty dialogue), the same way that "Gregg Araki" or "Bruce LaBruce" not only connote queer filmmaking but a very particular, radical way of dealing with queer-themed matter.

movies had wider audience appeal. Interestingly enough, parallel to the emergent return to political conservatism and the rise of the New Right beginning in the mid to late 1970s, in cinematic terms audiences were also flocking towards more orthodox features. Indeed, genre cinema came back in style with a great number of science-fiction and action/adventure releases, while sequelizations of previous successes, heightened promotion and merchandizing further generated enormous revenues (McLean 6-8; Bordwell & Thompson *Film History* 524-6).

Despite the return to more classical tendencies, the studios would nonetheless adopt certain elements from maverick moviemaking. Most obviously, the majors continued to target the exploitation as well as the youth market, while transforming these niche cinemas into polished and glossy high-budget productions, as e.g. seen in *Jaws* (Tzioumakis 201). The move towards youth and niche markets was an utmost important business decision as "[i]n doing so, the majors not only managed to regain their position of almost absolute control of the American film industry, but they also eliminated the competition that these independents provided until the mid-1970s. By the end of the decade, the majors were back controlling approximately 90 per cent of the film market" (Tzioumakis 202). Ultimately, this development had a shattering effect on independents that possessed less monetary resources, as Tzioumakis goes on to explain. Only with the introduction of video and cable as well as the emergence of film festivals could these minors find a market to sustain them (193).

In order to avoid confusion in the further course of this study, it is expedient to take a brief look at the term "New Hollywood" as it is often used for both, the maverick filmmaking during the late 60s to mid 70s as well as the resurgence of big Hollywood productions coming thereafter. Nystrom thus suggests a differentiation between "New Hollywood I" (the mavericks) as opposed to "New Hollywood II" (the return of blockbusters) (88). Although the author understands that to a certain degree "New Hollywood II is largely responsible for killing off New Hollywood I" (88), his denomination nonetheless also underscores the continuity and overlapping qualities of the two despite their apparent differences. Indeed, many filmmakers that started out as movie brats of the former wave (most prominently Steven Spielberg and George Lucas) would eventually become one of the great accelerators of New Hollywood II. Other scholars in turn have often referred to the later development of New Hollywood as "'New New Hollywood' or 'Contemporary,' even 'Postmodern' or 'Post-Classical Hollywood,' depending on the context of the critical approach adopted" (Kokonis 171).

Falling in line with the above, Duncan McLean suggests that we should "allow the term New Hollywood to serve as a general term, referring to all Hollywood cinema after the Second World War or after the decline of the studio system, and use alternative terms such as

Hollywood Renaissance or high concept when discussing more specific moments in the history of American film" (8). Indeed, the already widely applied term "Hollywood Renaissance[39]" evokes a resurgence or rebirth of the American film industry and culture after a long period of creative and economic stagnation. At the same time, the idea of *renaissance* points towards a break with the past, while also speaking about continuity. As previously noted, I will be using the analogous term "New Queer Cinema Renaissance" when talking about the reawakening of subversive queer cinema beginning at the end of the 2000s after a decade-long production of unexceptional and orthodox queer filmmaking that followed the similarly transgressive New Queer Cinema wave of the late 1980s/early 1990s.

Returning to McLean, instead of New Hollywood II, the author decides to specify the moviemaking that has dominated Hollywood ever since the late 1970s with the notion of the "high concept" blockbuster – a term in turn borrowed from Justin Wyatt (1994) – that designates "a film with an intentionally straightforward narrative which can be easily communicated and comprehended, allowing it to be accurately summarised for widespread marketing campaigns" (McLean 6). As will be discussed in the next subchapter, the move towards bigger and more costly productions still until this day defines Hollywood filmmaking.

2.2) *Indie Buyers Club*: The Commercialization of Independent Cinema from the 1980s to the 2020s

With the steady fading of progressive and experimental material in Hollywood, a different form of blockbuster cinema began to emerge in the United States during the 1970s. More precisely, New Hollywood cinema began to mainly devote itself to genre filmmaking – beginning with movies such as *The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972) or *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973) and particularly reaching unfathomable successes with the releases of *Jaws* (Stephen Spielberg, 1975) and *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977) –, which, ultimately, brought along several shifts within the movie business. As Lucia et al. skillfully synthesize, the New Hollywood blockbuster after all

> could be summarized in a couple of sentences and conveyed for advertising through a single iconic image. As an uncomplicated idea, it could then be used as the centerpiece for a wide marketing scheme that included the manufacture and sale of related products. [...] *Jaws* also signaled the potential of saturation booking – the simultaneous release of

[39] The term Hollywood Renaissance was first mentioned in a 1967 issue of *TIME*, in which its staff wondered whether "[f]or all the new talent, new money and new freedom available, it is not certain that Hollywood can or will sustain the burden of living in a renaissance" (TIME staff n.p.).

> a single film across the country in hundreds of theaters (later it would be thousands), accompanied by a simultaneous television advertising blitz in order to maximize attendance for a film's opening weekend. ("1976-1990" 151)

Additionally, as opposed to the adult-oriented, socially and politically aware spirit of the Hollywood Renaissance, studios began to lay an even greater focus on youth audiences (roughly between the age of 12 and 26) in order to boost sales numbers and encouraged sequelizations as well as bigger investments into spectacle over content through showy visual and auditory special effects (Lucia et al. "1976-1990" 152, 155; Levy 29-30).

The propensity towards perceiving the movie business as first and foremost a money-generating machine while sidelining its artistic integrity was furthermore spurred by the gradual monopolization and conglomeration of the big studios. Enabled by Reaganite *laissez-faire* economics of the 1980s, film companies began to reacquire movie theaters. Not only did this represent a clear breach of the provisions of the 1948 Paramount decree but it also meant a return to vertical integration.

This new era of big studio domination was further prompted by the integration of the six major studios into larger mass media conglomerates over the next decades, beginning with the buyout of 20th Century Fox by News Corporation between 1981 and 1984 (Schatz 21; Hall and Neale 246; Kumar 153; Lucia et al. "1976-1990" 153; Lucia et al. "1991 to the Present" 327-8). Eventually, "[b]y 2010, six conglomerates controlled the movie business – Time-Warner, Sony, News Corporation, Viacom, NBC/Universal, and the Walt Disney Company" (Lucia et al. "1976-1990" 154). This had profound and far-reaching effects for the Hollywood business as movies were subsequently not handled as products on their own anymore but rather as a part of a larger marketing and merchandizing scheme that profited from associating motion pictures to entertainment and leisure products as well as to services offered internationally (amongst which theme parks, music publishing, video games, toy manufacturing, or internet services are still some of the most profitable today) (154).

These developments, as well as the fact that top-rank independents continued to work in synergy with big studios while costs in filmmaking were steadily rising, made the production of independent films a growingly hard endeavor, eventually leading to a swiftly falling rate of independent features outside the studio system in the late 1970s (Tzioumakis 206-7; Holmlund "Introduction: From the Margins" 5). In a market in which finding investment as well as distribution deals became a hassle for smaller-scale filmmakers, it is not surprising that an oddity of a movie like David Lynch's *Eraserhead* (1977) took five years to be finalized, suffering periods without any type of funding and long breaks between shoots (MacGowan 26).

Despite this bleak outlook, groundbreaking changes within the independent landscape were about to arrive. Indeed, throughout the first half of the 1980s, individual low-budget movies started to emerge and began showing a yet undetected potential of independent moviemaking. Amongst these were the unexpected and lucrative successes of movies such as *Return of the Secausus Seven* (John Sayles, 1979), *My Dinner with Andre* (Louis Malle, 1981), *Chan is Missing* (Wayne Wang, 1982), *Smithereens* (Susan Seidelman, 1982), *Eating Raoul* (Paul Bartel, 1982), or *El Norte* (Gregory Nava, 1984). Even greater attention was paid to pictures that started long-term careers of now-renowned artists, including Jim Jarmusch's road movie *Stranger than Paradise* (1984), the Coen brother's hit debut feature *Blood Simple* (Joel Coen & Ethan Coen, 1984), or Spike Lee's feminist comedy-drama *She's Gotta Have It* (1986) (Tzioumakis 209-10; King "Independent" 192). At the same time independent action films created within the blockbuster mold such as *First Blood* (Ted Kotcheff, 1982) or *The Terminator* (James Cameron, 1984) started to make a name for themselves, creating incredibly revenue-generating franchises as well as new action heroes (Holmlund "Introduction: From the Margins" 5).

While the movies listed above were connected by no other fact than their unexpected successes and low- to medium-sized budgets, they revealed that something had decisively changed within the industry to allow independents to find a footing and flourish as an ancillary market within the movie business: as King reasons, the thriving of the independent sector in the 1980s was only possible as the groundwork for independent filmmaking was laid in form of what he calls a "supporting infrastructure" ("Independent" 192) in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Generally speaking, a determining factor for the breakthrough of a specific type of film or genre film cycle is the continual commercial success of a group of movies that are very similar in style and content. This not only proves that a certain audience demand exists but also guarantees that probable follow-up cash-ins will be made (Nowell 50). As a perfect example, the slasher film boom of the 1980s could be mentioned that was prompted by the immense success of films such as *Friday the 13th* (Sean S. Cunningham, 1980) or *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (Wes Craven, 1984) and that was years later revived by the box-office hits *Scream* (Wes Craven, 1996) and *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (Jim Gillespie, 1997). The same principle certainly applied to the rising independent scene during the 1980s as the success of the earlier mentioned independent features exemplify, inspiring a number of filmmakers to trace a similar path.

In addition, seeing that Hollywood blockbusters became gradually homogenized throughout the decade, audiences started to look for alternative visions and flocked to movies

that represented a bigger challenge both in terms of content as well as form (King *American* 22; Lewis 8; Levy 21). In point of fact, 1980s Hollywood cinema greatly mirrored the ultraconservative Reaganite politics of the time that "found expression in a large number of popular films of the period, especially films made by or for the majors, and spearheaded a return to a 'simpler', more affirming Hollywood cinema" (Tzioumakis 207). George P. Cosmatos's hardbody action movie *Cobra* (1986), for instance, perfectly fits this mold as it embraces Reagan's reactionary ideology and rhetoric in its relentless and straightforward action-packed purging of crooks by a hypermasculine and ultraviolent heroic lead keen on making America a safer and better place. The mere fact that low-budget movies were being created, distributed and screened against all odds in an atmosphere of conformity that spurred creative critical thinking became a fascination to audiences in itself. Certainly, this was the time in which many aforementioned romanticized stereotypes regarding independent cinema were born that still persist until today, namely that of independents as embodying an idealized anti-establishment, and socio-politically progressive film form (Tzioumakis 12).

Another building block that guaranteed the blossoming and growth of the independent sector was the development of independent film festivals that provided new means for low-budget features to be exhibited. Hereby, the emergence of Sundance, a festival primarily established by Robert Redford with the objective of presenting yet-unknown American independent filmmakers to a wider public, proved to be pivotal to the future of American independent film (Levy 39-40; King *American* 20). While slowly growing in prestige throughout the 80s, the turning point for the festival – and certainly a landmark in American independent film history – was the booming release of Steven Soderbergh's *sex, lies, and videotape* in 1989, a film presenting a deep dive into an unfulfilled marriage, filmic voyeurism, and the venturing into unexplored sexual desire. It should be noted that while the entire production of the film cost only around $1 million, the marketing scheme of distributor Miramax was able to garner a profit of $25 million, which was maximized to more than $100 million by the year 2001 (Holmlund "Introduction: From the Margins" 5; Levy 50). Not only did the sales numbers prove the profitability of lower budget films but also, more importantly, they aroused the interest of bigger studios to invest in the independent film business.

Sundance entries such as *River's Edge* (Tim Hunter, 1986), *True Love* (Nancy Savoca, 1989), *House Party* (Reginald Hudlin, 1990) as well as the teenage crime-comedy *Heathers* (Michael Lehmann, 1988) represented further *causes célèbres* that generated even more buzz

around the festival as the emblem of American independent cinema[40] (Levy 40-1). Yet, Sundance's growing popularity had its price: the steadily increasing numbers of film admissions to the festival made it harder for low-budget movies to be picked for exhibition (Holmlund "Introduction: From the Margins" 7).

While these developments clearly went against the ideas the festival initially stood for, they could hardly be stopped. Moreover, the commercialization of the festival and the selection of pictures to be screened has, at least to some extent, progressively shifted the focus from the artistic dimension of the movies towards the marketability of the same. Indeed, agents soon started to flood the festival eager to negotiate contracts (even prior to the festival's screening) in order to make the next best deal (Levy 41) and "[to] decide which (few) independently produced films will receive theatrical distribution" (Tzioumakis 254). As a result, in order to create spaces where more 'authentic' and less commercially-driven indies are able to be shown, other festivals have been formed, most notoriously Slamdance in 1995, which eventually faced similar issues to its predecessor due to its growing popularity and the rising number of feature submissions (Levy 46).

In addition to a mounting interest in independent movies and the creation of festivals as oases to exhibit these films, new technological achievements were able to create ways in which independent productions could reach audiences in a corporate-driven high-budget market that greatly hampered the distribution of low-budget cinema. More precisely, analog video recordings on cassette tapes as well as cable television became alternative methods of distribution for movies that were unable to receive proper theatrical runs, while also serving as an additional form of income for big studio productions aside from box-office revenues (Hall & Neale 235).

Amongst a tight competition of different magnetic tape formats, JVC's VHS (Video Home System) technology was eventually able to establish itself as the market standard and was launched in 1977 in the United States, the first video store opening that same year in Los Angeles (Lucia et al. "1960-1975" 152). The new technology quickly caught attention and led to a downright boom, reaching a point in 1987 in which "the amount of video cassettes rented in North America (1,040,000) eclipsed the amount of cinema tickets that were sold (1,030,000)" (Berra 20), thus proving itself to be an ancillary market that brought immense revenue to Hollywood.

[40] Interestingly, festivals were also responsible for bringing more European imports to the United States. This trend was particularly important in the sense that audiences were familiarized with a more *auteur*-driven kind of cinema, proving that the times and audiences' tastes were changing. Simultaneously, these imports had a certain influence on some American directors that became apparent in their filmmaking.

The demand for video film grew exponentially and it became clear that it could not be satisfied by Hollywood productions alone. Similar to the earlier described success of independent films during the 1930s double feature craze, the lack of material to fill the high demand offered a way for smaller independent studios to get their products to consumers (King *American* 22). As a matter of fact, for a short period between the mid- to late-1980s, this development led to the funding of quite uncommon independent film projects in order to meet the high request. Most interestingly, sponsorship for American independent productions came from rather unexpected places: not only were American film products exported to markets overseas in growing numbers, but great amounts of revenue were actually generated outside the US, particularly in Europe and Japan, while foreign sponsors began funding American independent projects (King *American* 22; Berra 21; Hall & Neale 251-2). Yet as soon as the market was saturated towards the late 1980s, many independent producers were dropped and eventually went out of business (Levy 25; Berra 20). Overproduction furthermore led to a more rigorous selection when it came to the funding of a movie, "generally favouring those capable of making a quick impression over those dependent on slow-burning recognition" (King *American* 35) – a tendency clearly mirroring the strategies of blockbuster marketing.

While many independents were destroyed by an oversaturated market, a few independent distributors – most notoriously Miramax (distributing hits like *Pulp Fiction* [Quentin Tarantino, 1994] or *Good Will Hunting* [Gus Van Sant, 1997]) and New Line Cinema (which made a name for itself with movies such as *A Nightmare on Elm Street* [Wes Craven, 1984] and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* [Steve Barron, 1990]) – were able to overcome this crisis by following a marketing model designed very closely to the workings of the big studios. More precisely, these two distributors concentrated specifically on the search for the next best marketable hit, leading to what King calls a "'boom or bust' economy in which a small number of films receive[d] headline-making advances at Sundance and/or large investments in marketing while large numbers fail[ed] to find distribution of any kind" (King *American* 34).

Indeed, by adapting certain patterns usually associated to major studios in order to reach larger and more diversified audiences traditionally not targeted by independent filmmakers, these distributors were soon given the label "major independents" (Tzioumakis 4; King *American* 32). Hereby, specific marketing strategies helped the companies to set themselves apart from other small-scale distributors: while New Line "profited through a mixture of both arty/alternative and much more mainstream genre-based independent features" (King *American* 33), Miramax in particular stood out by focusing on controversial marketing schemes that often stressed sexual content of movies as well as other taboo issues (32).

The role of both distributors was furthermore of importance as they were one of the first major independents to be purchased by a bigger media conglomerate: in 1993 Disney acquired Miramax whereas New Line became a specialty division of Time-Warner (King *American* 41). Noticing that the model of creating, producing, and distributing independent features within the larger dimension of Hollywood's corporate system proved to be profitable, it soon found an echo within the other majors. Especially from the mid-1990s until the early 2000s studios began investing in these divisions by either creating own independent subsidiaries or buying out existing independent production companies and/or distributors (Hall & Neale 244): Universal Pictures thus created Gramercy Pictures and acquired October Film; Paramount Pictures created the indie arm Paramount Pictures Classics; Fox formed Fox Searchlight; and Sony brought to life Sony Picture Classics – most of which are not operating anymore, yet certainly brought many benefits to the studios (Lewis 9-11; Berra 23; Holmlund "Introduction: From the Margins" 6; King "Independent" 197).

The reasons for forming these divisions, then again, were manifold. First and foremost, being aware of the significant profit that some independent films were bringing in, studios had an assurance that revenues could be made with low- to mid-budget movies. Consequently, investing into the indie market turned out to be rewarding while representing a lowered financial risk to the majors – a motivation and move comparable to those of the New Hollywood era when studios had already ventured into the territory of independent filmmaking. At the same time, the majors chose quite an opportune time to enter the indie market since the independent scene had already established a name for itself throughout the 1980s. By pouring money into this business branch, they quickly became leading figures and almost omnipotent in the entire American cinematic landscape by driving off competition.

More precisely, as John Berra explains, the move into independent filmmaking "ensure[d] their dominance, as it [shut] out independents by raising the cost of advertising to a level that smaller companies cannot compete at. With their ownership of additional media outlets, studios maximize[d] all marketing potential" (17). Becoming associated to independent cinema also helped to polish a studio's reputation, a factor that, in turn, served to reach new audiences in so far as independent productions were widely perceived as being more sophisticated and edgier than regular studio releases, often winning prizes at prestigious festivals. Lastly, delving into the independent sector furthermore represented an assured gateway to scouting and creating relations to new filmic talent (King *American* 46; King "Independent" 199; Lewis 12; Hall & Neale 244).

The mingling of the big players in the "indieverse" certainly brought a few benefits to the independent sector, yet it also harbored an array of disadvantages to smaller studios, producers, and distributors. In this respect, it needs to be acknowledged that many studios actually left a lot of autonomy to their independent divisions, thus granting director's greater creative freedom than was generally tolerated in regular Hollywood film productions (Tzioumakis 246). Moreover, studio financing not only led to an increase in theatrical distributions of independent features and to wider marketing schemes, but more people got to see features that did not particularly represent the Hollywoodian norm. Without the backing of the studios, some independent films would have probably never become the great commercial successes they ultimately turned out to be (Tzioumakis 270-1, 282).

Nonetheless, the drawbacks that came along with these developments were diverse and deeply hurtful to other independent companies: as independent filmmaking and productions became focused in the hands of a wealthy few, almost any type of extensive distribution for smaller-scale independents came to be highly difficult. This was particular due to the fact that the major's newfound investment "contribut[ed] to the driving up of prices, both for the films they targeted and the reduced number of attractive prospects left to the indie distributors" (King *American* 26, 41). Consequently, at least to some degree smaller companies grew more and more dependent on the multinationals, seeing that without the mogul's support, a single flop could mean the end for an independent producer or distributor (49).

In this regard, Geoff King suggests that the only way to survive as a smaller company during this time period was by finding a specific niche not targeted by the conglomerates: "Strand Releasing, for example, handle[d] foreign-language films and a range of American independents but made its name in the gay and lesbian market with low-budget films such as Gregg Araki's AIDS-era road-movie, *The Living End*" (*American* 51). On top of all these issues minor studios faced, towards the mid 90s and into the new millennium the indie boom deflated due to an oversupply of movies. This meant that many projects simply drowned in the endless pool of independent productions, while Hollywood and its indie boutiques were booming (King "Independent" 195).

Undoubtedly, as shown, the mainstreaming of the indie sector was responsible for pronounced ruptures within the market, which ultimately also greatly changed the way in which "independent film" as such was perceived. As mentioned in my attempt to define independent film in chapter 2.1, a blurring of the boundaries between independent cinema and mainstream cinema happened from the mid 1990s onwards due to the commercialization of the form. Accordingly, critics and audiences alike slowly began to distinguish Hollywood independent

hybrids from independent films produced outside the grasp of the media conglomerates by coining the terms “indies” and “Indiewood”.

More precisely, the term “indie” is still commonly used to talk about movies that are not necessarily produced by bigger conglomerates but still follow certain successful and easily marketable formulas used in studio-produced independent films, as King further elaborates: “by the end of the 1990s and into the 2000s, [independent features] appeared precisely to be following a recipe that had become conventionalized in some of its ingredients, including a willful ‘quirkiness’ that seemed to be too carefully designed as such to fit a particular bill rather than being simply the outcome of unchanneled creative vision” (“Independent” 198). The hit *Garden State* (Zach Braff, 2004) could be mentioned as a prime example for a path-breaking indie, as the overexuberant and deliberate quirkiness of its main characters contributed much to the following wave of movies (including *Elizabethtown* (Cameron Crowe, 2005) and *500 Days of Summer* [Marc Webb, 2009]) centered on a journey of self-discovery of a young, heterosexual male guided by a female counterpart whose “only character arc is helping the male lead improve himself, and her entire personality is tailored to the male character’s growth” (Miller n.p.).

On the other hand, “Indiewood” commonly stands for commercialized independent films that are created within Hollywood’s specialty divisions. The concept furthermore commonly bears a negative association as it is “a term usually used as one of abuse by critics who saw its creation as a threat to the existence of a more distinctive independent sector” (King “Independent” 198). However, as already addressed in chapter 2.1 it is quite problematic to speak about “true” and “false” independent films and a more nuanced approach towards the categories “independent film”, “indies”, and “Indiewood” needs be sought as each individual film in itself is located differently on a scale of *independence*.

All of the above-listed developments certainly brought stagnation to the independent film scene outside the conglomerates. However, as film history has shown time and time again, technological advances are often able to allow smaller filmmakers to produce features against all expectations: while the home video market suffered dropping numbers due to the decline of VHS sales in the late 1980s (King *American* 24), the introduction of the medium DVD (Digital Versatile Disc) in 1997 into the US market was an instant success and led to an “explosive growth of the foreign and home-video markets in the early 2000s” (Schatz 22). In point of fact, the new format was quite attractive to consumers due to a variety of reasons, including the higher quality of sound and image that could turn home viewing into a greater sensory experience (Hall & Neale 256-7), as well as the option to place bonus features on DVDs that

awoke extra interest in cinephiles as Hall and Neale (idem) suggest and furthermore found an audience in fandom culture. Ultimately, the DVD market revealed itself to be an important source of revenue for independent filmmakers. Very similar to its predecessor VHS, the new format allowed for an independence from theatrical distribution while accelerating international distribution deals.

Equally important, if not more essential, was the boom of digital video. In fact, digital technology had been around for quite some time in Hollywood as movies had already used digital special effects to varying degrees: *Westworld* (Michael Crichton) presented a two-dimensional pixelated effect as early as in 1973, while a computer-animated owl is seen flying in the opening credits of *Labyrinth* (Jim Henson, 1986) and the android character T-1000 in *Terminator 2* (James Cameron, 1991) morphs from a liquid-metal state into a seemingly human one. The first fully computer-animated film, however, was Disney's *Toy Story* (John Lasseter) released in 1995, followed by the groundbreaking release of *Star Wars: Episode I – The Phantom Menace* (George Lucas, 1999), which "had become one of the first films in which digital characters intermingled with human actors in an almost entirely synthetic environment, and in which digitally enhanced or generated shots far outnumbered those that were not" (Hall & Neale 255). Digital technology has grown ever since and is used more and more frequently in film, having reached a point where it has almost fully replaced practical effects.

While digital technology has fundamentally changed cinema as a spectacle, it also brought many advantages to independent filmmakers. Indeed, digital cameras and equipment as well as editing tools have been quite accessible pricewise since the 2000s. Furthermore, digital cameras are often incredibly light and easy to handle and can, therefore, be used in many circumstances without becoming a burden, as a result allowing for more spontaneity, experimentation, and an easy reshooting of scenes outside the realm of the studios and their ultra-expensive and complicated equipment. Digital film is usually also compatible with computer programs that enable a faster and more economic editing process besides allowing filmmakers to take production and post-production into their own hands on their own schedules.

Ultimately, this means that an entire film can be easily completed to a point where it is either ready to be screened to audiences in theaters (given that the right equipment for digital exhibition is available), to be distributed on online platforms, or to be released directly to DVD (King *American* 51-55, 112; Holmlund "Introduction: From the Margins" 8; King "Independent" 200-1). However, it needs to be taken into consideration that before theaters

were widely digitalized[41], a theatrical distribution usually meant that digital video needed to be transferred to film, which skyrocketed the low production costs. As King argues, about "$50,000 to $70,000 [were] required to make the transfer to 35mm required for conventional theatrical exhibition" (King *American* 53).

Lastly, new technological advances, particularly in the online sector, also brought new ways of providing funds for film projects. In this regard, in particular the emergence of online crowdfunding platforms like Kickstarter, have established methods to collectively finance film projects: in a nutshell, crowdfunding can be summarized as a process, in which a specific creative project is presented to an online audience so as to ask for financial support through donations of varying, yet generally minor amounts. Like this, a filmmaker can not only gain funding for a film but simultaneously build a community and inspire dialogue around a certain project. As the audience gets to choose which films it wants to support, crowdfunding also contributes to making the independent filmmaking process a more democratic one (Tryon 435-6, 448).

The potential of crowdfunding as a major tool for film financing was first understood[42] in 2007 when filmmakers Susan Buice and Arin Crumley started to use online platforms such as the social networking page MySpace to reach a like-minded audience willing to help liquidate the high debt they made while completing their film project *Four Eyed Monsters* (2005) (Tryon 437). Interestingly enough, only a few years later crowdfunding had become commonplace in the indie market, allowing many movies to see the light of day that probably would not have easily found financing otherwise (438). Yet, the praised democratization the online tool allegedly brought to the market was very quickly exposed as having its limits. This is to say that, in recent years, crowdfunding has come under fire as bigger names in the movie business such as Spike Lee[43] or Charlie Kaufman[44] have started to make use of these platforms themselves: the key issue lies in the fact that established filmmakers are taking away visibility from those who indeed have fewer means to finding sponsorship for projects. Most interestingly, these developments again reflect the endless friction between those on the lower

[41] Cynthia Lucia, Roy Grundmann, and Arthur Simon explain that, by 2012, the majority of cinemas had been digitalized, thus surpassing the number of 35mm projection as the norm in movie theaters ("1991 to the Present" 321).
[42] Crowdfunding has existed for far longer, though. John Cassavetes' *Shadows* (1958), for instance, resulted from something similar.
[43] Spike Lee has built an enduring career as a filmmaker ever since the success of his films *She's Gotta Have It* (1986) and *Do the Right Thing* (1989). He was eventually able to generate enough funding through the online platform Kickstarter to make his movie *Da Sweet Blood of Jesus* (2014).
[44] Charlie Kaufman is particularly known as the screenwriter of indie hits such as *Being John Malkovich* (Spike Jonze, 1999) or *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Michel Gondry, 2004). He has used crowdfunding tools to fund his stop-motion animated feature *Anomalisa* (Duke Johnson & Charlie Kaufman, 2015).

and higher end fighting for a space within a very restricted independent market (Tryon 238-442).

All of the above-presented new tools for distribution and production turned out to be of even more importance to independents due to a crisis within the independent film market towards the latter half of the 2000s that led to a wider marginalization of independent companies not protected under the umbrella of the big studios and their specialty divisions. Hollywood, in contrast, was booming. As a matter of fact, 2007 was a record year for the industry, as studio-produced projects reached never before seen box office revenues with blockbusters such as *Transformers* (Michael Bay, 2007) or *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (David Yates, 2007), while also garnering acclaim and awards for their independent productions such as *No Country for Old Men* (Ethan Coen & Joel Coen, 2007) and *There Will be Blood* (Paul Thomas Anderson, 2007) (Schatz 20-1). In stark contrast to the achievements of the moguls stood the fate of independents that registered a hazardous year:

> While the major Hollywood powers enjoyed unprecedented prosperity in 2007, the true independents responsible for some 60 percent of all releases suffered their worst year ever due to over-production and intense competition from the conglomerate-owned indie divisions. Out of some 130 independent distributors in 2007, only four—Lionsgate, MGM, the Weinstein Company, and Goldwyn—enjoyed any real success at the box office, with nearly two-thirds of their releases (45 of 71) grossing at least $1 million. (Schatz 27)

The majors seemingly skyrocketing prosperity, however, was short-lived as with the global financial crisis their hegemony became threatened. In order to prevent greater financial losses, the big studios were ultimately forced to gradually close down their independent subsidiaries (Connor 455). Not only was this move provoked by the reality of a sheer overabundance of independent films within a very restricted market (affecting both smaller companies as well as the conglomerates), but also, particularly since 2008, the financial crisis curbed outside financial investment. At the same time DVD and ticket sales were rapidly dropping, while other media options (most notably the boom of TV series produced by cable channels as well as social media and other internet platforms) began to emerge as alternatives to costly visits to the movies (Perren 231; Tryon 436; Connor 459). In point of fact, it needs to be remembered that for decades there has been a growing and seemingly inevitable shift from the big screen to smaller ones that has had devastating effects on the film business and led to a massive dying of cinemas worldwide – be it due to the ever-growing popularity of TV and home-viewing systems, computers, or mobile and handheld screens (Lucia et al. “1991 to the Present” 318, 320).

In the face of a deep crisis, Hollywood needed to restructure its marketing concept: by concentrating mainly on the production of expensive blockbusters that either belonged to the world of comic book adaptations (*The Dark Knight* [Christopher Nolan, 2008]), family-oriented films (*Up* [Pete Docter & Bob Peterson, 2009]), or 3D features (*Avatar* [James Cameron, 2009]), the industry was able to get through the crisis and back on its feet by 2013 (Lucia et al. "1991 to the Present" 317-8, 320). This also meant that almost no investment was put into low- to moderate-budgeted pictures (with the exception of a few horror and comedy movies) as the central focus now lay on transforming "movies into serialized tie-in devices and advertisements for a global toy market", while "Hollywood studios in the new millennium had become tent-pole mills, producing films expected to support both the production company itself and the ancillary products spinning off from the movie" (Lucia et al. "1991 to the Present" 318). Ultimately, the idea that a film is treated as a product standing on its own is long *passé* in Hollywood. Instead, films have become "small particles in comprehensive franchises, churned out by a sprawling industry with huge overhead, a high-cost infrastructure (including armies of post- production and computer-generated effects [CGE] specialists), and tax-related incentives that can sustain itself only by releasing big movies all the time" (Lucia et al. "1991 to the Present" 318).

As cinemas were rapidly dying and even conglomeration-led studios lost their interest in indies, it became increasingly complicated to find ways of screening movies and, consequently, further outlets to distribute independent pictures needed to be developed. Hereby, the internet opened up new doors for filmmakers with its many options – be they completely free of charge for audiences, as in social media sites such as Facebook or free video-sharing sites such as Youtube, or more moviemaking-oriented platforms for artists to advertise and offer their products in return for a certain amount of money. The development of online tools has been particularly important as they "have arisen to facilitate informal and instantaneous sharing. These platforms offer new capacities for people to pass along media artifacts—and, in the process, to seek models to generate revenue through the activities of their users" (Jenkins et al. 2). To a certain degree these tools, again, contribute to an easier and more democratic distribution of filmic material as they are accessible to almost anyone and can be viewed in a wide variety of countries worldwide.

Visibility for independent movies has also soared on a larger level in recent years through video on demand[45] (VOD) services, best represented by the companies Netflix and

[45] Video on demand platforms commonly offer a wide array of entertainment media (films, series, shorts) that viewers can choose from with unlimited access in return for a subscription fee.

Amazon Prime, amongst many others. With the growing popularity of these platforms, a need has arisen to constantly present and guarantee new material to subscribers, having led both Amazon Studios and Netflix to produce original programming[46] in recent years. Mareike Jenner dives deeper into the effects of these developments. Though the author principally focuses on television series, the reasoning can certainly be extended to the movie market:

> [T]he advent of Netflix and Amazon original programming certainly poses a challenge to existing media conglomerates that hoped to be able to dictate changes. As it is, Netflix, previously an online DVD-rental service and unconnected to the large media conglomerates that dominate media worldwide, became a powerful player in the reorganisation of what television *is*. Other companies quickly followed its example by providing original 'quality' TV as well as licensed programming without ad breaks in exchange for monthly or (in the case of Amazon) annual subscriptions. Netflix also quickly expanded globally, to some extent challenging the power of international conglomerates even more. (3)

As the immense success of Oscar-winning films like the Amazon-produced *Manchester by the Sea* (Kenneth Lonergan, 2016) or Netflix's *Roma* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2018) – two movies that have also received theatrical distribution – proved, the companies have been catapulted to a plateau that was, only a few years earlier, reserved for the specialty divisions of the Hollywood studios. Ultimately, this shows that the tide has turned as "[i]n just two-plus years, the biggest technology and consumer marketplace company has scaled Hollywood credibility" (Fennessey n.p.). This alarming development has led content creators to question whether their engagement with VOD moguls actually represents a good stroke of business. As a consequence, NBCUniversal and Disney have recently announced that they are going to buy back certain media content and begin offering it on their own streaming services. If this trend should continue, it could mean a splintering of the VOD market and a further strengthening of big media conglomerates (Heritage n.p.).

Certainly, the necessity to come up with new content on almost a weekly basis cannot be solely handled by the companies themselves. This is where independent filmmakers come into play: as Sean Fennessey argues, VOD services have taken over the role of film festivals, as they are now taking charge of movies that are usually rejected by Hollywood (n.p.). Both Amazon and Netflix, as a matter of fact, have shown great interest in acquiring a variety of

[46] While having (co-)produced films that found wider distribution in the past, Amazon Studios started offering original films (either self-produced or acquired/ licensed from other studios) in 2015, including movies like Spike Lee's *Chi-Raq* (2015) or the documentary about James Baldwin *I Am Not Your Negro* (Raoul Peck, 2016). Netflix has chosen a similar path, having equipped its library with features such as *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon: Sword of Destiny* (Woo-Ping Yuen, 2016) or *I Don't Feel at Home in This World Anymore* (Macon Blair, 2017).

independent movies at film festivals such as Sundance in order to be able to offer them on their streaming tools as originals.

Furthermore, just like the independent divisions of the bigger studios in the past, the companies have been able to establish connections to and enter contracts with certain independent filmmaking talents. Indeed, this is of great significance for independent filmmakers as it allows them to reach audiences worldwide in faster and more economic ways without having to depend on finding distribution in each country. In comparison to contents offered by multiplexes, the inclusion of independently produced movies on VOD platforms also guarantees that a more diverse selection of films is ultimately viewed by the larger masses (Lucia et al. "1991 to the Present" 328). With streaming sites such as MUBI leading the way, this trend has reached new dimensions as in recent years VOD companies that solely focus on augmenting their independent and arthouse repertoire have come into existence.

Nevertheless, the benefits of video on demand services should be enjoyed in moderation. It needs to be remembered that VOD exclusives usually are not available on media that allow for replayability (as opposed to, e.g., DVD or VHS releases). This implies that if a company decides to take down original programming from a platform, it becomes quite tricky to consumers to get a hold of certain content. Naturally, this has deep consequences for those eager to build a larger movie archive.

The companies' rejection of making certain content widely available ties in with another issue that Fennessey introduces, namely that of "Netflix's refusal to share internal viewing metrics, [forcing] filmmakers now […] to trust that the corporate […] is helping expand their careers, and not limiting them. This is unprecedented. How do we define a hit director in this environment?" (n.p.). Eventually, the complete ownership of certain projects by the streaming moguls has even more far-reaching consequences: "The raft of small films that have been bought and paid for by Netflix enforce a new kind of relationship that more closely resembles the old studio-contractor model that employed actors in the 1930s and '40s: Netflix owns everything. There are no DVD sales, no international receipts, no TV syndication deals" (n.p.).

All in all, while multinationals like Netflix or Amazon have been able to challenge the workings of the old studios, they have simultaneously turned into new monopolies – a development reminiscent of the way the Big Five were able to fight off the Motion Picture Patents Company's leadership role in the 1910s, just to turn into new monopolies themselves. As shown time and time again, the domination of the market by a select few can have harrowing effects on the entire cinematic landscape – including independent productions –, as, ultimately, it is up to these companies which films should and can be consumed by the masses. In other

words, while a variety of independent films have been acquired by VOD companies, – some of them containing LGBTQIA+ content, such as *Beach Rats* (Eliza Hittman, 2017) – in the end it is still a matter of picking movies that are attractive to wide audiences and thus neither too "hardcore" or "unpolished" to offend the tastes of the mainstream.

Ultimately, many of the struggles presented in this chapter represent phases and battles that queer independent cinema as well had to confront and endure through time. Still, it needs to be recognized that queer independent cinema is burdened with double marginalization: firstly, because independent cinema finds itself in a constant strife to being recognized, and, secondly, because queer cinema has long existed on the utmost outer fringes of the industry, as the next chapter will explore in detail.

3) *Different from the Others*: Marginal Queer Cinema(s) (1890s – 1970s)

In a scene from Charlie Chaplin's *Behind the Screen* (1916) the director is shown kissing a woman dressed in men's clothing. When a brutish-looking stranger passes by, he mistakes the two for an intimate same-gender couple and begins mocking them by adapting a highly effeminate manner. A few decades later, in a heartbreaking coming out scene taken from the movie *The Children's Hour* (William Wyler, 1961), a young woman called Martha (Shirley MacLaine) declares her love to her friend Karen (Audrey Hepburn). Filled with self-loathing, she describes her guilt, disgust, and feeling of entrapment towards her desires: "Don't you see? I can't stand to have you touch me! I can't stand to have you look at me! Oh, it's all my fault. I have ruined your life and I have ruined my own. I swear I didn't know it! I didn't mean it! Oh, I feel so damn sick and dirty I can't stand it anymore!" (01:33:37).

Though these two filmic examples could not be more different in terms of genre, style, and tone, both are able to provide a clear vision regarding the ways in which homosexuality was supposed to be dealt with within the context of American cinema for almost an entire century. As can be deduced from the scenic descriptions under discussion, early on in film history queerness was already generally perceived as a form of gender inversion (predominantly represented by effeminate men and mannish women) or as a dirty shame that needed to be pointed out, policed, or outright ridiculed by society. Most tragically, as becomes apparent when diving deeper into the plot of *The Children's Hour*, queer behavior was regarded as bearing a destructive core that had to be punished. Correspondingly, unable to cope with the pressure society places on her, and despite her best friend's support, Martha sees no other way to escape the hardship her sexuality entails in a homophobic culture than to commit suicide.

With an acute awareness of the deep-rooted homophobia inside the film business, I consider it essential to look back at examples like the ones described above and to gain a vaster understanding of queer film history to sustain a link between the past and the present, in turn enabling me to turn recurring issues in terms of queer representation visible. Addressing these misrepresentations will furthermore grant the basis for my discussion of New Queer Cinema and its renaissance, two film waves during which many stereotyped portrayals of queerness that had been perpetuated throughout an entire century of film history would be greatly questioned and deconstructed. Certainly, this dialog must begin at the dawn of film in the 1890s.

3.1) *Flaming Pictures*: Queer Cinema Under Fire from its Beginnings to the Underground Rebellion

When considering the earliest depictions of queerness in cinema, it is paramount to examine how these representations were deeply influenced by notions of homosexuality formed in the late 19th century. Indeed, as will be explained in further detail in the following, it was during this time that the perception of homosexuality as being a feature able to inform an identity in its entirety first emerged. As already briefly explored in chapter 1, this is not to say that same-sex relations and homoerotic acts did not exist prior to this point in time, but what developed in the western consciousness was the erroneous belief that same sex attraction could take up, characterize, and become perceptible in almost every aspect defining a person, rather than just being another feature amongst many that comprise the identity or sexuality of a human being.

While keeping in mind that same-sex attraction, relations, love, and desire are natural and ubiquitous elements of human history, if we decide to specifically plunge further into the cultural history of the United States, it will become apparent that discourses around homosexuality already existed as early as in the settlement era[47]: while the mention of homosexual acts was commonly silenced and avoided during this period (depending on the various colonies and their development over time), laws and moral codes forbidding and punishing same-sex sexual practices paradoxically made them the more present by creating a certain fear and cautiousness with regard to this offence (D'Emilio & Freedman 30; Eaklor 16-7).

However, people's understanding of intimate same-sex acts was far from the same as it is today, as D'Emilio & Freedman further explain: "colonial society had no permanent cultural category for those who engaged in sexual relations with members of their own gender. Like other sinners, women or men who were punished for unnatural sexual acts did not acquire a lifetime identity as 'homosexuals,' and they could be reintegrated into the fold" (31). What also calls attention is the fact that the main discourse around same-gender desire was based on religious, or more precisely Judeo-Christian principles concerned with the sin of "the unnatural spilling of seed, the biblical sin of Onan" that "almost always applied to men, not women" (122). In fact, this religious dimension of dealing with same-gender matters had already existed

[47] On pre-settlement North American grounds, *queer* relations and identities (as defined by today's standards) certainly existed in native cultures but were dealt with in very different ways, as "a tolerance of sex and gender diversity not found in the colonizers" was often practiced (Eaklor 17). Because this subject matter would go beyond the scope of this project, I am unable to discuss this issue in more detail at this point.

ever since the Middle Ages and directed a unitary discourse concerning sexuality as being "organized around the theme of the flesh" (Foucault 33).

Yet, changes began to occur in the 18th century when this homogeneous, religiously-guided way of dealing with and perceiving sexuality slowly split into a plethora of different public discourses prone on policing, classifying, and administering sexuality (Foucault 23-5). To get to the heart of the matter, governments became interested in identifying issues able to affect (the lack of) populational growth, which, amongst other factors, included birth rates, the procreation inside and outside of marriage, non-reproductive sexual practices, infertility, or contraception (25-6). As a consequence, the sexual life of citizens was suddenly perceived as of central importance to the growth, wealth and future of a specific society (26). More and more areas of knowledge – most notably economy, pedagogy, medicine, psychiatry, biology, or justice – began to define and institutionalize acceptable ways of performing sexuality, thus making the governed people conscious about the limits and obligations of their sex lives (31, 33). Nonetheless, this development had a flipside: in order to define the norm of acceptable sexual behavior, deviant sexualities needed to be consequently described and studied so as to educate the public about any possible sexual or behavioral transgressions in need of being treated, oppressed, and/ or punished (36).

This newfound necessity to address and discipline sexual deviancy – with particular attention given to same-sex practices – might be, at least partially, related to a surge of new forms of living out same sex relations that were increasingly noticed by the general public, at least in urban centers: while the trials of Oscar Wilde for "the commission of acts of indecency in private with members of the own sex" (Hyde 19) were making headlines across the western world, in a far less controversial and public manner, in late 19th century US culture a variety of new ways of cohabiting as same sex couples became possible due to profound social and cultural shifts, as D'Emilio and Freedman explain:

> Labor for wages allowed more and more men, and some women, to detach themselves from a family-based economy and strike out on their own; the anonymous social relations of the metropolis gave them the freedom to pursue their sexual yearnings. Some men and women began to interpret their homosexual desires as a characteristic that distinguished them from the majority. Slowly they elaborated an underground sexual subculture. […] Abundant evidence survives from observers and participants that between the 1880s and the First World War, a sexual minority of sorts was in the making. (226-7)

While by no means a flaming and public queer subculture existed in the sense in which it blossomed after World War II (or even more so in the 1970s), it is possible to speculate that

these developments did probably not go unnoticed. Accordingly, condemnation slowly began to grow by the end of the 19th century when homosexuality as such was introduced into the realm of pathologies. Generally speaking, at the turn of the century medical discourses gradually gained power and influence, leading to great shifts in the definitions of sexual perversions and the establishment of new methods on how to detect them (Eaklor 14). As a result thereof, sexual deviances started to be perceived as a fundamental descriptor of a person's identity able to give insight into the entire degenerate being of an individual. Homosexuality certainly fell under this category:

> The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology. Nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality. It was everywhere present in him: at the root of all his actions because it was their insidious and indefinitely active principle; written immodestly on his face and body because it was a secret that always gave itself away. (Foucault 43)

As Michel Foucault further describes, the term "homosexual" was first coined by German psychiatrist Karl Friedrich Westphal in his 1870 article "contrary sexual sensations" (Foucault 43), though other writers suggest that the "birth" of the homosexual as a marker of identity happened earlier. Basing herself on Alan Bray's 1982 book *Homosexuality in Renaissance England*, Annamarie Jagose reasons that a distinctive homosexual community and identity were actually established two centuries prior in western culture:

> Bray argues that the origins of modern homosexuality can be discerned […] at the close of the seventeenth century, with the emergence of an urban homosexual subculture that sprang up around those 'molly houses [which] were scattered across the whole of the built-up area north of the Thames' (ibid: 84 […]). […] Bray argues that the molly houses are significant because they constituted homosexuality as more than a sexual act or inclination; in fact, they constituted it in the modern sense as an identity, a way of being in the world. (11-2)

At any rate, while in the late 19th century male homosexuality was still widely perceived as a complete inversion of female and male markers within an individual – eroticism accordingly being only a fraction comprising a homosexual's identity –, in the following decades the definition of homosexuality slowly extended towards a more medicalized and sexualized understanding of deviant same-sex partner choice as a disease or insanity that had been acquired at some point in life. Particularly from the 1920s onwards Freudianism would be the key guide to addressing queer sexualities (Foucault 43; D'Emilio & Freedman 226;

Richardson & Seidman 4). These developments had far-reaching effects in American society, leading to more restrictions as well as public and institutional policing (D'Emilio & Freedman 129-30), though they "also made possible the formation of a 'reverse' discourse: homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or 'naturality' be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified" (Foucault 101).

Being born in a time of such turbulence, the medium film was therefore not free of its own share of homoeroticism and homophobia. Though large parts of early filmic works have either been lost or destroyed over the course of time, queer identities, acts, desires, and gazes can nevertheless still be traced back to the early days of the emerging film form, lurking underneath the heteronormativity of the medium. Paralleling the above-described unfavorable way in which homosexuality was perceived at the turn of the century, queer-inclined characters were usually not openly characterized or labeled as being LGBTQIA+ but rather constructed according to negative and harmful stereotypes. Their queerness was consequently expressed through subtext and allegory (Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 20).

In most known cases in which queerness was *de facto* more openly voiced at the dawn of cinema, it was particularly in form of male and female impersonation, as seen for instance in reels Edwin S. Porter produced in the first years of the new century (Russo 6). Nonetheless, it needs to be acknowledged that while some of these examples can be considered *queer* retrospectively, audiences might have not necessarily grasped the homosexual content or undertones at the date of release. A now-famous example is a shot that is generally referred to as *The Gay Brothers* (William K. L. Dickson, 1895) which shows two men dancing in one another's arms. Certainly, the original reception of this short clip cannot be understood or reconstructed from today's standpoint without any clear documentation. The question thus remains whether the idea of seeing two men dancing was taken up as either comical, offensive, or merely unnoteworthy in a society in which the modern concept of homosexuality was not yet pervasive.

As the film business grew throughout the 1920s and 30s, filmmakers became more audacious and explicit, leading a few adventurous ones to produce features centering around queer themes, particularly in the years prior to the implementation of the Production Code. A prime example is the silent film *A Florida Enchantment* (Sidney Drew, 1914) in which a young woman, Miss Lillian Travers (Edith Storey), accidentally swallows magical seeds that turn her mind into that of a stereotypical man, consequently changing her entire behavior as well as sexual preference (Russo 11; Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 23). Interestingly enough, as the movie

progresses, her fiancé falls under the same spell, becoming an effeminate man. These notions very much hark back to the previously addressed idea of homosexuality as an inversion of male and female attributes within an individual that was predominant in early medical analyses.

In this respect, though having already existed earlier in film[48], the clichéd character of the "sissy" or "pansy" – i.e. an effeminate, frail gay man – became more and more present by the 1920s and was commonly used as a laughing stock to contrast and simultaneously increase the virility of heterosexual costars[49] (Russo 16; Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 24-6). The sissy in himself is not a problematic character and can indeed be recognized as subversive and empowering, seeing that he embraces behavior that is traditionally associated to women in a hypermasculine, patriarchal world. Yet, the way in which the character has been commonly used in film reveals an utmost misogynistic way of thinking about gender and sexuality: femininity is considered to be inferior to masculinity and, consequently, men who adhere to behavior that is traditionally (and falsely) connected to women are perceived as lesser men (Russo 17; Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 25). This being said, the sissy was commonly portrayed as a harmless joke and was not understood as a predator *per se*. Instead, "[h]e didn't seem to have a sexuality, so Hollywood allowed him to thrive" (*The Celluloid Closet* 00:08:17-00:08:21).

However, as the public perception regarding homosexuality slowly changed, queerness as such was more widely discussed as a societal danger: during the 1920s and 1930s, as D'Emilio and Freedman write, gays and lesbians gained more visibility as wider parts of society became aware of the existence of homosexuality through novels such as *The Well of Loneliness* (Radclyffe Hall, 1928) and *Strange Brother* (Blair Niles, 1931), while psychoanalysis further popularized the degrading vision of queer sexualities as something depraved and perverted (288). Adamant critics of the movie industry soon realized that queer debauchery also existed on screen and, as already insinuated in chapter 2.2, they took it upon themselves to protest against Hollywood's corrupt influence. As a result, with the introduction of the Production Code any type of "sex perversion" would henceforth land on the cutting-room floor. For queer-related cinema this meant that any explicit mention or portrayal of homosexuality and gender-bending behavior or expression became a scarcity in the American filmic landscape.

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[48] Benshoff and Griffin mention the comedy *Algie the Miner* (Edward Warren, 1912) as well as the earlier mentioned *Behind the Screen* as two examples for the early use of the sissy archetype (*Queer* 25).

[49] As an early example for the misogynistic treatment of effeminate men, Benshoff and Griffin name the 1927 movie *Wanderer of the West* (Robin Williamson), in which a short appearance of a sissy is accompanied "with the intertitle 'One of Nature's mistakes, in a land where men were men'" (*Queer* 25). It can hence be deduced that as early as in the 1920s effeminate men – serving as placeholders for homosexuals – were perceived as *unnatural*, sick, and as unmanly, seeing that their gender-bending behavior opposes socially acceptable norms.

Despite all adversity, queer individuals never fully vanished from the big screen. As a movie could now only find wide distribution when passing the Production Code administration's approval, filmmakers had to be more careful and discreet when trying to tackle queer subject matters. Fortunately, the Production Code administration proved to be not attentive enough to understand certain innuendo and subtext, so that LGBTQIA+-related content was able to survive, even if only in the shadows[50]. Remaining on screen, however, did not necessarily imply that queerness was treated with dignity or in any progressive way. On the contrary, throughout the years the Code was intact, homosexuals were commonly alluded to in form of monstrous and predatory beings[51], "tinged with the era's signifiers of male homosexual culture, being finely acculturated, somewhat dandified, and given to bizarre modes of dress, make-up, and deportment" (Benshoff *Monsters* 46). A prime example for villainous depictions of gay men can be found in both of gay filmmaker James Whale's masterpieces, *Frankenstein* (1931) and *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935), whose queer subtext I have discussed at greater length in the past (see Klein Martins *From Monsters to Monsters*).

Keeping in mind that the main cinematic industry was being highly policed, it was only in the margins and far from Hollywood that queerness could be explored more openly. Thus, so-called 'stag reels' (or rather, early explicit pornographic films), physique films[52] as well as exploitation cinema found a – then still illegal – niche by exploring images that were prohibited by the MPAA (Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 108-9, 114; Waugh 137-8). While the former two genres were commonly screened in private clubs and spaces, a few exploitation films actually reached a wider audience by being marketed as educational movies, prone on teaching viewers moral lessons about decadence, corruption, and depravity (Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 109). Richard C. Kahn's film *Children of Loneliness* (produced in 1934, yet only first screened in the 1950s in censored form and today unavailable) was thus allowed to present a pathologized lesbian courting another woman as well as an effeminate artist who is diagnosed as mentally

[50] Although prior to the Code's implementation queerness was as well widely referenced through connotation, the insinuations used to, nonetheless, be more explicit or at least easier to identify by audiences (Benshoff *Monsters* 35).

[51] These heinous portrayals were not necessarily restricted to the realm of fantasy or to actual monsters. As an example, during World War II it became common to use pejorative amalgamations of different dangerous and threatening identities to heighten the depravity of an enemy. Indeed, placing queer individuals in the role of cold-hearted and blood-thirsty criminals became a trend in itself: in Hitchcock's *Saboteur* (1942) a German spy is portrayed as effeminate, whereas *Rope* (Hitchcock, 1948) was inspired by the 1924 murder of a child committed by the gay couple Leopold and Loeb (Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 35, 90).

[52] Physique films were commonly low-budget 8mm or 16mm films that could be acquired through mail-order and centered on exploiting almost-naked Adonis bodies in sport-related settings. This filmic tradition, however, lost its relevance as soon as hardcore pornography became legal after the fall of the Production Code (Thomas Waugh 137-8; Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 114).

being a woman. As was the prejudiced custom at the time, both characters die tragically in the end (Russo 104-6; Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 110).

Far better known and remembered today is Ed Wood's *Glen or Glenda* (1953), not least for its campy appeal. While this movie superficially serves as a plea for sympathy and tolerance towards gender nonconforming individuals (in this case referring to cross-dressing heterosexual, cisgender men as well as intersex individuals that mean to define themselves through one gender and/or sex with the help of surgery), the messages in *Glen or Glenda* are rather twisted, as horror tropes are used throughout the entirety of the picture, conjuring images of monstrosity in its presentation of queer individuals. Furthermore, from today's point of view the film's content can be considered as highly problematic, including the fact that it features a psychiatrist explaining that cross-dressers and individuals that we would nowadays arguably deem transgender, can be "cured" as, in utmost reductive Freudian fashion, their deviations must stem from a childhood trauma.

Far more pervasive in its queerness and with a long-lasting influence was experimental filmmaking as well as one of its subchapters, the underground movement. The origins of avant-garde[53] filmmaking can be traced back to Europe of the 1920s and 1930s and were associated to wider modernist art movements, including surrealism, expressionism, and impressionism (Suárez xv, 56; Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 116). Indeed, many characteristics informing later concepts of American independent cinema could already be discerned here, most notably the fact that "the European avant-garde film developed as forms of counter-cinema; they sought to establish alternatives to dominant commercial film at the level of aesthetics, production, distribution, and exhibition" (Suárez 56). Most interesting to the study at hand is the fact that the cinematic dimension of the European avant-garde – especially the French variation thereof – already bore queer undertones, perhaps best seen in the movies *Le Sang d'un Poète* (Jean Cocteau, 1930); *Zéro de Conduite* (Jean Vigo, 1933), or, in most explicit fashion, in *Un Chant d'Amour* (1950) by Jean Genet (Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 16-7; Dyer *The Culture* 139).

[53] The cinematic avant-garde movement first started "simultaneously in Germany and France at the end of World War I and later spread in varying forms to the Soviet Union, the US, and Great Britain" (Katz 71), while having enjoyed close connections to literature and the visual arts. Nowadays, the avant-garde is, however, used almost interchangeably with experimental filmmaking as a whole. Avant-garde cinema is known to commonly consciously distance itself from the mainstream film industry and instead tends to take the medium of film to its limits in terms of narrative techniques (or the deconstruction and rejection thereof), aesthetics, form, and even in terms of its technological experimentation and effects. Moreover, experimental film projects have a preference for abstract imagery, their meanings thus oftentimes becoming vague and rather hard to grasp. Instead, what is portrayed on screen is more focused on "evok[ing] ideas, feelings, or moods", while "initiat[ing] new ways of looking at things." Most interestingly, the avant-garde has at times also established close relations to queer culture, seeing that "experimental filmmaking runs counter to the Hollywood tendency to uphold the patriarchal and heteronormative status quo" (Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 116).

Le Sang d'un Poète, an utmost surreal dive into the process of artistic creation, features a scene in which an artist peeks through a keyhole of a hotel room, spotting an individual described as "the hermaphrodite" (00:22:53). Through practical effects this creature is slowly assembled, first forming as a male-coded and later on as a female-coded being as real and sketched body parts successively begin to appear on screen. *Zéro de Conduite* on the other hand takes it upon itself to deal with homophobia in a very direct manner. At an all-boys boarding school two pupils form a close and intimate bond. Being observed when walking arm in arm, the headmaster soon becomes aware of the boys' unusual behavior and declares it to be "excessive," (00:25:47) prohibiting them to further interact with one another. Interestingly, one of the boys, Tabard (Gérard de Bédarieux), is portrayed as a rather shy and scared student, further standing out due to his long hair and feminine appearance. Indeed, he encapsulates a variety of earlier mentioned stereotypes attached to gay characters (namely the effeminate, vulnerable, and sensitive young man), and at one point is even described as "*une fille*" (a girl) (00:31:56-00:31:57) by a classmate of his. Nevertheless, in the end it is the timid and rule-abiding Tabard who starts a rebellion against the rigid rules of the school, thus presenting a very progressive queer character weary of being treaded upon and of following societal expectations he does not agree with.

Known for his controversial and deeply homoerotic works of literature (most noteworthy *Querelle of Brest* (1947), which was adapted to screen by German filmmaker Rainer Werner Fassbinder in 1982 under the name *Querelle*), French novelist, poet, and playwright Jean Genet ventured into the world of moving pictures by directing his first and only narrative short film in 1950: in line with his written work that tended to "[align] homosexuality with roughness, everydayness, and criminality, and whose plots were often set in jails and the urban underworld" (Suárez 157), *Un Chant D'Amour* might be one of the very few experimental movies from the first half of the 20th century known today to feature unabashed explicit homoerotic content. The movie takes place in a male prison, in which a guard on duty wanders through a corridor and peeks through holes in various cell doors to spy on prisoners in solitary confinement as they touch themselves and masturbate.

By choosing to focus on this panoptic setting, the movie dives into a self-reflective meditation on the voyeuristic basis of the filmic medium, a subject matter that would be recaptured to greater extents during the New Hollywood era (in films such as William Friedkin's *Cruising* [1980]) or in New Queer Cinema with its proclivity for postmodernist storytelling (e.g. in *Hustler White* [1996]). The entire movie is drenched in a highly sensuous flair, perfectly encapsulating the desire and longing felt in isolation. We thus see several men

dancing on their own, stroking their penises, while fantasizing about a lover. At one point in the film, one prisoner knocks at the wall of his cell to make contact with a neighboring inmate. In a fit of aroused despair, he throws himself at the wall, kisses it, and rubs his erection against the stone. As the audience soon discovers, the prisoners' only possibility to somehow connect their bodies in captivity is by sliding a straw through a little hole in the wall and blowing cigarette smoke from one mouth to another – an obvious placeholder for oral sex performed through a glory hole and the exchange of bodily fluids.

It is with the help of these little details that a deep sense of restless longing is created: particularly through montages of close-ups of diverse body parts (flexing muscles, desiring gazes, a gulping neck), Genet is able to heighten the feeling of an almost despairing lust that grows throughout the film, yet never reaches its release as any bodily contact is interdicted and made impossible[54]. The closest these characters come to being together, however, is through the realm of fantasy. Thus, the aforementioned inmate imagines himself running in a forest with his next cell neighbor, being playful, handing him a flower. While one is lying on the ground puckering his lips, the other kneels above him, breathing heavily. Up to this point, a sexual tension has been created that is ready to be finally fulfilled. Yet, when one of the men is about to open his lover's belt, the scene cuts away and, just like these prisoners, the viewer is withheld from seeing the actual sexual act come to fruition.

In a turn of events, these rather romantically inclined sequences are intercut with sexual fantasies of the voyeuristic guard that stem from a very different nature. Observing the naked men, he as well dreams of being intimate with an inmate, both stark naked in his imagination, caressing one another. This dream sequence, however, is again abruptly interrupted as Genet shows the guard now literally standing in the inmate's cell. The correctional officer subsequently takes off his belt to punish his subject for his lascivious dance. The act of opening up the belt is at first left ambiguous: as the audience awaits a sexual encounter, it seems as if the guard were to undress to engage sexually with the prisoner, thus visually and thematically paralleling and extending the previously described fantasy sequence of the inmates. Instead, the prison guard begins to hit his object of desire – an action that can, again, be read in different ways.

Firstly, the guard might be punishing the inmate for his (homo)eroticism, while simultaneously using this action to distance himself from accusations of being gay. As I described in a past essay, in patriarchal western society "through [certain] disciplining acts –

[54] Indeed, not only is their "deviant" desire being constricted, but, ironically, the characters find themselves in a literal prison, a repressive and isolating institution that might represent their inability to unleash their lust.

which every man should follow and enact if necessary –, men among themselves control and condition each other to fit into the framework of dominant masculinity" (Klein Martins "Annie" 66). When transferring this idea to the scene at hand, it becomes plausible that through physically penalizing the inmate, the guard not only polices his opponent's queer desires but concurrently his very own. In other words, as long as the homoerotic act is not lived out and as long as it stays in the realm of fantasy, it – supposedly – does not exist. However, were the prison guard to live out his desires outside of his dreams, he would become a criminal himself (at least in the eyes of society, as same-sex acts *per se* were not unlawful for adults over 21 years in France at the time [Le Bitoux 255]).

The act of whipping, however, features a second layer of meaning as it is also clearly linked to eroticism, perceptible in the apparent pleasure the inmate experiences in the pain – or rather, in the attention he is given by another human being. This sadomasochistic scene also sexually arouses the guard, as his desires soon gain a more vicious layer: in another fantasy sequence he namely holds a gun to the mouth of the prisoner (again, an obvious phallic symbol). It is the erotic position of power and of being able to toy with life and death that ultimately stimulates him – certainly a motif that will again appear when discussing the films of Gregg Araki. Genet then cuts right to another shot displaying the guard's face in ecstasy, his eyes closed and mouth slightly open, only to abruptly jump to the next shot in which he is seen leaving the prison. This montage is very telling as it highlights the guard's exclusive erotic power to physically connect to another human being. More precisely, he is able to choose when to engage in sexual pleasure at will, be it through voyeuristic peeking and fantasizing or even forcible sexual assault, his position providing him with a certain authority that can be easily exploited.

Un Chant D'Amour is of particular interest to this study, as many issues that would inform later chapters of radical queer filmmaking can already be found here: questions regarding the voyeuristic dimensions of film, the relations between power and desire, corporeal explorations, as well as the twisted relation between sex, tenderness, and violence when talking about homoeroticism. It can indeed be regarded as a great fundamental text for New Queer Cinema filmmakers, reminding us of movies such as *Poison* (Todd Haynes, 1991), which makes direct connections to Genet, setting its plot in a male prison and playing with the fine line separating homoeroticism and homosociality (a term describing platonic, yet strong bonds between members of the same sex).

*

When turning to the history of LGBTQIA+ cinema in the United States, we find that although queer experimental films had existed prior to the rise of avant-garde filmmaking in the American landscape, they were mostly stand-alone productions or oddities[55]. The avant-garde particularly began gaining influence in America after the Second World War when equipment to film and screen 16 mm movies became widely available, as a result offering the basis for low-budget productions to flourish (Thompson & Bordwell 317, 489). With the existence of an accessible technological foundation, it was possible for a group of filmmakers to emerge in the 1940s who became interested in making so-called "trance films" that explored the psyche through surreal, dreamy images (Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 117). Most prominently, this American avant-garde movement found its roots in the films of Joseph Cornell (*Rose Hobart* [1936]), Maya Deren (*Meshes of the Afternoon* [1943]) as well as Kenneth Anger, whose picture *Fireworks* (1949) will be closely dissected further below when exploring underground cinema at greater length.

Briefly speaking, Joseph Cornell distinguished himself as one of the first filmmakers working with found footage collages: by cutting and reassembling shots of B-movies and replacing their original sound with a new score, he was able to alter the metaphorical and atmospheric meaning to already existing cinematic material (Rapfogel 524; Suárez 121; Thompson & Bordwell 498). Not only did his work predate and, perhaps, inspire queer filmmakers like Kenneth Anger or Jack Smith (Suárez 122), but his legacy is still felt today in the very common practice of contemporary music videos as well as the online trend of making fan-made collages of filmic material that are accompanied by popular music tracks.

The glue holding the avant-garde movement together, however, was certainly Maya Deren, whose film *Meshes in the Afternoon* (1943) was the movie that deeply influenced the way in which the American cinematic avant-garde developed thematically and stylistically in the 1940s (Rapfogel 523; Dyer *Now* 116). *Meshes* is indeed a curiosity of a film: this 16 mm introspection follows a woman (played by the director herself) on a surreal and twisted journey through the end of a relationship. Throughout the fragmented narrative, the protagonist multiplies into several selves in a dreamlike setting that defies temporal and spatial logic.

[55] In this regard, the short film *Lot in Sodom* (James Sibley Watson & Melville Webber, 1933) could be named, which might arguably be the oldest queer American avant-garde film known today (Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 117). Seeing that the film is a retelling of the biblical story of Sodom and Gomorrah, it "'gets away with' depicting queerness by officially offering a moral lesson about its sinfulness" (117). Most significant about this cinematic text is the fact that, at least to a certain extent, it "anticipates the gay underground not just by its direct use of gay subject-matter and imagery […] but by its use of expressionistic lighting and non-narrative editing to evoke experience […] and the way that one can discern elements of splitting and fragmentation in its presentation of psychic and sexual states" (Dyer *Now* 110).

Apart from the fact that the movie's otherworldly and surreal touch would certainly become the go-to model for the avant-garde during this decade, Deren's influence went way deeper into the structuring and the expansion of experimental filmmaking as such. More than being a filmmaker with a distinguished voice and visual style, Deren actually actively engaged to advertise, create, and organize a foundation for experimental filmmakers to thrive: "[s]he realised the potential of colleges, universities, schools and museums as places to show noncommercial film and found theatres and cinemas ready to put on screenings of them. In 1954 she established the Creative Film Foundation to help other filmmakers with problems of obtaining grants and raising money" (Dyer *Now* 116).

Having created a wider awareness of experimental filmmaking and of the ways in which movies could be made and distributed outside the workings of Hollywood, Maya Deren's accomplishments as a filmmaker and as a cinephile opened up a new understanding and wider possibilities for future generations to come. In fact, one of the movements deeply influenced by her work was New American Cinema, a film wave that can be considered a direct "predecessor of the underground" (Suaréz 75) which, in turn, presented a variety of characteristics and beliefs that would become crucial for the ideas defining independent cinema from the 1980s onwards.

Besides taking inspiration from the trance films of Deren's generation, New American Cinema was also closely linked to new waves of European cinema storming American urban theaters: resulting from a decrease in film productions from American studios after World War II, particularly during the 1950s and 1960s the number of European imports rose greatly, leaving the "market for international art cinema [to thrive] in metropolitan centres such as New York and San Francisco" (King *American* 17). Finding an audience in the US, the British Free Cinema, French New Wave as well as other variations of nonconformist European film had a great impact on young American filmmakers in terms of form, aesthetics, and ideologies (Suárez 77; Tzioumakis 172).

Simultaneously, audiences began gaining a more critical stance towards Hollywood productions. As explained in the previous chapter, a decisive shift in audience perception of movies did not only occur due to a greater contact with foreign film exports but also through the cinematic education television could provide: as filmic classics were repeatedly played on television, viewers at home soon became the more aware of obsolete and artificial filmic conventions. Ultimately, this "led audiences to develop an increasingly ironic attitude toward Hollywood, which appeared now as a storehouse of outmoded signs available for recycling through quotation, allusion, and appropriation" (Suárez 124).

Eventually, New American Cinema was able to take off when Jonas and Adolfas Mekas created an infrastructure for the movement in 1955 by founding *Film Culture*, a journal dedicated to promoting and creating awareness around experimental and underground film as well as new and upcoming artists (Rapfogel 522; Suárez 72). In detail, the two brothers lay great emphasis on endorsing "structures in place for the exhibition, promotion, and distribution of independent films" (Rapfogel 522) with the objective to form a supportive community amongst artists connected to film (Suárez 76). Behind these attempts was an effort to allow filmmakers to free themselves from the big Hollywood studios and large-scale independents in order to "produc[e] and distribut[e] ultra low-budget films entirely outside the structure and influence of the US film industry" (Tzioumakis 172).

The New American Cinema movement started gaining momentum and attracted attention with the release of two successful low-budget films, *Shadows* (John Cassavetes, 1958) and *Pull My Daisy* (Robert Frank & Alfred Leslie, 1959) (Suárez 75). Both movies were specifically groundbreaking as they greatly set themselves apart from other experimental forebearers, mainly by rejecting the dream-like quality of trance films, by engaging in greater socio-cultural and -political critiques and by, above all, celebrating spontaneity, improvisation and realist aesthetics (Suárez 75; Rapfogel 523; Lewis 7). In this respect, in particular *Pull My Daisy* stood out due to its spontaneous nature: while its scenes were shot in common, linear manner, the movie lacks any diegetic sound and instead features Jack Kerouac's voice narrating the scenes in improvised fashion, imagining and mimicking the characters' voices and thoughts. Naturally, Kerouac's and Allen Ginsberg's involvement (the latter being featured as an actor) pushed the film's success as both Beat writers were enjoying wide popularity at the time. The film's spirit of spontaneity would be reproduced to great extends in underground cinema (Thompson & Bordwell 492-3; Rapfogel 529).

In similar style, *Shadows*' success might have, at least partially, also been boosted due to the fact that its director, John Cassavetes, was already known to a wider audience as an actor, starring in a variety of TV series and films such as *Edge of the City* (Martin Ritt, 1957) and, years later, in Roman Polanski's subtle horror hit *Rosemary's Baby* (1968). His fame granted Cassavetes a privileged position that allowed him to self-finance many of his features – including his debut film *Shadows* –, a move that provided him incredible creative freedom (Tzioumakis 174; Lewis 7; Berra 41). Cassavetes achievements as an independent filmmaker was path-breaking and would greatly alter the perception of what independent cinema could signify. This is to say that

> [f]or future generations of filmmakers, Cassavetes represented the American auteur in its most pure and unadulterated form: the filmmaker who writes their own scripts, arranges their own financing, organises the whole project on their own, works with a small circle of dedicated friends who are willing to work for very little or even for nothing, edits their own work, arranges distribution after the film is completed.
>
> (Tzioumakis 174-5)

Even though New American Cinema was widely celebrated in film and art circles for a few years, it did not last for long and after 1962 soon began to crumble, with some of its filmmaking talents – such as Cassavetes or Peter Bogdanovich – having been lured by Hollywood (Suárez 79). This, however, did not imply the collapse of independently produced and inflammatory filmmaking in America; if anything, it had just started to gain a life of its own since the New Wave was directly followed by another batch of radical filmmakers forming the so-called "underground". The underground is indeed an intricate subchapter of American experimental filmmaking that is of much significance to this study as some of its authors could, in fact, be deemed precursors of the waves of independent queer cinema I aim to take into focus.

Underground film is a specific period within experimental filmmaking in the United States, roughly taking place between the late 1950s and the mid-1960s in New York (Rapfogel 521; Suárez 54). It was a loosely defined movement that had neither a manifesto nor leadership or hierarchies, but instead consisted of a community of filmmakers that were driven by a rejection of Hollywood's formal, narrative, and ideological aesthetics, its traditionalism, as well as the polished filmmaking qualities of the big studios. In doing so, these filmmakers hoped to grant visibility to images and identities ignored by the moguls, instead embracing the breaking of taboos, and spontaneity, while taking filmmaking to its extremes. Central to the underground was also the incorporation of popular culture texts to blur the distinction between high and low culture. Hereby, a critical, yet celebratory stance regarding mainstream cinema was commonly adopted that existed in an almost paradoxical liminal space, as the underground could never totally free itself from Hollywood representations despite seeming highly skeptical of them (Rapfogel 521-2; Suárez xii-xiii, 53-4, 87-8; Dyer *Now* 102-4).

In fact, it is in this relation to the realm of popular culture and in its distancing from elitist notions of high and low culture that the great difference between the underground and previous avant-garde movements can be found. Accordingly, these filmmakers began to include what was previously regarded as mundane and as not related to the highbrow world of fine arts into their projects: popular, mass, commodity, and youth culture, as well as the ideologies and issues related to diverse counter- and subcultures. (Suárez xvii, 35; Thompson & Bordwell 501; Belgrad 235).

Interestingly, a further factor that greatly differentiates the underground from previous avant-garde movements is directly associated with this approval of the popular: having recognized Americana as "reflecting youthful open-mindedness and self-assurance," disciples of the underground showed less interest in European cinematic roots but turned their glances towards their national, American culture and society, like this clearly reflecting "the democratic vision of the Kennedy administration, which projected a vibrant, rejuvenated America" (Lucia et al "Setting the Stage: American Film History, 1960–1975" 13). Being connected to other youth- and countercultures, underground film also opposed moralistic social norms and as such became known for its inherent sexual content and transgressive eroticism (Suárez 53; Thompson & Bordwell 502).

It should be noted, however, that "'[t]he 'Dionysian' strain of American avant-garde filmmaking" (MacDonald 242) – best represented by movies such as Kenneth Anger's *Fireworks* (1947) and *Scorpio Rising* (1963); Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures* (1964); Andy Warhol's *Couch* (1964) and *Blue Movie* (1969); Paul Morrissey's trilogy *Flesh* (1968), *Trash* (1970), and *Heat* (1972); or John Waters' camp spectacles *Pink Flamingos* (1972) and *Female Trouble* (1974) – exemplifies but a small, yet, perhaps, utmost controversial part of the underground that is still best remembered today for the reason of shock value. Even if not all movies connected to the movement are essentially drenched in sexual content, it is precisely this rebellious quality of these films that shines throughout and might hence be deemed characteristic of the underground. That being said, it is vital to comprehend that subversion was not necessarily only used for subversion's sake but at times actually served as a form of cultural critique as my upcoming analysis of Warhol's *My Hustler* will demonstrate (Rapfogel 521).

The term "underground" therefore perfectly encapsulates the core ideas of the movement: the name can be attributed to postwar countercultures in America, while "[t]he notion of an 'underground scene' had been put forward by some of the beats themselves– notably, by Jack Kerouac in his novel *The Subterraneans* [1958]" (Suárez 82). In turn, Kerouac's notion is clearly linked to those living on the margins, hidden from the ordinariness of white, middle-class heterosexuality: "[t]he 'subterraneans' are the cool hipsters who come alive at night haunting dark alleyways and jazz clubs, living for art, poetry, highs, and sex" (Varner 275). The underground movement is thus also clearly connected to specific subcultures of the 1950s and 1960s and the glamorization of marginalized figures shunned by society, such as queers, drug addicts, or prostitutes (Suárez 43).

Certainly in line with this reasoning, Benshoff and Griffin point out that the term "underground" also alludes directly to the locations in which these films were usually exhibited,

as they were "often [screened] in late-night shows at out-of-the-way venues, making attendance itself seem somewhat illicit" (*Queer* 120). These institutions, in turn, were crucial to leverage the success of some filmmakers while also promoting queer identities as a component of society. Going against the conforming potential of regular cinemas, they served as cultural havens and safe spaces for those ostracized to see themselves represented on screen. Ultimately, it was partially due to these venues that "censorship statutes and obscenity laws [were challenged], [since] these films helped change the cultural understanding of sexuality in general" (Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 108). The wider connection of the underground to queer culture and the LGBTQIA+ communities, however, does not end here: most obviously, a great deal of underground movies actually feature queer actors, characters, and queer-related content, thus creating a great rupture to mainstream film and its fundamental heterocentrism and heterosexism. Moreover, openly queer filmmakers (including the likes of Kenneth Anger, Jack Smith, Andy Warhol, or John Waters, to name but a few) were actually able to find a way to speak about the communities they were a part of and their respective struggles.

Despite the progressive nature of these films, particularly when recognizing the sociopolitical context of the 60s, they were, nonetheless, not devoid of their own issues. As Benshoff and Griffin point out, most of the American gay press refused to mention the underground altogether, identifying it as "too graphic and too controversial for the more staid, assimilationist homophile groups who published [gay and lesbian] journals. And there was very little in most underground cinema to interest lesbians" (*Queer* 122). The sheer lack of representations of lesbian or other non-heterosexual women is indeed quite striking and "a fact that might best be explained by the era's base-level sexism. In fact, feminist author (and occasional Factory actress) Valerie Solanas shot and wounded Andy Warhol in 1968 because she felt his work was demeaning and sexist" (122). Aside from being a strongly male-centered film wave, it also needs to be stressed that intersectionalities are likewise missing in terms of race – both, when it comes to representations within movies as well as when talking about the actual members of the movement (issues that the New Queer Cinema and, even more so, the New Queer Cinema Renaissance would try to tackle).

Widely considered to have mostly taken place in the 50s and 60s, the time frame of the film wave is not as strictly defined since some members of the underground did not necessarily begin their work during those decades. While there were indeed other American filmmakers that made queer-related films early on, Kenneth Anger is perhaps the most known, influential and of immediate importance to the central questions of this study due to his special tendency for questions of gay sex, corporeality, and pleasure. Having started making movies at the young

age of eleven, Anger was open and explicit about his sexual orientation early on, preferring themes linked to the realm of desire, while drenching them in deep pop-cultural references and iconography that served to transform his projects into homoerotic tales with an explicitness rarely seen at the time (Dyer *Now* 120; Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 118; Thompson & Bordwell 496-7). Indeed, as Dyer explains, his films "use much of the iconography of twentieth-century US gay eroticism (sailors, bike boys, muscle men) and symbolise gay sexual pleasure, acts and orgasms, vividly and intensely" (*Now* 120).

One of his first short movies, *Fireworks* (1949), thus takes up these themes by opening with a youngster (played by Anger himself) waking up in his bedroom to see his blanket raised, teepee-style: what at first glance resembles a veiled erection is then revealed to be a small phallic statuette hidden underneath the blanket creating this illusion. Indeed, there is oftentimes "a humorous view of sexuality [in Anger's movies], so that images are sent up even while they remain keenly desired" (Dyer *Now* 120). The use of irony coupled with sexual imagery right at the beginning of the film is quite indicative that the images about to be presented are more lighthearted than one might assume at first and, at the same time, it serves as a form of foreshadowing indicating that the entire narrative is all but an illusion as most of the story will take place in the realm of fantasy. The viewer should therefore not take anything at face value.

The idea of a sexual fantasy is continued when the young man's fetish object is introduced in form of a number of photographs depicting sailors as well as an empty matchbox that reads "United States Navy". It is indeed here that the line between erotic fantasy and reality already begins to blur: in his room, a door appears that indicates "GENTS", leading right into a bar where the protagonist finds a sailor flexing his muscles, taking his shirt off and doing a handstand to show off. Very reminiscent of the policing of queer desire in *Un Chant D'Amour*, the sailor soon becomes aware of the boy's gaze, with his cigarette coquettishly in one hand. He thus turns around to slap his admirer various times. Next, and again quite as evocative of Genet's film, unexpected dream-like jumps between locations happen, as the two of them suddenly find themselves back in the protagonist's bedroom in front of a fireplace. The sailor then takes a bundle of burning sticks to offer the young man fire to light his cigarette – a possible allegory for the lighting of his desire and the inauguration of their carnal interaction.

Having given into his homoeroticism in the hypermasculine realm of marines, the protagonist is now made to suffer the homophobic consequences: a whole gang of sailors

appears before him, predatorily equipped with metal chains[56]. They encircle and eventually attack the youngster in a fast montage of violent imagery. Lying on the ground, we see a close up of the young man's face while one of the aggressors pokes a finger in each nostril: blood splashes out and the youngster vaguely smiles. He is then hit over and over again, screaming in agony and, drenched in blood, kneels, head buried in his hands. When a milk bottle explodes on the floor, one of its pieces is used to cut open the protagonist's chest: we see fingers rummaging inside his entrails to find a pressure gauge in place of his heart; the pressure again, arguably, representing his burning desire.

Though violent, these images bear a clear erotic undertone. Indeed, the subject matter of "gay bashing" present in the film is an utmost problematic issue that might appear to be romanticized or even fetishized by Anger. As previously stated, the youngster is attacked for displaying queer desires and like this "*Fireworks* convey[s] the everyday violence, shame, fury, and guilt of postwar queer life in powerful ways" (Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 118). Nonetheless, seeing that most of the movie can be interpreted as a sexual fantasy, the protagonist seems to feel pleasure in the pain that he is allowed to receive in the realm of the imaginary. The question thus remains whether these types of fantasies are legitimate portrayals of the personal and queer expression of one's kinks or if this type of representation should be viewed more critically as it might perpetuate certain aggressive and non-consensual types of sexuality, which are unfortunately still widely promoted in diverse media.

Seeing that the violence stands in for the sexual act between men, it is plausible that this encounter ends with highly orgasmic imagery, represented by a milk-like white liquid that drips all over the youngster, running down his entire body. The idea of ejaculation is again reverted to in the next scene, in which a door to a public restroom opens and a sailor lights up a Roman candle placed in front of his crotch, flaunting its explosive effect. Although the sexual titillation enjoyed through violence does not appear to be reciprocal at first, eventually the film allows for a space of mutual orgasms shared by all lovers engaged in the sexual act: the protagonist's climax is therefore reached when he lights a candle on top of a Christmas tree (representing another obvious phallic allusion).

Most strikingly, *Fireworks*' orgasmic ending sets a stark contrast to *Un Chant D'Amour* in so far as Genet's film eschews any actual sexual act between two individuals or the possibility

[56] Gay bashings by marines were not uncommon as the stories of two well-known American artists show: both, American composer Marc Blitzstein and American poet Hart Crane, fell victim to violent attacks by sailors they had intended to cruise – the former dying from the injuries in 1964. With no intent to oversimplify his highly complex life and inner workings, it is curious that Crane suffered this violent encounter right before his suicide in 1932 (Martin 350; Sturges 194).

of ejaculation altogether. *Fireworks* therefore works closer to the narrative structure of pornography, as Dyer further elucidates:

> Though not in any usual legal sense pornographic (we see no actual penis or semen), this resembles gay pornography in two regards: the emphasis on the male orgasm as something seen, as spectacle, and the exaggeration of how much fluid it produces and how long it lasts. […] What *Fireworks* suggests is the importance within gay sexuality of the orgasm as something to be seen, an importance that may be amounted for in a number of ways: as a sign that the other is excited by one's presence, as a present (a giving of a part of oneself), as part of the importance of the visible in the construction of male sexual desire and so on. […] Equally the exaggeration of ejaculation may express the great psychic importance of so slight a physical reality or also be an example of erotic utopianism, lengthening and heightening the moment of (visual) pleasure so regrettably brief in reality. (*Now* 121)

This hyperbolic form of representing the male orgasm becomes the more interesting when considering that so-called "money shots" (the shot of the ejaculating penis) in pornography were not common nor normative in the time of the movie's production: stag movies – the prominent form of explicit sex cinema at the time – only rarely used shots of men ejaculating externally (and thus visibly for the audience members). Only with the growing popularity of hardcore pornography in the 1970s and 1980s they would become a staple (Williams *Hard Core* 73). More than just ending the movie with a climactic release, as the title *Fireworks* insinuates, the orgasm is *at the center* of the film's plot and, consequently, represents the actual drive in the protagonist's journey of cruising the sailors.

In turn, the act of visualizing and allowing the audience to see sexual pleasure is central to the filmic medium's relation to desire. At this point it should be noted that the reciprocal (albeit violent) quality of the sexual act presented in *Fireworks* is not the norm in pornography. As porn is, unfortunately, to a great extent male-centered and heterosexist, particularly women's pleasure is commonly treated as subordinate and frequently reduced to ecstatic screaming (perhaps the easiest and laziest way to represent female desire on film) only to mirror the male's lust and gaze (Williams *Hard Core* 94). In contrast, the ejaculating penis becomes a way in which the visual and aural stimulation of the sexual act can most directly be made graspable to viewers (121). Therefore, the male actor "almost always sees himself ejaculate; the act seems much more clearly intended for his eyes and those of the viewer. […] It substitutes for the relation between the actors the more solitary (and literally disconnected) visual pleasure of the male performer and the male viewer" (101).

Briefly speaking, in its celebration of the male orgasm and the resulting ejaculation, Anger already plays with what will become a staple in many erotic and pornographic films to come (including features such as *Hustler White* or *Shortbus*, the latter opening up with several

ejaculations in an utmost interesting montage sequence). As a sidenote, in this context it is also of interest to mention Andy Warhol's underground classic *Blow Job* (1963) for its complete deconstruction of the pornographic fixation on genitals and ejaculations by presenting a closeup of a man's face for about 35 minutes as he receives fellatio from an unseen person offscreen. Indeed, the only indication that a sexual act is taking place can be gathered from the title of the movie as well as the changing facial and gestural expressions of the man that visually validate his sexual pleasure.

Returning to *Fireworks*, in almost cyclical form the film's final scene presents the youngster lying in bed again, this time, however, with another man right next to him. This detail turns the entirety of the movie on its head as the events prior to this (the entire cruising scene with its surreal imagery) up until this point appeared to be but a fantasy of the protagonist. As soon as it is revealed that he was in fact able to cruise one of the sailors, new possibilities of interpretation are established in so far as it becomes inconclusive which parts of the narrative indeed represent reality and which parts were only fabrications of his dreamscape.

Lastly, I would like to return to the fact that *Fireworks* is replete with twentieth century gay iconography, most obviously that of the sailor and mariner, a figure that has long been fetishized within the queer community: "[s]ailors have especially figured in gay erotic tradition […], for a number of possible reasons: longer enforced periods spent in enclosed single-sex environments suggests they may have greater homosexual experience" (Dyer *Now* 112). Simultaneously, the figure of the sailor is connected to the cult around hypermasculinity in gay culture, something that was celebrated to an extreme in form of the "gay clone" during the 1970s, a matter that will be reverted to in the next subchapter. Even the places in which the characters move, are unique to gay male culture: the gay bar, public toilets, or the docks, all represent spaces used by gay men for cruising that were certainly known to queer individuals in the first half of the 20th century, as can be e.g. attested in works of literature such as Hart Crane's *The Bridge*[57] (1930). In fact, for most of the century, it was predominantly in specific public spaces that queer men were able to get in contact with other likeminded people to find intimacy, seeing that a life in the closet was essential for surviving as an LGBTQIA+ person.

Undoubtedly, the use of gay iconography is a recurring theme in Anger's *oeuvre* as seen in his perhaps best-known project *Scorpio Rising* (1963), a short film that is infamous for having been confiscated by the authorities and charged for obscenity in trial (Suárez 183-4;

[57] According to Langdon Hammer images of queer cruising appear on numerous occasions in Crane's poetry book: "[i]n 'The Tunnel,' Crane describes love as 'A burnt match skating in a urinal'—the trace of a casual pick-up in a public toilet. In the poem, he pictures himself alone on the waterfront under the Brooklyn Bridge, a location for gay cruising" (n.p.). Catherine A. Davies furthermore adds that "[i]t is 'under thy shadow by the piers' that the speaker cruises, probably for the sailors that the poet reputedly enjoyed many sexual encounters with" (83).

Russo 118-9). What makes this film stand out is the way in which its sexualized and gritty images build a stark contrast to its soundtrack that, in turn, consists of bubbly popular music. Like this, in the fashion of Joseph Cornell's work, *Scorpio Rising* "anticipat[ed] the structure of music videos" (Thompson & Bordwell 502). This filmic collage also takes queer iconography concerned with the worship of hypermasculinity to the next level, flaunting bikers, male Hollywood legends such as Marlon Brando in leather gear (as seen in *The Wild One* [Laslo Benedek, 1953]) or Gary Cooper in *High Noon* (Fred Zinnemann, 1952), as well as physique film models. It is quite striking that these depictions indeed represented an utmost subversive form of queer representation in the 1960s as they refused to see gay men as vulnerable and weak (Suárez 158). In a very similar vein, the debate of how popular culture influences the creation of personal identities and that of certain groups and subcultures is examined at even greater length in the work of Andy Warhol.

Perhaps best remembered as a visual artist, Andy Warhol rose to prominence in 1962 due to his silkscreens depicting Campbell's Soup cans and was quickly deemed one of the pioneers of the emerging pop art movement, rapidly moving up to becoming a museum and gallery artist (Suárez 214, 218; Dyer *Now* 150). It is less well known that since early on in his career he already engaged in filmmaking, having his debut as a director in 1963 with movies like *Kiss* (1963) or *Blow Job* (1963). Stylistically, his movies bear a strong rawness, usually accentuated by his over- or underexposed 16 mm film recordings, poor sound and picture quality, besides being characterized by a lack of editing whereby every technical fault as well as actors' mistakes are documented.

As will be further discussed in the following, Warhol also shows a preference for very few cuts, for long takes, and a static camera. Consequently, as a director he seems almost uninvolved and indifferent in relation to what is being depicted on screen. By allowing the action to unfold and even occasionally leaving sets while filming, his role in filmmaking is thus closer to a voyeur or observer than an actual director. Longtime Warhol collaborator and actor Gerard Malanga (featured e.g. in *Couch* [1964] or *Vinyl* [1965]) hence recalls that "Andy never intruded personally on what was going on in the films, he was a mere observer and he was complemented by the movie camera observing things for him also" (*Warhol's Cinema* 00:22:00-00:22:13).

The majority of Warhol's movies were produced in his central artistic and creative hub called the "Factory" (a name that emanates the mode of mass production practiced by the artist's team) where he not only created most of his artwork, filmed and screened a variety of his movies, but also encouraged oddballs and misfits to mingle in parties and other events.

Warhol's entourage, in turn, greatly inspired his moviemaking, considering that he was particularly keen on capturing everyday, ordinary occurrences and tasks, usually involving marginalized individuals – ranging from a phone call, to drinking, eating, having sex, or having a mundane conversation. It is in this regard that his so-called "superstars" come into play. Warhol was attracted to individuals that caught his attention in one way or another, be it due to their status as social outsiders – drug addicts, flamboyant and campy gay men, drag queens, transgender individuals[58], sex workers – or simply because he deemed them superbly beautiful, charismatic and worthy to immortalize on camera. As writer Stephen Koch ponders, "[h]e would discover people who were irresistible personalities and who were also lost souls and he would turn on the camera" (*Warhol's Cinema* 00:16:16-00:16:24). Accordingly, when it came to choosing his performers, the idea of having any acting experience or of even owning any acting talent at all was secondary to the filmmaker.

As the term "superstar" already implies, the decision to create his own entourage of b-celebrities represented a simultaneous celebration of and a mocking nod to the Hollywood star system. Many of Warhol's stars even adapted similar names to those of Hollywood legends or created their persona according to a specific idol – a simulacral replication of identities that Warhol was very interested in (Suárez 122-3; Dyer *Now* 153-4). More than that, he was strongly invested in addressing and replicating the artificiality found in the way star personas can be (re)created: "[f]or Warhol, acting *is* the truth, there is nothing to reveal except the instinct to perform, to assert an identity. And if his 'superstars' fabricate and project their own identities more explicitly than most, their performances are only magnifications of the same process we all take part in" (Rapfogel 530).

Though created decades before the emergence of queer theory, these concerns greatly mirror the concept of performativity coined by Judith Butler, which have been closely discussed

[58] Warhol's support for the transgender community needs to be put into perspective: the artist was indeed fascinated with trans individuals and the idea of otherness they exuded, thus often providing transgender actors the spotlight in his movies. This is, indeed, a fact that needs to be cherished as Warhol, after all, offered one of the few spaces that actually granted the trans community visibility. Yet, at least in hindsight, we can simultaneously detect a strong transphobic leaning and objectification of trans individuals when engaging with Warhol's work: "I'm fascinated by boys who spend their lives trying to be complete girls, because they have to work so hard – double-time – getting rid of all the tell-tale male signs and drawing in all the female signs" (54), Warhol writes in *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol*. He then goes on to explain, "I'm not saying it's the right thing to do, I'm not saying it's a good idea, I'm not saying it's not self-defeating and self-destructive, and I'm not saying it's not possibly the single most absurd thing a man can do with his life. What I'm saying is, it is very hard work. You can't take that away from them. It's hard work to look like the complete opposite of what nature made you and then to be an imitation woman of what was only a fantasy woman in the first place" (54). In the end, his ambiguity places us in a tricky position. On the one hand, we need to consider the historical context in which these texts were written. Warhol's dry humor and hyperbolic form of writing thus embodying a time in which any mention of queer individuals was usually censored. On the other hand, we should still approach these questions critically as we are able to analytically dissect them with the experience and (theoretical) knowledge of today.

in chapter 1. The artificial and constructed nature of identities is furthermore a subject matter taken up in many postmodern films and something I will return to when discussing the New Queer Cinema. Lastly, Warhol's creation of stars did not only give a voice and visibility to individuals shunned by society and media, but it was also a step towards democratizing the filmic landscape: "he seemed invested in underscoring that stardom was an infinitely open condition that could be achieved by anyone. Such a notion extended to his film subjects the democratic attitude toward mass-manufactured objects that informed his own pop artifacts" (Suárez 228).

Warhol's early cinema was moreover characterized by its static and minimalistic nature. More precisely, he would usually point a camera at objects or people and simply let it record: *Kiss* (1963) thus presents a 50-minute film consisting of close ups of various couples kissing, *Eat* (1963) features a man eating mushrooms for approximately 45 minutes, *Sleep* (1964) portrays a man sleeping for over five hours, while the culmination of static documentary filmmaking can be found in *Empire* (1964), an eight-hour shot of the Empire State Building. From 1964 onwards, Warhol would also record hundreds of so-called "screen tests", i.e. intense, penetrable close-ups of individual faces, something that, according to Gerard Malanga, Warhol used to think of as "paintings that move" (*Warhol's Cinema* 00:11:43-00:11:46). This reveals that, at least in his early years as a filmmaker, Warhol took more interest in the visual dimension than necessarily the narrative or technical aspects of the medium. Gazing at an object uninterruptedly and without distractions by any camerawork furthermore has an interesting side effect as, almost like a meditation on the significance of the object, it heightens its meaning. By refusing the fast pacing of Hollywood filmmaking and spotlighting the everyday on screen, the filmmaker also categorically refused to see cinema front and center as a spectacle and as a first and foremost narrative medium featuring story arcs and continuity.

Even so, Andy Warhol's filmmaking would change overtime by gradually developing more of a narrative structure[59]. It was at this time that Warhol also decided to venture into a series of comical sexploitation films, including movies like *The Nude Restaurant* (1967), *Bike Boy* (1967), *Lonesome Cowboys* (1968), or *Blue Movie* (1969 – the first American film featuring explicit sex scenes that enjoyed an extensive and successful theatrical release). Warhol's fascination with pornographic conventions not only elevated the genre in itself but also provided a critical deconstruction that served as a blueprint for other (queer) filmmakers

[59] To some extent this shift might be attributed to the introduction of sound into his projects. Writer Stephen Koch comments on this, stating that "[i]t meant that he was able to move on to a whole new phase of his art, in which he could record the people who surrounded him in his entourage, have their lives and their whining voices be heard" (*Warhol's Cinema* 00:37:08-00:37:19). Indeed, by permitting the voices of his flamboyant and shrill following to "be heard", Warhol's movies gained a comedic layer, hence becoming more and more campy.

to come. As critic J. Hoberman puts it, "[r]ight from the outset, Warhol's cinema engaged in a kind of dialogue with pornography, which […] had not surfaced nearly to the degree that it would later in the decade, partially as a result of his own films. […] It was probably the most consistent thematic concern" (*Warhol's Cinema* 00:19:42-00:20:17).

Apart from these shifts in storytelling, Warhol also became invested in spicing up his filmic aesthetics from the mid-60s onwards: while his camera is still mainly fixed, the artist began introducing sporadic movements, cuts, and pans (as will be illustrated in my analysis of *My Hustler*). Blossoming out of this era, his 1966 feature *Chelsea Girls* holds a very special place in the history of avant-garde filmmaking as it was one of the first underground films to receive a theatrical release and to be seen by a wider audience – thus figuratively catapulting the underground above the ground to smell the air of success (Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 122-3). Warhol was pleased by the movie's popularity and began venturing into filmmaking that, though still greatly distancing itself from Hollywood standards, was closer to more traditional structures and directed towards becoming a commercial hit[60].

This intricate dynamic of balancing underground conventions with Hollywoodian norms of storytelling can be found in *My Hustler* (1965), a film that holds a unique place not only for having enjoyed great approval in mainstream theaters, but also because stylistically and content-wise it falls into a transitory time between Warhol's more static early films and his later mainstream-oriented features (Suárez 139). The movie takes place on Fire Island, a holiday destination that is well-known for its gay demographics since the end of World War II (Eaklor 133). At the center of *My Hustler* stands the film's fixation, the young sex worker Paul (played by Paul America), who has been rented through the service "Dial-A-Hustler" by a rich man named Ed (Ed Hood). Sitting on the porch of his beach house, Ed observes, admires, and comments on the young man as he lays on the beach, sunbathing, sharpening a piece of wood with a knife, completely unaware of his client's ramblings. The movie thus begins with Ed telling a servant in an utmost vicious manner that he expects him to serve the young man at the beach in every way that he requires, describing the hustler as "absolutely beautiful, godlike in

[60] At least partially, this drastic change might also be credited to the shooting of Warhol by Valerie Solanas in June of 1968, a former member of his factory, which led him to become more withdrawn from the position of a film director. This being said, while Warhol was not necessarily involved in the shooting of all movies associated to his brand, he still functioned as producer and lent his name to certain projects (e.g. *Andy Warhol's Frankenstein* [1973] or *Andy Warhol's Dracula* [1974]), a fact that has led to certain disagreements amongst scholars regarding which of his final films were actually still directed by the artist (Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 159-60; Dyer *Now* 152; Thompson & Bordwell 504). Soon enough Warhol's assistant Paul Morrissey would take over and direct most of his features, turning Warhol productions into films that present a clear story line, are scripted, and might thus be best summarized as a "dialectical synthesis of Hollywood and the avant-garde" (Lucia et al "1960-1975" 15).

his ways" (00:03:55-00:04:00). Like this, Ed's total obsession with pleasing his object of desire is introduced.

Shortly thereafter, Ed's neighbor Genevieve (played by Genevieve Charbon), a young and beautiful woman, arrives and they begin discussing the young hustler. It soon becomes clear that a certain tension exists between the two as they have a backstory that involves shared infatuations: Ed claims that Genevieve has a propensity to steal away men from him, just out of sheer spite. He goes on to reproach her for usually not even being sexually interested in his fixations, asserting that she only teases men so as to be able to drop them, further accusing her that "[she doesn't] get any sexual pleasure, [she] get[s] some kind of perverse psychological enjoyment out of stealing them away from faggots" (00:07:59-00:08:06). Indeed, Genevieve agrees by exclaiming that "all [she] want[s] to do is getting a little revenge maybe" (00:07:21-00:07:26). Ed's competition increases when another hustler, Joe (Joseph Campbell), arrives at the beach who is a few years older and more experienced than Paul. When seeing him engage with the rent boy, Ed immediately gets mad, calls the older hustler up to the porch, urging that "[he doesn't] want any tired old princesses muscling in on" (00:14:10-00:14:14) his boy toy. Ed and Joe begin to fight verbally, offending one another and it becomes clear that Ed is nervously paranoid and jealous, afraid to lose his hustler to his competition. Notwithstanding their differences, the three gather to longingly and pruriently observe and discuss Paul's beauty.

At this point, I would like to highlight that as any cross-cutting or first-person shots are missing in *My Hustler*, the viewer is forced to identify only with the position of the distanced camera. As a consequence, a meeting of various gazes takes place: that of the characters on the porch, the gaze of the camera and, as an extension of it, the viewer's gaze; the point of juncture being the hustler's body. As the film in itself is quite static and not much variety is shown visually, the viewer is forced into the desiring position and, just like the other characters, becomes complicit in the act of fantasizing about Paul and his body.

Though remaining rather motionless, throughout the events the camera nonetheless sporadically pans from the beach to the beach house (thus switching between showing the young boy and his observers), while only the people on the terrace are audible throughout this segment. These minor interruptions are crucial when considering that with a few occasional zooms and shaky movements the amateurish camerawork easily takes the audience out of the fantasy and privileged position of absolute voyeuristic control. In this respect, Richard Dyer explains that these techniques are used in a self-reflexive fashion as they are able to "draw attention to the devices that are permitting the object to be seen and establish distance, so that

when Paul is in frame we may nonetheless be aware that only we the audience, and not the speakers, can gaze so closely" (*Now* 159).

Furthermore, the camera appears to move at its own will, meaning that it does not seem to be motivated by anything specific happening in the plot prompting its pans and zooms. Not only does this go against traditional ways of camera work, but, more importantly, it makes the camera a main player in the movie: seeing that the static camera has a strong voyeuristic feel to it – almost as if sitting on the beach and gazing through binoculars – and taking into consideration that the characters – just like the audience itself –, are gazing at the hustler, through its unpredictability the camera holds the control to deny the viewer access to the object of desire whenever it pleases. It thus takes the central attraction of the movie (i.e. the unfiltered gaze at a half-naked male body) and subverts it at its own free will. Simultaneously, the amateurish nature of the camera bears a certain feeling of camp as the sudden zooms and the homemade quality have an almost comical touch to them. As a result, the campy attitude of the actors is further heightened while also being complemented.

In this regard, it is also important to briefly consider one of the seminal texts regarding the voyeuristic gaze in cinema, namely Laura Mulvey's feminist essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975). According to Mulvey, ever since its beginning cinema has been subjugated to patriarchal ways of subjective perception. In other words, traditionally men are the ones able to see in film (and thus the one the viewer is supposed to identify with), while women on screen are frequently used as bodies to be gazed at, or rather the "erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium" (Mulvey 19). This dichotomy has a variety of implications: the male in cinema commonly occupies an active role in as much as he is the one "advancing the story" since he "articulates the look and creates the action" (Mulvey 20). Women in film, on the other hand, are perceived as passive objects, drained of a voice and a will of their own, simply existing to perpetuate "the unconscious of patriarchal society" (14).

Mulvey explains the core of this issue by taking a psychoanalytical approach. She thus claims that a male viewer's castration anxiety is responsible for his unease when seeing a woman on screen, as women's "lack of a penis, impl[ies] a threat of castration and hence unpleasure" (21). In order to process and overcome these emotions the male character – and by proxy the male audience member – needs to "[re-enact] […] the original trauma (investigating the woman, demystifying her mystery)" (21), so as to then, in utmost sadistic and supposedly liberating fashion, "assert[] control and subject[] the guilty person through punishment or forgiveness" (22).

Although Mulvey's essay was undoubtedly groundbreaking for film studies, pointing out deep-rooted sexist issues in the medium and paving the way for feminist and queer film critique, some scholars have taken a stance to show that, though having a valuable core, Mulvey's assumptions are not as clear cut or ubiquitous as they appear to be. Damon R. Young thus asserts that the voyeuristic gaze inherent in cinema should not necessarily be equated with sadism. He thus argues that when going back to Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), it becomes clear that "Freud associates sadism not with the organ of vision but rather with anality (he refers to the 'sadistic anal' disposition). Moreover, he distinguishes scopophilia from the component drive he calls in that text the 'instinct for mastery,' which will eventually inform a sadistic disposition" (35-6). Furthermore, voyeurism "sustains a relation with its object that has no consummation or end; it merely persists, insists; it requires an object but does not aim at the object or seek to do anything with it" (36).

This has deep-cutting implications for this film since the sexual desire the characters feel while observing Paul does not necessarily need to translate into living it out. Indeed, as will be discussed next, all of them are actually unsure of the hustler's sexual orientation and whether he would engage in all-male sex acts at all. What is more important here, is the detail that the mere act of gazing at, fantasizing about, and observing him is sexually titillating to these individuals. In a more self-reflexive manner, this also mirrors the workings of cinema as such, as it is impossible for the viewer to sexually engage with characters on screen, though the possibility of desiring them persists.

Going back to Mulvey, while generally speaking a tendency towards placing women in the role of the "to-be-looked-at-ness" (Mulvey 19) certainly exists, indeed, as all of the previously discussed films have shown, both men and women can be found in either the position of the observer or the observed object. This is particularly true when it comes to queer filmmaking, as in cases in which desire is directed towards a member of the same sex, the heterosexist practice of segregating genders and/or sexes into the camps of observers and observed objects becomes irrelevant. Simultaneously, it should not be disregarded that although cinema has a tendency to reduce viewership to the male gender and, as a result, force individuals into the role of a male, audiences are more varied, obviously also including women as well as a wide range of queer identities. As this discussion has shown, the concept of voyeurism, particularly in queer filmmaking, is of utmost interest as it deconstructs traditional ideas of subjectivity and desire, subject matters that I will revert to in the following chapters – and particularly in my analysis of *Spa Night* in chapter 9.2.

Returning to the plot development of *My Hustler*, it is at this point, almost halfway through the movie that the central question of the narrative arises: if the young hustler were to choose a sexual partner, then which of the characters would he prefer? Already implied in this is the second burning question on the characters' minds, namely whether Paul is really keen on having sex with other men or if he is simply "gay for pay". Indeed, seeing that both Genevieve and Joe turn out to be intrigued by Paul, Ed comes up with a bet, claiming that none of his uninvited guests will be able to seduce the young man. Genevieve therefore goes first, joins the hustler on the beach to interact with him and like this leaves her voyeuristic position. When they go swimming together, Ed and Joe end up in a rant about women, exclaiming that the only features that make women appealing are their long hair and the sense that they seem helpless in life.

This is problematic in two ways: on the one hand, Ed's attitude towards women is deeply misogynistic; on the other hand, the manner in which Ed presents himself refers to a specific Freudian stereotype of the woman-hating gay that was widely spread at the time of production. In other words, according to this reasoning a homosexual is attracted to men because he dislikes women. As Alexander Doty puts it, this stereotype is based on the misconception that "homosexual men are jealous of, and therefore hate, (straight) women" (Doty *Flaming* 164), which, in turn, has been propagated by psychoanalytical authorities. More accurately, it is associated to the Oedipus complex as during the phallic stage of a male's psychosexual development "homosexual men are unsuccessful in turning women into fetish objects in order to overcome the castration fears women's penis-lacking bodies represent" (170). Naturally, these are obvious and false oversimplification regarding the roots of sexual orientation that, unfortunately, have been perpetuated to this day.

This is where the first section of the movie abruptly ends, the viewers suddenly finding themselves transported to the second, shorter part of the narrative. A fixed camera now captures the action inside a bathroom – presumably located in Ed's beach house – through a doorframe that creates a feeling of intimacy and closeness. Inside the bathroom, the two hustlers, Paul and Joe, alternately get in and out of a shower, dry themselves and get ready in front of a mirror by shaving, combing their hair, and brushing their teeth. What really strikes our attention in this scene is that we hear Paul's voice for the first time and see him interacting with the other characters in close proximity to the camera. It is in the intimacy of a small, private space that he turns from a mere object to be gazed at into a more fleshed-out character. The viewer thus gets to know his background, including biographical tidbits of the likes that he studied at a college in Michigan and that he is unemployed at the moment. The choice of displaying him

up-close as a matter of fact also mirrors the idea that he needs to be inspected by both, the characters and the audience, as part of the bet.

This getting-to-know scene is also part of a more intricate strategic move in Joe's attempt at seducing the hustler. As such, he proceeds very cautiously: Joe begins to talk about mundane topics such as oral hygiene, the prices of dentists, and very casually mentions that Paul has a great body. When he eventually finds out that the young sex worker is not paid for spending the weekend at Ed's house, he changes his entire strategy by trying to make the youngster understand that he is being exploited by his client and that he could, in fact, be making a lot of money on a weekend like this. Seeing that Paul is still a newcomer to this trade and in need of advice to understand whether it is worth pursuing this career, Joe takes up the role of the mentor and begins giving him tips and tricks regarding the work as a hustler.

Joe's generosity does not come without an ulterior motive: in-between offering guidelines to the youngster, Joe keeps questioning why he should support a possible competitor in the market and very bluntly asks what profits he might gain from helping him out. Yet, when Paul inquires what he wants from him in return, Joe simply ignores the question and continues his game, eager to wrap Paul around his finger. As Richard Dyer puts it, seeing that Joe is unsure of Paul's sexual orientation, "[h]omosexual desire could be openly spoken when the object of desire is at a distance, but in circumstances of proximity requires an elaborate manipulation of male codes of 'business'" (*Now* 160). In other words, this elaborate game bears a feeling of a business transaction – i.e. Joe will provide knowledge and connections as long as the hustler offers his body and sexual services in return. Yet, as Paul might be heterosexual, he has to be slowly eased into this proposal.

Having established a certain rapport with his companion, Joe ventures on to a more intimate approach by slowly massaging Paul's back while explaining that, as a hustler, he needs to take care of himself physically and to be flexible and able to adapt to the different tastes of each individual client. Most interestingly, the very notion of having to be flexible and transient as a sex worker will surface again when discussing the character of Johnny Alonzo in Van Sant's *Mala Noche*. When Joe begins to moisturize Paul's back, he takes advantage of the situation and slowly starts rubbing the cream onto his belly, thus getting closer into an embrace. It is at this point that the true physical seduction begins, a strategy that Paul can only hardly miss.

In the very same moment, however, the two are interrupted by Genevieve who leans onto the bathroom door to tell Paul that she has money and is going to France, inviting him to travel with her. Next comes Ed and begins selling a proposition as well by promising Paul a

plethora of benefits, including money, holidays, travels, even all the girls he wants to have, as well as contacts to famous and influential people and education. While all these offers appear to be incredibly generous, in the end "[t]heir bidding for him as if he were up for auction confirms his commodity status" (Suárez 241-2). This also opens the question regarding their desperate need to possess Paul: is it because of a burning desire or is this game less about the hustler and more about wanting to feel desired themselves or in need to prove that they can acquire anything – or anyone – they lay their eyes on (which would be in line with Young's suggestion that voyeurism is not necessarily linked to living out ones sexual fantasies). What also catches attention during these proposals, is that Paul goes on with his routine; seemingly unimpressed by the offers he simply keeps looking at himself in the mirror. This is utmost interesting as Paul only seems to have eyes for himself, in a way mirroring the behavior of the other characters as well as the audience.

While his gazing into the mirror could certainly be read in a narcissistic way – an important question when it comes to queer filmmaking, as will be recapitulated in the next chapters –, it might also stand for someone who is looking *for* himself. Seeing that he has subjected himself to the status of a commodity ready to please others and to transform and adapt himself in the process (including accepting sexual advances that do perhaps not represent his preferences), Paul might have reached a position of having lost his identity and his true ambitions in life. To strengthen this idea, another person appears at the bathroom door. This time it is a woman that has not yet been introduced and is thus an outsider not involved in Ed's bet. She tells the hustler that it would be more advantageous to him to get away from these people so as to find out what he aspires to be in life. In *Pygmalion*-like fashion, she then promises that she could get him educated, something that he is clearly missing. Without waiting for Paul's decision, the movie ends abruptly. Seeing that Paul's fate is not decided upon, the film suspends the answer to this tremendously complex question by choosing an open ending, like this strengthening the idea that a number of possible futures await the sex worker.

Another issue closely linked to the characters' obsession with the young hustler and, simultaneously, a subject matter that also brings to mind queer filmmaking from the 1980s onwards, is the question of normative masculinity and its inherent desirability in American society, which is largely based on misogynistic and patriarchal social structures as well as ideas around gender performativity. This is best seen in the way in which Joe chooses to act in a different manner when around the young hustler, particularly in comparison to his behavior on the porch. In fact, he begins adapting a demeanor that is closer to standards of hypermasculinity by talking about motorbikes, fitness, and football (instead of being a gossipy queen), which is,

in turn, erroneously linked to heterosexuality (which harks back to my discussion regarding queer theory and gender performativity in chapter 1).

What becomes central to his change in attitude is therefore the question of what defines masculinity in American society and, as a consequence thereof, which types of sexuality (and the gendered codes these supposedly imply) turn someone more desirable or attractive. As hustlers, both Joe and Paul thus need to be able to easily adapt to different roles in order to please customers; the role in this case being that of a "tough" or "butch" guy seeing that Paul's client Ed seems particularly absorbed by his masculine attributes, whereas Joe needs to hide his supposedly "feminine" features so as not to be perceived as gay by Paul from the get-go. Paradoxically, both men are getting ready in front of a mirror for a rather long period of time while putting on this hypermasculine performance. Traditionally – and in the 1960s more so than today – the role of personal grooming and skin care is connected to women. Thus, Paul even comments that Joe's beauty routine is taking him unusually long. This detail is essential as it serves to demystify that gendered behavior and sexuality are in no way naturally connected to one another and that none is ultimately able to define an individual. In the end, gendered clichés are nothing but a performance able to be acted out by almost anyone, regardless of their sexuality.

Interestingly, issues concerned with gender and sexual identity are also often found throughout queer literature of the time. Novels like *Another Country* (James Baldwin, 1962), *City of Night* (John Rechy, 1963)[61], or *Midnight Cowboy* (James Leo Herlihy, 1965) not only all link homosexuality – or at least same sex acts – to prostitution, but many of them are also interested in deconstructing oppressive heteromasculine norms by playing with the fluidity of gender and sexuality. As Dyer thus further develops, in these stories

> [t]he tension derives more from the uncertainty about [the hustler's] masculinity and heterosexuality. It is not that he wants to find out if he is gay or what that means, but that he wants to prove that he is masculine. He does this by making it with women and only having sex with men for money. Heterosexuality proves he is a man, and manliness has not to do with inner feeling but with performance, acting like a man. (*Now* 140)

Indeed, as Dyer goes on to explain, these novels speak about a wider issue in the United States that, unfortunately, still seems as up to date today as in the 1960s and 1970s: "these novels suggest that the hustler's experience tells the truth about America, its obsession with masculinity and effeminacy, its identification of maleness with Americanness, the emptiness of

[61] Vicki L. Eaklor calls the novel "a turning point in gay literary history" (90) seeing that it became a bestselling book despite its queer content.

all definitions of Americanness" (*Now* 141). It is important to keep these issues in mind as they will reemerge over and over in my discussion about American queer cinema. The same goes for the power dynamics present in *My Hustler*, which are strongly linked to capitalist ideas surrounding sex and the commodified body. Indeed, this relation between power and sex, as well as ideas surrounding obsessive desire, the desiring homoerotic gaze, and the commodification of bodies are topics that will reappear throughout New Queer Cinema and will be discussed at large in my analysis of *Mala Noche* in chapter 7.1.

Ultimately, leaving my discussion of *My Hustler* behind to return to underground cinema at large, 1968 not only marked a step towards the commercialization of the underground due to the success of *Chelsea Girls* and *Lonesome Cowboys* (Andy Warhol & Paul Morrissey, 1968), but also, as Suárez explains, it represented the end of underground filmmaking altogether. Nonetheless, the underground's legacy would persist in various different aspects of American culture:

> Social protest was mostly channeled through student rebellion and political radicalism; underground gay activism burst into public attention with the Stonewall Inn riots and thrived on in the Gay Liberation Front and its multiple splinter groups; the underground's open depictions of sexuality were outdone in the late 1960s by commercial pornography; and finally, the critical desublimation of pop culture became a highly specialized field of inquiry with university departments, academic journals, and conferences devoted to it. In the terrain of alternative filmmaking, the underground was superseded at the end of the decade by political film and structuralist cinema.
>
> (Suárez 260-1)

In this respect, it could be argued that the fall of the Production Code in 1968 accompanied with the rise of pornographic film also had staggering effects on the underground. More precisely, underground cinema lost its thrilling, illegal, and shocking dimension as audiences were lured by other means to satisfy their curiosity and sexual urges. Furthermore, many techniques found in the underground were also transferred to porn, particularly in its early, experimental years, as e.g. visible in films such as the softcore frontier tale *Song of the Loon* (Andrew Herbert & Scott Hanson, 1970) or the more explicit *Boys in the Sand*[62] (Wakefield Poole, 1971) (Dyer *Now* 170-1; Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 158).

Naturally, no dividing line can be drawn as to the end of the underground movement: while the major appeal of the underground and the cohesion of the movement and its collaborators began to wane, queer movies with a strong underground feeling and aesthetic

[62] While by no means being the first gay hardcore film in the US, it was the first explicit gay pornographic film to celebrate commercial success and to bring in huge box office returns, thus paralleling the pivotal importance of the heterosexually inclined *Deep Throat* (Gerard Damiano, 1972) (Williams *Screening* 143-4)

could still be found throughout the 70s, particularly in *Pink Narcissus* (1971), a film directed by photographer James Bidgood, as well as, most notoriously, in the films of John Waters: ranging from the celebration of filthy behavior in *Pink Flamingos* (1972), up to *Desperate Living* (1977), a film about the life in a shantytown prison where social and sexual outcasts are able to thrive, Waters' early movies all embrace camp, criminal and anti-social characters, a low production quality, parodic stances towards gender, sexuality, and pop culture, as well as a clear (though at times politically incorrect) love and respect for queer individuals. Lastly, we also need to keep in mind that many themes and characters portrayed in underground cinema would soon find its way into Hollywood. As described in the previous chapter, New Hollywood was quite interested in radical formal approaches and content that was similar to that of the underground. We thus find that the character of the male hustler survived in a variety of movies, most popularly in *Midnight Cowboy* (John Schlesinger, 1969) as well as *Dog Day Afternoon* (Sidney Lumet, 1975).

3.2) "Not All Faggots Bump Themselves off at the End of the Story:" The Rise of Gay Liberation Filmmaking

It is not surprising that the first wave of queer films emerged after World War II when considering that it was during this time that a meeting of circumstances propelled LGBTQIA+ individuals to engage in a new understanding towards same-sex relationships. In the first place, the Second World War led to great migrations inside but also outside of the US as American men and women were displaced to either work in big cities in jobs directly connected to the war or to serve in the armed forces. This emergency situation created strictly same-gender environments which made it easier for young individuals to come in contact with queer feelings, affection, and other queer experiences. Away from the family home and its inherent pressure to follow societal traditions, these individuals began to understand that their same-gender attraction was not an isolated case but was actually found in an entire demographic displaying similar inclinations (D'Emilio & Freedman 288-9; Dyer *Now* 111-2).

The awakening to the fact that homosexuality was a surprisingly widespread phenomenon in the United States was further popularized when Alfred Kinsey published his bestselling works *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948) and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (1953). Having conducted around 1800 interviews about the sex lives of Americans, Kinsey described the sexual habits of his fellow men and women in a consciously objective manner, including "the frequency and incidence of masturbation, premarital petting

and coitus, marital intercourse, extramarital sex, homosexuality, and animal contacts" (D'Emilio & Freedman 286). Seeing that his study concluded that "over a third of adult males had had homosexual experience"[63] (285-6), his work in itself represented not only a groundbreaking and shocking claim but also a great relief to many as it proved that their "dirty secrets" could be deemed quite common. Furthermore, Kinsey proclaimed sexuality to be a fluid constituent of human behavior instead of a constructed and hierarchical dichotomy divided into hetero- and homosexuality. However empowering this message sounded to some, it also had its flipside as it "increased public unease […] since it implied that homosexuality could now be lurking anywhere, even in straight-acting friends and neighbors" (Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 88). This paranoia would become of special importance during the Cold War.

In detail, the Cold War entailed a great fear of an effeminating manhood, which was directly connected to shifting gender paradigms for men within their families and at work. Simply put, due to a return to domesticity in America after World War II "masculine virtues of strength, courage, and decision-making" (J. Grant 119) were replaced by more passive roles that were commonly associated with the female gender. Masculinity was thus perceived as threatened. Coupled with a fear that was spurred by psychoanalysis, namely that "domineering mothers were acculturating young boys to female values in the home," these concerns led to the conclusion that boys were destined to become 'sissies' – or rather, as the reasoning went, to become homosexuals (119)[64]. To aggravate matters, popular psychoanalysis also frequently associated male homosexuals with child molesters, thus further constructing queer individuals (with their supposed perverted, uncontrollable impulses) as being a threat to the nuclear family, the basis of American life (Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 87; Eaklor 88).

The so-called "Lavender Scare"[65] went even deeper into the fabric of American institutions as, just like any other fear of Otherness that was perpetuated at the time, homophobia was greatly spurred by the government. As a consequence, homosexuality was suddenly turned into a national security risk (Johnson 1-2, D'Emilio & Freedman 292): in 1950 (around the time that Senator Joseph McCarthy initiated his witch hunts on supposed Communists in government positions), it was claimed that the "State Department—perhaps the

[63] These findings have been contested ever since the release of the studies as Kinsey's surveys presented a rather limited scope when it came to the number, background, and diversity of its subjects (Eaklor 100).
[64] Interestingly enough, as Julia Grant further explains, at the time girls were usually not the target of this excessive gender-policing (120).
[65] The "Lavender Scare" were anti-gay purges beginning in 1950 that paralleled the anti-communist witch-hunts often referred to as the "Red Scare". In detail, it represented "a fear that homosexuals posed a threat to national security and needed to be systematically removed from the federal government" (Johnson 9). As Johnson goes on to explain, the Lavender Scare and its far-reaching effects on the lives of many Americans have been and are still widely ignored by historians (2-3).

entire government—was infiltrated with sexual perverts" (Johnson 1), whereupon the Senate released a statement that a widespread homosexual menace existed. Due to the fact that gay men and women were required to keep their sexuality a secret, officials presented them as unable to serve the state precisely due to the nature of their secretive sexuality. In other words, the security risk lay in the fact that queer people could be blackmailed by communists (or other enemies of the state) because of their fear of being outed (Johnson 9, Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 88, Eaklor 88). As becomes apparent, this reasoning is rather twisted as "the chance of being blackmailed was caused by the stigma placed on homosexuality in the first place" (Eaklor 88).

The paranoia regarding a queer invasion not only coincided with Joseph McCarthy's witch hunts on supposed Communists inside the Department of State but also clearly mirrored ideas connected to the Red Scare regarding predatory aliens infiltrating the US, taking over government positions, and manipulating the public. Indeed, this prevalent concern of the time is a topic that was greatly alluded to in 1950s science fiction and horror films, most notably in those produced during the worst times of McCarthyism, such as Don Siegel's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) or Gordon Douglas' *Them!* (1954). Though most scholars commonly read these "creature features" as an allusion to a communist threat, the idea of the look-alike Other living amongst everyday citizens also applies to fears regarding the invisible homosexual in need to be exposed and outed (Benshoff *Monsters* 128-31).

To sum up, mid-century America added another harmful connotation to the already stained idea of the pathologized and perverted homosexual, namely that of a political renegade or betrayer. Indeed, these accusations had radical consequences, forcing an already-marginalized group further into the closet: "[y]early discharges doubled in the 1950s, and rose another fifty percent in the early 1960s", while "repressive policies of the federal government, encouraged local police forces across the country to harass them with impunity. […] Throughout the 1950s, and well into the 1960s, gay men and lesbians suffered from unpredictable, brutal crackdowns" (D'Emilio & Freedman 293-4).

It is rather striking then that, despite all the setbacks and the systemic persecution, a gay subculture was nonetheless able to form. As previously broached, it was during the Second World War that numerous queer people began comprehending that their sexuality was not an isolated phenomenon and thus after returning from war many refused to retract to their regular lives and their families and instead "decided to settle in the cities that provided employment, social opportunities, and anonymity if needed" (Eaklor 94). By doing so, over the postwar years LGBTQIA+ neighborhoods and spaces were created that featured a multitude of queer institutions, including bars, baths, clubs, as well as cruising areas (parks, docks, public

restrooms amongst others). Though many of these meeting points faced great adversity from the police, their existence was essential to their patrons for allowing to form a communitarian and group identity, for helping to fight isolation through the creation of relationships and friendships and for enabling sexual encounters (Richardson & Seidman 5; Eaklor 95; D'Emilio & Freedman 290-1).

Finding a like-minded community also served as a steppingstone towards the formation of queer rights groups. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that even prior to the emergence of LGBTQIA+ activism in the 1950s, scattered individual attempts to fight for equal rights had already occurred. The origins of these struggles can be traced back to late 19th century Europe. Indeed, one of the most influential protagonists might have been German neurologist Magnus Hirschfeld who created the Scientific Humanitarian Committee in 1897 to fight for the recognition of gay and lesbian rights and to combat *Paragraph 175* of the penal code, which criminalized homosexuality in Germany (Giersdorf 178, Jagose 22-3).

A similar, yet less famous chapter can be found in the United States when Henry Gerber founded the Society for Human Rights in 1924 to educate the public regarding homosexuality and to fight homophobia (Corber 1391-2, Eaklor 96; Jagose 24). Another voice worth mentioning was that of German doctor Harvey Benjamin who emigrated to the United States in 1912 and supported transgender rights and advocated for medical accompaniment throughout the process of transitioning (including the use of hormone replacement therapy as well as gender confirmation surgery) (Eaklor 81). Just as noteworthy are the deeds of Dr. Evelyn Hooker, an American psychologist who conducted studies to prove that "gay men were no more likely to be mentally ill than straight people" (Eisner 703). As a result, "[i]n 1956 she presented her findings at a meeting of the American Psychological Association and also began publishing the results of her studies, paving the way for homosexuality ceasing to be classified as a mental disorder two decades later" (Eaklor 81).

Expanding on the brave and pioneering efforts of these individuals, more organized (though still relatively small) advocacy groups would only begin to flourish in the 1950s. These units would refer to themselves as "homophile" groups (as in "loving the same") in an effort to refuse the pathologized and medicalized term "homosexual" (Eaklor 96). At the same time, by using this terminology they consciously "shift[ed] the emphasis from sex to love" (Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 89). Perhaps most active amongst these groups was the Mattachine Society – a society that predominantly advocated for the rights of gay men between 1951-1961, though local chapters survived through the 1970s. Just as prominent were the Daughters of Bilitis, an exclusively lesbian group founded in 1955 that chose to focus on women's issues seeing that

they differed from those of gay men due to different interlocking and intersectional systems of oppression and discrimination women were – and, unfortunately, still are – made to face in a highly misogynistic society (Eaklor 96-7, 99; D'Emilio & Freedman 320; Jagose 26-7).

Though several groups with different agendas and ways of working existed simultaneously, specific ideologies can nonetheless be found throughout the main organizations of this decade. Most importantly, homophile groups tended to dismiss queer individuals that did not conform to gender traditions, which predominantly affected effeminate men, butch women, as well as transgender or other gender-nonconforming identities. On the contrary, it was commonly advised that advocating for tolerance of homosexuality should happen through assimilation to the norm (Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 89; Richardson & Seidman 8). In the same vein, the decriminalization of homosexuality was not tackled through shaking the usual state of affairs but by adapting to the *status quo*: some hence took the route of claiming that since gays and lesbians suffered from a psychiatric disorder they needed to be treated as patients instead of criminals, while others wanted to show that, in the end, queer and non-queer people were all alike and therefore had the right to equal treatment (Richardson & Seidman 1).

When critically engaging with the ideologies of the groups, several obstacles to their success quickly become apparent: not only was there the already hindering divide between gays and lesbians but segregation and discrimination was also encouraged within the sexes (that is if certain individuals did not comply to traditionalists' principles in terms of gender norms). Consequently, under these circumstances recruiting new members and growing into a bigger movement turned out to be a very hard endeavor for homophile groups, above all since they were already forced to work clandestinely. Ultimately, "[a]s time passed [these groups] […] came to seem overly optimistic and too 'assimilationist,' or too anxious to present themselves as 'good Americans' in order to avoid persecution" (Eaklor 99).

Nonetheless, it would be unjust to criticize these early activists without recognizing that they did as much as they could under the restrictive, and dangerous circumstances they lived in. It should also be stressed that the principles of homophile societies were not static and that, indeed, some became bolder as the 1960s unfolded. As lesbian civil rights activist Barbara Gittings explains in the documentary *Before Stonewall* (Greta Schiller & Robert Rosenberg, 1984),

> [i]n the sixties, there was a distinct change in the temper and tempo of the gay movement, partly as a result of the black civil rights movement's militancy. We began to get more militant in the gay movement, we began to see that the problem of homosexuality is not really gay people's problem, it's a problem of the social attitudes

> of the people around us and we had to change their attitudes and that, in turn, would help us with our self-image. (01:12:24-01:12:52)

So as to achieve these goals, a variety of new ways to openly protest were chosen, as D'Emilio and Freedman recognize:

> Homophile organizations staffed picket lines around government buildings in the nation's capital to protest the ban on federal employment and the exclusion from military service. They initiated court cases to challenge discriminatory statutes, lobbied successfully to win the support of the American Civil Liberties Union, and monitored police practices. A dialogue was opened with liberal Protestant clergy, and a campaign begun within the medical establishment to have homosexuality removed from the list of mental disorders. Perhaps most importantly, these ventures made the movement newsworthy. Television cameras filmed the picketing in front of the White House, while print journalists incorporated the views of activists into their articles on gay life. By the end of the 1960s, this pioneering band had succeeded in disseminating widely a point of view that diverged sharply from the dominant consensus about homosexuality. (320)

In doing all this, their accomplishments also laid the groundwork for later movements and paved the way for alternative approaches to achieve change. In the end, it "is worth remembering that in its radical origins it raised issues similar to those championed by gay liberation, but in a different context and with different effects" (Jagose 29).

Today the 1969 Stonewall riots are celebrated as the turning point in queer history when LGBTQIA+ activists began to mobilize in vaster masses and to embrace a more radical, politically assertive, and outspoken form of resisting oppression. The decisive trigger for the eruption of the uprising were routine police raids gay and lesbian bars were commonly objected to and "which served several purposes: intimidation of bar owners and their homosexual customers; providing city officials the appearance of a dedication to law and morality; and creating conditions which brought payoffs to the police from bar owners hoping to avoid raids and closings" (Eaklor 118). On June 28 of 1969 one of these harassments occurred at the Stonewall Inn located at 53 Christopher Street, Greenwich Village (New York City). These arrests, however, did not proceed quietly as in an unexpected turn of events, a crowd of drag queens, trans women, gay men, and lesbians that were fed up with being victimized gathered to fight their oppressors (Bronski *A Queer* 209; Roseneil 31; Eaklor 122; Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 130). More than only being a mere clash between patrons and policemen, this event soon gathered momentum and continued throughout the weekend:

> Rioting continued far into the night, as crowds of angry homosexuals battled the Police up and down the streets of Greenwich Village. The following day, graffiti proclaiming "Gay Power" was scribbled on walls and pavements in the area. The rioting that lasted throughout

> the weekend signaled the start of a major social movement. Within weeks, gay men and lesbians in New York had formed the Gay Liberation Front (GLF), a self-proclaimed revolutionary organization in the style of the New Left, seeking justice for homosexuals. As word of the Stonewall riots circulated among radical gay youth and other disaffected homosexuals, the gay liberation impulse took root across the country, spawning scores of similar groups. (D'Emilio & Freedman 319)

Though oftentimes advertised as a sudden new step in LGBTQIA+ history, Stonewall was more of a concoction of a variety of elements that had been seething for years. First and foremost, the growing police harassment but also the general persecution, oppression, and discrimination of queer minorities after World War II became unbearable to a queer community that was not only growing but also creating close-knit ties (Eaklor 123; D'Emilio & Freedman 319). This was aggravated by the work queer activists had done prior to Stonewall that made "many lesbians and gay men receptive to the message of 'gay power'" (D'Emilio & Freedman 319). Almost paradoxically, there was a simultaneous dissatisfaction with the homophile groups, their forced respectability, and their apparent lack of achievements, which became the more obvious when compared to the great leap other countercultural movements were making at the time while transforming their positions in society (Jagose 31, 33-4). It was thus felt that new forms of protest had to be taken into consideration and acted out to overthrow the existing conditions.

This desire to be heard as a community grew even more urgent as the 1960s also represented a time in which social taboos concerning sexuality were being challenged and openly discussed (including subject matters such as birth control, sexual autonomy, sex outside of marriage, divorce and many others). In this context, the idea that homosexuals had the right to have a seat at the table and to become part of this dialogue grew louder (Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 130-1), yet not necessarily in the pejorative way, in which media and film – most notoriously movies like *Advise & Consent* (Otto Preminger, 1962) or *The Sergeant* (John Flynn, 1968) – addressed the issue. Finally, as some claim, the grief over gay icon Judy Garland's death was the last straw that broke the camel's back as her funeral had taken place that very same afternoon (Bredbeck 588, Jagose 30). The queer community was exhausted, frustrated, and angered with being treated like second class citizens.

Stonewall's legacy was unprecedented. This is most evident in the fact that it is still commemorated today (even largely outside of the US) in form of LGBT Pride Month and the various annual gay pride parades and festivities. Indeed, this celebration was first initiated one year after the Stonewall riots "[w]hen thousands of queer men and women showed up for the Christopher Street Liberation Day Parade and 'gay-in' following on June 28, 1970, it marked the nation's largest lesbian and gay rally in its history to that point" (Eaklor 127).

Stonewall also fundamentally shifted ideologies and mindsets within gay activism in America and "sparked new attitudes toward queer self-acceptance and the struggle for equality" (Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 130). Indeed, more militant and radical gay and lesbian advocacy groups were formed that rejected change through tolerance, acceptance, and assimilation and instead opted to subvert the heteronormative *status quo* at its core by embracing and taking pride in the ways in which their gender, sexuality, and alternative forms of living allowed for a gay and lesbian identity that differentiated itself from the masses (Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 130; Jagose 31-2). While gay liberation was by no means a unified movement with coherent principles, generally speaking it

> was organised around analyses of the structures of lesbian and gay oppression, and how such oppression might be overcome. Homosexuality was represented as an identity repressed by heterosexist power structures which privilege gender-asymmetry, sexual reproduction and the patriarchal nuclear family. Unlike the homophile movement, gay liberation theorised that the system would never be radically transformed by those who were invested in it. Dominant formulations of sex and gender categories (and the institutions which supported them) would be eradicated only by gay men and lesbians who, refusing to accept their subaltern status, would destroy the system through literal and symbolic acts of violence. (Jagose 36-7)

In its early years gay liberation had a deeply subversive side to it: radical leftist gay and lesbian groups were formed – ahead of everyone the Gay Liberation Front in 1969 – that "set about championing gay rights within a larger project of social revolution. Other groups, such as the Gay Activists Alliance, focused on more narrowly defined legislative goals, such as the repeal of sodomy statutes and the passage of equal opportunity laws" (Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 155). Moreover, gay liberationists were eager to fight the psychiatric pathologizing of homosexuality, instead choosing to rely on their own experiences to discuss their position in society and the meaning of their sexuality (Jagose 37-8). Correspondingly, emphasis was laid on using the term *gay* instead of homosexual, the latter at the time bearing a medicalized connotation (Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 154). Principally, the movement was adamant to fight homophobia by taking ideas from radical feminists and by transforming domineering binary social structures of gender, sex, and sexual orientation, so that not only queer individuals but ultimately a wider range of human beings could be freed from these oppressive notions (Jagose 40-1; D'Emilio & Freedman 321).

In order to achieve all of the above, it became, however, necessary that queer people started to come out by declaring their sexual orientation publicly. Coming out of the closet thus developed into a political action to spur lesbian and gay visibility as well as a sense of projecting

self-acceptance, self-affirmation, and pride[66] (Eaklor 132; D'Emilio & Freedman 322; Jagose 38). A standout independent movie that ponders on these shifting mindsets within the gay community is Christopher Larkin's *A Very Natural Thing* (1974), which is a clear product of its time. The movie begins with fictional images that are intercut with documentary interviews taken at a pride event, in which individuals express the importance of gay pride seeing that coming out of the closet signified a great relief and, ultimately, represented a life-changing experience to them. On a larger scale the movie's plot then revolves around the tension between wanting to adapt to societal expectations and embracing the new possibilities gay liberation has to offer by focusing on a relationship between religious schoolteacher David (Robert McLane) and the more free-spirited, promiscuous Mark (Curt Gareth).

The movie documents the entirety of the men's relationship through romance, everyday life as a couple, betrayal, their growing insecurities, the opening of the relation to non-monogamy and its eventual downfall. Each character hereby appears to represent a different façade of the history of gay activism: David with his reserved, family-oriented, monogamous outlook and drive to assimilate to heterosexual standards seems to suggest homophile queers – or perhaps rather the gay liberation as it lost its radical touch in the mid-70s (as will be discussed further below) –, whereas Mark greatly represents a more subversively queer stance of liberationism, trying to free himself from "screwed up romantic ideas" (00:40:05-00:40:06), at one point even exclaiming "I just don't fit into that mold. I'm liberated" (00:40:16-00:40:20). Being told from the perspective of David, the film at first seems to reject the promiscuity and free loving ideals of liberationists as a scene in a bathhouse illustrates. After the breakup, David namely visits a bath in search of anonymous sex. The entirety of the scene, however, is accompanied with distorted music reminiscent of a horror movie, while – most evocative of a horde of zombies – men follow the protagonist with arms outstretched, encircle and devour him from all sides.

Yet, towards the end of the narrative David is shown to slowly reconcile with the ideologies of post-Stonewall activism. He thus goes to see a pride march (without partaking) and meets a young, out and proud man, Jason (Bo White). As the two of them begin a conversation, David voices his skepticism in regard to the pride event: "I don't believe that coming out for one day a year is going to liberate these people or change the system that much. I mean, how many of these people who marched today will go back in the closets tomorrow, afraid to even talk about it" (01:09:59-01:10:11). Still, Jason counterbalances his point of view

[66] Though widely perceived as the ultimate form of self-liberation and -fulfillment, the act of coming out is not necessarily positive in every context, as my discussion of *Spa Night* (chapter 9.2) will show.

by contradicting that "sometimes you got to make noise and organize to get things change" (01:09:52-01:09:56). While this discussion serves a deliberate educational purpose, it is refreshing to see that neither point of view is demonized. David's fears stemming from his conservative upbringing are thus also given a space to be expressed and treated as just as legitimate: "[l]etting people at work know that I'm gay would complicate things, to say the least. […] I enjoy my work. Being completely honest about my personal life would jeopardize my professional life. And whether I like it or not, that's the way it is for me and for many of these people, too" (01:10:19-01:10:40).

Having spent more time together, the two finally become a couple. Now in touch with a new perspective on life, David admits that "[l]iberating myself is the most important thing for me right now" (01:11:47-01:11:50). The film thus ends on a more optimistically *queer* note as the protagonist shows that he is on the quest to explore new forms of living and thinking about his sexuality. Liberating in this sense does not only mean from old structures he has been subjugated to all his life, but also from the mark of heartbreak that Mark has left on him. "I'm not as aware of who I am yet as I'd like to be" (01:18:30-01:18:34), he thus pronounces before the final scene, in which the newly formed couple is seen running nude into the ocean in slow-motion, joyfully playing in the water in most liberated fashion.

As the development of LGBTQIA+ history proves, David's worries that the movement's endeavors were all in vain, fortunately turned out to be unfounded, as new forms of activism and changes in reasoning about homosexuality triumphed in a number of paramount shifts: during the 1970s the sodomy statute was taken off the penal code in half the states comprising the US, while the American Psychiatric Association, which had listed homosexuality as a mental disorder since 1952, revised this statement in 1973. Undoubtedly, the latter represented a tremendous leap for the gay liberation movement in terms of both, medical jurisprudence as well as on a more personal level, as individuals who had struggled with and questioned their own sanity for decades were finally allowed to accept their sexuality as a natural given (D'Emilio & Freedman 324; Eaklor 150; Bronski *A Queer* 218; Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 155-6). As D'Emilio and Freedman go on to explain, even police harassment diminished remarkably in larger cities as a direct consequence of these accomplishments (324, 339).

With less persecution, a gay culture, which, as shown, had already started to form after World War II, was now permitted to explode: queer commerce, bars, nightclubs, discos, bookstores, movie theaters proliferated in bigger cities (Eaklor 134-5; Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 156), whereas baths "grew into centers for political and health activism" (Eaklor 134).

At the same time, a culture around promiscuous gay sex rose steeply in urban centers, seeing that "in large cities, gay bathhouses, bars with back rooms, and stores showing pornographic films allowed gay male patrons to have sex with a series of men in rapid succession. For many, sexual promiscuity became part of the fabric of gay life, an essential element holding the community together" (D'Emilio & Freedman 340). After all, "[w]hat had been an underground sexual subculture increasingly came to resemble an urban community" (D'Emilio & Freedman 324).

Nevertheless, this supposed all-embracing and progressive queer idyll was but a short-lived illusion and would soon come to a halt. To begin with, by the mid-70s the spirit of upheaval within gay rights activism was losing its grip as the country was re-entering a more conservative phase. In order to adapt, the gay rights movement began focusing more on gaining recognition as a minority group, attaining civil rights, as well as on the construction and strengthening of a community. Rather than trying to subvert the system, the groups attended more and more to local issues that needed to be fixed (Jagose 59-60; D'Emilio & Freedman 323).

To the resentment of a wide range of LGBTQIA+ individuals, gay liberation was also soon reduced to white, cisgender, affluent men, able to afford the commercialization of gay culture (Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 156-7). Even within male groups a splintering took place as individuals were segregated on grounds of their race, ethnicity, or even due to expressing their gender in a way that was considered too effeminate (156-7). Indeed, one specific identarian group that took over the gay community was the "clone" – a distinctive character that defied the stereotyped role society imposed on queer men (i.e. as effeminate men) by adhering to behavioral patterns and superficial signifiers commonly associated to "true men" (according to the heteronormative paradigm):

> a new gay masculinity emerged in gay enclaves of America's major cities. In these "gay ghettos," the "clone," as he was called, dressed in hypermasculine garb (flannel shirts, blue jeans, leather) and had short hair (not at all androgynous) and a mustache; he was athletic, highly muscular. In short, the clone looked more like a "real man" than most straight men. (Kimmel 184)

By identifying with excessive masculine ideals, clones found a way to prove that through the adaptation of predefined performative roles homosexual men were not only capable to successfully "pass" as virile men, but also able to deconstruct a dominant belief system linking certain determined gender expressions to sexual orientations. While these radical ideas of rupturing gender norms might appear forward-thinking, the masculinist overtone of the liberation movement together with the centering on gay men's issues as its main cause led to

the marginalization of other identities within the LGBTQIA+ community. Even though in its early years the movement "had political affinities with other sexually marginal identities like bisexuals, drag queens, transvestites and transsexuals" (Jagose 40) – who had actually fought on the forefront during the Stonewall riots –, these ostracized individuals were deserted only a few years later by the main movement. As Benshoff & Griffin describe, "[m]any clones turned their backs on effeminate gay men and drag queens, associating such gender-bending with the pre-Stonewall era, self-pity, and self-loathing" (*Queer* 157).

A wide range of individuals (such as non-binary, transgender, bisexual, non-white, or lower-class people, amongst others) felt (and were) left out and not represented by the prevalent white, gay (and lesbian) discourse (Jagose 62). Already fraught with problems, the reductive notions of the movement in regard to what represented the community veiled the fluidity of sexuality and gender and spurred the ostracizing within an already marginalized group (concepts and causes that would become central to queer theory almost two decades later). In its place emerged a complacent acceptance of the binary between male and female, homosexuality and heterosexuality (Eaklor 151-2).

Slowly gaining a voice as a community, throughout these turbulent years activists also tried to bring awareness to the offensive and harmful depictions that Hollywood had perpetuated for decades, but, unfortunately, fell on deaf ears. Though Hollywood appeared to try to adapt to the developments within other blossoming Civil Rights and youth movements (best experienced in the films produced during the New Hollywood era), the moguls refused to take notice of gay liberation altogether (Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 154, Russo 185-6).

Instead, in the few instances of screen time queer individuals were granted, Hollywood excessively drew on clichés that had been set up decades prior. One of those tropes is that of the killer queer, which, as earlier explored, had existed in subdued or connoted form during the Production Code period. The overall situation changed with the release of *Psycho*, as a very obvious equation between queerness (or in this case, gender-nonconformity) and a murderous, pathologized mental instability merged in the film's protagonist/ villain, Norman Bates. This trend was maintained for the next decades in movies such as *Caprice* (Frank Tashlin, 1967) and *Freebie and the Bean* (Richard Rush, 1974), both featuring a gender-bending killer, as well as in *Fortune and Men's Eyes* (Harvey Hart & Jules Schwerin, 1971) and *Deliverance* (John Boorman, 1972), two films that clearly associate gay desires with the rape of heterosexual victims.

A guiding thread connecting most of the films shot after the fall of the Production Code are their tragic and scary conclusions: thus movies like *The Sergeant* (John Flynn, 1968) or

Advise & Consent (Otto Preminger, 1962) end with the suicide of a queer individual, whereas the depraved and monstrous queer is brutally murdered in *The Detective* (Gordon Douglas, 1968) or even occasionally cured and converted to heterosexuality through the simple act of having sex with the opposite gender (as seen in *Tea and Sympathy* [Vincente Minnelli, 1956] or *Tell Me That You Love Me, Junie Moon* [Otto Preminger, 1970]) (Russo 52, 156). Sadly, "[i]n twenty-two of twenty-eight films dealing with gay subjects from 1962 to 1978, major gay characters onscreen ended in suicide or violent death" (52). At this time, the revelation that a character was queer was also often used as a shocking twist, "a ploy of classic horror films, like studying a pretty picture and watching it turn into a grinning skull." (Russo 146). On the other hand, queerness was furthermore used as comic relief and as a means to be ridiculed, best represented by *That Touch of Mink* (Delbert Mann, 1962) where a straight character is mistaken for homosexual in a comedic scene and thus declared as having "developed some instabilities which make his judgment questionable" (01:04:36-01:04:39) or in the subversive blaxploitation classic *Blacula* (William Crain, 1971) featuring a couple of over-the-top flamboyant antique dealers. As becomes obvious, using tropes that hark back to the early years of film, the victims of this mockery were mostly effeminate men.

In this celluloid pool of toxic masculinity and heterosexism, a few exceptional cinematic oddities nonetheless managed to see the light of day. The screen adaptation of the stage play *The Children's Hour* (William Wyler, 1961) tried to teach sympathy through an empathetic portrayal of a lesbian woman, while *Cabaret* (Bob Fosse, 1972) featured a bisexual love interest (though his queerness is only explored in very subdued form). Other instances of empathetic and reflective queer-themed cinema that specifically centered on the community also surfaced sporadically. One of those occasions is William Friedkin's *The Boys in the Band* (1970), a film adaptation of a stage play by Mart Crowley bearing the same name (which premiered Off-Broadway in 1968). Paralleling its theater roots, the movie takes place over the course of an evening in a single New York City apartment setting where a group of nine gay men celebrate a birthday party. Upon initial release some queer audience members were taken aback by the deep sorrow and self-loathing that the characters display. Looking back, however, it becomes evident that the movie in itself attempted to tackle a variety of struggles that queer individuals faced in an oppressive and highly homophobic society by placing a range of diverse gay men as main protagonists, thus creating a whole range of personalities and presenting different façades of gay life. Even though Friedkin did draw on a variety of (Freudian) gay clichés, his handling of the characters was nonetheless empathetic and sympathetic, humanizing these men and their struggles to American audiences.

Ultimately, as Benshoff and Griffin note, a sensitive and considerate movie about gay men that was screened in mainstream theaters was vitally important to a wide-ranging American population since it "provided isolated queers of the 1960s with the much-needed evidence that people like them did exist and that there was possibly hope for a better tomorrow" (*Queer* 139). Curiously, the movie seems very aware of and self-reflective regarding the degrading ways in which media plays with stereotyped notions of homosexuality. This becomes apparent towards the end of the film when the character Michael exclaims: "[i]t's not always like it happens in plays. Not all faggots bump themselves off at the end of the story" (00:58:32-00:58:37). To live up to this statement, *The Boys in the Band* rejects to punish its characters in form of a death penalty and even refuses to place them in the role of the victim or victimizer of heterosexual men. In this way, the film represents an oddity among the many queer-bashing movies of the decade.

As a response to the success of *The Boys in the Band*, other filmmakers tried to tackle queer-related subject matters in their filmmaking, yet the few attempts at studio releases flopped, as witnessed in the fates of *Fortune and Men's Eyes* or the British production *Staircase* (Stanley Donen, 1969). Instead, as the 1970s progressed, the above-described stereotypes in mainstream filmmaking only fortified with "the sissy at one end, the leather-jacketed macho violence of the waterfront sex bar at the other. Gays who wanted films about people in the middle forgot that movies will not reflect what America cannot see" (Russo 188-9).

As seen time and time again in film history, despite all obstacles set by the mainstream industry, where there is a will there is a way: acutely aware that the studios were completely ignoring the progress of gay liberation, the realm of independent cinema took it upon itself to address issues concerned with the subject matter. Opportunities thus emerged in marginal cinemas for queer filmmakers to speak about the experiences of their community: "[t]he films *A Very Natural Thing, Word Is Out* [Nancy Adair, Andrew Brown, & Rob Epstein, 1977], *Nighthawks* [Ron Peck, 1978 – British production], *Outrageous!* [Richard Benner, 1977 – Canadian production], *The Consequence* [Wolfgang Petersen, 1977 – German production] and *Gay U.S.A.* [Arthur J. Bressan Jr., 1977] evolved out of a consciousness seeded by gay liberation and shaped by the lies and distortions of most commercial cinema" (Russo 164).

Even though these films were not box office hits, their existence was of paramount importance as they documented LGBTQIA+ achievements made during these years of turmoil, while retelling stories from a different perspective that was not dictated by the Hollywoodian norm. At the same time, productions like these also served a more obvious political goal: "Gay Liberation films made by and for queer people helped to define and solidify queer communities.

They laid the groundwork for increased criticism of Hollywood's representation of homosexuality, as well as the explosion of work that would be produced by queers in the ensuing decades" (Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 173).

4) *Some of my Best Friends Are…Dying*: The 1980s and the Struggle around HIV/AIDS

LGBTQIA+ mobilization and the continuous struggles for gay and lesbian liberation and equal rights during the 1960s and 1970s turned out to be a preparation of paramount value for the years to follow. Suddenly, queer activism developed into a highly urgent matter in the sense that by the mid-70s a devastating political backlash was emerging in the United States. This move to the far right, in turn, was primarily fueled by a sinking feeling found in sizeable portions of the American population that decisively rejected the progressive political and social changes as well as the supposedly "excessive" and "immoral" ways of life that had been forming in the country since the end of World War II. Naturally, these included shifts of sociopolitical nature such as the different Civil Rights movements, the opposition to United States involvement in the Vietnam War, the increasing impact of feminism, gay and lesbian liberation and the rising visibility of LGBTQIA+ communities in the public sphere, the sexualization of American pop culture, as well as alterations pertaining to the private lives of US citizens, such as mounting divorce rates or the legalization of abortion (Eaklor 159; Bronski *A Queer* 221; D'Emilio & Freedman 352; Brier *Infectious* 3).

As such, it is crucial to remember that for decades

> [t]o the World War II generation, the government was trustworthy, standards of living only got higher, resources never ran out, and the military always won wars (if one ignored the undeclared war in Korea). Now, faith in those basic tenets was tested on all fronts. News of withdrawal from Vietnam without a clear victory and the Watergate break-in and cover-up was compounded with a discouraging economic situation: the first U.S. trade deficit in history, the first "energy crisis" related to reliance on imported oil, inflation, and a general recession lasting through the Ford administration (1974–1977). (Eaklor 167)

The influence and effects of the clash of different actors of change, coupled with the speed and violence with which they seemed to develop across American culture, conjured the widely held belief that uncertainty and ever-spreading chaos were threatening fundamental American values. Indeed, it was partly due to the overwhelming intensity of these cultural ruptures that many felt taken aback and ready to return to more traditional, "simpler" times.

Eventually, out of this dissatisfaction grew an ultraconservative political movement that was based on moralistic Christian fundamentalism and is commonly referred to as the "New Right". The elements of novelty gracing this so-called *New* Right lay in the fact that core values characterizing the political right wing up to this point, to a certain extent, changed profoundly: prior to the 1970s "both on the side of the right and left, there seemed to be some agreement on

all sides that moral and/or religious views should remain separate from party politics" (Eaklor 169). Yet, with the rise of this steadily growing movement, in the mid- to late-1970s religious beliefs were suddenly taking over the arena of American politics with a fervor able to influence many future political attitudes and actions.

Blatantly taking advantage of the above-described anxieties, the New Right developed two main agendas so as to return to a more "traditional" and "stable" life in America, "one stressing economic liberalism, the other social and moral order" (Weeks *Sexuality* 39). Particularly the idea of a "social and moral order" is of interest to the context of this study, seeing that it would have tremendous effects on discourses around sexuality and all its variants throughout the 1980s. Strictly speaking, what hid behind the term was in fact a commitment to tactics of scaremongering regarding sexuality and family-related issues, able to "articulate genuine social anxiety through a referential system in which 'sexual anarchy' became the explanation of social ill" (Weeks *Sexuality* 34).

The Republican Party's sudden interest in politics concerned with sexuality is also most significant. Not only was this development a direct counter reaction to the politics of the left, but, ironically, it was also directly inspired by it. To put it differently, mirroring the slogan of feminists and other movements concerned with identity politics of the 1960s and 1970s, the political right now became aware that issues concerned with the *personal* were indeed quite *political*. Republicans therefore learned not only how to use this knowledge to deconstruct and counter the "permissiveness" of the left for its own purposes, but also, more importantly, that issues that were traditionally regarded as "private" could "unify political forces on the right in a way that older conservative interventions were unable to do" (Weeks *Sexuality* 38).

Underneath conservatives' newfound fixation with the private sex lives of the American people also lies the immensely complex history of America's relation to sexuality at large. At a base level, it is fair to say that the New Right's sex-negative and prudish strategies greatly built on the idea that sexual practices can be divided into acceptable and non-acceptable forms. Basing herself on Weeks' *Sex, Politics and Society*, Rubin argues that it is imperative to consider that "[w]estern cultures generally consider sex to be a dangerous, destructive, negative force" (150). Yet, sexuality, as Rubin goes on,

> may be redeemed if performed within marriage for procreative purposes and if the pleasurable aspects are not enjoyed too much. In turn, this idea rests on the assumption that the genitalia are an intrinsically inferior part of the body, much lower and less holy than the mind, the 'soul', the 'heart', or even the upper part of the digestive system. (150)

As becomes apparent, the idealized notion of family life therefore also becomes closely linked and essential to this discussion, specifically when considering that "'the family' represented an image of certainty, stability and social position" (Weeks *Sexuality* 36). Accordingly, especially in times of upheaval and change, sexuality needs to be policed (by institutions as well as society as such) so that the nuclear, male-headed family – comprised of two heterosexual parents and children, each serving respective roles in defined spheres – can be upheld as the core keeping American moralism and order intact (Weeks *Sexuality* 40, 43).

Considering all of the above, in particular the rise of feminism and queer relationships (both of which were known to critique and destabilize established patriarchal power structures and traditional gender roles) became a thorn in the conservatives' flesh and was consequently accused of bringing the downfall of the country. The above-described ruptures engendered great feelings of unease and unrest, often channeled and expressed through discriminatory actions, and eventually resulted in the election of Ronald Reagan, whose political campaign could be described as the epitome of his voters' demands. The upswing of rightwing fundamentalism did not occur overnight but was a process in itself, the road for Reagan's administration thus having been paved earlier by other vocal moralists.

Hereby, Christian singer and former beauty queen Anita Bryant represented a New Right pioneer that could be, retrospectively, deemed a harbinger of the imminent deep homophobia that would drench the United States during the 1980s: in 1977 Bryant started the homophobic, Christian-led campaign "Save Our Children" as a reaction to Miami-Dade County's passing of an anti-discrimination ordinance protecting individuals on basis of their sexual orientation. Eager to fight the alleged propagation of a homosexual "lifestyle" and a "gay agenda"[67], her large-scale popularity led to a media-frenzy that achieved nation-wide influence (Bronski *A Queer* 219-220; Eaklor 170; D'Emilio & Freedman 364-5; Mcruer 228;).

The case of Bryant is fairly interesting since it proves that even prior to Reagan's election, anti-LGBTQIA+ voices grew stronger in American politics and reached new masses. Anita Bryant, ultimately, merely served to give this movement an avalanche-like boost and a face. Not only was Bryant eventually able to get the ordinance repealed in Miami, but also "[i]n

[67] The concept of the gay agenda conceals a conspiracy theory that warns about homosexual individuals taking over the world by recruiting other, innocent heterosexual victims to their cause, in the process "turning" them gay. Amongst the most "endangered" citizens are supposedly the young and susceptible, thus further fusing the anxieties of a gay takeover with those concerning pedophilia. As Eaklor explains, the erroneous link between homosexuality and pedophilia or the recruitment of children is based on highly homophobic misconceptions: "[b]ecause homosexuals cannot reproduce (at least as a result of same- sex activity), the reasoning goes, they need to recruit others to their cause […]. This was added to older fears of homosexuals as sexual predators unable to control their impulses […] and the general view that youth are more easily influenced to create a powerful if irrational basis to question antidiscrimination law" (Eaklor 170).

April and May 1978, laws protecting gays from discrimination were repealed in St. Paul, Minnesota; Wichita, Kansas; and Eugene, Oregon, even though Bryant did not personally campaign for their repeal" (Bronski *A Queer* 220). Furthermore, as Gayle S. Rubin adds, it is quite noteworthy that even before the AIDS crisis ushered in an era of devastating homophobic attacks, Bryant's campaign "inaugurated a new wave of violence, state persecution, and legal initiatives directed against minority sexual populations and the commercial sex industry" (Rubin 145). Though homophobia had been rampant in the United States even throughout the height of gay and lesbian liberation and its aftermath, it now assumed an even more precarious shape.

Bronski goes as far as to declare that the Bryant incident "is viewed by many social historians as the beginning of the rise of the religious right" (*A Queer* 221). In similar fashion Rubin writes that "[t]he success of the anti-gay campaign ignited long-simmering passions of the American right, and sparked an extensive movement to compress the boundaries of acceptable sexual behavior" (Rubin 147), further adding that

> [r]ight-wing opposition to sex education, homosexuality, pornography, abortion, and pre-marital sex moved from the extreme fringes to the political centre stage after 1977, when right-wing strategists and fundamentalist religious crusaders discovered that these issues had mass appeal. Sexual reaction played a significant role in the right's electoral success in 1980 (Rubin 148).

These developments, nonetheless, also presented an opportunity for queer activism in as far as the influence of Bryant's campaign inspired a stronger unification of LGBTQIA+ rights struggles (see chapter 4.2). All things considered, however, no one was prepared for the profound disruption that the Reagan administration would bring, particularly in light of the then imminent AIDS crisis.

4.1) My Hateful Gazette: Reactions to HIV/AIDS in Media, Politics, and Society

Although the first cases of AIDS were only officially identified by the medical field in 1981, nowadays it is commonly suggested that the HIV virus had already been spreading in the United States throughout the 1970s – if not earlier. The crux of the matter lay in the fact that due to the differing symptoms and opportunistic diseases that accompany advanced HIV infections, full-blown AIDS cases were regularly confused with other diseases and infections (Edwards 122). Taking into account this inattentiveness of the medical field, Crimp thus puts forth the argument that there is a definitive discriminatory element to these early, misdiagnosed AIDS cases, inasmuch as "it appears that IV drug users -whether gay or straight- were dying of

AIDS in New York City throughout the '70s and early '80s, but a class-based and racist health care system failed to notice" (59).

However, when in 1981 a growing number of patients began dying from opportunistic diseases or infections linked to HIV/AIDS, health specialists were utterly puzzled. Information about this unknown threat eventually began leaking into the public sphere on June 5, 1981, when an article in the newsletter *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* of the CDC (Center for Disease Control) identified five cases of a rare pneumonia (*Pneumocystis carinii*) that had been detected in Los Angeles. One month later, on July 3, the *New York Times* became aware of a similarly mysterious phenomenon, reporting that the uncommon cancer *Kaposi sarcoma* was diagnosed in supposedly young and healthy men, further disclosing this news story with the headline "Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals" (Eaklor 174; Bronski *A Queer* 224.; D'Emilio & Freedman 354; Gross 95; Hart *The AIDS Movie* 4, 45). As AIDS activist Cleve Jones[68] recalls in his autobiography *When We Rise: My Life in the Movement*, while "[t]he world was still largely unaware of the misery to come," in urban centers, parts of the queer community quickly became aware of these deathly occurrences: "we in the Castro neighborhood were growing more frightened every day. There was great division, wild speculation, dreadful rumors, and more and more stories of friends and neighbors suddenly stricken with diseases we'd never heard of before" (203).

The link to the homosexual community that the *New York Times* established is essential to the wider understanding of the subsequent impact of HIV/AIDS. Considering that the first cases in question affected mainly gay men, health care specialists and, as a consequence thereof, the media were quick to coin the still unknown disease a "gay cancer" or "gay plague," accordingly linking and reducing its cause to homosexuality. Charges of this nature were not necessarily new to the community; in fact, as discussed in depth in chapter 3, these accusations built on and were a continuation of the misconstrued way in which the medical community

[68] Cleve Jones, a San Francisco activist and key figure in the battle against AIDS, is perhaps best remembered as the founder of the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt. The NAMES project, an idea first conceived in 1985, encompassed the creation of a memorial for the victims of AIDS through community folk art (Gross 109). More precisely, individuals from various parts of the country would contribute 3- by 6-foot panels that were joined to create "[t]he largest community art project in the world" (Fee 979), which was subsequently exhibited all over the country. The quilt being an organic piece of art has grown steadily ever since "exceeding 45,000 panels by 2006" (Eaklor 178). The idea behind it, as Jones notes, served to inspire political awareness while celebrating and giving a voice to those that died from complications of AIDS: "[i]t spoke of cast-offs, discarded remnants, different colors and textures, sewn together to create something beautiful and useful and warm. […] It could be therapy, I hoped, for a community that was increasingly paralyzed by grief and rage and powerlessness" (C. Jones 216). At the same time, the quilt had the power to break the silence surrounding AIDS in the general public and in the realm of politics as "[i]t could be a tool for the media, to reveal the humanity behind the statistics. And a weapon to deploy against the government; to shame them with stark visual evidence of their utter failure to respond to the suffering and death that spread and increased with every passing day" (C. Jones 216).

pathologized homosexuality since the end of the 19th century. Sadly, these accusations now seemed to be fulfilled as gay men were literally becoming ill and dying.

As a result thereof and in order to label these inexplicable occurrences, the pseudo-medical term GRID (Gay-Related Immune Deficiency) was immediately ascribed to the enigmatic disease, a decision that placed the male homosexual community in a position of great vulnerability: seeing that cases of AIDS were first detected and were, indeed, to great degree and speed spreading predominantly inside the gay male community, from the outset the condition was associated not only to homosexual men but also to certain "immoral" behaviors, i.e. particularly those linked to sexual acts between men (Hart *The AIDS Movie* 4-5, 38-9; Edwards 122, 129; Weeks *Sexuality* 46; Gross 97).

This had deep implications, as Edwards notes: "the association of sexual activity and sexual identity leads to a confusion of activity and identity as equally causal constituents" (129). In other words, even though the causes for and the ways of transmitting AIDS were not yet known in 1981 – considering that the virus would only be discovered in 1984 –, AIDS, a purely medical condition, was incorrectly associated to a certain characteristic of an ostracized and already-scapegoated group of people (or rather, the sexual orientation of gay men) that has no bearing whatsoever on the health of a human being. Unfortunately, due to this prejudiced early handling of the situation, more appropriate or realistic possible modes of transmission were not immediately looked into.

Interestingly enough, the medical community could have easily debunked this myth, seeing that cases of heterosexual men and women with AIDS were already known to the CDC in the summer of 81 (Hart *The AIDS Movie* 45). This behavior on the part of health officials – and of the general media that soon adopted the same rhetoric – spoke of utter negligence as the conflation of AIDS and homosexuality was incredibly dangerous and represented a crucial misstep in the prevention of new HIV infections. Eventually, these representations not only had a direct influence on those affected by AIDS, turning certain types of identities into vulnerable scapegoats, but, moreover, they blurred medical facts, in effect deceiving non-gay people into not feeling at risk. Believing that they were immune to the virus, many did not take the necessary precautions to protect themselves from possible infections (8).

Similarly damaging was the fact that the term AIDS (Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome) was only coined and adopted by the CDC in 1982, replacing the charged label GRID. The new medical term and the understanding that the disease could affect – and had already affected – individuals regardless of their sexual preferences or sexual orientation, did not change the prejudiced ways the media, American politicians, and society at large chose to

understand HIV/AIDS. It would henceforth be treated as a gay disease (Eaklor 175; Weeks *Sexuality* 46; Hart *The AIDS Movie* 4).

In 1984, three years into the AIDS crisis, the virus was isolated for the first time and eventually named HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) in 1986 while a test for the existence of antibodies in a patient's blood was developed that same year (Eaklor 175; Hart *The AIDS Movie* 4; D'Emilio & Freedman 355; Brier *Infectious* 98). These developments were crucial to the understanding of the modes of HIV transmission and of the virus' workings inside a host's body – thus shifting the main emphasis of transmission from categories of individuals (as in contagious homosexuals) to unsafe activities (unprotected transmission of bodily fluids) (Edwards 122). The conclusion scientists were ultimately able to draw was that HIV is a type of retrovirus that spreads inside a human's body after infection, eventually attacking and weakening its host's immune system, in the process making it gradually vulnerable to opportunistic diseases or infections, and usually ending in death if left untreated (Hart *The AIDS Movie* 4).

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The dissemination of distorted facts by most outlets had very profound effects, leading to a reckless mistreatment of AIDS patients in everyday life. Consequently, the strong aversion directed towards individuals with HIV/AIDS was heightened due to the sexual and queer nature that was erroneously associated to the transmission of the virus. As Susan Sontag explains, it is quite common in western cultures to burden diseases or infections with moralistic judgements by ascribing them metaphorical meaning, especially in cases of those "whose causality is murky, and for which treatment is ineffectual" (*Illness* 58). Indeed, it is precisely through these discourses that AIDS became a signifier beyond its mere medical facts:

> AIDS does not exist apart from the practices that conceptualize it, represent it, and respond to it. We know AIDS only in and through those practices. This assertion does not contest the existence of viruses, antibodies, the reality of illness, suffering, and death. What it does contest is the notion that there is an underlying reality of AIDS, on which are constructed the representations, or the culture, or the politics of AIDS.
>
> (Crimp 28)

Edwards takes up a similar reasoning when describing that AIDS as a metaphor has been misused in a variety of forms to suit different ulterior motives while shaping society's vision regarding the medical condition: "AIDS can be seen to mean everything concerning life and

death, from eros to thanatos. Consequently, it is crucially necessary to distinguish AIDS as a medical condition from AIDS as the myriad of meanings and representations" (Edwards 121).

With this in mind, for the sake of the discussion at hand it becomes paramount to dismantle the most popular metaphorical meanings attached to the virus that led to the construction of specific, detrimental ideas around the immunodeficiency. Thus, it should be considered that the reactions to AIDS were generally associated to fear, which was, in turn, incited by purposeful scare tactics used in discourses around the pandemic[69]. In an utmost concise manner, Eaklor therefore argues that the AIDS crisis reveals three converging deep-rooted American fears – or rather "generally unforgiving American attitudes" – towards diseases, namely those closely related to "[1] victims of circumstance, [2] illness and disease, and [3] sex and sexuality" (Eaklor 175).

Touching upon the first anxiety on her list, Eaklor claims that a culture of victim-blaming is deeply engrained in the United States, which finds its origin in the 19th century myth of the self-made man: "if one's economic success was due to hard work and living right, then the opposite traits accounted for failure […] Americans often are critical of misfortune, it seems, with the brunt of the hostility aimed at the unfortunate" (176). In order to get more insight into this matter, we can, again, turn to Susan Sontag, who clarifies that for centuries it has been widely believed that diseases are able to reveal a patient's hidden character traits. In turn, this assumption is based on the illusion that it is due to certain attributes inhabiting a human being that specific diseases are caused in the first place (38-40).

Accordingly, the emergence of a particular disease thus lies in an individual's depraved innermost self and represents the adequate and deserved punishment for personality-based corruption and immorality. As Sontag describes it, "the character causes the disease—because it has not expressed itself. Passion moves inward, striking and blighting the deepest cellular recesses" (*Illness* 46). This misbelief, in the end, is burdened with two additional and highly troublesome problems: firstly "[p]atients who are instructed that they have, unwittingly, caused their disease are also being made to feel that they have deserved it" (57) and, secondly, a "[c]ure is thought to depend principally on the patient's already sorely tested or enfeebled capacity for self-love" (47).

Following this reasoning, gay men and individuals with drug dependence were commonly singled out and declared to lead "deviant" ways of life and, consequently, considered to have brought their HIV/AIDS infections on themselves. In this way, every person became

[69] Though the AIDS crisis began as a localized epidemic, seeing that it quickly grew into a worldwide health issue and to, furthermore, avoid confusion, going forward I will refer to it as a pandemic.

the artisan of his own fortune – an assertion that harks back to Eaklor's idea of America as a country that praises self-made people and in which each citizen needs to care for their own hardship (as individualism reigns above mutual cooperation and support). These attitudes, then, have profound implications for those on the margins: the sidelining of ostracized identities helps the public to further detach itself emotionally from the fate of victims while allowing "members of the general population to separate themselves from the people who have the disease and, indirectly, from the disease itself". Again, this ultimately feeds into the construction of an "us-versus-them ideology," or rather a binary division separating society into the fraction of the "heterosexual, middle to upper class, family centered, non-pleasure seeking, and unaddicted" (Hart *The AIDS Movie* 36) masses (representing "us") that opposes the diseased, immoral, and othered "them" – or rather all those blamed for transmitting HIV/AIDS.

While I will later on return to the influence the general media exerted in forging the ways in which the general public understood, thought about, reacted to, and interacted with individuals with AIDS in more detail, in the context of the above-mentioned dualistic worldview, it is important to already highlight that the sensationalistic media quickly picked up on these notions and perpetuated the same tropes. Nevertheless, the binary division between the diseased gay community and the non-diseased wider public was quickly put to the test with increasing numbers of HIV-infected non-gay individuals, including seropositive children and women that could not be treated with equal disdain. Suddenly, not every HIV-positive person could be deemed a monstrous predator anymore and new forms of explaining the emergence of the disease were in need of being fabricated.

News outlets thus quickly began dividing people with HIV into two camps: those of "innocent victims" on one side (or rather the "general population" mainly consisting of white, heterosexual, middle- and upper-class individuals) and guilty, diseased victimizers (represented mainly by homosexuals, people with addictions, sex workers and others) (Edwards 121-2; Eaklor 181; Hart *The AIDS Movie* 35-7). The discourse was thus inconsistent: AIDS was a punishment for those who gave themselves into the "sins" and temptations of a permissive society, while "blameless" others were treated as victims taking collateral damage from the wrongdoings of perverted outcasts. In particular fundamentalist religious communities were fervent in perpetuating these ideas, "encourag[ing] a witch-hunt mentality with statements calling AIDS 'the judgment of God' against those who 'declared war upon nature'" (Eaklor 176).

The second of three great American fears Eaklor discerns in the context of the AIDS crisis is the twisted relation of US citizens to illnesses at large. In a society in which "well-

being [is] analogized to physical health" (Sontag *Illness* 76), it is only plausible that its citizens might create "complex attitudes toward illness, infirmity, and disease" (Eaklor 176). Eaklor goes even further by pointing out that "Americans faith in science, especially medicine, literally to cure all ills" (Eaklor 176) – particularly when talking about sexually transmitted infections – has also led to the deep-rooted belief that untimely deaths have become obsolete, even "unnatural" (176). In consequence, the fact that, at least in the 1980s, there were no prospects to control the slow spreading of the virus in a human organism, made AIDS all the scarier.

Due to its incurable nature, the condition was perceived as a "permanent" marker imprinted on one's identity: "[e]ven if someone infected were never to develop any symptoms-that is, the infection remained, or could by medical intervention be rendered, inactive-the viral enemy would be forever within" (Sontag *AIDS* 20). Most curiously, what Sontag predicted in her text from 1989 is still a reality today: though HIV viral loads can now be reduced to a bare minimum, making the virus untransmittable if kept in check through rigorous and controlled antiretroviral therapy, the stigma of being HIV-positive persists as well as the social isolation, general mistreatment, abuse, and (in some countries) legal and political discrimination associated with it. Ultimately, AIDS shook the public out of a seemingly unwavering faith in medicine, proving that modern science had not yet found a cure-all solution for every ailment. People's troubled relation to HIV/AIDS thus emphasizes America's deep-rooted fear of illness, of becoming weak, and, going back to Eaklor's first point, of failing in a society that shows no mercy for those who falter.

Also closely related to this problem are anxieties concerning the corporeal changes that HIV infections harbor. More precisely, untreated cases of AIDS allow for opportunistic infections to take advantage of their host's immune system, in the process commonly resulting in visible physical changes, such as cutaneous lesions or weight loss. The crux of the matter during the AIDS crisis was thus not only that once healthy and vital human beings were suddenly dying, but also that markers of their impending death frequently surrounded their entire being visually, even before their lives were cut short by the virus.

Hereby, it is essential to recognize that illnesses that physically alter the appearance of an individual are the ones that are most shocking and appalling to society, not only because they turn the disease or infection visible to the outside, but also due to their alienating, "dehumanizing" (Sontag *AIDS* 38) potential, ultimately capable of leading to "the dissolution of the person" (41). Most conspicuously, this anxiety goes hand in hand with the previously mentioned modern day obsession with beauty and health as "[u]nderlying some of the moral

judgments attached to disease are aesthetic judgments about the beautiful and the ugly, the clean and the unclean, the familiar and the alien or uncanny" (41).

Generally, deteriorating bodies easily generate fear by emphasizing that which is considered abject (one only needs to look at any type of body horror film, a subgenre that uses this trope over and over again for shock value to understand the connection). In the context of the dominant gay culture of the 1970s and 1980s, bodily decay bore further associations, especially when keeping in mind that

> a large part of the male gay revolution of the 1970s lay in the celebration of the body. The 'machoisation' of the male gay world in those years was in part at least a product not of a simple aping of traditional male values but of an attempt to break away from the easy assumption that male homosexuality represented an effeminisation of men. It was a demonstration that you could be male *and* gay. The cultivation of the body beautiful was a vital part of that. But AIDS is a disease of the body, it wrecks and destroys what was once glorified. (Weeks *Sexuality* 50)

As a result, with the advent of AIDS the longstanding stereotype of gay men as frail and weak was once more revived and perpetuated.

Finally, returning to Eaklor's discussion of the greatest anxieties related to AIDS, perhaps the issue able to provoke the highest outrage and aversion was the one concerning sexuality. Indeed, this matter is directly connected to my earlier discussion of the negative connotations associated with extramarital, non-heteroconformist sexual expressions. In this respect, Gayle Rubin contends that sex commonly – and more so in times of crisis – serves as a catalyst for and mirror of deep-seated social anxieties (143). In the American context, even prior to the reemergence of a conservative right-wing and despite the opening of sexual mores during the sexual revolution, sexuality had remained one of the greatest societal taboos (Eaklor 176). Thus, getting a disease that was widely linked to the social offence of fornication appeared to be even more blame- or willful to the American public (Sontag *AIDS* 26).

As previously stated, AIDS was, however, not only associated to sex, but also, to a vaster extent, to sexual acts between men – homoeroticism, in turn, being commonly treated as one of the most debased forms of sexual practices. To elucidate these ideas, Rubin argues that sexual acts are constructed in a specific hierarchical system of sexual value that is greatly determined and influenced by religion as well as by medical and psychiatric institutions. Each act, then again, is furthermore "burdened with an excess of significance" (151). To put it more clearly, "[m]arital, reproductive heterosexuals are alone at the top of the erotic pyramid. Clamouring below are unmarried monogamous heterosexuals in couples, followed by most other heterosexuals" (Rubin 151). Ranking in the topmost position of sexual acceptability, the

named groupings “are rewarded with certified mental health, respectability, legality, social and physical mobility, institutional support, and material benefits” (151). At the bottom of the hierarchy stands homosexuality. Consequently, same-gender acts need to be punished, homoerotic practices being “subjected to a presumption of mental illness, disreputability, criminality, restricted social and physical mobility, loss of institutional support, and economic sanctions” (151).

Naturally, these assumptions have been greatly challenged by the queer community. As closely examined in previous chapters, the prevalent notion of homoeroticism as perverted and subordinate has been put into question by several movements, most successfully by the homophile organizations of the 1950s as well as by gay and lesbian liberation in the 1960s and 70s. Although the sentiment of queer-as-beautiful was certainly not shared by the wider public, a sense of self-acceptance was nonetheless developed amongst LGBTQIA+ communities. A crucial part of this emancipation was the embracing of homoeroticism as neither shameful nor unnatural, culminating in a healthy gay sexual community and culture in the 1970s (at least, as far as they were able to outside the perimeters of law).

On a related note, it also needs to be pointed out that although sexual liberty would become an intrinsic part of gay male culture, promiscuity as such was by no means an invention of or limited to gay men. Instead, it is necessary to consider that the wider accessibility to sex and the increasing speed of casual sexual encounters with different partners did, in fact, not begin in gay male culture *per se*. This trend was rather an extension of the sexual liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s and was further made possible by the widespread belief that medicine had created a situation where risk-free sexual intercourse could be fully enjoyed – notwithstanding the fact that a variety of sexually transmitted infections still existed (Sontag *AIDS* 77).

Susan Sontag further points out that sex as a recreational practice is also linked to values that are deeply engrained in the American cultural spirit. She namely relates sexual excess to a certain entitlement that American consumerism supposedly grants society, permitting each citizen to fully enjoy boundless pleasure, liberty, and physical mobility in search of self-fulfillment. Correspondingly, “[a]ppetite is supposed to be immoderate. The ideology of capitalism makes us all into connoisseurs of liberty-of the indefinite expansion of possibility” (Sontag *AIDS* 77).

The liberty to explore sexuality certainly falls under the freedom capitalism encourages. As has become most obvious, not everyone is supposed to dwell in those same joys, which has resulted time and time again in the policing of the sexuality and bodies of certain minorities.

Additionally, the idea of open discussions surrounding physical intimacy has invariably left the masses rather uncomfortable. The already tense sex-negative climate of 1980s America coupled with the fact that AIDS was an issue of a supposedly "excessive" (gay) sexual culture was eventually a fatal clash. Naturally, this had dire repercussions for the gay male community on a social, political, and even legal level.

As if being diagnosed with HIV/AIDS and fighting the immunodeficiency were not enough to handle, people with AIDS had to face the cold truth that being seropositive often harbors "a social death that precedes the physical one" (Sontag *AIDS* 34) inasmuch as ostracized individuals were further pushed to the margins, even by members of their own communities. Due to the tainted public opinion regarding the meaning of queerness and AIDS, LGBTQIA+ achievements of the 70s and 80s suffered tremendous setbacks as the term gay "was reloaded with stereotypical connotations of effeminacy, contagion, and degeneracy" (Hart *The AIDS Movie* 47). This, in turn, led to new waves of homophobia and queer-bashing, "reach[ing] a level not seen since the Cold War, and perhaps never expressed quite so openly. Harassment and violence directed at gay people continued (and more than doubled from 1985 to 1986), but now seemed justified" (Eaklor 176). As Rubin recounted in 1984 – and therefore at the height of the pandemic – the rising number of hate crimes was staggering:

> There have been proceedings against several bars, countless arrests in the parks, and, in the fall of 1981, police arrested over 400 people in a series of sweeps of Polk Street, one of the thoroughfares of local gay nightlife. Queerbashing has become a significant recreational activity for young urban males. They come into gay neighbourhoods armed with baseball bats and looking for trouble, knowing that the adults in their lives either secretly approve or will look the other way. (Rubin 146)

While these incidents were perhaps more frequent in urban centers and largely fell under the radar of most Americans, more clear-cut messages were sent out on a legal level, best evident in the fact that the "stigmatization led to numerous laws that discriminated against people with AIDS in insurance, the workplace, and housing" (Bronski *A Queer* 225). Most notoriously, "[o]n June 30, 1986, the Supreme Court ruled in *Bowers v. Hardwick* that there was no constitutional protection for homosexual sodomy" (230). The passing of such laws further reinforced the notion that the aversion and violent actions against LGBTQIA+ individuals by the general public were justified and even indirectly encouraged by the state.

As previously analyzed, the rise of the New Right resulted in the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, whose political priorities mirrored the attitudes of his voters, including, most importantly, a demand to return to traditional social mores. As a direct continuation of the Dade

County controversy, the New Right used the AIDS crisis to cause panic, hysteria, and to further defame LGBTQIA+ individuals, while being backed by a government that supported these discriminatory actions. In fact, arguably due to Reagan's strong commitment to please his New Right supporters, the Reagan administration refused to face AIDS altogether, particularly in the first years of the pandemic. This was a fatal decision on the side of the government as it failed to touch upon evident strategies to combat the spreading of the virus[70].

As outside pressure was rising, in 1987 it finally dawned on the Reagan administration that it had become imperative to begin taking measures against the spreading of HIV: in order to make the White House appear more involved, in 1987 the Presidential Commission on the Human Immunodeficiency Virus Epidemic was formed, which served to "not only show[] presidential leadership on AIDS but also allowed the White House to mark the limits of what AIDS prevention should look like" (Brier *Infectious* 93). Brier's last point is vital to our understanding of the further course of state-funded AIDS prevention in the United States, seeing that "[w]hile the presidential commission laid out an explicit and comprehensive initiative to deal with AIDS and drug use, and the defunding of the welfare state," (96) it shied away from directly addressing ways of preventing new HIV infections through safe sex practices, which, naturally, formed the basis in the battle against HIV/AIDS.

Reagan's war on open discourses on sex took on an even broader dimension: in its attempt to reinstate "traditional" values, his sex-negative government "attribut[ed] to sex the power to corrupt, even to weaken fatally, American society" (D'Emilio & Freedman 345). More than keen to halt any type of progressive and healthy sexual culture, this moral crusade thus included a harsh stance on pornography, promiscuity, and non-marital intercourse in general, as well as a strong propagation of chastity programs to bring underage sexual encounters to a stop (D'Emilio & Freedman 344-5, 357). Staying in line with this ultraconservative outlook on sex, the administration widely refused funding and support for AIDS prevention programs that included more direct forms of and information about safe sex education. Instead, it was decided that prevention through proper moral behavior, including sexual abstinence, was the appropriate way to curb new infections. The government thus knowingly withheld the necessary information from the public, like this taking the chance of risking growing infection rates, lest it addressed issues that might leave certain conservatives uncomfortable.

[70] To the devastating disrespect of people that were living with HIV/AIDS, Reagan only chose to mention the pandemic for the first time on June 1, 1987 (Brier *Infectious* 253; Gross 101; Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 204), i.e. six years into the crisis while "giving a speech during the Third International Conference on AIDS in Washington on May 31, 1987. This was after 36,058 Americans had been diagnosed with AIDS, of whom 20,849 had died" (Bronski *A Queer* 231).

Additionally, to ensure that risk groups and people with AIDS would not receive essential information, much-needed medical accompaniment, and personal security and support, "[t]he Reagan administration opposed bills in Congress that were designed to prohibit discrimination against people with AIDS, and Congress repeatedly hobbled the work of the Centers for Disease Control by refusing to fund comprehensive surveys on Americans' sexual habits" (Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 204). Moreover, with the passing of the Helms Amendment in 1987, Congress prohibited AIDS education funds to the CDC intended for activities that promoted or condoned same-gender sexual practices or illegal drug usage in any way (204).

As my account of the negligence on the part of the Reagan administration proves, it was not a specific group of people or their sexual behavior that was to be blamed for the spreading of the virus. If one was to be held accountable, it was the deliberate decision of authorities and institutions to withhold necessary means of informing and helping the public. After all, the governments carelessness allowed for a few assessable cases of AIDS in 1981 to eventually spread and turn into a full-blown pandemic that we still struggle with today:

> Because of the deep denial of the situation's gravity—denial that clearly would not have occurred if the majority of people being affected by AIDS had been white heterosexuals—medical research, prevention education, and basic care for the women and men who were sick started far too late. This lack of response, which in retrospect can only be understood as willful negligence, helped construct a social situation that allowed an epidemic to spread unchecked. (Bronski *A Queer* 225)

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Following the government's lead, the media was not any gentler in addressing people with HIV/AIDS but was certainly far more outspoken and vicious. In order to best illustrate the homophobic bias and cruelty of the media regarding the health condition, a comparison with the way Legionnaire's Disease was treated only a few years prior to the emergence of the HIV/AIDS crisis must be addressed: in 1976 Legionnaire's Disease, a pneumonia caused by a type of bacteria, infected a group of twenty-nine white, assumedly heterosexual, middle-aged individuals, who were all part of the prestigious American Legion. During this two-months crisis, "the *New York Times* published sixty-two stories on Legionnaire's disease, eleven of them on the front page" (Gross 96). Eventually, the wide public interest in this story enabled funding to research the infection, further proving the influence the media can have. In the words of Emma, a nurse in Larry Kramer's popular AIDS play *The Normal Heart*, "[t]he front page of *The Times* has a way of inspiring action" (Kramer *The Normal* 10).

Unsurprisingly, these "inspiring" messages and consequent actions of *The Times* and other large-scale media fell short when it came to AIDS: "from July 1981 through the end of 1982, the *New York Times* ran a total of ten stories about AIDS, and none of them reached the front page. The television networks did not even mention AIDS on their nightly newscasts until 1982" (Gross 96). The lack of media attention was devastating since, after all, the media was one of the most influential players in paving the way in which AIDS patients should be treated and perceived socially and politically by fellow Americans. To this effect, Hart contemplates the enormous issue found in the fact that large parts of American's actually "receive[d] *all or most* of their social information about those groups from media offerings, rather than learning about them through firsthand interactions as well" ("Representing" 78). This, then, ultimately also informed and determined the way the collective consciousness perceived, reacted to, tolerated, and empathized with seropositive people in a broader sense.

As already indicated, in the first years of the AIDS crisis, mass media fell completely silent on the matter, in large part owing to the all-pervading and powerful homophobia of the press. Queer subject matters were deeply despised in journalistic circles and were considered dreaded career enders, leading most reporters to shy away from the topic due to fear of being immediately associated with homosexuals or being pigeonholed as queer themselves (Gross 95-6, 99, 101). In the few instances AIDS was, however, addressed, journalists failed to thoroughly investigate the matter, solely relying on the misinformation that put the blame on the promiscuous lifestyle of white, homosexual men (Crimp 49; Gamson "Sweating" 342-3). These accounts, in turn, were further depicted with the help of "sensationalistic tropes of death, decay, victimization, and isolation" (Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 203).

When it came to the gay press, while mostly independent from the general media, it nonetheless chose to follow the example of mainstream outlets, though its silence was rather based on a lack of understanding of the magnitude and significance of the situation at hand (Gross 95-6, 103). However, as Gross contends, "by mid-1983 the gay press was regularly covering the story, along with some of the alternative press, such as the *Village Voice*" (103). Honest investigative journalism and reporting about the crisis only started rolling when, as a response to the lack of reporting, controversial LGBTQIA+/AIDS rights activist, playwright, and author Larry Kramer took the stage and wrote an article for the *Native* in March of 1983 entitled "1,112 and Counting" (Gross 103). In this call to action, a desperate Kramer targeted gay men's "anger, fury, rage" by trying to make them understand that "[u]nless we fight for our lives, we shall die. In all the history of homosexuality we have never before been so close to death and extinction. Many of us are dying or already dead" ("1,112" 28).

Lamenting that the CDC was not setting AIDS research and prevention as an urgent priority and was, furthermore, tragically underfunded, while hospitals were overcrowded and their regulations were not adapted in the slightest to the new reality AIDS brought along (best seen in Kramer's description that "AIDS patients are often treated like lepers" ["1,112" 29]), it was up to the gay community to stimulate change by raising its voice and making itself heard through its anger. Kramer reasoned that especially the gay press played a paramount role in this fight seeing that the majority of media outlets so far "ha[d] been useless" (36). More precisely, he denounced that "[i]f we [as a queer community] can't get our own papers and magazines to tell us what's really happening to us, and this negligence is added to the negligent non-interest of the straight press […], how are we going to get the word around that we're dying?" (Kramer 36). Kramer's message and initiative to stimulate the spreading of information were key at these troubled times.

While this front-page story might have appeared hysteria-inducing to some, the rising numbers of AIDS cases and AIDS-related deaths in urban gay centers clearly justified his outcry. Fortunately, in the end, Kramer's writing had the desired effect as "[t]he article did rouse gay men, lesbians, and their allies and helped to spur the growth of the political and service organizations within the gay community" (Gross 103).

Certain outspoken figures like Kramer, however, also fed into the sex negative outlook of the mainstream media, though perhaps involuntarily due to the mystery surrounding the fatal disease. They thus quickly took up scientifically unfounded harsh critiques of gay sex culture and accused "disreputable" sexual activities such as S&M as causes for transmission (Bronski *A Queer* 227). Ultimately, these attitudes revealed a certain fear of specific sexual expressions and kinks that had been relegated to the fringes, often resulting in an interest in policing and limiting non-conformist sexualities. Gay journalist and author Randy Shilts was also an emblematic and notorious figure in this regard: in a similar fashion as Kramer[71], he put the

[71] Larry Kramer's alarmist rhetoric, which put the blame for the spreading of the virus on gay promiscuity, can be traced back to his 1977 pre-AIDS novel *Faggots*. In this controversial work he namely "suggested that the gay world was ripe for retribution. His contribution to the AIDS debate was widely echoed, suggesting that there were indeed deep reservoirs of guilt to be mined" (Weeks *Sexuality* 51). Indeed, Kramer depicts gay men as lonely, drug-fueled, and sex-obsessed victims of their own scene culture, while the only – and rather reductive – form of redemption can be found if they slow or settle down and try to create meaningful, monogamous relationships. A conversation between two characters, Gatsby and Lemish, illustrates this point perfectly. Gatsby namely begins lecturing his friend by proposing that he is running away from finding happiness in life by obsessively "govern[ing his] emotions to fit the scene just like everyone else" (*Faggots* 9) – not seeing that it ultimately destroys him. He then concludes by stating that "[a]ll you want is Love. And if you've wanted love so badly, why haven't you had it? Does not that say something about The Wanter, not his World?" (9). Indeed, Kramer was not alone in these assumptions. Once AIDS cases amassed, the community was stunned at first and responses were diverse. Ultimately, two theories became the most pronounced among gay men: "[o]ne stressed that it was the gay lifestyle that was the cause of infection; the other that it was a viral infection, probably transmitted through close contact and blood, which turned out to be the real situation" (Weeks *Sexuality* 47).

blame of the spreading of the virus on the sexual thirst of the gay community, a fact that becomes the more pronounced when taking into account that it was Shilts himself who presented and spread the idea of "patient zero" in the American public with the publication of his (in)famous 1987 account of the AIDS crisis *And the Band Played On*.

According to Shilts' journalistic investigations, Canadian flight attendant Gaëtan Dugas was responsible for having brought AIDS to North America (Crimp 51-2). However, these accusations were completely unfounded not only because of "the fact that the supposed 'patient zero' factor in spreading HIV had been discredited by the time Shilts completed his book" (Gross 143), but also, as is known today, because AIDS had been present in North America years before Dugas' infection. In point of fact, "the CDC [was] aware that he was the 57th person to be diagnosed with HIV during a time of uncertainty within the medical community" (MacIsaac 4). What is most horrifying about Shilts' representation of Dugas is the homophobic, prejudiced way in which he depicts "patient zero" as "the very figure of the homosexual as imagined by heterosexuals–sexually voracious, murderously irresponsible" (Crimp 52). With Shilts confirming the prejudiced tropes that heteronormative media had placed on gay men, there was now an avowal on the side of a member of the queer community that was all the more dangerous. The idea of a scapegoat also fed into the arms of conservative Republicans as far as it helped to detract focus away from Reagan's own failings regarding the pandemic.

While silence surrounding AIDS reigned supreme for half a decade, the mainstream press only really seemed to gain interest in the subject matter with the death of famous actor Rock Hudson, a story that was able to arouse public attention and to land the front page. The impact and deep shock regarding Hudson's outing as being a man living with AIDS was deeply connected to the persona the studios had fashioned for him as an actor: "[f]rom the 1950s through the early 1980s, no film or television star better personified American manhood than Rock Hudson. His square jaw and handsome facial features combined with a well-developed physique, a deep voice, and an easygoing demeanor to create the quintessential leading man" (Streitmatter 57). Indeed, it was perhaps due to the fabricated image of the star that epitomized American heterosexuality and hypermasculinity that he became "one of the most popular actors in the country" (57) to begin with. As Klinger adds, "Hudson enjoyed tremendous popularity as a beefcake idol and romantic lead" (98) especially because he "embodied a certain brand of sexual normalcy, a normalcy every bit as important in defining the tenor of the times as the more excessive" (99).

Hudson's public revelation as being HIV-positive in July of 1985 and his death three months later resulted in a profound shift regarding the norms according to which the media and society would deal with AIDS from then on. Not only was it suddenly safe for journalists to associate themselves with a story that was not anymore solely linked to the perverted gay underground (despite Hudson's own closeted life as a gay man) (Gross 101-2), but, more importantly, "[s]uddenly there was a face to the crisis that was recognizable to most of America (as opposed to shadowy homosexuals and drug users)" (Eaklor 203). Media coverage of the immunodeficiency syndrome increased explosively. More precisely, "Hudson's public admission precipitated a 270 percent increase in AIDS reporting by the end of 1985" (Klinger 121). As such, stories about heterosexual individuals with HIV/AIDS gradually also became more common, though the subjects in these accounts were in contrast usually considered "innocent victims", as previously noted.

4.2) *Love! Valour! Anger!*: From Victimized Victims to Resisting Rebels

As discussed in the preceding subchapter, AIDS had a massive impact on the community not least due to the steadily rising number of new infections, an ever-increasing death toll, and growing stigmatization and discrimination. Accordingly, not only those already infected lived in constant fear and uncertainty, but danger seemed to lurk everywhere, particularly in the years before testing became possible. Within LGBTQIA+ circles the news of the blood-borne virus was commonly received in different ways and processed in various stages. Edwards synthesizes the reactions to the crisis by members of the community who "were initially shocked, denied sexual transmission and were furious at the accusations of causality, until the loss of friends and lovers to AIDS, dying in their tens and dozens, led to widespread grief and intensive activism" (120).

Certainly, *activism* is key when addressing the AIDS pandemic, as, more than only being a tragedy of people dying, the crisis also represented an opportunity to mobilize and strengthen active queer rebellion. Curiously enough, it was the government's disinterest and attempts at keeping gay visibility at bay that ultimately triggered the emergence of radical, vocal, and visible AIDS advocacy: "AIDSworkers did not stop working because the political environment told them what they were doing was wrong or immoral. Rather, they tried to form, albeit imperfectly, a new model for thinking about the state's responsibility to its citizens as well as people beyond its borders" (Brier *Infectious* 10). A newly formed vigor and fighting

spirit flourished, partly inspired by previous battles, including the lesbian and gay liberation[72] movement of the 1970s as well as other Civil Right struggles.

In an attempt to stay alive, gay men gradually began to take precautions and to adapt their sex lives to this new, unknown threat, at least as much as they were able to, considering the unfamiliarity with its causes (Weeks *Sexuality* 52-3). While sexual distancing became more common amongst some parts of the community, communitarian ties were further cemented, something that was, ultimately, made possible due to the social institutions that had been erected and fostered ever since the end of World War II, as already discussed in a previous chapter: above all, "the bars, baths, and other meeting places that were blamed for the AIDS epidemic were the very structures that gave the community the knowledge and networking that allowed for efficient organizing when the epidemic began" (Bronski *A Queer* 228). The decisive factor hereby was to engage in dialogues and exchange information about ways to practice sexual activity safely. While many certainly agreed about the necessity to educate the wider public in this regard, a plethora of approaches as to how to tackle the issue were extensively discussed. To best illustrate the conundrum of needing to change people's sexual behavior without wanting to attack them for their needs and desires, I would like to take a brief look at the bathhouse controversy.

With the intent of keeping new HIV infections in check, by the mid-1980s policy makers in San Francisco and New York began closing down gay bathhouses. Serving as primary meeting places for sexual exchange, oftentimes with frequently changing partners, these establishments became a great subject of criticism (Bronski *A Queer* 227-9; Eaklor 179; Gross 105). In this regard, it is fair to say that in big cities of the 1970s there was indeed a tremendous increase in the quantity of sexual encounters between men who have sex with men, something that was certainly promoted and facilitated through gay baths and other spaces such as dark rooms (Weeks *Sexuality* 47-8). In this sense, it would be negligent to ignore the importance of bathhouses for LGBTQIA+ culture and the liberation of queer sex.

We need to be mindful of the fact that sexual freedom held immense esteem within the gay community because, after centuries of living in shame and under oppression, the sexual revolution had introduced a liberational factor to discourses around sex, allowing for a healthy

[72] While finding inspiration in previous generations, AIDS activism was not a direct continuation of the gay and lesbian liberation movement. Instead, as Kramer explains, gay rights activism had actually lost its wide appeal by the end of the 1970s and, consequently, the revival of radical queer activism was a process that needed to be reinitiated. In other words, the spirit of the gay and lesbian liberation movement, though still existing, had only survived marginally: "[i]t was not chic; it was not something you could brag about with your friends. You would sneak off and do it. […] I can remember being at Fire Island in the 1970s, and when there was a news story on television about the gay pride parade, people would sit in front of the TV set and make fun of it" (Kramer "The Unwanted" 422).

and open communitarian culture around sexuality to thrive for the first time during the 1970s (Brier *Infectious* 1). Sex, more than being a mere physical exchange, became a part of the gay identity and self-acceptance. As Weeks reasons, "[h]omosexual desire was no longer an unfortunate contingency of nature or fate; it was the positive basis of a sexual and, increasingly, social, identity" (*Sexuality* 50).

Bathhouses played a key role in this context. In fact, ever since the late 19th and early 20th century gay baths were one of the few places where homosexuals could socialize and find refuge from a world that discriminated against them (Bérubé 33-4). These venues namely offered their clientele "the protection of anonymity, a degree of privacy, and the possibility of meeting men interested in sex" (35). Due to the illegal nature of these meeting places, the gay community put itself at risk not only by frequenting them but also, even more so, by fighting for their existence. This implies that these sites are charged with historical meaning and should be cherished as part of LGBTQIA+ memory as they "became the first stages of a movement of civil rights for gay people in the United States" (34). Moreover, it was in these sexual and social institutions that a sense of community, of self-acceptance, and gay pride might have first sparked[73]:

> At a time when no one was saying "gay is good," the creation of an institution in which gay men were encouraged to appreciate each other was a major step toward gay pride. Since then, several generations of gay men–partly because of the opportunities provided them by gay bathhouses and, later, gay bars–have learned to prefer sexual partners who are also gay. The bathhouses, thus, are partly responsible for this major change in the sexual behavior and self-acceptance of gay men. (Berubé 38)

Ultimately, as Bérubé masterfully synthesizes, gay bathhouses were also essential in forming gay life on a personal, political, and social level:

> For the gay community, gay bathhouses represent a major success in a century-long political struggle to overcome isolation and develop a sense of community and pride in their sexuality, to gain their right to sexual privacy, to win their right to associate with each other in public, and to create "safety zones" where gay men could be sexual and affectionate with each other with a minimal threat of violence, blackmail, loss of employment, arrest, imprisonment, and humiliation. (34)

Taking all of the above into consideration and bearing in mind that sexual experimentation and freedom had been a hard-earned privilege for queers in the 1970s, it might not come as a

[73] Interestingly, decades later the movie *Spa Night* (Andrew Ahn, 2016), though taking place in a non-queer Korean spa, would indirectly pay tribute to baths as sites of sexual awakening (see my close reading of the movie in chapter 9.2).

surprise that various individuals vehemently opposed the closing of these institutions. Many regarded the forced shutdowns as a targeted attack on the freedom of gay men and an attempt at policing and regulating their sexuality. Moreover, and more importantly, what policy makers and activists such as Kramer failed to take into consideration was the fact that by shutting down bathhouses, sexual activities between men could still happen in spaces in which activists had less reach to educate, inform, and distribute condoms (Brier *Infectious* 53; Gross 105; Bronski *A Queer* 227-8; Eaklor 179).

While good intentions might have lain behind at least some of these censuring and moralistic voices, the aggressive and patronizing form of expressing concern was, to a certain degree, tactless and discouraged quite a few people. Correspondingly, so as not to succumb to a policy of total celibacy, LGBTQIA+ and AIDS activists chose to support a more positive and empowering outlook on matters of same-gender intimacy. More precisely, "[i]nstead of calling on men to curtail sexually liberated behavior, they sought to reinvigorate gays and lesbians in the fight for political and cultural recognition as well as to push for equality of diverse sexual practices. These women and men argued that sexual expression itself held the potential for containing the spread of AIDS" (Brier *Infectious* 14).

Once scientists were able to isolate the virus in 1984 and comprehend its relation to opportunistic infections, the debates around the preservation of sexual freedom as a debt to gay liberation *vs.* forceful celibacy now shifted towards questions on how to best protect oneself against the virus during intercourse (Brier *Infectious* 14, 44). Therefore, instead of advocating for prohibitive measures around sex, activists turned to spread advice and information regarding "safe sex" practices (Bronski *A Queer* 229). To this effect, they began demonstrating that sexual expression could be celebrated in various forms and that "sex is not, in an epidemic or not, limited to penetrative sex" (Crimp 69). The focus shift towards safe sex deeply challenged normative and socially tolerated sexual behaviors, encouraging the opening of a dialogue about trust and the setting of boundaries between sexual partners.

This simultaneously clearly opposed governmental tactics of sexual policing, repression, or regulation, and, eventually, enabled "a reclaiming of the sexually based community formation that had started decades before" (Bronski *A Queer* 230). Through counter-discourses and -practices of this nature, (queer) eroticism and sexual freedom were reclaimed as a positive. Reeducation simultaneously reinforced the understanding that the public needed to speak about sex and risk-free sexual acts, in the process redirecting the general discourse towards risk practices instead of risk groups. In this empowerment of gay male sexuality lays one of the

foundations that would, a few years later, inform many movies belonging to New Queer Cinema[74].

To take away the connotation of same-gender sexual acts as necessarily dangerous, safe sex needed to be advertised and made appealing. The most immediate and easiest way of promoting this was through advertising condom use. Several things therefore needed to change: to begin with, it was crucial that condoms were eroticized and directed towards a gay demographic (seeing that until the mid-1980s condoms were only marketed to heterosexuals). To this effect, AIDS prevention campaigns needed to be generally revamped, abandoning scare tactics that involved imagery of death and decay (Brier *Infectious* 45-6). Finally, means to divulge these ads had to be found, which was particularly complicated due to heavy censorship laws and regulations, particularly on television[75].

Naturally, these ads, just like most other support systems and preventative campaigns, were not funded or endorsed by the Reagan administration. Due to this devastating situation that put people in dire need of help without governmental and institutional assistance, own networks of support had to be eventually created. One of the first organizations to sprout out of this precarious situation was Gay Men's Health Crisis, a grassroots AIDS organization founded in New York City in 1982 by a number of gay men (Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 211; Gross 96). The group particularly focused on "media exposure, to warn gay men of the risks they seemed to be facing, and to call for medical efforts to investigate and fight this new disease" (Gross 96). Indeed, the accomplishments of Gay Men's Health Crisis should not be underestimated, as over the years "[i]t drew in thousands of volunteers to help care for the sick and dying, raised millions of dollars for education and research, and lobbied for state and federal research money to unravel the mystery of the disease and find a cure" (D'Emilio & Freedman 356). Just as important is the fact that it inspired other AIDS resource groups to emerge in urban centers all over the country (Eaklor 177; Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 211), "staffed with health care professionals, lawyers, and community activists, worked as clearinghouses, helping people with AIDS find the resources and information they needed in order to survive" (Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 211).

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[74] Funnily enough, as a sidenote, a number of safe sex ads are actually briefly displayed in a scene in Laurie Lynd's 1992 New Queer Cinema short film *R.S.V.P.*, already hinting towards the great political activist work that continued into and influenced this subversive cinematic movement. At the same time, the complete opposite also exists in films like *The Living End*, which unapologetically portrays bareback sex, as my discussion in chapter 7.2. will reveal.

[75] American puritanism once again came to the forefront: "[a]s late as 1998 all the major television networks as well as Fox, UPN, and WB were unwilling to accept advertisements for condoms. As the amount of explicit sexual content in TV ads and programs increased, however, condom ads began appearing in the 1990s on cable channels such as MTV and Comedy Central" (Gross 100).

One of the founding members of GMHC, Larry Kramer, however, soon chose to leave the organization since he was particularly weary of its orthodox approach in following institutionalized protocols. As he put it in an interview, "very quickly the organization was taken over by the social workers" (Kramer "The Unwanted" 427) that chose to play by the rules, although the administration's inaction "turned at times toward outright hostility" (Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 211). Working within institutionalized organizations and following procedures while a generation of people were dying, was slowing down progress and seemed to lead nowhere. More and more people therefore became frustrated, desperate, and turned to more radical approaches to achieve change (Edwards 131). It was in this struggle that activism split into two larger fractions, or rather

> more "radical" versus more "moderate" approaches. While the former advocates less cooperation with the larger culture, more celebration of difference, and expects more rapid changes, the latter usually works within existing systems (government, medicine) to accomplish more gradual and "accommodationist" goals, all the while stressing the values shared between the minority and majority […]. In part, AIDS activism not only heightened these differences but also allowed a resurgence of earlier radicalism. (Eaklor 181)

Radical AIDS activism was primarily led by ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), a group that was formed in 1987 – Larry Kramer, again, being one of its cofounders (Eaklor 177). What distinguished the group's principles from those of others was the fact that it did not necessarily represent and focus on LGBTQIA+ lives but rather chose a more intersectional approach. This was primarily due to the understanding that more communities than those of gay men were afflicted by the virus, many of them being greatly socially, politically, and financially disenfranchised, including "in particular impoverished communities, communities of color, women, immigrants, and—as the epidemic spread—children. ACT UP's single-issue mandate translated into a multicommunity coalition" (Bronski *A Queer* 232). Interestingly, with its inclusive approach the activist group very much represented what the concept of *queer* would come to stand for – already revealing the close connection between queer/AIDS activism and queer theory.

The idea of uniting people from different groups and social strata to fight for the same purpose also had an interesting side effect insofar as it represented a conscious opposition to the splitting of the LGBTQIA+ community that had occurred after the Stonewall years (Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 211). Not only did ACT UP on the whole fight for all types of individuals from different backgrounds, but it was also represented a concoction of different people that, as Russo suggests, prior to the AIDS crisis were hard to join, including

conservatives and those privileged enough to not "get touched by homophobia" (Russo "The Film" 416).

Ultimately, ACT UP's central goal was to point out the government's inaction (best represented by the "Silence=Death" slogan they quickly identified themselves with), making the recklessness and greed of pharma moguls accountable, spreading awareness regarding AIDS prevention, as well as widening the access to medical resources for *any* AIDS patient regardless of (a lack of) privilege and social standing (R. Jones 219; Edwards 131). Lastly, the activist group put great emphasis on "demand[ing for] basic health care, civil rights, legal protections, and respect that Americans were guaranteed under the Constitution" (Bronski *A Queer* 231).

The actual measures ACT UP took to fight AIDS also differed from those of more moderate organizations. After all, its members chose more confrontational tactics and direct action over traditional, non-violent methods, such as letter writing (Edwards 131). To achieve these goals, the rapidly-growing group joined a "combination of homework and hell-raising—knowing the facts and using militant, media-attracting tactics to publicize them" (Gross 108). Doing their "homework" also meant having an awareness of those who fought LGBTQIA+ and other minority-related struggles in the past.

Early militant groups such as the Gay Liberation Front and the Gay Activist Alliance and their belief "that the people who are affected by injustice are the most effective in changing their own circumstances" (Bronski *A Queer* 231) thus served as cornerstones while their forms of activism were also updated and adapted to the conditions of the volatile sociopolitical climate. ACT UP's methods changed insofar as the "identity and community politics of the 1970s" were now mixed with innovative thought that was on the rise in academic circles, in particular "post-structuralist emphasis upon representation and meaning, and [a focused] centrality on a plurality of identity that comes from the work of Foucault, Lacan and Derrida as well as a whole host of other postmodernists and post-structuralists" (Edwards 131). Indeed, these tendencies already point towards the close relation between AIDS activism, queer theory, and New Queer Cinema that I addressed in chapter 1 and that I will further engage with in the following chapters.

The loud and disruptive nature of ACT UP's *modus operandi* eventually gained great media attention, catapulting queer- and AIDS-related content onto American screens and front pages, though often in defamatory ways (Gross 108). As Vito Russo puts it in the documentary *Voices from the Front*, "[i]f I'm dying from anything, I'm dying from the sensationalism of newspapers and magazines and television shows, which are interested in me as a human interest

story as long as I'm willing to be a helpless victim but not if I'm fighting for my life" (00:04:17-00:04:34).

When closely engaging with the direct actions the group took, it becomes quite obvious why they would be deemed "disruptive" by many. Putting efficiency first, members of ACT UP almost immediately brought their ideas into action, as "[o]n March 24, three weeks after the first meeting, ACT UP members marched on Wall Street demanding an end to profiteering by drug companies and easier access to experimental HIV drugs" (Bronski *A Queer* 231), whereupon they scored their first major success when "[w]ithin months, the Food and Drug Administration announced that it would shorten the drug approval process by two years" (231-2). Just as successful and impressive was "its well-covered zap of the New York Stock Exchange to protest Burroughs Welcome's exorbitant pricing of the AIDS drug AZT, then costing around $10,000 per year (the drug company responded by lowering the price substantially)". Among the most noteworthy future endeavors were their disruptions on "Wall Street, the FDA (Food and Drug Administration), the NIH (National Institutes of Health), the CDC (Centers for Disease Control), and New York's St. Patrick's Cathedral ("Stop the Church")" (Eaklor 177).

Naturally, the radically subversive tactics of the group were not embraced by the entirety of LGBTQIA+ individuals. Many felt that the group's principles were, to a certain degree, too wild, irresponsible even, and were based on a certain privilege that not every member of the community had at their disposal. Highly questionable was, for instance, the practice of forced public outings of closeted homosexuals. Underlying this was the idea that "to end the secrecy and hypocrisy surrounding homosexuality, to challenge the notion that gay life is somehow shameful, and to show the world that many widely admired and respected men and women are gay" (Duggan "Making" 15), queer public figures needed to be outed. As group members took it upon themselves to tell the public about the sexual orientation of LGBTQIA+ individuals, they disregarded their right to privacy and the notion that an outing could put certain individuals in precarious, vulnerable, even dangerous positions in an utmost homophobic political and social climate (15, 17).

Duggan explains that this has even deeper implications when considering the idea of intersectionality that ACT UP, at least theoretically, represented. Outing individuals springs from the assumption that "homosexuals" are a unitary group of people, disregarding that "for people with multiple 'marked' identities, the political project begins at the level of the very problematic construction of identities and their relation to different communities and different political projects" ("Making" 17-8). The reasoning behind forced outings thus derives from the

privileged position of gay, white manhood, discounting other realities, who, if outed, might suffer utter social destruction (18). Unfortunately, even today white gay males are still commonly placed as representatives for queerness as a whole, an issue that will cross our path throughout my discussions in the chapters to come.

Other critics of ACT UP's course of action turned away from the violence they perceived in their strategies. Cleve Jones, for instance, at the time expressed that rage was not enough to keep people alive – and hence took a different approach, epitomized in his statement that "[w]hile the fury of ACT UP was justified and powerful, we needed more than rage to survive this plague. We needed love" (224) – a vision he put into action through the earlier mentioned NAMES Project. Ultimately, it was perhaps the mixture of both moderate and radical tactics of diverse groups and organizations and their different approaches that made change possible.

Looking at the many breakthrough achievements during these years, their impact becomes the more plausible: generally speaking, "AIDSworkers inspired structural and political changes in municipal, federal, and international governments that shaped institutional and political possibilities in health care, community development, and foreign policy priorities" (Brier *Infectious* 5). Just as significant were actual changes in laws, starting with "the Civil Rights Restoration Act and Fair Housing Amendments Act, both passed in 1988; the Simpson-Mazzoli Act (1986) [which] removed the 'sexual deviation' clause that had been used to exclude homosexual immigrants since the Lavender Scare days of the fifties" (Eaklor 182). These were followed by the Ryan White CARE (Comprehensive AIDS Resources Emergency) Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act (which included antidiscrimination protection for people with HIV/AIDS), both being passed in 1990 by President George H.W. Bush (177).

AIDS activism with all its anger, fury, and fierceness also challenged the way in which individuals with AIDS were perceived overall, seeing that protestors actively went against the stereotypical depictions of AIDS patients – and as an extension thereof, of the queer community – as frail, passive, and submissive. In this respect, Rodger Pettyjohn explains in the 1991 documentary *Voices from the Front* that the general idea the public had of individuals with AIDS was that "of an emaciated white male in a hospital bed, gasping for his last breath. […] That isn't an image of strength, that isn't an image of victory, that isn't an image of struggling against odds, which is what […] living with AIDS is really about" (00:05:10-00:05:32). AIDS had lit a fire in a community ready to fight, even if it meant being harmed in the process.

5) *To Die Like a Man?* Queerness in 1980s American Cinema

Before engaging with New Queer Cinema, it is essential to understand that the emergence of the film wave was greatly influenced by the horrors and injustices the AIDS crisis brought to the forefront. It is therefore impossible to dive into NQC without having a deeper understanding of the implications of AIDS (already discussed at length in the previous chapter) and of AIDS film, a cinematic expression that emerged out of these events. Not only did AIDS movies of the 1980s inform NQC as its predecessor, but New Queer Cinema filmmakers would also deliberately go against many clichés and tropes established in these proto-New Queer Cinema films. Consequently, as the following discussion will be able to prove, New Queer Cinema did not emerge out of thin air. Instead, a gradual and organic evolution of LGBTQIA+ cinema and queer independent cinema can be traced throughout the 1980s, which slowly opened itself to more nuanced and authentic debates around queer themes, while becoming prone to discussing sexuality in an increasingly open, and, at times, more explicit way.

5.1) *Hollywood's Cautious Gay Screen Kiss*: 1980s LGBT Cinema

As this project has demonstrated time and time again, throughout its history Hollywood has proven to be generally prone to conservatism. It might therefore come as no surprise that the political backlash was also greatly reflected in American cinema at the time. Certainly, the New Right's reach extended beyond clear-cut political boundaries and instead also had a great impact on media portrayals of queerness. As Benshoff and Griffin argue, "[m]embers of the New Right organized to voice their objections to any images deemed to be promoting 'the gay agenda,' and they worked to pass strict rules against obscenity and to limit government funding of 'controversial' art" (*Queer* 179). As presented in my discussion of independent filmmaking of the 1980s in chapter 2.3, during the decade studio productions were characterized by a very conformist type of moviemaking that, to a certain extent, reflected Reaganite politics.

Naturally, Hollywood, which was already permeated by homophobia from the outset, quickly became aware of the changing climate in the US, now going out of its way to keep homosexuality as its very "last taboo" (Russo *The Celluloid* 249). Afraid to touch any queer-related topics, the studios considered homosexuality to be a highly daring and controversial subject matter that was, in effect, usually handled in rather detrimental ways (249-50). To better illustrate this issue, it might be valuable to consult a specific sequence taken from *The Celluloid Closet* (Rob Epstein & Jeffrey Friedman, 1995), a documentary that was primarily inspired by

Russo's eponymous book, though produced after the author's death from complications related to AIDS in 1990: it namely features a 40 second montage sequence of gay slurs in a variety of movies and totals in a number of 18 uses of the derogatory terms "faggot", "fag", or "queer". Although these reflect but a fraction of queerphobic insults used in movies at the time, watching the nonchalant way in which even teenagers on screen made use of them, might take most viewers aback (at least from today's perspective). The tolerance of derogatory language and images in the end made open homophobia acceptable and prevalent, normalized it in movies and, as a consequence thereof, in the general population.

These discriminatory attitudes moreover resulted in greater difficulties for queer filmmaking inside the Hollywood system: even if a somewhat "adventurous" producer was interested in approaching a queer topic (and thus accepting the possibility of being pigeonholed as gay themselves), there was always great pressure from various players in the industry to not represent the matter in an empathetic tone. Progressive producers, Russo states, were oftentimes "afraid to hurt their profits by offending the sensibilities of the Christian lobby and conservative elements in the mass audience with films that challenge their prejudices. It's easier to underestimate the general public and bow to religious pressure than to take a stand" (*The Celluloid* 250).

The question of profit was also a major hurdle that complicated the greenlighting of queer-related productions. More precisely, Hollywood reasoned that it was near to impossible to narrow down LGBTQIA+ individuals into a unified group with a more or less homogeneous taste. Accordingly, without a target audience a film project would not turn out to be lucrative. There was, at least partially, some truth to this matter. As mentioned in chapter 3.2, the LGBTQIA+ community had been crumbling and splitting into various subgroups since the 1970s, the process of fragmentation continuing into the 1980s. Consequently, this complicated finding and specifying a core queer audience:

> Lesbians and queers of color were often denied access to the worlds of white gay men. Transgendered or effeminate gay men continued to clash with clones, who favored overt expressions of masculinity. Some lesbians still took offense to male cross-dressing, while others critiqued the butch/femme traditions of their own communities. Lesbians who championed radical sexual practices, including sadomasochism or a performative butch/femme aesthetic (including self-identified "lipstick lesbians"), clashed with feminist antiporn crusaders, whose belief in the harmful nature of explicit sexual representation created a strange alliance between them and the religious right. In such a climate of contestation, most queer films of this period (whether made in Hollywood or by the growing number of independent producers) had a hard time pleasing diverse audiences. (Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 179)

If queer film projects were already a risk for producers and filmmakers on a personal level and career-wise, marketing movies with LGBTQIA+ content became an even greater task in a film industry that failed to understand how to address queerness in a way that actually attracted moviegoers.

The few uplifting queer movies that, against all odds, did come to fruition consequently faced additional obstacles. The fact that the film industry tried to please the widest audience possible repeatedly collided with demands of LGBTQIA+ activists for movies to represent the community in the most positive light possible. Due to the number of requests coming from all sides, the studios' dilemma eventually resulted in the production of inoffensive, suave, fluff pictures with no real tension or interest, as Russo argues: the clashing interests of the studios and the community "[b]oth […] encourage the making of films in which acceptance of homosexuals is begged based on the notion that they are just like everyone else. […] There is no reality or tension in such films. The point is to reflect life in an interesting way and learn to live with the personal, idiosyncratic truth of an individual artist no matter who gets freaked out by it" (Russo *The Celluloid* 271).

Since these uplifting queer-related films remained a scarcity, the prevailing tendency in mainstream cinema throughout the 1980s was to treat LGBTQIA+ individuals as standing in opposition to the heterosexual norm and majority. To be more exact, heterosexuality commonly denoted purity (Seidman *Beyond* 129), while queers were represented "either as harmless but freakish and pathetic figures (*Car Wash* [Michael Schultz, 1976], *Next Stop Greenwich Village* [Paul Mazursky, 1976], *St. Elmo's Fire* [Joel Schumacher, 1985]), or as serious physical, moral, and social threats (*Sudden Impact* [Clint Eastwood, 1983], *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* [Richard Brooks, 1977], *Cruising* [William Friedkin, 1980], *Deliverance* [John Boorman, 1972])" (132).

Indeed, when it comes to queer-phobia, the decade could not have started on a more sour note: two movies with strong homo- and transphobic undertones, *Cruising* and *Dressed to Kill*, inaugurated the 1980s by causing such strong reactions within LGBTQIA+ communities that they mobilized a horde of angry demonstrators[76]. It is fair to say that these events are of utmost significance to the history of queer filmmaking as, above all, they demonstrated the

[76] In an earlier published comparative and nuanced close reading of *Cruising and Dressed to Kill*, I was able to demonstrate that these movies do not necessarily need to be read as homo- or transphobic. While many of the actions within the film are violent and violence is mostly exerted by and against queer individuals, in their multi-layered, postmodern nature, both movies attempt to break the boundaries of traditional queer filmmaking by showing how a victim in a deeply queer-phobic society can be turned into a victimizer. Naturally, it is understandable that in times in which the number of positive queer portrayals was but insignificant, these movies became another reminder of Hollywood's great influence in the gruesome treatment of the LGBTQIA+ community (see Klein Martins *From Monsters to Monsters*).

power and influence LGBTQIA+ communities had achieved throughout the 1970s and, despite the political backlash, were still able to wield[77].

William Friedkin's plans to release an eponymous movie adaptation of the 1970 pulp novel *Cruising* by Gerald Walker was leaked a year prior to the film's actual 1980 release. Indeed, it was *Village Voice* reporter Arthur Bell who disclosed this information to the public, calling for a boycott of the project. While Bell particularly blisteringly criticized the idea of yet another movie production that resorted to the cliché of a gay killer and that was, moreover, set in the gay cruising and S&M scene, he also vividly remembered Friedkin's *The Boys in the Band* (1970), a movie he perceived as similarly homophobic and which he had savaged a few years earlier (Guthmann 2; Davidson "Contagious" 25). Bells intentions perfectly translated into action when an angry mob began to vandalize and disturb the sets of Friedkin's film, resulting in delays and difficulties to proceed with filming (Wilson 98, 103; Davidson "Contagious" 25).

While production costs had ultimately exceeded 60% of the actual budget because of these disturbances, *Cruising* nonetheless saw the light of day. That very same year, a similarly controversial movie found its way to American screens. Brian De Palma's *Dressed to Kill* featured the graphic murder of its female lead by a gender-queer killer and, as a result, infuriated both feminists and LGBTQIA+ activists. While the idea of gender-bending killers can be traced all the way back to 1960's *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock), the trope exceedingly began to gain momentum and was never as frequently used as during the 1980s.

Retrospectively speaking, both movies can be viewed as heralds of the fatal treatment of queer individuals on screen that was about to flood the American film market. Especially the high degree of graphic violence exerted against (and by) LGBTQIA+ individuals that was established by *Cruising* and *Dressed to Kill* would be continually exploited throughout the decade, particularly in the slasher subgenre, as many critics like to point out. As I have discussed at length in another publication, slasher films commonly also bear inherent queer qualities that permeate the entire subgenre, perhaps best seen in the gender-bending characteristics of the Final Girl (a female character that survives the attacks of the psychotic murderer) or the killer's psychosexual fury. These, in turn, are not necessarily pejorative, but

[77] These media-targeted fightbacks would eventually evolve into a greater institutional power, as LGBTQIA+ communities refused to further take these inflammatory portrayals lying down. To challenge the continuous and vicious attacks and in order to contribute to an LGBTQIA+-friendly mediascape, GLAAD (Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) was formed in 1985 with the aim of monitoring, informing, and educating media outlets regarding more inclusive and respectful ways of representing queerness (Eaklor 189-90; Gross 106-7). GLAAD's influence indeed rose continuously to the point that in 1992 it "was named one of Hollywood's 100 most powerful entities by *Entertainment Weekly*" (Gross 107).

can speak of queer empowerment and of a rejection of and struggle against heterosexist and -normative societal expectations (see Klein Martins *From Monsters to Monsters*).

More than becoming a mere slasher trope, the archetype of the sociopathic killer queer established itself as a general filmic convention during this decade: from the obsessive killer in *The Fan* (Ed Bianchi, 1981), the lesbian vampire in *The Hunger* (Tony Scott, 1983), to the gender-queer character Buffalo Bill in *The Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991), queer sexuality was linked to violent and murderous behavior (Seidman Beyond 129; Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 179-80, 205-6). This trend permeated American media in such a way that "[e]ven when not overtly homosexual or transgendered, the killer [was] still usually queer, often a man in some sort of gender distress. He is an updating of the psychopathic sex pervert so beloved of 1950s psychiatrists" (Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 179-80). Sadly, these gruesome tropes reached such popularity that they could even be found in entertainment that was directed towards children, including "a cartoon gay villain in *The Great Mouse Detective* ([Ron Clements et al.] 1986) and a sissy cat in Steven Spielberg's *An American Tail* ([Don Bluth,] 1986)" (Russo *The Celluloid* 251).

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Though specific overarching tendencies can certainly be found when discussing Hollywood, it is still a complex, heterogeneous system that is not as clear cut as many would make it out to be – and, most importantly, it is actually able to slowly adapt to new societal trends. Even in times of utmost conservatism, as the 1980s have proven to be, some queer oddities still popped up on screen from time to time. Several of those peculiarities occurred in the year 1982 when a whole range of movies were released that gave attention to uplifting and positive[78] LGBTQIA+ stories – an occurrence that Vito Russo coined the "mini-cycle of so-called gay films that emerged from Hollywood in 1982" (*The Celluloid* 271). Movies belonging to this so-called "mini cycle" included the gay melodrama *Making Love* (Arthur Hiller, 1982); the gender-bending musical *Victor/Victoria* (Blake Edwards, 1982); the cross-dressing charade *Tootsie* (Sydney Pollack, 1982); lesbian athlete drama *Personal Best* (Robert Towne, 1982); *The World According to Garp* (George Roy Hill, 1982, which featured a transgender character); and, finally, *Lianna* (John Sayles, 1983), a movie that focuses on the social exclusion a married mother endures after coming out (Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 184; Russo *The Celluloid* 271).

[78] Though many of these films attempted to adapt a more queer-embracing stance, they nonetheless remained problematic, especially because all of them were eventually told from the perspective of straight, heteroconformist filmmakers.

To get a better grasp of the reasons for the sudden emergence of a variety of queer-embracing movies, it is necessary to bear in mind two big events that caused light tremors in the American film scene. Firstly, the great wave of fury that movies like *Cruising*, *Dressed to Kill*, or even *Windows* (Gordon Willis, 1980) caused did not go completely unnoticed by the studios, who, perhaps, attempting to redeem themselves and to appease LGBTQIA+ audiences, chose to greenlight these productions (Benshoff *Monsters* 236-7; Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 184). Simultaneously, it is as important to bear in mind that Hollywood would not take a risk of this magnitude without already taking into consideration possible financial rewards, a factor closely related to the second essential happening of film-historic relevance.

This is to say that this mini cycle was a clear effort to cash in on the immense success of the French import *La Cage aux Folles* (Édouard Molinaro, 1978), a lighthearted comedy "that became the most successful foreign film release in American history (to that point in time). *La Cage aux Folles* was so successful that it led to two film sequels (1980, 1985), a Hollywood remake (*The Birdcage* [1996]), and a long-running Broadway musical" (Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 184). Though at the time such box office gold seemed unthinkable for a movie that so openly dealt with gay characters, audience members appeared to sympathize and fall in love with the movie's protagonists. Briefly summarized, the film focuses on a middle-aged gay couple, Renato (Ugo Tognazzi) and Albin (Michel Serrault), whose son decides to bring home his fiancé and parents-in-law, all of whom are eager to meet his parents. Aware of the conservatism of the guests and their son's fear to reveal his parent's sexual orientation, in a turn of events one of the hosts, the flamboyant Albin, appears in drag, pretending to be his son's mother.

What is rather striking about the movie is the fact that it presents a same-gender couple in a loving, long-term relationship, and, even more importantly, that the film does not end in tragedy or death – something that greatly opposed the norm of queer portrayals in America at the time. This being said, *La Cage aux Folles* also engendered criticism from LGBTQIA+ activists, mostly due to the stereotypical use of an innocuous, asexual gay couple that epitomized the sissy stereotype of the 1920s and 1930s for cheap laughs (Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 184; Russo *The Celluloid* 262-3; Gross 71-72).

Inspired by the film's success, Hollywood ventured on a similar journey in the hopes of creating its very own LGBTQIA+-embracing hit movie, i.e. as far as the system allowed a filmmaker to go in portraying queerness favorably. One of the most remarkable movies that came out of this cycle might have been *Making Love* (Arthur Hiller, 1982), a film that follows a doctor named Zack (played by Michael Ontkean) who leaves his picture-perfect marriage to

a woman to live with the successful writer Bart (Harry Hamlin). This relationship, however, is very soon put to the test when Zack understands that his partner is not interested in a monogamous relationship. Even though they separate (or never really become a committed couple to begin with), the doctor eventually finds love and settles down in a monogamous same-gender relation while creating a new friendship with his ex-wife who also remarried.

A movie this "outrageous" – at least from Hollywood's perspective – was only made possible due to a lucky meeting of diverse coincidences, including the influence of gay scriptwriter Barry Sandler, the tenacity of a progressive heterosexual producer in a position of power, a new, female head of production, as well as the interest of established director Arthur Hiller (who had directed the box office hit *Love Story* [1970]) to bring this movie to life (Gross 73). Indeed, *Making Love* was one of the first big budget mainstream movies centered almost exclusively on gay men (two out of three central characters are gay) while portraying them in a humane, empathetic, and positive light (Russo *The Celluloid* 271; Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 186).

In order to make the unpopular and shunned subject matter of homosexuality appealing to wider audiences, the production company cast Michael Ontkean and Harry Hamlin, or rather "two less established—but 'certifiably heterosexual'—actors" (Gross 73), who were known for their involvement in television. The same strategy was also employed in the handling of the characters within the script. In other words, there is an obvious attempt to normalize the queer protagonists in *Making Love*, in such a way to make audiences not accustomed to seeing positive queer portrayals on screen feel more at ease. Both Ontkean's and Hamlin's character are therefore depicted as masculine, confident, socially well-integrated men. Sadly, all these choices, in the end, were used in a somewhat homophobic manner, seeing that they were supposed to make the gay protagonists easier digestible and more relatable to the homophobic masses, especially when compared to characters such as the flamboyant, self-loathing queen Emory in *The Boys in the Band*.

Surprisingly, *Making Love* detaches almost any melodramatic elements of suffering from its main characters' sexuality. Though Zack indeed at first finds it hard to come to terms with his sexual orientation, sneaking in and out of gay bars and cruising spots, his coming out to his wife, while representing a point of friction, lacks any high tension and drama in the long run. In its aftermath, neither him nor his ex-wife are put through too much stress or are in any way socially or economically challenged (Gross 73). Both characters are thus allowed a happy ending, like this updating and manifesting Michael's desperate lament in *The Boys in the Band* that "[n]ot all faggots bump themselves off at the end of the story" (00:58:34-00:58:37). In the

end, this very decision demonstrated to audiences that, more than being spared a gruesome death, queer individual's on and off screen had the possibility to live happy and fulfilled lives.

Nonetheless, some critics argued that this almost spotless portrayal of gay life was willingly erasing queer issues, especially when reflecting on the grave struggles LGBTQIA+ individuals faced during the late 1970s and 1980s. While this point of view is certainly valid and reasonable, it is as important to realize that in a climate in which the pain, suffering, and violent deaths of LGBTQIA+ people were time and time again exploited in film, *Making Love*'s tender embracing of a gay love story came as a breath of fresh air to many, providing hope that homophobia was not monolithic in the United States. More importantly, seeing that this was one of the first mainstream films to feature a happy gay story arc, we might see it as the blueprint for many romantic and celebratory movies to come, especially those produced after the heyday of New Queer Cinema (which will be discussed in chapters 6 and 8).

Just of as much importance – and certainly of more weight to this study at large – is the homoeroticism explored in *Making Love*, even though it is only reduced to a single, central scene. After eventually finding out that his writer friend is gay, Zack explains that he is "curious" (00:48:47) to be with another man. The couple then falls into a long and tender kiss. Interestingly, this intimate moment is presented in a full shot, which has two effects: firstly, this being Zack's first time kissing another man, it heightens and visualizes his estrangement. As the scene progresses, the men begin undressing and the camera is finally allowed to get closer to the characters, ending in a close-up of their passionate kiss and like this reaching the height of intimacy. Secondly, a full shot might also be a way to ease a non-queer audience into the idea of two men kissing: from afar, they only represent two bodies in an embrace. Just like the camera, Zack and the general viewer are permitted a moment to grow more comfortable and are eventually (theoretically) able to fully open up to this new experience. The scene eventually ends with the couple falling onto a bed in a tight embrace while kissing.

It is also key to stress that the entire scene is slowly paced, the movie seeming to indulge in the men's passion that is finally able to be released. In turn, the lengthiness of their kisses (in comparison to moments of tenderness between men in other gay-themed movies) and of the scene as such also suggests the significance of this very moment to the plot: Zack has finally given into his desire and allowed himself to live it out. This furthermore implies that instead of having a disposable sexual experience, the men are "making love" as the title of the movie proposes. Unsurprisingly, the reactions to this scene in particular were quite emotional: "[t]he scene set off the familiar jeers and cat-calls from straight audiences, but for gay (male)

audiences it was the first time that two handsome male movie stars had appeared in a love scene" (Gross 74).

Twentieth Century-Fox was aware of the controversial nature of the kiss and thus prepared to defend itself. To warn the public, the studio included a disclaimer right before the beginning of the movie reading, "MAKING LOVE deals openly and candidly with a delicate issue. It is not sexually explicit. But it may be too strong for some people. MAKING LOVE is bold but gentle. We are proud of its honesty. We applaud its courage"[79]. While it is indeed laudable that the studio conveyed the message of backing the content of the movie, it is also lamentable that it had to include the disclaimer in the first place. Speaking of "courage" and calling the movie "bold" just underlined that homosexuality on screen could not be taken as a given, everyday life occurrence. To some degree, the disclaimer thus went against the point of the movie, i.e. to normalize the homosexual couple found in its plot.

The same issue can be encountered when returning to the erotic "making love" scene: while definitely representing a milestone in regard to queer intimacy in mainstream cinema, unfortunately, in terms of exploring the protagonists' sex lives, *Making Love* goes no further than displaying a kiss which is followed by a few-second shot of the protagonists lying in bed. The suggested sexual act is left to audiences' imagination – or perhaps rather to their denial. Very much aware of the failings of the Hollywood system when it comes to male homoeroticism, Russo thus draws a direct comparison between this scene and the sexual explicitness found in *Personal Best* (Robert Towne), a film centered on a lesbian couple connected to the realm of athletics sports that was released that same year: "[t]he explicit sexuality of two men onscreen is also more offensive and upsetting to audiences than lesbian sexuality, which is why *Personal Best* contained confident erotic love scenes played in the nude while *Making Love* held its breath for a single kiss between Ontkean and Hamlin"[80] (*The Celluloid* 294).

As far as *Making Love*'s critical acclaim went, although the gay press ultimately praised the film's inclusive and positive appeal (Russo *The Celluloid* 272), "[m]ainstream audiences stayed away from the film in droves" (Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 188). Even amongst queer audiences *Making Love*'s flaws did not go unnoticed despite its affirmative message. Many

[79] The disclaimer was taken out of home video copies and is thus no longer available. It is, however, shown in the documentary *The Celluloid Closet* (01:14:58-01:15:11).

[80] In addition to this, despite the lovers' many quarrels and their eventual breakup, the intimate bond between *Personal Best*'s protagonists is seen throughout the film, as they kiss, embrace, and express tenderness in various other ways. The reason for the discrepancy between the depiction of male and female homoeroticism might be found in the fact that same-gender sexual acts between women are frequently exploited as a heterosexual male fantasy because lesbian love is often mistreated as an unthreatening "preliminary to the 'real' event, sex between men and women" (Russo *The Celluloid* 5).

viewers felt that by trying to stay as unproblematic as possible and avoiding any memorable conflict, *Making Love* was turned into a spineless, boring, and conformist tale (Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 188; Russo *The Celluloid* 272-3). In some measure this mirrors the earlier mentioned conundrum of finding a core queer audience in the 1980s. Hence, trying to please such a heterogeneous group with a single token film was impossible and took away the movies potential edge.

Another factor that might have contributed to the disapproval on the part of queer audiences was the choice of deliberately distancing the movie from the gay community by choosing a character that believes in traditional heteronormative values. Though the movie briefly shows gay bars in a realistic way (though they are, however, predominantly frequented by white, virile hunks), it mainly works within the confines of a reality that heterosexual audiences felt at ease with. In fact, the entire film seems to be told from a straight perspective, while the main conflict arises specifically because of the doctor's insertion in the heterosexual institution of marriage. Indeed, in contrast to the earlier discussed *The Boys in the Band* or the gay liberation feature *A Very Natural Thing*, LGBTQIA+ communities, culture, and institutions as such are almost completely missing in the plot and have no bearings on the characters' lives whatsoever (except for representing places of adultery where our main protagonist is able to cruise other men for sex).

The heteroconformity of the film becomes even more evident in how "[t]he title of the film itself indicates how the script nods to bourgeois heterosexist conventions by stressing the desirability of 'making love' rather than 'having sex'" (Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 186). Similar to the ideas Kramer presented in *Faggots*, the act of making love thus harbors a sense of monogamy and trust, while "having sex" is left to promiscuous figures such as Bart, never completely sexually fulfilled, always looking for the next best trick. In fact, Bart's sexuality becomes of further interest in this context. Though Bart is outspoken about his promiscuity, the movie does not endorse it *per se*. Rather, it chooses to portray the character as self-destructive, his constant sexual encounters serving as an outlet and refuge from deeper emotional issues that plague him.

This becomes particularly obvious towards the end of the movie when the character repeatedly affirms that he is happy being single (almost as if to convince himself of this fact), only to then admit that "there was something there [in his relationship with Zack], and I don't mean the sex or the challenge. Because after all those years of one-night stands and easy pickups, I think I finally met someone that I really believed was making love to me. Maybe that's why I had to destroy it" (01:24:20-01:24:40). Unable to see polygamous or non-

monogamous behavior in a non-judgmental way, *Making Love* represents the characters choice of not staying in a healthy relationship as a subconscious form of manipulating his own happiness in life.

The ending of the film confirms this idea: Zack continues to be successful at his job and is able to keep up a friendship with his ex-wife and, just like her, finds love and happiness in a monogamous relationship. He thus remains perfectly integrated in the life he has always led – aside from the gender of his partner. Bart, on the other hand, simply vanishes from the plot altogether. The last time we see him, "Bart returns to the twilight world of gay bars and one-night stands, a choice that the film represents as a sort of ethereal netherworld via the use of hazy, out-of-focus city lights that symbolically seem to swallow up Bart's very identity" (Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 187). Quite interestingly, throughout the plot he is mostly associated with the night, with bars, while heterosexual, monogamous bliss is directly linked to organized and secure domesticity.

Ultimately, in the same way in which this movie flopped and was soon swept under the rug, so was the 1982 "craze" of gay movies quickly put to an end. As will be further explored in the following chapter, AIDS might have played a major role in this, mostly because more people slowly began to gain awareness of its existence and to discuss the condition with contempt, Hollywood hence going the extra mile to keep away from the topic matter. After this brief moment of queer-embracing relief, the 1980s rarely featured any openly gay – or at least optimistic and confidently queer – characters in leading roles. The same can be said for homoeroticism: "[g]ay male kissing or overt eroticism was definitely out—as they basically still are in mainstream Hollywood films. Softcore lesbian erotics could be tolerated, but revolutionary dyke characters or queer central characters could not" (Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 189).

5.2) *Postcards from Europe*: Imports that Changed the Game

Though mainstream Hollywood was stagnating when it came to more progressive and daring non-heterosexual and non-cisgender filmmaking, as luck – or perhaps rather the organic evolution of technology and the industry – would have it, new possibilities were handed to filmmakers who were keen on encapsulating a different façade of American life, one that mis- and underrepresented minorities and subcultures were longing to see on celluloid. To recapitulate my discussion in chapter 2.3 centering on independent filmmaking of the 1980s, while smaller-scale film projects outside the major studios were almost extinguished in the late

70s, the 1980s brought many changes and new opportunities to the independent cinematic landscape: the boom of cable television and, more importantly, the success of VHS technology were perhaps the most groundbreaking amongst these, allowing filmmakers to reach audiences almost anywhere without the necessity of having to rely on theatrical runs, while, at times, even making a profit along the way.

In fact, the rising popularity of video called for constant new releases of film products that Hollywood was simply unable to satisfy by itself. Consequently, the doors for non-studio affiliated film producers were opened, who stepped in and, in turn, caused "a boom in independent film production" (Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 190). The widening of the independent sector and the enabling of new channels of distribution, then again, made it easier for minority filmmakers to express their point of view without major restrictions and to reflect on the world they lived in while also reaching their specific niche audiences. As a result, "African American [e.g. Spike Lee's *She's Gotta Have It* (1986)], Asian American [e.g. Wayne Wang's *Chan Is Missing* (1982)], Latino [e.g. Gregory Nava's *El Norte* (1983)], and queer filmmakers began to document their communities in a series of well-received independent films" (Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 190). Audiences also clearly benefitted from these technological innovations: a queer home video consumer in a rural space, for instance, was now able to have access to a movie like *Buddies* without needing to wait in vain for a screening in a local theater, not to mention the fact they would furthermore be able to re-watch a film over and over again from the comfort of their home. To a certain degree, this further generated more independence from traditional forms and authorities of distribution and represented a step towards the democratization of the film industry.

Technological achievements, however, did not only greatly influence the means of distribution, but also film production as such. Here, in particular the invention of the first camcorders by Sony were extraordinarily relevant. Rich hence asserts that "[n]ewly invented camcorders enabled easy production of electronic media at the personal level for the first time in history. A new generation emerging from art school seized the new tools to reimagine cinema with a video eye, revising the medium thrillingly from the bottom up" (Rich *New* xvii). As will be addressed later in this chapter, the practicality and handiness of these camcorders would also prove to be utmost helpful to queer activism, "enabl[ing] the reversal of surveillance: police could now be recorded by the crowds" (xvii).

The rise of independent cinema was also made possible by another, often-overlooked factor, one that seemed completely external to the actual world of cinema or filmmaking, which, however, helped to vastly further the infrastructure for low budget independent filmmaking:

cheaper film production was namely accompanied by affordable housing conditions in some US metropolises. As queer film critic B. Ruby Rich notes in *New Queer Cinema*, cheap rent in major cities such as New York had a deep impact on the possibilities of young filmmakers: "New York City wasn't yet the post-Giuliani, Bloomberg-forever, Disneyland-Vegas tourist attraction of today, trade-marked and policed to protect the visitors and tourism industry. […] The benign economics and easy density enabled the continuation and even growth of a widespread community united by issues, sexualities, politics, aesthetics" (xviii). As a result, a neglected city with lower life costs allowed artists to produce art without the limitations of incredibly high rental expenses.

Just as important to the history of independent queer filmmaking were foreign language imports, many of which were first screened at film festivals, which, in turn, had also started popping up throughout the 1980s. The imported movies American audiences got to see further strengthened a demand for something else outside the homogenized and conformist blockbuster landscape Hollywood had settled on in the 1980s. Amongst these imports, openly European queer cinema was not a complete obscurity as overseas even renowned filmmakers had the means to address LGBTQIA+-related issues[81].

It is also of interest to note that the workings of the European film industry greatly differed from those of the United States, allowing for more film projects to be released that did not necessarily seek to follow the path of big budget successes. This was made possible because actual funding for independent features existed, meaning that "independent filmmakers [were] more often subsidized by television stations and governments" (Russo *The Celluloid* 267). As a result, during the 1970s and 1980s smaller-scale productions were released that showed an interest in exploring a wider range of LGBTQIA+ content (including movies with greater sexual explicitness, sophistication, and maturity) and did not rely on the prejudiced and stereotypical depictions that their cinematic forebears had been perpetuating for decades (Wharton 107; Rich *New* 6). The most noteworthy examples include *Sebastiane* (Derek Jarman, 1976); *Nighthawks* (Ron Peck, 1978); *Taxi zum Klo* (Frank Ripploh, 1980); *Pepi, Luci, Bom y otras chicas del*

[81] Numerous queer-themed films thus existed in the European cinematic realm, though most of them concentrated on gay, white males, including the UK productions *Victim* (Basil Dearden, 1961); *Sunday Bloody Sunday* (John Schlesinger, 1971), or *Women in Love* (Ken Russell, 1969). Germany had a whole range of movies directed by the incredibly prolific *auteur* Rainer Werner Fassbinder (including titles such as *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* [1972], *Fox and His Friends* [1975], or *Querelle* [1982]) or those by the lesser known and controversial activist filmmaker Rosa von Praunheim, recognized for movies such as *It Is Not the Homosexual Who Is Perverse, But the Society in Which He Lives* (1971) or *The Bolsters* (1971). Italy's celebrated masters also dabbled in the art of queer filmmaking, including the likes of Luchino Visconti (*Ludwig* [1973]), Pier Paolo Pasolini (*Teorema* [1968]), or Fellini (*Fellini Satyricon* [1969]), while France had a long history of queer avantgarde cinema (see chapter 3.1 for my discussion of *Le Sang d'un Poète*, *Zéro de Conduite*, and *Un Chant d'Amour*) that continued throughout the 20th and 21st century.

montón (Pedro Almodóvar, 1980); *The Angelic Conversation* (Derek Jarman, 1985); *Westler* (Wieland Speck, 1985); *My Beautiful Laundrette* (Stephen Frears, 1985); *Caravaggio* (Derek Jarman, 1986); *Prick Up Your Ears* (Stephen Frears, 1987); or *Coming Out* (Heiner Carow, 1989).

It is interesting that, as Robin Griffiths points out, all of the above – as well as those unmentioned here – formed "a group of very different filmmakers whose works have, in varying ways, carved out a space wherein to address a number of quite provocative new questions about both the limits and unimagined possibilities of sexuality, nationhood and belonging that have long been waiting to be explored" (15). In order to somehow bring unity to a number of movies that lacked any type of national, aesthetic, or ideological signatures and were, moreover, directed by individuals from utmost different backgrounds and produced not only in a variety of countries but also under diverse circumstances, it might be valuable to pick out a couple of standout case studies released in the 1980s. I therefore would like to take a brief look at *Taxi zum Klo* and *My Beautiful Laundrette* to understand the ways in which 1980s European cinema attempted to shake up queer representation on screen and, like this, managed to introduce several elements that would soon be adapted by US filmmakers.

What is rather striking about both films is their handling of homosexuality as a given, which is mainly achieved by taking away the central focus from the sexual orientation of the protagonists. Consequently, drama does not arise from the fact that characters are queer, but their queerness serves only as a backdrop to more pertinent questions these movies seek to address. Quoting *Taxi zum Klo*'s director Ripploh in his book *The Celluloid Closet*, Vito Russo writes "'I hate problem movies, […] I wanted to show the audience both happiness and sadness because that's how life is'" (270). Indeed, Russo then goes on commenting on the cinematic landscape of 1980s queer independent film, stating that "[w]e are now seeing gay films […] that refuse to be defined by straight expectations" (307), which would ultimately also become a crucial element in New Queer Cinema.

What makes *Taxi zum Klo* stand out is its likable, yet flawed protagonist that builds a stark contrast to both, the monstrous queers in US mainstream film of the time and those queer characters that were either idealized or put into the box of happy-go-lucky, or hilariously cute gays that lost all their edge and interest in the process. School teacher Frank (played by the director himself) enjoys his life as a single man, going to cruising spots to have disposable sex. When he meets Bernd (played by Bernd Broaderup, the director's real-life boyfriend), he tries to settle down to please his partner's monogamous needs, only to soon find himself confronted with feelings of entrapment he needs to break out of. While there might be some parallels plot-

wise to *Making Love* or *A Very Natural Thing*, the actual handling of sex in the movie could not be more different to these formerly discussed films.

Taxi zum Klo is incredibly gripping for its honest and explicit depiction of sexuality and its complete disregard of the cinematic norms of portraying homoeroticism as something that needs to be hidden or tackled tentatively. In his unabashed fearlessness as a director, Ripploh thus presents unsimulated sex scenes that include fellatio and anal penetration in all its unglamorized and unpolished glory. Though highly explicit, the scenes are not necessarily pornographically titillating. In an utmost interesting turn of events, the fixation on the character's genitals or the pornographic fascination of showing the act of penetration in close-up shots become rather secondary, in effect making these sex scenes appear more authentic and closer to reality (a handling of sexual content that will reappear in the context of the NQCR as explored in chapter 8).

In general, the sex displayed in *Taxi zum Klo* does not take itself too seriously: in one scene, for instance, the main character sits in a cubicle of a public toilet, correcting the homework of his students, when suddenly, in almost absurd manner, an erect penis pushes its way through a glory hole in the wall. Sexuality thus becomes multidimensional in this movie, invoking also a tender side that is all too often missing in queer film of the 1980s. This is best seen in an intimate scene in which two men are shown bathing, shampooing each other's hair, and kissing. Ultimately, the way homoeroticism is dealt with in *Taxi zum Klo* was quite ahead of its time and would only be recaptured in such varied and delicate form in a film like *Shortbus* that takes the queerness and diversity of sexuality even further while treating it in an everyday, matter-of-fact fashion (see chapter 9.1).

In comparison to its German contemporary *Taxi zum Klo*, *My Beautiful Laundrette* tackles different issues while treating the protagonists' homosexuality almost as an irrelevancy, instead placing particular emphasis on exploring the intersectionality of identities in British culture. In detail, the movie offers diverse situations that highlight the shortcomings of Thatcherite ideologies, particularly by centering itself on a queer and interracial relationship between an ex-punk Englishman (Johnny, played by Daniel Day-Lewis) and the Pakistani immigrant Omar (Gordon Warnecke). Briefly put, *My Beautiful Laundrette* overall exposes that the pluralities and intersectionalities that form identities – on a personal and national level – are realities that Thatcherism, as well as most characters in the film, fail to take into account. This refusal and the obsessive clinging to uniform identities are portrayed as highly damaging throughout the course of action. In the end, the only characters that are able to live harmoniously and to find peace are Johnny and Omar, a queer and interracial couple that represents an anti-

Thatcherite "in-betweenness", or rather a fluidity and a rejection of structural rigidity (a motif that will be taken up again in my discussion of *Mala Noche*). Ending the film with these characters of different classes, races, and ethnicities uniting in a queer relation is a hopeful plead to all the different groups within Thatcherite England to wake up to the multiple and multilayered realities of 1980s Britain.

The points addressed here are of utmost importance when dealing not only with New Queer Cinema but also with the academic field of queer theory, both of which are commonly concerned with ideas around fluidity, postmodernism, intersectionality, and the opening of boundaries of sexuality. Surprisingly, originally designed as a low budget TV production, *My Beautiful Laundrette* became a major theater hit, eventually even winning several awards (Smith 8-9). With successes like this came the dawning awareness of the possibility that a queer independent movie could be quite rewarding, further encouraging some to seek out this branch of moviemaking. Interestingly enough, in 1986, a year after the release of *My Beautiful Laundrette*, two American LGBTQIA+-themed independent movies came to the big screen that were similarly praised and became fairly popular: Donna Deitch's romantic drama *Desert Hearts* (1985) centered on a lesbian couple and Bill Sherwood's *Parting Glances*, a movie that will be examined further below (Russo *The Celluloid* 259; Gross 76).

Indeed, when it comes to the American context, the first queer-themed independent movies of the 1980s were for the most part directed by heterosexual directors. Some of these pictures include Robert Altman's *Come Back to the 5 and Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean* (1982) featuring a transgender character, or John Sayles' *Lianna* (1983) focusing on the coming out of a married mother. Aware that these films had been directed through the lens of heterosexual, white men, parts of the queer community met them with disapproval (Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 191). This situation, however, soon started changing when by and by more LGBTQIA+-identified filmmakers began to find possibilities to produce movies about the lives and struggles of their respective communities. Moreover, what distinguished these films was the fact that they were openly catered to LGBTQIA+ audiences and were explicitly marketed as gay and lesbian films. While not yet as subversive as movies that belonged to New Queer Cinema – especially when it comes to their formal, narrative, genre-bending, and aesthetic experimentation –, they nonetheless challenged assumptions and wrongdoings widely perpetuated in queer-themed movies at the time. In an attempt to deconstruct the general consensus of queerness in Hollywood, these directors made a deliberate effort to focus on stories the mainstream failed to tell. Furthermore, as *My Beautiful Laundrette* has already perfectly demonstrated, by taking the point of view of queer characters, plots oftentimes did

not emphasize and concentrate on the hardships of being LGBTQIA+, the characters' queerness instead representing but one characteristic amongst many others and becoming a backdrop to the actual story to be told.

With this in mind, in the documentary *Fabulous! The Story of Queer Cinema* (2006) B. Ruby Rich notices that all of the above-mentioned elemental shifts ultimately encouraged LGBTQIA+ film enthusiasts to begin making movies: "[i]t's the rise of the independent feature movement. They're all exploring new film languages, all exploring new characters, and part of that newness is for the first time etching on to the screen these new, modern, gay and lesbian characters who are living their lives, falling in love, pining after somebody, getting in trouble" (00:19:25-00:19:45). As will be argued further on in this chapter, several of the elements that had emerged in 1980s queer cinema indeed represented the first seeds of New Queer Cinema and were greatly expanded upon and more significantly subverted towards the late 1980s and early 1990s.

5.3) "It's My Party and I Die if I Want to:" Independent AIDS Features and Proto-New Queer Cinema

More than merely serving as inspiration for dramatic film scripts, AIDS would actually largely inform queer filmmaking from the 1980s onwards, even if, at times, only on a subconscious level. Indeed, the health crisis created such a hunger for representation that it became one of the driving forces and catalysts of the emerging wave of queer independent filmmaking. Directly referring to these developments, Michelangelo Signorile explains in *Fabulous! The Story of Queer Cinema* (00:25:02-00:25:15) that just in the same way in which the pandemic mobilized activism in American streets, AIDS also gave filmmakers a great push to break traditional boundaries of what was considered socially acceptable. Yet, the anger and fury that came with AIDS activism and resistance was not immediately visible in the cinematic realm.

Even though AIDS was certainly exploited by queerphobes and although it had the power to add another vicious layer to the defamatory handling of the queer community on celluloid, it might come as a surprise that the issue was completely ignored at first. Instead, particularly during the first years of the pandemic, AIDS was merely perceived as not being marketable enough to be handled on the big screen (Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 205; Russo *The Celluloid* 256). Only as time went on and more people became aware of its existence, AIDS content started to creep up in subtle and unexpected ways, mostly in horror film, a genre that is often considered particularly prone to mirroring societal anxieties of a specific time and place (B.

Grant 391; Tudor 5). Hence, similar to the handling of queer issues during the Production Code era, AIDS was mostly addressed through subtext in what Benshoff and Griffin call "'pseudo-AIDS' films" or "crypto-AIDS film[s]" (*Queer* 205).

What lurks behind this idea are allegorical movies that do not directly address or mention HIV/AIDS in any way but assume certain elements that were commonly associated to AIDS narratives, such as deteriorating bodies (David Cronenberg's *The Fly* [1986]), infectious diseases (Pen Densham's *The Kiss* [1988] or the blood-borne virus in John Carpenter's *The Thing* [1982]), or a gruesome death that is (in)directly connected to sexual intercourse (mostly seen in a variety of slasher films such as in *Friday the 13th* [Sean S. Cunningham, 1980]). Most importantly, blood, an integral part of horror that reached new heights of gore from the 1970s onwards, was now given an entirely new meaning: it became contagious and treacherous, as this vital life source could now be misused to kill.

While, as previously proposed, the topic of AIDS was greatly discouraged in Hollywood, in the fourth year[82] of the crisis, a few productions actually concerned with the issue began popping up. Hereby, cable television was one of the main players catapulting AIDS stories onto American screens[83]. Leading the way was the Emmy award-winning made-for-TV movie *An Early Frost* (John Erman, 1985), a film that I have chosen to highlight and to dissect in more detail because of its sympathetic, albeit flawed, approach when dealing with the pandemic. As a matter of fact, having a deeper understanding of the workings of these first AIDS movies is essential as they would pave the way and serve as examples for AIDS films to come. Simultaneously, the one-sided and prejudiced portrayals found therein will be essential to my discussion of New Queer Cinema, as certain tropes would be greatly deconstructed by the film wave.

An Early Frost focuses on a young, successful Chicago lawyer named Michael (Aidan Quinn), who is faced with his HIV/AIDS diagnosis early on in the plot. He quickly discovers that he might have contracted the virus from his unfaithful partner Peter. As the story unfolds and Michael's health degrades, he leaves his lover, moves back to his hometown and is taken into the care of his heteronormative family, where he is forced to come out as both HIV-positive

[82] These first AIDS films coincided with the outing of Rock Hudson as a man with HIV/AIDS, which was followed by a new appraisal of AIDS-related stories in the media, as I already discussed at length in the previous chapter. It could therefore be argued that, at least to an extent, they can be perceived as follow-up cash-ins of the breaking news story.

[83] Bearing in mind that "in part […] the made-for-television movie has a history of dealing with topical social problems, including health and justice issues" (Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 208), AIDS perfectly encapsulated the interest of TV's target audience. Amongst others, these movies included *Liberace: Behind the Music* (David Greene, 1988), *The Ryan White Story* (John Herzfeld, 1989), *Our Sons* (John Erman, 1991), *Citizen Cohn* (Frank Pierson, 1992), or the filmic adaptation of *And the Band Played On* (Roger Spottiswoode, 1993) (Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 208).

and gay. While his mother and grandmother quickly take on the roles of loving caregivers, his father and sister begin to distance themselves from him – the former due to his rampant homophobia, the latter because of her issues and fears in dealing with disease. In the end, the family makes up, while Michael eventually chooses to return to Chicago to spend his remaining days with his boyfriend.

An Early Frost was particularly groundbreaking for trying to humanize people *living* with AIDS, an approach that went against the general consensus in American media, considering that, as I will discuss further below, most AIDS-centered movies are rather prone to portray characters *dying* from the immunodeficiency syndrome. As a means to depict the struggle of the protagonist in a more intense, emotional and empathetic manner, the film's use of melodramatic tropes proves advantageous, a trend that would, in fact, become a defining feature for AIDS filmmaking. Melodramatic influences, as Benshoff and Griffin point out, can be particularly discerned in AIDS films' fondness to draw on rather traditional formal and narrative approaches, while commonly focusing on the agony and death of AIDS patients. These emotional triggers are, furthermore, mostly utilized in storylines that feature a coming out as being HIV-positive in the context of the family (*Queer* 207)

While commonly marketed as inclusive for featuring individuals shunned by society, most AIDS movies produced in the 1980s and 1990s (such as *Buddies* [1985], *As Is* [1986], *Parting Glances* [1986], or even *Philadelphia* [1993]) typically reduced their characters to white, cisgender, fairly financially successful, good-looking, masculine everyday men (Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 207, 210). In this respect, *An Early Frost*'s protagonist, Michael, perfectly falls in line with these requirements. By shying away from the common stereotype of gay men that was pervasive in media at the time (i.e., the effeminate and frail nelly queen), AIDS films mirrored the prevailing assumption among studios that heterosexual audiences would not be able to relate to or feel comfortable with stories about homosexuality unless they were told from the perspective of someone who closely resembled the general American – or rather those identities that were usually portrayed on whitewashed television and media.

As becomes apparent, these films thus employed the same strategy that I uncovered in my discussion of *Making Love*. More precisely, taking gay characters out of the context of the LGBTQIA+ community and placing them in the heteronormative space of a nuclear family home, supposedly made them more relatable to heterosexual audiences. These choices were, ultimately, also applied to appeal to viewers' emotions, empathy, and pity by creating an awareness regarding this fatal condition and that everything it encapsulates could strike

anyone's family, including anyone's son or daughter (a circumstance that the title of the 1991 AIDS film *Our Sons* [John Erman] alludes to).

This form of representation, however, harbors a set of problems: firstly, individuals suffering from AIDS were in reality far more varied in terms of their race, background, social standing, gender, sexual orientation, and could therefore not be limited to gay, cisgender, white men. By insisting on this stereotype, movies such as *An Early Frost* further cemented certain prejudices[84] in the public consciousness while "perpetuat[ing] the pervasive ideologies of homophobia and heterosexism, to the detriment of all gay men in American society and their long-term social prospects" (Hart *The AIDS Movie* 32). This, in turn, ultimately resulted in "renewed waves of prejudice and social intolerance toward gay men in American society" (Hart "Representing" 85). Unfortunately, the trope of the gay white AIDS victim was maintained for years to come in movies, while only rare exceptions such as *Kids* (Larry Clark, 1995) or *Gia* (Michael Cristofer, 1998) dared to speak about non-queer cases of AIDS.

Finally, portraying AIDS as a disease of homosexuality did not only have precarious consequences for queer individuals. Instead, it also created a false sense of security for the rest of the population by implying that every non-white, non-gay male was not part of this risk group. Interestingly enough, African American, Latinx, as well as teenage characters are almost entirely missing in these films even though they clearly represented groups with large and growing rates of new infections (Hart "Representing" 83-4).

A further point of contention can be found in terms of the social standing of AIDS patients in these movies. When taking into consideration that LGBTQIA+ individuals were often ostracized in the 1980s job market and, furthermore, bearing in mind that AIDS rates were higher in underprivileged communities, particularly due to a lack of information and means to afford health care, it becomes the more questionable as to why these films would largely focus on affluent white males. To put it bluntly, a practically complete disregard existed as to the fact that a wide array of individuals with AIDS had no financial assistance and that not everyone was capable of taking care of themselves or had a support system at home in form of a caring family. It is therefore vital to, again, highlight and consider that the likelihood of transmission

[84] These attitudes furthermore clearly contributed to the earlier-discussed separation between two grouping, i.e. the non-infected, heteronormative "us" and the ostracized, abject "them" – an issue that, surprisingly, one AIDS movie in particular briefly voices: in the TV production *Our Sons*, Julie Andrews, playing a character whose son's lover is dying from AIDS, mentions that dividing individuals into different groupings is at the root of her internalized homophobia, a fact that she tried to ignore for years: "[o]ne of them – those are the words all the other words are about, ugly words. Your son isn't 'one of them.' My son isn't 'one of them.' Our sons are two of us" (01:13:06-01:13:22).

is higher for people living in a context of vulnerability and in an unstable economic situation with, consequently, less access to insurance and to a health system at large.

Another point of criticism resides in the role the nuclear family is granted in many AIDS films. Hereby, audiences' empathy is commonly generated through loving and understanding identificatory female characters – the nurturing, caring woman in itself being a stereotype with a long history in film and other media. In the case of *An Early Frost*, particularly the role of Michael's mother and grandmother are essential to this effect: both show how the support of a family and friend is essential for people living with HIV/AIDS, simultaneously underlining the value and reconciliatory power of the American family, even through times of adversity, hurt, and disagreement. As Michael's mother, Katherine (Gena Rowland) therefore puts it, "[t]he thing is, you're my son. I wouldn't let anything in the world separate us" (00:35:38-00:35:45).

While a supportive environment can be equated with hope and optimism, the crucially problematic point here derives from the fact that the chief focus lies on the family's difficulty in dealing and coming to terms with Michael's diagnosis (Gross 143). As Vitto Russo puts it, "[t]here is no consideration given to the fact that this is happening to him—not them. […] Such films are about the real people in our society, the straight people. Gays are the problem they have" (*The Celluloid* 277). AIDS in this context therefore serves as a device to create friction in yet another family drama.

The emphasis on the family also represented a slap in the face for those who worked on the front lines, since the lived reality of AIDS activism and support systems painted a very different picture. In other words, this film – as many others – rejects and disregards to address the greater political struggle and injustice around the crisis, as well as the achievements of AIDS activists, though they are fundamental factors to the AIDS narrative. Furthermore, the "depiction of the gay 'families of choice' that so many lesbian and gay people have created and from which they derive support" (Gross 144) was also generally overlooked. Instead, movies introduced heterosexual heroes and benefactors that generously accept a seropositive, queer outcast into their care. Indeed, in *An Early Frost* Michael's only link to the LGBTQIA+ community is Victor, an AIDS patient he bonds with at the hospital. Yet, Victor's role is reduced to two purposes: he is introduced to serve as comic relief, only to then quickly die. His death, in turn, happens rather abruptly so as to demonstrate the strength with which AIDS takes over and ends a life. Sadly, not until the release of movies such as *Longtime Companion* (Norman René, 1989) audiences actually got to see gay men with AIDS being taken care of by their chosen families.

Apart from trying to humanize individuals with HIV/AIDS, the movie also bears a strong educational dimension. As the wider population in the 80s still believed in inaccurate facts and ghost stories about the virus, setting the record straight was a step to create a more informed outlook in the general public. To this end, the previously addressed female characters take on the roles of educators and mentors. In particular Michael's mother provides the family with important facts about AIDS, its means of transmission, and the effect the virus can have on an infected body (i.e. at least the information that was available at the time). To reinforce the message, *An Early Frost* also introduces a doctor who deals with AIDS patients in a non-judgmental manner. More importantly, he refuses to treat AIDS as a condition linked to a specific group of people by clearly stating that "it's not just a gay disease" (00:21:11-00:21:12) and even mentioning AIDS patients from different demographics that are also affected, including hemophiliacs and children.

Lastly, the movie does not shy away from educating its viewers about the prejudice, stigma, and discrimination that come along with an HIV/AIDS diagnosis. Strictly speaking, the prejudice begins with Michael, who voices common doubts and fears in regard to his immunodeficiency, pointing out that he sees it as "a disease that when people hear about it, they wanna run in the other direction. And I don't blame them. I would, too, only I can't, 'cause it's inside of me" (00:37:57-00:38:11). Early on in the film's narrative, these anxieties become a reality when he starts to experience social exclusion: friends he once cared about and confided in keep avoiding him and begin disappearing from his life as soon as they find out about his status. His pregnant sister, Susan, the only member of his family who is in the know about Michael's homosexuality and who seems completely accepting of it, soon follows in his friends' footsteps. As soon as she understands that Michael has AIDS, she completely freaks out: when her son tries to hug his uncle, she screams out in shock and forbids him to do so. Naturally, her response could be accepted as an understandable impulsive reaction, particularly since she, perhaps, does not know any better and wants to avoid any chances that could harm her children.

Still, even after having been lectured by her mother about the impossibility of transmission through superficial contact, she keeps her distance. By introducing an individual that had one of the strongest bonds with the protagonist, the movie, again, perfectly encapsulates the fear and paranoia surrounding the disease that, unfortunately, were (and still are) stronger than reason. To counter this idea, the film next takes a rather unexpected route: it is Michael's grandmother who, towards the end of the narrative, asks his nephew for a goodbye kiss. When he shies away, she confronts him by stating that "[i]t's a disease, not a disgrace"

(01:15:27-01:15:31). Interestingly, the short embrace and kiss on the cheek that ensues, as a matter of fact, caused wide debates during the production of the movie. As Gross informs us, "after extensive deliberations that included consultation with Dr. James Curran, head of the CDC's AIDS program, the producers [eventually] included a kiss between Quinn and his grandmother" (Gross 144). To strengthen this message, Susan changes her mind and reunites with Michael before he moves back to Chicago. Showing a pregnant woman embracing a person living with AIDS naturalizes and, again, humanizes seropositive individuals. Thus, it is important that, just like with Michael's grandmother, this act is not simply implied but actually visualized, thus facilitating viewers to accept the facts preached by Michael's mother and the doctor.

Finally, the question of deep homophobia is best personified in another role, namely that of Michael's father, Nick (Ben Gazzara). Most significantly, when Michael comes out as gay, Nick's immediate reaction is to physically attack his son, a scene that is further accentuated by eerie violin music, reminiscent of classic horror. In this regard, it needs to be pointed out that while containing this queer-baiting element in the plot, *An Early Frost* always attempts not to venture into homophobic territory, as Michael, despite all adversity, never loses his sense of pride. Accordingly, he does not bow down to his father's pressure, nor does he regret his same-gender relationship. As he puts it quite clearly, "I am not going to apologize for what I am because it's taken me too long to accept it" (00:39:03-00:39:11). Indeed, a common AIDS film convention that would be rehashed time and time again in cinema can be found in Nick's behavior, namely that of "gay men as embarrassments to their parents, particularly their fathers, with whom they have especially strained (or even nonexistent) relationships after they reveal their homosexuality" (Hart *The AIDS Movie* 51).

Only when Michael attempts suicide in the family's garage and Nick saves him, he finally breaks the ice by reproaching his father, telling him that "[i]t's what you want, isn't it, dad? See me dead. Well, I want it, too" (01:29:09-01:29:18). More than a mere confrontation during which Michael calls out the callousness his father has been directing towards him, this conflict is as much a deconstruction of the father's sense of masculine superiority, which, in turn, certainly mirrors common conceptions of masculinity in society. In other words, Nick's distaste and fear of homosexuality – feelings that are, perhaps, linked to common ideas of gay men as failing in terms of masculinity, as being effeminate and frail – are disclosed as a weakness in themselves when Michael holds Nick's own frailty and anxiety against him: "I'm not the man you wanted me to be. Well, I don't give a damn what you think anymore, because I'm a better man than you'll ever be, you son of a bitch" (01:30:53-01:31:06).

Having rejected his own son, the elderly man has simultaneously given up on the role he so proudly saw himself in, namely that of a support system, a companion, and father figure to his family. The discourse that homosexuality and sickness are unmanly is thus turned upside down and it is fear and cowardice that are ultimately revealed as a weakness. Father and son eventually hug it out. By ending their conflict in this fashion, the movie provides a ray of hope, reminding its audience that people are able to change their minds – and, most importantly, allows those with a homophobic mindset to be reminded of their own humanity.

Despite *An Early Frost*'s attempts at dealing with AIDS and homosexuality in a sympathetic manner, the movie is still plagued by problematic issues, particularly in the way it tries to downplay queer intimacy. As becomes most obvious, sexuality as such is completely missing in the plot, the main protagonists thus being portrayed as virtually asexual. Consequently, this movie becomes part of a long lineage of pictures that show great fear of even faintly depicting queer individuals in healthy sexual relations, being intimate with one another, or having any possible physical contact to other queer characters. In the case of *An Early Frost*, the movie very early on reveals its sex-negative outlook by making clear that HIV-positive individuals should practice complete celibacy. In order to give this message more plausibility, it is communicated by a health specialist, who warns Michael not to be intimate with others, in this way mirroring the view on AIDS prevention perpetuated by the American government at the time. Michael takes the idea of chastity and social distancing to an extreme by isolating himself physically from his partner and sleeping in another room on a sofa. In creating distance between the two male lovers, it appears as if the movie attempts to appease its audience by making sure that any risk of a possible uncomfortable and unsafe sexual slippage is avoided.

The growing physical and emotional distance between the lovers also grants insight into another popular trope: AIDS movies commonly portray gay men "as sexually promiscuous individuals who irresponsibly put others at risk of contracting HIV/AIDS" (Hart *The AIDS Movie* 52) and, in a moralistic turn of events, usually bring justice by punishing them for their sexual transgressions. Even though this is not as evident and overstated in the movie at hand, Michael's boyfriend is still portrayed and criticized as being reckless amidst the AIDS crisis. He was, after all, unfaithful. Consequently, someone else must suffer for it. Though later on it is questioned and it remains open whether Michael actually got infected by him in the first place, the awareness that he might be the one to blame nonetheless remains. Following this reasoning, if our protagonist, Michael (a sexual outcast for being gay), distances himself from his homoerotic desires, he might, perhaps, be able to find redemption.

With no intention to discredit non-monogamous relationships or promiscuity in any way, I would nonetheless like to point out that insisting on portraying gay individuals time and again as promiscuous only "serve[s] to solidify the inaccurate perceptions that all gay men engage regularly in high-risk sexual behaviors" (Hart *The AIDS Movie* 53). Unfortunately, the sex-negative outlook of the film industry goes even deeper than this: in numerous AIDS movies it is not only gay promiscuity that is penalized, but also any type of sexuality outside the bounds of monogamy – including rare cinematic cases in which a heterosexual character is infected. This only speaks of negligence, as other forms of transmission exist that could be explored in a script in plausible and realistic ways. The formula seemed set for long and would not allow for disassociating HIV from the sexual act as such. What we witness again in these types of depictions is a clear focus on victim blaming, which means that those who choose to live licentiously will suffer in the end.

Most remarkably, in contrast to many other AIDS films (such as *Kids* [Larry Clark, 1995] or even *For Colored Girls* [Tyler Perry, 2010]), Michael's cheating partner is not punished and is able to reunite with his partner. Nonetheless, even after their reconciliation the characters never get a chance to proclaim their true intimacy and love for one another physically on screen: the distance between the lovers persists throughout the narrative and is even kept in moments of joy that would usually be exploited for emotional gratification and thus call for physical contact. Hence, when the two lovers make up after their falling out, Peter is merely permitted to put his hand on Michael's back and to give a gleeful laugh. The friendly gesture, again minimizing the connection of the two lovers, takes away the meaningfulness of the couple's same-gender relationship.

When discussing the representation of homoeroticism in AIDS film, it also becomes of utmost relevance to consider the association of sexuality as a death penalty, a convention that was particularly exploited in slasher films, as examined in the previous subchapter. As a result of these connotations, portraying queer intimacy openly was commonly perceived as rather dangerous, seeing that a depiction of sexually active seropositive individuals might have supposedly been misinterpreted and perceived as risk-free. While these worries are, at least to an extent, understandable when considering the fear and the lack of knowledge surrounding AIDS in the mid-1980s, the idea that safe sex exists as a possibility is not even voiced or

considered[85]. The enforcement of complete celibacy was, in fact, an illusion. In reality, people's libido, lust, and desire to feel intimate and close to one another did not simply vanish because of the virus. As people continued to have sexual relations, it became the more urgent to find alternative ways of sexual fulfillment.

Eventually, *An Early Frost* concludes as a cautionary tale. Though the movie ends prior to the protagonist's passing, the final image is very suggestive of an imminent death: Michael says goodbye to his parents and expresses his love for them before taking a cab that drives him into the darkness of the night. Most AIDS movies adopted this idea of exploring AIDS victims' suffering in a manner that was always directed towards their looming death. In the end, these choices are incredibly destructive inasmuch as they do not allow for the presence of any form of hope. Though, perhaps, not found at the root of the film at hand, many AIDS films also used death as a form of just punishment for promiscuous homosexuality or rather "for individuals who choose to violate widely shared social and moral norms" (Hart *The AIDS Movie* 41). As Hart further explains this phenomenon, "[m]ost commonly within AIDS movies, gay men are represented as the primary others who must be sacrificed to restore the patriarchal social order that existed prior to the discovery of HIV/AIDS; they are the sexually promiscuous 'enemies' of both the family and the larger society" (Hart *The AIDS Movie* 32).

To conclude this discussion, while having pointed out several flaws that existed in early AIDS films, I do not mean to lay the burden of all these issues on *An Early Frost*. Though this pioneering project was unable to deal with a plethora of problems surrounding HIV/AIDS, the real crux of the matter lay in the movies that followed in its wake, emulating its themes and structure. Without any critical questioning and re-evaluation of the realities of HIV/AIDS and of the stories and lives that were forever affected by it, the multifaceted nature of the pandemic could not be even rudimentarily captured. It also needs to be recognized that "these first gay features about AIDS did help form a foundation from which more radical queer cinema could and did emerge" (Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 210). Jumping forward into the early 1990s, many of the tropes I have presented here would be challenged by New Queer Cinema filmmakers, providing stories about AIDS that offered hope and a more empathetic point of view by turning

[85] As my following discussion of *Buddies*, a movie that was released the same year as *An Early Frost*, will clarify, safe sex practices were certainly not unheard of at the time. Another example in which safe sex is actually openly discussed can be found in the widely forgotten 1989 feature film *Fun Down There* (Roger Stigliano). In one scene, two lovers who recently met and just started dating establish boundaries so as to stay safe. Instead of shying away from a polygamous relationship, one of the men, Joe, lectures his lover by explaining: "there are some things you have to do every time, the rules, and if you do, you'll be okay. Masturbation is fine, kissing is fine. If you get fucked, use a rubber every time. […] These are the rules we have to follow every time, with everyone you're with. If you do, you'll be alright" (01:04:38-01:05:02).

their attention away from the aspect of AIDS-as-a-death sentence, instead concentrating on the lived experiences of people affected by the condition.

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The needed dialogue about safe sex would only arise with independent filmmaking. Indeed, the same year *An Early Frost* got its TV debut, the independent production *Buddies* was released, which gave a voice to the longings and passions of an individual with HIV/AIDS – or rather, an individual in an advanced stage of AIDS nearing death in a hospital bed. In its unabashedly queer approach, the film follows the principle that the abject homosexual AIDS monster (as perceived by the wider society) can still be sexual and can still be intimate. Protagonist David Bennet (David Schachter) volunteers at a gay center to participate in a so-called buddy program. As a volunteer he is supposed to become an ally and a friend to an individual with AIDS in need of company and help. Unaware of what to expect from the journey he is about to take, David meets the patient Robert Willow (Geoff Edholm), who immediately challenges the volunteering buddy with his pervasive and highly intimate questions. The movie then mostly develops through dialogue between the two gay men, during which both characters grow closer and – as the movie implies yet never explicitly states – fall for one another.

Just as striking is the frank talk about sex in the film that mostly originates from Robert, the AIDS patient. Indeed, as early as during their second buddy meeting, Robert's interest in anything sex-related comes to light. He thus immediately introduces himself as a person who led a highly promiscuous life before receiving his HIV diagnosis, explaining that "[s]ex is the part that makes you in or out, hot or cold. You know, where your passion is. It's not everything but it's a big piece of the puzzle" (00:10:21-00:10:31). In the same vein as the film integrates sexuality as a natural component when discussing a human being, Robert's remark demonstrates that he believes sexuality, sexual expression, and sexual desire to be essential to what defines an individual. In fact, it is their open talk about sex and their sharing of intimate stories that brings the two men closer, the discourse on sex hence taking a decisive role in terms of the development of the narrative and of their relationship right from the beginning (an important detail that will resurface with New Queer Cinema Renaissance filmmaking).

However, more than only insisting on theoretical conversations regarding the subject matter, the film does not shy away from plunging into actual eroticism. This is a crucial point when bearing in mind the previously addressed fear of connecting people with AIDS to actual sexual acts on screen. By treating Robert Willow as a patient who still desires, *Buddies* repudiates the notion that a person living with HIV/AIDS should be reduced to their medical

condition[86]. This is made apparent in a scene in which Robert begins to masturbate while going through some photographs of his old lover. Underlined by dramatic and sad violin music, we see him shaking his head after reaching orgasm and being visually upset. It is only in a conversation with David that he later on reveals as to what weighed on his mind in this moment: "It was terrible. I jerked off. Well, everything worked out, I hadn't fallen apart yet. My cock came but I didn't. I didn't feel it. There's more to sex than an orgasm grabbed in the dark. I started alone and I finished alone" (00:50:05-00:50:50).

This incident clearly illustrates the fact that Robert's once-blooming sex life – which cannot be recovered for obvious reasons – is now reduced to solitary masturbation. The movie thus respects and gives voice to his longings. At the same time, however, Robert's feeling of solitude harbors a darker undertone. More precisely, a parallel between the idea of "start[ing] alone" and "finish[ing] alone" and the fear of *dying alone* can be drawn. In fact, Robert suffered immense losses because of his serostatus, having been left by everyone that was once close to him: his family who disowned him, his lover who was too afraid of his HIV-status and abandoned him, just like his roommate, who is too afraid to even come to the hospital.

Aware of these rather pessimistic filmic conventions when dealing with illness, *Buddies* counteracts the above-described notions by displaying Robert, though physically affected by the disease, not only as still desiring but also as a still desirable man. This becomes the most obvious when, late at night, David begins recalling the photographs he saw of Robert as a young man. Fantasizing about a shared life, he replaces the image of Robert's past lover, Edward, with himself – thus rewriting history, even if only in his fantasy world. Indeed, it is only because of Robert's advanced stage of AIDS that a future for the two men will never exist. On a larger level, David's wishful thinking and fantasizing could thus also represent all of the moments and opportunities the queer community has been deprived of because of the pandemic.

David slowly but steadily becomes more than intrigued by Robert and, possibly, falls in love with him. In an utmost unconventional way, this tension is not overly dramatized or exploited as a major plot twist. Instead, their relationship evolves naturally, eventually leading to a sex scene that happens without much fanfare or repercussions: when David sneaks VHS porn tapes into the hospital room, they watch it together and Robert slowly begins masturbating under the sheets. Looking into each other's eyes, David gets on Robert's bed, lays closely next

[86] The message that people living with HIV/AIDS are just as human as every other citizen, deserve the same treatment and the same rights, and represent much more than their serostatus, was perfectly and powerfully conveyed in a speech Max Navar gave at the GMHC AIDSWALK in June of 1987, declaring that "I am a person with AIDS. I am not an AIDS victim. I'm not an AIDS sufferer. I'm not an AIDS case. I am not an AIDS patient, I'm a person with AIDS. I have a condition which undermines my health, but it doesn't undermine my personhood. I am first and always a person" (*Voices from the Front* 00:00:08-00:00:30).

to him and begins massaging his shoulders, like this helping Robert to experience an orgasm while feeling intimate with someone. Even though this scene is, generally speaking, still very cautious and timid in terms of physical contact, the movie represents a step towards portraying the desires of AIDS patients in a more inclusive light. At the same time, we cannot fail to mention that *Buddies* also looks for alternative forms of promoting safe sex that does not need to be penetrative *per se*.

Additionally, Robert's past is not only introduced to haunt David's fantasies, but there is also a highly politicized dimension to Robert's bygone love life. Indeed, Robert's relationship with his former lover, Edward, was greatly intertwined with politics: the two of them met during the time of gay liberation and represented very active and outspoken members of the movement. When talking about his ex-lover he thus links their shared memory to that of their political struggles: "[Edward's] two favorite things are getting it on outdoors and politics. Gay rights, gay community, marching, demonstrating. […] We were a hot match. The brainy politico and his humpy sidekick" (00:17:09-00:17:33). This detail is fundamental as the movie not only politicizes gay sex – the mere fact of showing a queer man with AIDS having sex in itself already being a great act of subversion –, but it also considers and places itself in the history of LGBTQIA+ struggles in the United States. Moreover, *Buddies* openly recognizes that the fight for sexual expression was an integral part of the gay liberation movement and was still of interest in the 1980s, despite – or perhaps especially because – of the silence around the matter. Indeed, it is precisely this form of placing LGBTQIA+ struggles and political elements in a larger historical context that is all but missing in *An Early Frost*.

After Robert and Edward eventually split up, Robert met Tom with whom he lived until Robert received his HIV diagnosis. Robert even comments on the fact that it was AIDS and the fear surrounding the condition that destroyed their bond[87]. The misfortune he encountered did not shake his unwavering belief in his political ideals. In fact, he continues to determinedly stand by the principles of gay liberation and does not disregard his activist impulses. This becomes most evident in a scene in which Robert imagines how he would spend a perfect day, were he somehow magically fully recovered for twenty-four hours: he thus envisions that he would start the day reunited in sexual ecstasy with his ex-lover. Afterwards, he would fly to Washington, D.C. "[a]nd [he]'d have a two-by-four and a magic marker and a piece of cardboard and [he]'d be a one man picket outside the White House […] And [he]'d write

[87] Robert proposes that the "relationship might have gotten through the usual problems, but the AIDS hysteria, the fear that [Tom might] get it from [Robert], the guilt that maybe [he]'d gotten it from him, just killed his love" (00:19:15-00:19:38). When reading this personal loss within the greater context of LGBTQIA+ history, the breaking of this relationship could be perceived as an allegory for the rapid shift from sex-embracing gay liberation during the 60s and 70s to the AIDS pandemic that soon blemished intimacy and destroyed closest relationships.

something on the cardboard like, 'America, AIDS is not a gay disease. It hurts everybody. Release all the money for research and care.' Then [he]'d go back to New York and [he]'d be with Edward" (00:36:41-00:37:15).

Not having witnessed the height of LGBTQIA+ advocacy in the 1970s and having grown up away from the politically charged circles of LGBTQIA+ life, David, in contrast, is not as politically engaged. To please his buddy, he nonetheless manages to get hold of a VHS tape of a pride march – the VCR, amusingly, needing a short introduction in the movie as it was still a recent invention at the time. Quite reminiscent of a previously discussed scene from *A Very Natural Thing* that was conceived to promote the politics of the gay liberation movement, Robert comments that he finds marching "tacky" and perceives it as "a freak show" (00:45:45-00:45:47). The one time he went to a pride march, he admits, he felt uncomfortable. Robert, the token activist, quickly lectures his younger friend by stressing that gay existence in itself is political and that AIDS, after all, should be considered a meaningful cause to every gay man, precisely because it is generally linked to homosexuality:

> Do you think that if straight senators and their straight sons had AIDS that all that money that's being held up in Washington […] would be taking so long to come down to research and hospices here in New York City with the most dead and the most cases? And me, I'm just a number in a pile here in the Big Apple. There's not even an AIDS clinic. […] Here in New York City it's an epidemic and I was lost until that gay crisis group took me in. No money from the state or the city. No bucks from Washington. But just some gay people and their straight friends who volunteer, like you. (00:46:55-00:47:49)

Even when close to death, Robert does not give up on educating David about the importance of queer activism, convincing him to give an interview to a newspaper about his work as a buddy. Indeed, David is first appalled by this suggestion, feeling that an article about his volunteer work might exploit the private pain of a patient, going as far as calling it "ghoulish" (01:00:51). Endorsing the spirit of the gay lib movement, Robert, however, is of a different opinion: in his personal story he detects a way to inspire others to help, volunteer, donate, and protest.

Ultimately, his hope comes to fruition: the person he most affected not only on an emotional level, but clearly also on an ideological one, is David, representing the next generation of queer activism he can pass the torch on to. While perceiving Robert's views as relics from the 1970s at first ("I felt superior to him at the start. All his old, tired ideas." [00:52:29-00:52:34]), David soon begins to comprehend the urgency of political unrest in times of an ultraconservative threat. Most poignantly, on the day he receives the news of Robert's

passing, David travels to Washington to protest in front of the White House, like this not only fulfilling Robert's fantasy of a perfect day, but also, in a wider sense, symbolizing the newfound activist drive of his generation that was arising along with the burgeoning pandemic.

Buddies also greatly engages with the idea of queer memory building, especially through its determination to give people with AIDS a voice and remembering and honoring their names, stories, and lives[88]. Most commonly, stories about AIDS are centered around the idea of absence and loss. In the case of Robert – who, in this respect, might be a placeholder for a variety of people belonging to the LGBTQIA+ community at large – we find these ideas plentiful of times: there is Robert's absent lover, his absent family that abandoned and disowned him, the loss of friends that already passed, but also a loss in terms of what could have been had he not been affected by the immunodeficiency to begin with. Indeed, as already mentioned, the scene in which David fantasizes about being Robert's lover speaks exactly about the idea that people have been deprived of possibilities in life due to their diagnosis, its inherent stigma and discrimination, and the many premature deaths.

Going back to the very beginning of the movie, we understand that these ideas are introduced right from the start: *Buddies* namely begins with a circa two-minute close-up shot of a fax machine printing out a list of names of individuals that died from complications of AIDS, each name being allotted a number. However, to go against the notion that AIDS-related deaths must inescapably become anonymous statistics, Robert is introduced, a person with AIDS that shares his personal story. Most strikingly, by not solely concentrating on the torment he goes through before his eventual passing, he is given the chance to become a full-fleshed human being whose lived experience bears a deep interest to the viewer, the gay community and its politics at large. His life story – *despite* and *because* of AIDS – is thus given meaning and importance. The person behind the disease, never fully idealized, romanticized, nor turned into a sacrificial martyr, but rather represented as someone with ups and downs, ultimately proves that neither his condition nor his death defines him.

In order to further stress the importance of getting to know the person behind the disease, the film ends the way it began, i.e. with the same fax machine printing a list of deaths. Correspondingly, Robert was but an outtake from a never-ending obituary and, simultaneously, makes us appreciate how many more stories there are to be told. Finally, the very practice of queer memory building that *Buddies* engages in becomes the more significant when considering that queer history has long been denied by the hegemonic historical narrative. Until very

[88] Seeing that *Buddies*' director, Arthur J. Bressan Jr., himself died of complications related to AIDS in 1987 (Rich *New* 14), the idea of leaving behind a legacy to be remembered gains even more meaning.

recently queer experiences have been silenced and closeted by heteronormative culture, historians, and discourses, mainly because queer individuals were perceived as irrelevant waste products[89] (notions that NQC challenges directly as will be revealed in chapter 6).

Before concluding my discussion of *Buddies*, it is impossible not to give attention to the fact that Robert dies at the end of the film, a choice that seems to comply with the clichéd endings of AIDS movies and the general treatment of the immunodeficiency in the media. Still, the movie at hand utilizes this trope so as to subvert it – almost in the style New Queer Cinema would be known for – by giving Robert's death new meaning through his life story and through the sharing of his knowledge and political point of view. Moreover, seeing that Robert is steadfastly unrepentant of his life and at no point blames himself or one of his partners for having contracted HIV/AIDS, the burden of punishment for supposed moral misdeeds is also taken from his death. Unfortunately, until today *Buddies*' nuanced handling of HIV/AIDS remains an obscurity in the realm of LGBTQIA+ film.

A year after the release of *Buddies*, the independent movie *Parting Glances* that also features a gay man living with HIV would sweep the nation and prove that a movie about AIDS could be fun, authentic, and relatively successful (at least within the queer community). *Parting Glances* was an utter surprise hit, despite being a production that did not have to fall in line with Hollywood's twisted policies. Having raised the money for the film himself through family, friends, and members of LGBTQIA+ communities, director Bill Sherwood shot his debut in 1984 and was eventually able to release it in 1986 (Levy 448; Rich *New* 8; Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 209). On account of its success, it became part of a selection of queer independents that were celebrated as box office gold, alongside Donna Deitch's lesbian love story *Desert Hearts* (1985) as well as Stephen Frears' aforementioned *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985) and *Prick Up Your Ears* (1987), all of which were "made for less than a million dollars [and] have reached wide audiences" (Russo *The Celluloid* 259).

Parting Glances essentially tells the mundane story of a love triangle, along with its everyday issues and misunderstandings. Robert (John Bolger), a proper New Yorker working for an international health organization, is about to embark on a long work-related sojourn in Africa, leaving behind his boyfriend of six years, Michael (Richard Ganoung). The movie thus takes place during Robert's last 24 hours in the Big Apple. Conflict begins to simmer when, to Michael's discontent, the couple is unable to spend their remaining hours together: instead, Michael needs to meet up with his ex-boyfriend Nick (played by a very young Steve Buscemi).

[89] To an extent, director Arthur Bressan's attempt to immortalize and remember the deceased is very reminiscent of the NAMES Project Memorial Quilt mentioned in the previous chapter, in as far as both focus on remembering, sharing, and celebrating the names and stories of people that were bound to be lost to oblivion.

Nick is a rock star – and the love of Michael's life as we get to know later on – whom he takes care of ever since he received his AIDS diagnosis. This is followed by a dinner with Robert's boss and a surprise going-away party that a large group of friends throws for the traveler.

What strikes the viewer when watching *Parting Glances* – especially in direct comparison with movies such as *Making Love* – is the way in which queerness is treated as inessential to the plot by both, the movie and the characters within the narrative, regardless of their sexual orientation. Accordingly, the drama of coming out as queer or being a person with HIV/AIDS are secondary to the story at hand and do not represent points of friction. As a queer film made from the perspective of a queer filmmaker and thus an insider when it comes LGBTQIA+ culture[90], the need to cater to heteronormative sensibilities becomes indifferent. Instead, the fun stories and characters we get to experience during the 90-minute film feel like an authentic extract from the life of a gay couple and their friends (despite the existing conflict between the lovers and Nick's HIV status). The comedic lightness permeating the movie, in turn, opens up new possibilities for AIDS-related cinema, distancing itself from the somber and distraught stories that were told time and time again.

In this regard, the movie also overcomes some of the issues we have encountered in *Buddies*. Director Bill Sherwood introduces a person with AIDS who is very much alive and, at least as far as the movie presents, seems rather fit and well (if we choose to overlook his hallucination about a deceased friend). Furthermore, Nick is not bed-ridden or in any way forbidden to go through his daily routines. Quite the contrary is the case as one scene proves, in which he spontaneously decides to join a party in the middle of the night. In direct comparison, despite its uplifting message, *Buddies*' Robert was, after all, a patient nearing death. Furthermore, Nick's role is not determined by his HIV status, he is neither treated in an overly cautious or discriminatory manner by others, nor is he in any form victimized. Just as refreshing is the fact that the protagonists in *Parting Glances* are members of the LGBTQIA+ community who interact with a number of other queer characters. On top of that, Robert and Michael's circle of friends is a rather mixed crowd, in which both queer and non-queer people mingle in a most natural manner. By doing so, the film becomes less focused on the idea of loss and absence earlier mentioned, but rather stresses the supportive spirit of community.

Unfortunately, AIDS movies as a whole – and especially those that represent AIDS matters from an informed point of view – remained a scarcity. In fact, "[i]t took the networks six years to return to the subject of gay men with AIDS (if we exclude TV bio-pics about

[90] Bill Sherwood was a gay man with AIDS. He passed away from AIDS-related complications in 1990. *Parting Glances* would remain the filmmaker's only movie (Mennel 65).

Liberace and Rock Hudson), and when ABC broadcast *Our Sons* in April 1991, some things had changed, but much remained the same" (Gross 144). With this said, a cultural shift seemed to finally appear on the horizon with Jonathan Demme's 1993 drama *Philadelphia*.

The film centers on a lawyer played by Tom Hanks who takes legal action against his discriminatory workplace that dismissed him for being gay and HIV-positive. The movie was a breakthrough for LGBTQIA+ cinema in multiple ways. To begin with, *Philadelphia* was the first mainstream Hollywood film that centers on a person with AIDS and features high-name Hollywood actors (apart from Hanks it also included A-list actors Antonio Banderas and Denzel Washington). Simultaneously, the film was very successful and Hanks even won an Oscar for his role as a gay man living with HIV/AIDS. This sheer circumstance was unprecedented at the time: the fact that a highly regarded straight actor did not get destroyed by the media for having played a gay character, but, on the contrary, was applauded for it, might have, in some measure, taken away the fear of embracing queer roles in film[91], thus paving the way for other mainstream productions such as *Brokeback Mountain* (Ang Lee, 2005).

The message that change was possible within American society and the film industry was not only demonstrated by the sheer existence and success of this movie, but also within its plot in form of Tom Hank's character winning his case. As beautiful as this ending might be, it represents but an illusionary message of hope, trying to make audiences believe that the silence around the immunodeficiency was finally lifted while people living with HIV/AIDS were even legally backed. With this said, and as expected from conservative Hollywood, on closer consideration the movie is thus not as queer-embracing as it might seem to the ordinary, heteronormative moviegoer. On the contrary, it bears several of the same flaws found in *An Early Frost*, though almost an entire decade had passed between the releases of both films.

[91] While definitely representing an improvement in the handling of queerness on screen and simultaneously serving as a form of showing allyship to LGBTQIA+ communities, the idea of heterosexual actors/actresses performing the role of queer individuals has also been confronted with great opposition: one needs to bear in mind that in a film industry in which queerness has been sidelined for over a century, LGBTQIA+ individuals already have to fight harder for a seat at the table – or even to keep up a career in the first place. Still today this controversy persists: it is particularly astonishing that transgender roles, which are still a rarity in today's filmic landscape, are often reserved for cisgender actors. Some of the most prominent examples include Hilary Swank who was cast as Brandon in *Boys Don't Cry* (Kimberly Peirce, 1999), Felicity Huffman as Bree in *Transamerica* (Duncan Tucker, 2005), or Eddie Redmayne as Lili in *The Danish Girl* (Tom Hooper, 2015). More precisely, it is already an immense struggle for transgender individuals to be cast for playing cisgender characters, which represent the vast majority of available roles. The question thus remains as to why they should not at least be given those scarce opportunities in which they are able to represent their community on screen. Doing so would certainly signify a small step towards combating the erasure and systemic exclusion of an already marginalized community on screen. Independent cinema has broken the ice in this respect, leading the way with movies such as *Tangerine* (Sean Baker, 2015) or the Oscar-winning Chilean import *Una Mujer Fantástica* (Sebastián Lelio, 2017). Quite commendable examples can also be found in television- and streaming-series, such as Amazon's *Transparent* (Joey Soloway, 2014-2019) or Netflix's *Pose* (Steven Canals, Brad Falchuk, and Ryan Murphy, 2018-2021).

Most obvious is, once again, the issue that the relationship between Hanks' and Banderas' characters is only implied, but never really depicted. Almost no intimacy is therefore visualized, their physical contact being reduced to a slow-dancing scene, a kiss on the hand, and handholding. This shying away from non-heterosexual love and desire is quite reminiscent of the coyness and fear around exploring queer desire that permeated the 1980s. Just as upsetting is the detail that the great and hard work of AIDS activism, which had already made itself quite noticeable at the time, is also largely missing. This problem goes hand in hand with the fact that it is a cisgender, heterosexual (though non-white) man who ultimately represents Hank's character in his lawsuit and helps him win. While queer activists played a far greater role when it came to fighting for the rights and the well-being of seropositive individuals, *Philadelphia* opts to introduce a heterosexual hero, who overcomes his homophobic prejudices and ultimately redeems himself, instead of betting on queer comradeship and empowerment. With all this said and despite its many flaws, *Philadelphia* ultimately was much needed at the time and very important for the development and acceptance of queer subject matters in film. Indeed, after its release and immense success less and less movies that portrayed queerness in a monstrous and degrading way were produced, though, as my brief discussion of this box office hit has revealed, other issues would continue to plague LGBTQIA+-related filmmaking for decades to come.

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While a large part of queer-themed movies of the 1980s did not consider the political struggles informing LGBTQIA+ life in America, the most straightforward way in which activism and filmmaking actually began to merge and work hand in hand was found in AIDS video, a filmmaking practice that was often shot on-site of protests and other AIDS-related events. In detail, this was made possible by the earlier-mentioned technological invention of camcorders that brought a very special benefit for the movement: as the equipment was handy and easy to carry, it was commonly used to quickly capture anything happening on the front line – thus playing a similar role as mobile phones nowadays to record and bring awareness of systemic injustices.

Hence, camcorders served as a means of "countersurveillance" (Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 212) and were correspondingly used as weapons to protect people against police brutality and harassment. Furthermore, "AIDS activist videos were sometimes used in court to acquit protestors of trumped-up 'resisting arrest' charges" (212). Luckily, AIDS video also had a

variety of new forms of getting images across to a wider public at its disposal, including transmissions "on public-access cable channels, in bars and nightclubs, and at activist meetings" (212), while, as previously noted, "the widespread use of VCRs provide[d] the potential of a large audience for this work" (Crimp 39).

AIDS video, furthermore, served several other purposes. First and foremost, it was used to establish counter-images, counter-discourses, and ultimately a counter-memory to the fatally offensive and toxic imagery and ideas the media were generating and perpetuating at the time. Indeed, by taking reporting and documenting into its own hands, the movement itself was able to paint a clearer and more authentic picture regarding the circumstances in the United States, while giving a platform and a voice to silenced minorities living with HIV/AIDS (Pearl 25-6; Bronski *A Queer* 233; Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 211-2; Crimp 39). Hence, AIDS video bore a deep educational dimension that aimed at informing people living with the immunodeficiency (for instance about the possibilities regarding health care and available treatment), but also anyone else in need to learn about preventive measures and forms of contributing to the movement. In a time in which the circulation of objective and effective information was almost nonexistent in the general population, it was ultimately through these channels that activists were doing the work that the government was failing at (Pearl 25-6). This once again proves that activist art can, in truth, "save lives", as Douglas Crimp comments, adding that at least "until a cure for AIDS is developed, *only* information and mobilization" (38) can do so.

Secondly, AIDS video was also utilized to spread awareness regarding the different activist movements and to keep people up to date while encouraging them to join these causes (Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 211-2). A prime example of this, and perhaps one of the best remembered AIDS videos today, is the documentary *Voices from the Front* (Sandra Elgear, Robyn Hutt, & David Meieran, 1991) that follows different AIDS activists groups during several protests between 1988 and 1991, documenting not only direct actions taken by them, but also capturing different voices and opinions in one-on-one interviews with several participants (some of which have been already previously quoted).

When it comes to formal characteristics, the various projects comprising "AIDS video" differed extensively in terms of themes and aesthetics. What unites them is the great contrast they build to the previously discussed sanitized and subdued AIDS films seen on television. Rather, filmmakers chose to portray the AIDS crisis with its struggles and injustices in all its gritty and ugly truth, while also, above all, putting a great deal of emphasis on the commitment of the community and activists that AIDS feature films all too often forgot or denied mentioning. Aesthetically speaking, Benshoff and Griffin draw an utmost interesting parallel

to underground cinema of the 1960s as well as experimental filmmaking of the 1970s, detecting some of the roots of AIDS video in those decades:

> In a certain way, the alternative methods of producing, distributing, and exhibiting them mirrored those of 1960s underground filmmaking, although that cinema's goals were never as explicitly political. AIDS activist video also has ties to 1970s queer experimental filmmaking […]. Other politically revolutionary cinemas have also been credited with influencing AIDS activist videomaking—particularly via the concept of collective filmmaking. Some point to the "imperfect" Third Cinema movement of the 1960s, and others to 1960s leftist filmmaking groups such as the Dziga Vertov Collective and Newsreel. (*Queer* 212-3)

Indeed, the diversity of formal and aesthetic approaches used when dealing with the health crisis on celluloid was ultimately what glued these filmic endeavors together. After all, the form varied as much as – or, perhaps, according to – the different goals filmmakers were trying to achieve. Furthermore, what also distinguishes this wave of films from more conventional AIDS narratives was its disregard for traditional cinematic rules. As Benshoff and Griffin describe, "[t]hese pieces rarely have any desire to tell conventional narratives with an easy-to-follow beginning, middle, and end. Each of them has its own raison d'être, and each follows its own stylistic muse." They go on to explain that AIDS videos "often blend historical or news footage with fictional scenes that take ironic or satiric jabs at individuals and institutions ignoring or demonizing the crisis" (*Queer* 213).

Ultimately, AIDS video is of great interest to the study at hand as several of its main characteristics led the way for New Queer Cinema and would be seamlessly adopted by the movement. The most obvious ones include the low budget quality (warranted by the use of affordable camcorders), a certain interest in exploring experimental forms of queer filmmaking, as well as a tendency towards embracing postmodern tools, such as parody, pastiche or irony. Almost as important is the communitarian dimension found in many AIDS video and New Queer Cinema projects: not only was AIDS video created to inform and educate, but, in many instances, it also consisted of a variety of collaborative and cooperative endeavors made possible by individuals fighting for the same cause. The same holds true for New Queer Cinema filmmaking: for shooting the low-budget classic *The Living End*, for instance, Gregg Araki used the help of a number of friends, who took on different roles in the making and production of the film.

Additionally, a parallel found in both branches of queer filmmaking is their pronounced political awareness, greatly warranted by the life-and-death struggle and urgency that AIDS brought onto the scene. An equally important and essential element linking both cinematic

forms is the idea of producing counter-images, counter-practices, and ultimately a queer counter-memory. This is to say that both AIDS video activists and New Queer Cinema filmmakers had a deep interest in rewriting LGBTQIA+ (film) history and representation, while extending the scope in which queerness can be dealt with in film and media at large.

6) *Queers in Revolt*: New Queer Cinema and the Subversion of LGBTQIA+ and AIDS Cinema

In the late 1980s and early 1990s several radically queer anglophone independent films suddenly burst onto the scene: while these mainly consisted of US productions like *Mala Noche* (Gus Van Sant, 1986) or *Tongues Untied* (Marlon Riggs, 1989), in other parts of the world features with similar aesthetics and a subversive spirit popped up simultaneously. Amongst these we find UK releases such as *Looking for Langston* (Isaac Julien, 1989) or pictures by Derek Jarman (who had been directing feature films for over a decade at that point) as well as the Canadian title *Pissoir* (John Greyson, 1988). Not falling in line with LGBTQIA+-themed pictures discussed in the previous chapters, these movies rather embodied a distinct trend of their own. More precisely, they were significantly distinguished by their transgressive content (dealing with queer subject matters, AIDS and other "taboo" issues), their break with formal, narrative, ideological structures and representations, and their rejection of a compulsory need for positive portrayals of queer individuals.

While many of these independent projects were initially screened at underground and local arthouse theaters (Arroyo 71), they truly started reaching wider and more diverse audiences at film festivals, which, in turn, had been quickly on the rise since the 1980s (as discussed at length in chapter 2). It was at these events that these low- or no-budget productions also drew the critics' and the media's attention to their existence. Eventually, those that played – and even won awards – at established and prestigious film festivals in 1991 and 1992 were the first that were distinguished as harbingers of a new moment of queer cinema.

The wave of recognition particularly left off in 1991 when Gus Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho* swept the International Critics' Award in Toronto and Todd Haynes' *Poison* won the Teddy Award for best feature film at the Berlin International Film Festival and claimed the Grand Jury Prize (dramatic) at the Sundance Film Festival. Indeed, queerness seemed to take over Sundance that year when another top jury prize went to Jennie Livingston's *Paris is Burning*[92] (Doty "Film" 499; Benshoff "Gay" 282; *Fabulous!* 00:27:49-00:28:00). Most importantly, as B. Ruby Rich explains in the documentary *Fabulous!*, this was not a singular event, but the trend continued into 1992[93], now gaining even more clout: "[i]n January 1992 at

[92] Both *Poison* and *Paris is Burning* were nominees and winners at several other festivals.

[93] Christopher Munch's *The Hours and Times* won the Special Jury Recognition award at Sundance, *Swoon*'s cinematographer Ellen Kuras swept the cinematography award (dramatic) at the same festival, while the film also won the Caligari Film Award for Best Feature at the 1992 Berlin International Film Festival. Derek Jarman won the Teddy for Best Feature Film at the very same festival that year. This list includes only a few nominations and wins, as the sheer number of other queer successes would go beyond the scope of this discussion.

Sundance, that's when the full explosion, from my point of view, happens. And that's when Derek Jarman is there with *Edward II* [1991], Chris Munch is there with *The Hours and Times* [1991], Tom Kalin is there with *Swoon* [1992], Gregg Araki was there with *The Living End* [1992]" (00:33:40-00:33:56). What arose from this was an explosion of fresh, vibrantly creative, groundbreaking queer-related movies[94].

Growing in number, this new phenomenon eventually needed a name, which was quickly coined by film critic and scholar B. Ruby Rich[95] who came up with the tagline *New Queer Cinema* in an article bearing the same name. Rich became the "baptismal preacher to the movement, creating a category with a widely circulated report of [her] transformative experiences on the film festival trail of fall 1991 and winter 1992" (Rich *New* xix). The diverse film festivals that screened New Queer movies in conjunction with a catchy label and the curiosity of the press and media, gave the wave all the publicity, visibility, and marketability it needed to become a commonplace shorthand for media outlets, the industry, scholars, and viewers (Hart *Images* 9; Rich *New* xxi, xix). This, then again, shows that the rise of New Queer Cinema as a category was much more than a simple conjunction of films with a similar sensibility appearing on the market in tandem. After all, "the birth of a movement is never unilateral, never a solitary affair; it's an impulse aimed at creating community and made *by* community" (Rich *New* xx). Certainly, a community of cinephiles – often fostered at film festivals – was also an impactful factor that should not be underestimated. New Queer Cinema was namely fueled by filmmakers who belonged to a marginalized community and who chose to address their fellows so as to satisfy a deep-rooted longing for recognition and representation in art.

Oftentimes the only enclave enabling queer films to be publicly screened, LGBTQIA+ festivals became places of meeting and of sharing experiences. Simultaneously, these very events served as a form of passing on a sense of queer history and memory-building, as it was at film festivals that new generations were made aware of films of the past, of queer film history and its legacy – something that New Queer Cinema, as we shall see, was also greatly invested in (Pidduck "After" 267). As a result, "[t]he audiences, aesthetics and expertise that developed

[94] Other movies and shorts that display a similar sensibility and belong to early New Queer Cinema include *Young Soul Rebels* (Julien, 1991); *The Making of Monsters* (John Greyson, 1991); *The Meeting of Two Queens* (Cecilia Barriga, 1991); *Khush* (Pratibha Parmar, 1991); *Zero Patience* (Greyson, 1992); *Tongues Untied*; *R.S.V.P.* (Laurie Lynd 1992); *Flaming Ears* (Ursula Puerrer, A. Hans Scheirl, Dietmar Schipek, 1992) – and many others.

[95] Rich not only coined the name of the wave but would continue to write about it throughout its lifespan. Her chronicles about the development of the movement were eventually merged into the 2013 collection *New Queer Cinema: The Director's Cut*. Rich might have also been the first person creating a panel at Sundance that entirely consisted of New Queer Cinema filmmakers as early as in January of 1992, titled "Barbed Wire Kisses," (Rich NQC xx, 17) which was again rehashed for the 30th anniversary of the movement at the same festival in 2021.

in these contexts have been pivotal to the genesis of the New Queer Cinema phenomenon" (Pidduck "New" 89). The impact and need for spaces that nurtured a sense of belonging and sharing was further signaled by the growing number of LGBTQIA+ film festivals: first created in the mid-1970s, they steadily grew and saw a particular advancement by the 1990s, reaching over one hundred by the end of the decade (Pidduck "After" 267; Rich *New* 33, 41, 131-2).

Though the tagline of New Queer Cinema was rapidly widely adopted, it was rarely questioned how this group of loosely connected films should be categorized: should NQC be deemed a genre or rather a movement or even a wave? To begin with, I would reject the notion of New Queer Cinema as a genre, for a variety of reasons. Most obviously, New Queer films lack any strong standout conventions that penetrate most of its corpus. While certain characteristics can be extrapolated that somehow link the various movies holding this group of films together (such as the use of postmodern devices like irony or pastiche etc.), they do not represent formulaic elements that are immediately recognizable by a vast audience. What is missing are the generic conventions that commonly not only help to establish certain expectations regarding a movie, but also facilitate the marketing of the product. Indeed, different genres are commonly defined by certain parameters, though these parameters, then again, vary from gerne to genre – ranging from "subject matter, theme, narrative and stylistic conventions, character types, plots, [to] iconography" (Benshoff "Gay" 297). The traditional Western thus finds its generic conventions in the figure of the cowboy, the American Western landscape, as well as a specific period in time in American history (ca. 1865-1890) (298). Horror, pornography, or comedy, on the other hand, "are defined or conceived around the intended emotional affect of the film upon the viewer" (297).

In contrast, when it comes to New Queer Cinema no specific convention that designates most of its movies can be established. Furthermore, though certain NQC films might fall into a genre – or deliberately engage with or deconstruct certain genre conventions (as seen in *The Living End* [road movie]; *Swoon* [crime film]; or *Go Fish* [romantic comedy]) – most of these movies would more easily fit into the rubric of *auteurist* creations[96]. This is to say that a *film d'auteur* does usually not follow a specific, recognizable mold nor does it feature generic character types that are easily understood and grasped by audiences (like the virile cowboy, the femme fatale). The same goes for NQC filmmaking, as its stories are too varied from one

[96] This being said, I would like to point out that *auteurism* and genre filmmaking are not mutually exclusive as directors such as Tarantino or DePalma prove in their postmodern tendency towards playing with genres while tinging them with a very unique point of view. See chapter 2 for my discussion about *auteur* cinema.

another, characters usually display complex psychological developments, while different directors display unique signatures that can be found all over their *oeuvre*[97].

I would therefore rather propose New Queer Cinema to be a movement or a wave. Both concepts are often used interchangeably as they overlap in many regards but are, in fact, not one and the same: while movements exist since the early days of film – one only needs to look at the avant-garde or German expressionism –, New Waves are specific international movements that emerged in the latter half of the 20th century. The *Nouvelle Vague*, for instance, is therefore often described as a movement as well as the first movement that was designated a *New Wave*.

To get a general understanding of what comprises a film movement we can turn to a definition by David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson who describe it as "[a] group of filmmakers working in a common period and place who share some distinctive presumptions about how films should be made. Typically, the films of a movement share formal, stylistic, and thematic features" (*Film History* 735). Oftentimes, yet not necessarily, the members of a movement know one another and form a close union, as seen, for example, in the cases of French Surrealism of the 1920s or the Soviet Montage filmmakers of the same decade. These relations naturally allow for a dialogue and a sharing of ideas and information and might even foster a spirit of competition between its members (Bordwell & Thompson *Film History* 735; Bordwell & Thompson *Film Art* 462).

As Thompson and Bordwell go on to explain, however, these special ties are not always present, as "[o]ther movements are more diffuse, with unconnected filmmakers gravitating toward a common approach to form and style" (*Film Art* 462). New Queer Cinema definitely falls under the latter category. Particularly in its early years, various New Queer filmmakers happened to make movies at the same time in different places and independently from one another that coincidentally bore similar traits. Therefore, the backgrounds of these filmmakers were as diverse as the movies they created: "[t]hese films were made by both new filmmakers, like the young Gregg Araki," who created his first movies on a minimal budget, "and by established filmmakers, such as Derek Jarman and Isaac Julien, who were fostered through a British cultural establishment concerned with maintaining artistic relevancy on the international stage" (Dubowsky 60-1). Yet, all of these artists were united by the fact that they belonged to the LGBTQIA+ community and that they made similarly transgressive films. Luckily, being

[97] We might be tempted to pick characters' queerness as a defining factor or convention for New Queer Cinema so as to open it up to the idea of a genre. This, however, would signify that we reduce these characters to their sexual orientation or sexuality, thus drawing on essentialist assumptions that NQC tries to deconstruct.

queer was not necessarily a hinderance anymore: though coming from the margins, many directors mentioned above would become figureheads of New Queer Cinema and even start full-fledged careers.

Returning to my definition of a film movement, we need to recognize that filmmakers belonging to a specific movement commonly also exhibit rather unique ideas and attitudes regarding cinema and the way they want to approach filmmaking. These ideas can, in fact, be written down statements or manifestos – such as the 1962 Oberhausen Manifesto that was utmost decisive for New German Cinema or the Danish Dogme 95 Manifesto[98] (Bordwell & Thompson *Film Art* 462; Kuhn & Westwell 934). Then again, these shared goals, points of views, and ideologies are not necessary building blocks when speaking about a movement as, again, other opposing examples exist "that do not arise from prior goals and objectives but are regarded retrospectively as sharing these. In several countries in Europe, for example, the 1960s saw the emergence of 'young cinemas' of various kinds, some of them more united and focused in their objectives than others" (Kuhn & Westwell 934). This already demonstrates how difficult it is to grasp the true meaning of a film movement[99].

What is, nevertheless, an almost universal factor uniting movements is the fact that the points of view represented by its various cinematic texts usually challenge and question the norms of filmmaking of their time and territory and are thus often related to crossing traditional conventions and borders with the intent of bringing forth innovation through experimentation. There is, therefore,

> a conscious wish on the part of the filmmakers to challenge established understandings about the place and potential of film at a given moment in time; the influence of commercial, technological, industrial and ideological forces; and, perhaps most evidently, a desire to rethink and refresh the ways in which a film can be expressive typically in terms of an acute effort to represent human perception, thinking and feeling. (Clarke 24-5)

Regarding NQC, the political aspirations of its filmmakers not only unified the group but also connected them to a wider movement. In fact, this is where I would place the true heart of NQC as a movement: NQC's political ambitions, after all, represent a form of expression

[98] The rules set by these manifestos in the end served more as general guidelines and were frequently disregarded by the various defenders and members that put them into place to begin with. Lars von Trier, one of the founding fathers of Dogme 95, for instance, breaks a myriad of his own vows in *Dancer in the Dark* (2000).

[99] The same uncertainty applies to the factors that generate the emergence of a new movement as usually not a single decisive point can be credited. Instead, these causes vary depending on a specific time, on different sociopolitical situations and can range from "factors such as the state of the industry, artistic theories held by the filmmakers themselves, technological features, and cultural and economic forces. These factors help explain how a particular trend began and developed" (Bordwell & Thompson *Film Art* 462).

that is tightly connected to the fight for LGBTQIA+ equality and the rights for people with AIDS. Indeed, when looking at the way the social sciences define a movement, we understand that New Queer Cinema is very much in line with ideas around social and political struggles: "social movements [are] one of the principle forms through which collectivities give voice to their shared grievances and claims by engaging in various kinds of collection action or behavior, such as protesting in the streets" (Snow xlii). Utmost interestingly, "[i]t is also the case that social and political movements tend to cluster across time in 'waves' or 'cycles,'" (Snow xlii) – a link that, again, shows the great connection between film waves and movements and underlines my choice of defining NQC as both a movement and a wave.

Finally, I would like to call attention to the fact that movements are generally restricted in time, existing but for a few years before they dismantle. Their impact, nevertheless, is usually felt for decades and often bears an influence able to change mainstream filmmaking (as my previous discussions of New Hollywood, e.g., has illustrated) (Bordwell & Thompson *Film Art* 462; Clarke 22-3). This finally leads me to an issue Rich voiced towards the end of the 90s when the scholar lamented that, in hindsight, New Queer Cinema should rather be deemed **"**a moment than a movement" (*New* 131), an expression that has been taken up – or at least mentioned – by various other critics (see, e.g., Mennel 69-71; Morrison 136; King 227-8; Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 242-3; Motyka 221).

Though I will return to the demise of New Queer Cinema further below, I would like to already engage with Rich's observation at this point. Taking into consideration the above discussion, the complaint that NQC was but a short-lived moment (as opposed to a fully-fledged movement) is, in fact, only partially accurate: it might be true that a "full-blown" New Queer Cinema only existed for over half a decade and thus for but an instant in relation to film history. Nonetheless, speaking of a mere "moment" inherently takes away the power, the influence, and the longevity NQC exerted on other forms of filmmaking (as will be examined further into this chapter). Most importantly, however, is the fact that movements and moments are not mutually exclusive. In fact, I would argue that pairing or equating them might even be redundant: after all, as we have learned, many movements in film history have only existed for a limited or short period of time. To better illustrate this, we can consider that New Queer Cinema ended as quickly as the *Nouvelle Vague*, which by 1964 "had become absorbed into the film industry" (Bordwell & Thompson *Film Art* 488). After all, it is essential to remember that "[n]o movement can stay 'new' for long" (Morrison 136). That being said, instead of taking the idea of a film *moment* at face value, we should rather read Rich's wording as a form of expressing

her disappointment with the way LGBTQIA+ filmmaking was evolving towards the end of the 1990s.

In turn, these questions then again make us ponder on the exact period in which New Queer Cinema truly existed. As a matter of fact, demarcating a precise timespan is rather tricky: depending on different scholars, it might have started in the 1980s with AIDS activism, AIDS activist video, and the early films of NQC filmmakers such as Gus Van Sant (*Mala Noche* [1986]), Todd Haynes (*Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* [1987]), or Derek Jarman (*Caravaggio* [1986]) (see, e.g., Rich *New* xix or Nowlan 3). Others follow Rich's assertion that it only really came into being with the boom of edgy queer films that rose to fame in 1991/1992. Be it as it may, there is no true or false answer to the periodization of New Queer Cinema. After all, "no particular initiating moment, such as the Stonewall riots, or endpoint, such as Hitler's rise to power in 1933 Germany, marked its beginning or end" (Mennel 69-70).

Historical lines are usually hard to draw in film history, as has been made apparent in my previous discussion on the history of independent and queer cinema. The same applies here: just because Van Sant's 1991 hit *My Own Private Idaho* would be suddenly graced with a label that had just been created, his similarly subversive 1986 picture *Mala Noche* is not worlds apart from his follow-up films and does, retrospectively speaking, not suddenly cease to fulfill similar criteria that would make it a representative of NQC[100]. On the other hand, a movie like *Buddies* that was released a year prior to *Mala Noche* can be deemed a NQC prototype, partially sharing some common characteristics (the discussion of AIDS and queer memory building) but lacking other substantial qualities that would make it stand out as part of the movement (including, e.g., the narrative and formal experimentation or a postmodern reworking of history). In the end, while we could define the birth of the movement somewhere between the mid-1980s and early-1990s, it depends on the unique features of each and every filmic text to determine whether it belongs to NQC or not. Ultimately, the same issues apply to the periodization of the end of the wave, which is commonly placed somewhere between the mid-1990s and early 2000s for reasons that I will revert to towards the end of this chapter.

Perhaps a concept fitting New Queer Cinema best is the one of a *film wave* or of *new wave cinema*. This results not only from the fact that NQC meets criteria that define a film wave (as I will explore below) but also because New Queer Cinema can be considered part of a lineage of so-called new waves (a factor most perceptible in the very name *New* Queer Cinema). Starting with the French *Nouvelle Vague*, new wave cinemas were born in the late 1950s and

[100] As will become apparent thoughout this study, I have chosen movies for my analyses that range from 1986 (Van Sant's *Mala Noche*) up to 1992 (*The Living End*). This, however, is not meant to imply that these are strict historical boundaries. They rather serve to include various stages of New Queer filmmaking.

soon spread all over the world, finding a plethora of localized forms. These arising cinemas were quickly deemed "new"[101] due to the fact that numerous directors were either still young or new to making films or, perhaps even more importantly, because they tapped into the *zeitgeist* of youth cultures, youthful audiences and tackled themes, issues, and contemporary politics that mattered to youngsters. Correspondingly, new waves are also often referred to as "young cinemas" and "new cinemas" (Bordwell & Thompson *Film Art* 486; Bordwell & Thompson *Film History* 439, 445; Kuhn & Westwell 1250-1). In this respect, the *Nouvelle Vague* is a perfect point in case, indulging in stories about "urban professional life with its chic fashions and sports cars, all-night parties, bars and jazz clubs" (Bordwell & Thompson *Film History* 445).

In comparison to film movements, members of a specific film wave generally exhibit weaker personal ties, though, again, varying degrees of independence and mutual support exist. This individuality also goes hand in hand with the idea of *auteurist* cinema often associated with film waves, which in itself rejects a uniform or formulaic aesthetic, formal and narrative approach, and style. Like many movements, the existence of waves was also generally limited to a few years (Bordwell & Thompson *Film History* 324, 445, 448). This is, however, not to say that film waves are just a chaotic amalgam of individualists. An important element holding a new wave together is frequently located in the filmmakers' cinephilia. Many new wave directors in fact went to film school[102], thus being very critically aware of the history and state of cinema, which, in itself, was often panned for having lost touch with younger audiences and for stagnating in its stale traditionalism. The uniqueness many of these young talents thus brought to the table was found in a subversion of certain cinematic trends with the ultimate intention of rejuvenating cinema and the general love for the art form in wider audiences (Kuhn & Westwell 1250-1; Bordwell & Thompson *Film Art* 488-9). This, nonetheless, was not achieved through a complete rejection of their forebearers, but instead these filmmakers "set out to both extend the traditions and try something new" (Bordwell & Thompson *Film Art* 489).

To illustrate this point, we only need to consider the manifold references to earlier films found in new wave titles: "Godard characters allude to *Johnny Guitar* (Ray [1954]), *Some Came*

[101] Interestingly, while being celebrated for their novelty in some circles, these new waves were at first difficult to define theoretically. What truly constituted a new wave was therefore initially more of a feeling that was hard to fully grasp or pinpoint: "[i]t was only after the event, with the arrival on the scene of 'film theory' in the late 1960s and early 1970s that concepts were developed which could be used coherently to define the ways in which the new cinemas differed systematically from cinemas that preceded them (and co-existed with and even survived them)" (Nowell-Smith 4).

[102] As an example, the vast knowledge of film history and traditions bestowed New Hollywood filmmakers such as Francis Coppola, George Lucas, Steven Spielberg, or Brian DePalma the title of "movie brats" (Bordwell & Thompson *Film Art* 489; Ferncase 12).

Running (Minnelli [1958]), and 'Arizona Jim' (from Renoir's *Crime of M. Lange* [1936]). […] Such citations, the new wave directors felt, acknowledged that cinema, like literature and painting, had lofty traditions that could be honored" (Bordwell & Thompson *Film Art* 487). Indeed, the same can be said for New Queer Cinema directors, many of which had been to film school (including the likes of Bruce LaBruce, Gregg Araki or Todd Haynes), a fact that is mirrored not only in their knowledge of and reference to cinematic predecessors, but also in the intellectual and theory-induced approaches many of them took. Interestingly, NQC also refers to earlier new wave films. This utmost complex overlapping of various eras and waves of film history, in turn, creates new layers of meaning, as witnessed in Araki's *The Living End*, for instance, which features a poster of Godard's *Made in U.S.A.*, whose work greatly influenced New Hollywood filmmakers, who, in turn, also had an impact on NQC.

New wave cinemas' distinguishing break with traditions, then again, was achieved through various means. One of these lay in a rejection of the studios' glitz and glamour, an objective accomplished through a deliberate refusal of Hollywood's glossy visuals, which, as many of these filmmakers felt, were a distraction from the lack of real substance (Nowell-Smith 3-4). In order to experiment and to create new aesthetic and formal styles, but also out of sheer financial limitation, new wave filmmakers often settled on making films with lower budgets while turning away from Hollywood and the idea of the studios as well-oiled film factories. Naturally, as discussed at length in chapter 2, this granted many filmmakers new freedoms in expressing themselves through the medium. This rebellious way of cinema-making was further heightened through on location shots, smaller crews, the use of natural or available light, hand-held cameras (allowing for dynamic, flexible shots), as well as uncommon techniques like the jump cut used in *Breathless* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1960) or the freeze-frame in *The 400 Blows* (François Truffaut, 1959) (Kuhn & Westwell 1250-1; Bordwell & Thompson *Film History* 489; Bordwell & Thompson *Film Art* 486-7). All of these factors helped in creating a "casual look" by opposing the ambition to produce flawless pictures, a choice that, in turn, attracted attention and became instantly recognizable (Nowell-Smith 4; Bordwell & Thompson *Film Art* 486).

Similarly, New Queer Cinema became known to traverse formal cinematic boundaries. As such, it is rather tricky to pinpoint one dominant aesthetic trend in NQC as it is, in fact, characterized by an explosion of styles. In postmodern fashion, each movie thus takes up own interpretations of a variety of well-known formal approaches to serve whatever message it tries to convey: "[f]rom the *cinéma-vérité* style of *The Times and the Hours*, to the different visual styles Haynes employs for each of the three segments of *Poison*, to the black and white still photography style of *Swoon*, to the mock *Beverly Hills 90210* [1990-2000] aesthetic of Araki's

films (especially *The Doom Generation* and *Nowhere*)" (Tzioumakis 269), we are presented with a multitude and a joining of different aesthetics from different eras in this film wave. In doing so, New Queer films become not only an amalgam of styles, but also "cross boundaries of genre and style and simultaneously feature both excess and minimalism, elements of both Hollywood and avant-garde moviemaking" (Hart *Images* 8-9).

While we might expect NQC to bear more of a low budget aesthetic (a fact that is certainly represented in several of its films), due to the diverse backgrounds of the filmmakers and the differing forms of funding projects received[103], "their aesthetics cover a range from 'imperfect' cinema with low-budget hand-held cameras to sophisticated black-and-white compositions evocative of silent film from the 1920s" (Mennel 67). Juxtaposing La Bruce's gritty *Super 8½* (1994) with Isaac Julien's smooth-looking *Looking for Langston* thus makes the contrast and formal variety become all but too obvious.

New Queer Cinema aesthetics are also often connected to camp, a sensibility that is, in turn, greatly linked to LGBTQIA+ communities[104]. Indeed, camp elements are mostly found in bad, hyperbolic acting and dialogues (*The Living End*); in NQC's propensity for kitsch and a lack for taste or sophistication (the general camp sensibility of the musical genre found in *Zero Patience*), and a fondness for pop culture and youth culture (mentions of bands like Cocteau Twins, Ministry, or Nine Inch Nails in *Totally Fucked Up*). In turn, these campy elements serve several purposes. Due to its great connection to LGBTQIA+ culture, camp can be perceived as enabling queer community building, especially in times of heightened targeting and marginalization. Most of all, this can be ascribed to the circumstance that from the outset camp "created a subject position from which urban gay men could revise a text's original meanings, and thus it strongly figured in the creation of a sense of shared community. Its nuanced

[103] In some cases, a total lack of resources was utmost fruitful for experimentation with different media. Sadie Benning, for example, used a children's toy camera, the Fisher-Price Pixelvision camcorder, to make several of her shorts, including *A Place Called Lovely* (1991), *It Wasn't Love* (1992), as well as *Girl Power* (1993) (Mennel 68). Furthermore, "[l]ack of funding encouraged the production of shorts. Several of the filmmakers associated with New Queer Cinema, Benning, Dunye, Su Friedrich and Pratibha Parmar, were well-known for their short film *oeuvre* before they made features films" (68).

[104] Even though, historically speaking, camp is not necessarily limited to LGBTQIA+ culture, with the emergence of cinema it was quickly appropriated by queer communities, thus becoming associated with queerness at large. As Benshoff and Griffin argue, camp sensibilities began to spread in "urban gay male communities during the classical Hollywood era," representing "a highly idiosyncratic approach to appreciating not only films but also music, theater, art, architecture, fashion, and (straight) culture in general" (*Queer* 68-69). Classical Hollywood stars were celebrated as camp icons "because they too exuded a 'bigger than life' quality that seemed to suggest the performative nature of gender" (69) – already linking the sensibility to queerness. Camp, however, is also greatly connected to a lack of taste or sophistication. More precisely, "the camp sensibility has mocked and opposed high culture aesthetics. Critics have considered camp as a kind of 'counter-taste' that vies brashly truisms about good taste to establish the validity and special worth of that which appears to be vulgar" (Klinger 134). What is commonly denigrated in society thus becomes cherished – a re-appropriation that reminds us all too much of developments within queer communities.

complexity needed to be acquired and then taught to others[105]" (Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 69). Moreover, camp becomes the more crucial to NQC as it holds the power of queer resistance. This, then again, stems from a myriad of stresses that forcefully closeted LGBTQIA+ individuals have faced throughout American history. More precisely, camp

> supplies an opportunity to express distance from and disdain for mainstream culture. Exchanged in private settings, camp helps forge in-group solidarity, repairing some of the damage inflicted by the majority and preparing us for further onslaughts. Used as a secret code in public settings, it can also be a way to identify and communicate with other 'club members' under the unknowing eyes of the straight world—itself an act of subversive solidarity. Politically, it can also be a form of public defiance, a flamboyant expression of sexual variation that dares to show its face. Finally, camp is the quintessential gay strategy for undermining the hegemony of mainstream media images. The sting can be taken out of oppressive characterizations and the hot-air balloons of conventional morality can be burst with the weapon of irony. Most importantly, by encouraging viewers or readers to evaluate mainstream culture as outsiders, as spectators living beyond its perimeter, a camp sensibility creates a sense of detachment from the dominant ideology. (Gross 18-19)

We thus come to the understanding that many of the political stances inherent in camp are ambitions that NQC filmmakers strove for. The bad acting in Gregg Araki's *The Living End* consequently becomes a questioning of the heteronormative need for "natural" representations, hence queering societal expectations regarding what is acceptable and is therefore treasured and rewarded. Instead, the picture aligns with acting found in fringe cinemas, at times even verging on the hollow dialogue known from pornographic film. The aesthetic artificiality elicited by the campy production of some NQC texts furthermore helps to distance the audience from the immersion into the diegetic world. More precisely, by playing with campy cliches, as e.g. seen in over-the-top acting, movies are able to draw attention to and are able to render ludicrous the artificiality not only of cinema and its diegetic world as such, but also of societal norms (like the gender binary) by exaggerating them.

While film waves in general are distinguished by their distaste for Hollywood aesthetics, the same is true when it comes to content. Subversive and controversial topics permeated numerous film waves, best seen, for example, in themes around violence or drug use (*Easy Rider*), a higher sexual explicitness (*Last Tango in Paris* [Bernardo Bertolucci, 1972]) as well as a general distrust of authorities (*The Conversation* [Francis Ford Coppola, 1974]). The same transgressive energy also commonly transcends into the way in which these pictures are told. Non-linear storytelling, loose connection between plot lines, aimless protagonists tumbling into

[105] Indeed, this is what NQC strives to do as well: aware of its camp appeal, the film wave does not shy away from recognizing its camp predecessors. This is, for example, visualized through "a Warhol poster in *The Living End* [or] a killing in *Nowhere* in which the victim is finished off with a can of Campbell's tomato soup" (King 236).

chance events, sudden and unexpected changes in tone and mood, and ambiguous open endings namely characterize many new waves. Simultaneously, even prior to the popularization of the actual concept of postmodernism, new wave cinemas commonly displayed a tendency towards experimenting with some postmodern tropes such as self-reflexivity and intertextuality. These not only aid in further stretching the line of acceptable cinematic norms, but, at the same time, also make audiences aware that they are *de facto* watching a film (Kuhn & Westwell 1251; Bordwell & Thompson *Film History* 445; Bordwell & Thompson *Film Art* 487, 491). This love for experimenting with narrative structures is also vividly present in NQC, a fact that I will revisit later.

Lastly, as already insinuated, there is also an occasional tone of political radicality associated to these waves. With political turmoil on the rise in the 1950s and 1960s (as greatly broached in previous chapters), many filmmakers and audiences began to long for honest discussions of these critical issues on screen[106]. When it comes to the actual filmmakers, however, again, no unitary political or ideological viewpoint existed, though a large section of them were rather left-wing leaning. Likewise, some New Queer Cinema filmmakers, including Tom Kalin and John Greyson, were deeply embedded in AIDS/ LGBTQIA+ activism, drawing inspiration from progressive social movements, while using their art to support it (Aaron "New Queer Cinema: An Introduction" 6; Pearl 26).

New Queer Cinema, however, was not only deemed *new* for being part of a lineage of new waves, but there are a number of other factors that make it a *new* type of cinema, which might even distance it from former waves: indeed, most obviously the epithet "New" does not stand by itself but is instead followed by the designation "Queer", already hinting towards a novel political and blatantly unapologetic queer (in every sense of the word) dimension. After all, these movies were made by open LGBTQIA+ folks and targeted at an LGBTQIA+

[106] In a way reminiscent of rebellious sociopolitical movements that became more prominent in the 60s on a global scale, transgressive new waves also began to sweep the world: these different national branches included Britain's Kitchen Sink films (Karel Reisz (*Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* [1960]); the Japanese New Wave (Nagisa Ôshima [*Diary of a Shinjuku Thief* – 1968]); New Indian Cinema (Mrinal Sen [*Bhuvan Shome* – 1969]); New German Cinema (Rainer Werner Fassbinder [*Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* – 1974]); New Iranian Cinema (Dariush Mehrjui [*Gaav* – 1969]), as well as new waves emerging in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and Hungary – among many other places (Bordwell & Thompson *Film History* 454, 460, 469, 471, 537, 564, 669; Kuhn & Westwell 1251-2). Bearing in mind that the study at hand is mostly focused on North American filmmaking, it becomes plausible to also highlight the American offshoots of new wave cinemas, namely New American Cinema and New Hollywood, both of which I have already discussed at large in chapters 2 and 3. In particular New American Cinema bears a great resemblance to its queer offspring: the inspiration it took from various European new waves in terms of formal choices, aesthetics, and ideologies as well as a newfound perception and engagement with Hollywood classics along with a certain socio-cultural critique, and a propensity for spontaneity would, later on, also appear in NQC. New Hollywood, on the other hand, while continuing with many of these experimental tendencies, was commonly backed by the studios financially and in terms of distribution, which, then again, greatly distances it from NQC filmmaking.

audience[107]. Even though this might sound banal from today's perspective, it was an immensely essential point of innovation at the time. To better illustrate this idea, let us take New Hollywood for instance, i.e., one of the most popular American new waves, which naturally exhibits some parallels to NQC, mostly when it comes to the break with formal and narrative cinematic traditions. As already explored in chapter 2, hereby especially the early representatives of New Hollywoodian filmmaking (the ones that came before the rise of blockbusters) were the ones most prone to playing with the boundaries of the cinematic medium and included directors such as Arthur Penn, Dennis Hopper, Martin Scorsese, Mike Nichols, Francis Ford Coppola, or Brian de Palma (Mennel 50). When listing these names, however, it immediately strikes us that all these directors are males who identify as heterosexual. Indeed, it is herein that Mennel finds one of the great issues of New Hollywoodian *auteurist* cinema – an issue that I would expand to new waves in general:

> Since *auteurism* relies on the single vision of the director, it typically privileged individual men in the male-dominated film industry. With only the exception of editors such as Dede Allen and Thelma Schoonmaker, few if any of the major figures associated with 'New Hollywood' were women (and still fewer were openly gay). *Auteurism* consolidated power in the director instead of distributing it across different departments defined by a division of labour, which included areas, in which women and gay men traditionally flourished, such as costume, make-up and set design. (Mennel 50-1)

Enabling opportunities for marginalized queer identities is one of the deeply transgressive aspects of New Queer Cinema, creating new sensibilities and points of view in the process – although it remained widely male-dominated as will be examined later in this chapter. In the end, this was a conscious political decision that lines up with the political movement happening at the time.

New Queer Cinema was, however, also "new" inasmuch as it distanced itself from predecessors of gay and lesbian filmmaking while referencing them at the same time, thus deliberately acknowledging its place in LGBTQIA+ film history. Firstly, and most obviously, NQC went against the long history of one-sided, stereotypical, and tragic portrayals of the community in mainstream filmmaking, whose viciousness has been discussed at length in previous chapters. Yet, as shall be delineated, with as much fervor the film wave went against assimilationist mainstream films presenting perfectly integrated, harmless, lovable, or victimized gay men as found in examples such as *Making Love* or *Philadelphia*.

[107] *Totally Fucked Up* literally starts with the slogan "another homo movie by Gregg Araki" (00:00:44).

In this respect, even certain products of inoffensive queer independent cinema made by and targeted at queer people were not spared. This type of LGBTQIA+ cinema, as a matter of fact, was a trend that first arose *en masse* in the 1970s, commonly portraying the minority group in a positive, affirmative, but also in an assimilationist way. These choices characterized a political attitude that was quite important at the time: "we are just like anyone else" was the central message, asking for respect and tolerance not only inside the community but also regarding the wider homophobic population and culture. As previously discussed, these approaches harbored deep issues as creating movies able to represent a community this multifaceted was a conundrum that no one was able to ultimately tackle and often resulted in dull pictures (Rich *New* 124; King 230). Simultaneously, movies in which individuals had to deal with issues that arose *because* of their sexuality or their coming out in a heteronormative world (*Making Love*; *Lianna*) were also greatly part of these early queer independent pictures. Queer sexuality was thus regularly depicted as a problem[108].

New Queer Cinema clearly detaches itself from these approaches, defining its characters' queerness as a given from the get-go. Similar to the previously discussed pre-NQC movies *Parting Glances* or *Taxi zum Klo*, the characters sexuality is therefore not questioned, does not cause any distress, while the need to come out to others becomes irrelevant. Quite the contrary is the case, as both, the filmmakers as well as the characters within the diegetic world, are okay with the fact that their films or behaviors might not be accepted or easily digestible by straight society. These movies thus take a more "in-your-face" approach, not necessarily to shock but simultaneously unafraid to do so.

That said, making concessions to or subverting the expectations of straight audiences and culture was never at the center of these projects. On the contrary, New Queer Cinema was greatly "defined as much, if not more, by their opposition to gay culture as to straight" (Aaron "New Queer Cinema: An Introduction" 7). This defiant energy was mostly directed towards a mainstream, sanitized form of gay elitist culture, representing the most privileged within the community due to their monetary means, greater visibility in the culture, and general power. Predominantly, these assimilated people were the ones pronounced as role models for the wider LGBTQIA+ community[109] (Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 221).

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[108] Overall, it is important to note that these accommodative pictures did not suddenly end with the emergence of more radical independent films. The trend in fact continued with movies such as *Longtime Companion* which "creates exemplary images of gay men before and during the epidemic" (Howell 124) as is the case with the aforementioned *Philadelphia*.

[109] *Totally Fucked Up* deconstructs the notion of acceptable homosexual culture quite obviously through a character's open mocking of the stereotypical gay taste: "everything that homos are supposed to like – disco music, Joan Crawford, drag shows –, I hate. And Bette Midler. God, I hate fucking Bette Midler" (00:24:11-00:24:23).

The defiance against this homonormative pressure, then again, was achieved in different ways. Firstly, in an utmost unapologetic manner, NQC addressed and depicted certain taboo issues that seemed too negative or inappropriate to be included in previous queer films, not least due to the fact that they might be perceived as harmful to the progression of LGBTQIA+ rights struggles. For NQC directors, however, certain silenced matters simply represented facets of queer life that had as much right to be portrayed on screen as any other topic. NQC consequently introduced identities that were socially marginalized, disenfranchised, and turned invisible by the media, including queer people of color, people with AIDS, sex workers, people with drug addictions, transgender individuals, or persons experiencing homelessness, amongst others.

Surprisingly to viewers at the time, these characters, however, were no longer portrayed as tragic and self-loathing victims or adhered to one-dimensional hero tropes. Rather, many characters found in New Queer Cinema are challenging, even problematic and quite villainous: in the same way in which the slur "queer" had been re-appropriated, so was the trope of queerness as monstrous given a new context, perception, and appreciation. After all, "embrac[ing] 'negative' images [can] show the productive and pleasurable forces that can be found in them" (Kohnen 52). Accordingly, protagonists who engage in criminal or shady activities are, for example, encountered in *Swoon* (Tom Kalin, 1992), a film that focuses on a male couple bonding over the murder of a child. *Swoon*'s gay criminals are, moreover, portrayed as attractive men, they are eroticized, while their behavior and violence are simultaneously glamorized. These choices were not made for mere shock value but to a greater degree there is a deliberate attempt to "show how social and cultural forces can shape murderous identities" (Benshoff "Reception" 172-3) while heteronormativity (as represented by the murdered child) is subverted and thus *queered*.

NQC furthermore demarcated a profound shift within LGBTQIA+ cinema in terms of breaking away from movies dealing with essentialist gay or lesbian issues so as to make *queer* movies about *queer* identities. Naturally, these include depictions of sexual identities that go hand in hand with my definition of queerness in chapter 1 and are characterized by a fluidity in terms of sexuality, sex, gender, and desire (and others). *Paris is Burning* was groundbreaking in this regard, not only for dealing with race and class in an utmost intersectional manner, but also by putting drag queens, trans individuals, and ballroom culture in the limelight, like this deeply engaging with issues around the performativity of gender[110]. As becomes evident, New Queer Cinema and queer theory, as already hinted at in chapter 1, bear a close-knit tie seeing

[110] Most interestingly, in order to explore these topics in her writing, Judith Butler chose to take the film as a prime example and grant it an entire chapter in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*.

that "New Queer films also underline the social and historical forces that regulate sexuality in the first place" (Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 221). New Queer Cinema ultimately was clearly inspired by queer theory, grew alongside the academic discipline and activist movement, and served as a creative response to them.

Hereby, it particularly drew on ideas around sexual and gendered identities from a social constructionist perspective and highlighted the lack of representations of marginalized and supposedly deviant communities and their unique subjectivities (Morrison 136; Dubowsky 6; Mennel 69). Queer scholars, on the other hand, accompanied the wave through theoretical and critical writing, the movies aiding these writers to expand, deepen, and support the emerging branch of queer theory in turn. This symbiosis of mutual stimulus happened in three overlapping forms: firstly, through critical discussions of the films and directors connected to the wave; secondly, through a queer (re)reading and (re)appropriation of cinematic texts from the past; and, lastly, through a look into queer audiences and their relation to cinema (Aaron "New Queer Cinema: An Introduction" 10). Prime examples for these types of scholarly investigations published during NQC's prime and combining both film studies and queer theory, include *Inside/out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories* (1991); the anthology *How Do I Look?: Queer Film and Video* (1991); *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture* (1993); *Queer Looks: Perspectives on Lesbian and Gay Film and Video* (1993); and *Monsters in the Closet* (1997).

At the same time, queerness was not only explored in terms of sexuality. Harking back to my definition in chapter 1, we need to remember that the concept "queer" should not be reduced to the initialism LGBTQIA+, but instead needs to be regarded as a tool to question and transgress many other oppressive norms and categories. Similarly, some NQC directors like Gus Van Sant did not feel at ease with being reduced to making "queer" or "LGBTQIA+" films in the sense that they refused to be placed in a box that limited them to only make specific types of films featuring specific characters that were directed towards a specific minority (Doty "Film" 499). On the contrary, as the case of Todd Haynes'[111] *Safe* proves, certain movies existed that were clearly queer yet did not feature any LGBTQIA+ characters at all. The

[111] Indeed, Haynes criticizes the necessity of limiting queer cinema to stories about open and identifiable LGBTQIA+ individuals. Instead, he believes that queerness can be expressed through other dimensions (like narrative structures e.g.): "[p]eople define gay cinema solely by content: if there are gay characters in it; it's a gay film. […] It's such a failure of the imagination, let alone the ability to look beyond content. I think that's really simplistic. Heterosexuality to me is a structure as much as it is a content. It is an imposed structure that goes along with the patriarchal, dominant structure that constrains and defines society. If homosexuality is the opposite of the counter-sexual activity to that, then what kind of structure would it be?" (Haynes "Cinematic/Sexual" 32).

queerness in this case is closely linked to an underlying queer context that had been evoked by the AIDS crisis, a matter I will return to further down.

As embracing of difference and inclusionary as these approaches may sound, parts of LGBTQIA+ spectatorship, however, felt uncomfortable, even offended, and shocked by the nature of the film wave (Benshoff "(broke)" 198). Having fought for positive portrayals in a swamp of negative celluloid depictions for decades, some found that drawing upon clichés was utterly tasteless and harmful. Simultaneously, other detractors considered NQC productions to exude excessive elitism and pretentious intellectualism, complaining that the films were too far induced in tedious theory and that their sociopolitical critique was hence not obvious enough for the regular moviegoer. All that allegedly remained was thus a perpetuation of negative stereotypes (Benshoff "(broke)" 198; Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 220; Benshoff "Gay" 284). Failing to see the subversive, parodic, rebellious, deconstructive, and empowering stance many of these movies took to demystify numerous reductive Hollywoodian assumptions, assimilationist audiences felt taken aback without engaging with the movement on a deeper level. After all, these critics were blind to the fact that a stereotype is not necessarily destructive while reappropriation does not equal a mindless copying of past trends. Instead, the wider context and layered meanings of a specific text always need to be also taken into consideration. Likewise, who was to say that queer culture should not be problematized as much as non-queer culture?

Further debates arose in this respect: other voices, namely, as a result, found it contradictory that these films were celebrated while box-office hits like *The Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991) and *Basic Instinct* (Paul Verhoeven, 1992) were widely protested (Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 221). Naturally, the most obvious difference between the film wave and the two mentioned studio movies is the fact that New Queer filmmakers are the ones reflecting on their own, marginalized experiences whereas *The Silence of the Lambs* and *Basic Instinct* were both directed by white, cisgender, heterosexual males. Then again, we might question if the personal identities of the directors are enough to slam one movie representing controversial queer characters while praising another, and, as a result, we need to inquire why these two films were protested in the first place.

In detail, very reminiscent of the boycotting of Friedkin's *Cruising* and De Palma's *Dressed to Kill*, irritated by the stereotype of murderous queers, GLAAD and OutRage! began picketing and boycotting *The Silence of the Lambs* and *Basic Instinct* in 1991 and 1992 (Pidduck "After" 278). Although these protests did not hinder the release of these movies, both incidents "did have an impact on the news media, which devoted an unprecedented amount of

attention to the questions raised about the portrayals of lesbian women and gay men in movies and television" (Gross 149). As a result, mainstream Hollywood filmmaking slowly began backing away from exploiting queerness in derogatory ways (at least when it comes to most obvious and superficial depictions) and "it seemed that good scripts were being found, and by some of the very people who had been in the queer spotlight: *Silence of the Lambs* director Jonathan Demme announced plans for *Philadelphia* [1993]" (Gross 150).

At the same time, to counteract the positive image mandate, an oppositional culture arose that scrutinized and questioned these censuring trends by celebrating and embracing the two highly debated movies. Accordingly, "*Basic Instinct* and a wave of independent 'queer killer films' (both lesbian/gay authored and not) sparked a series of complex debates in popular and academic discourse," which encouragingly associated the movie with "an historical tradition including *A Walk on the Wild Side* 1962, *The Hunger* 198[3], *Vampire Lovers* 1970" (Pidduck "After" 278-9). Similarly, heterodox feminist film critic Camille Paglia approached a re-reading of the movie as an important queer document in her commentary on the film's DVD. Perhaps, both movies – just like Friedkin's *Cruising* – were somehow victims of their restrictive times and wider culture, consequently becoming reduced to a lineage of homophobic portrayals that I already explored at length. After all, the way someone perceives these matters varies from individual to individual: although the representation of queerness in film has been mostly pejorative for a long time, a queer spectator must not necessarily perceive them as offensive or degrading since queer villains and monsters "allow for spaces in which normative heterosexuality is threatened, critiqued, camped up, or shown to be an unstable performative identity" (Benshoff "Gay, Lesbian" 278).

Be that as it may, critique did not only occur within the queer community. In fact, the precarious sociopolitical situation described in the previous chapter continued into the 1990s: with an even wilder passion and determination the conservative right wing went against NQC in an attempt to use every possible way to discredit the LGBTQIA+ community. Being under fire from all sides, NQC became part and an important point of friction in the so-called "culture wars" of the 1980s and 1990s:

> The term "culture wars" came to prominence in the early 1990s, referring to conflicts in US society over abortion, religion in schools, acceptance of homosexuals, pornography, the judiciary, and the arts. Many of the flashpoints in the culture war derive from competing cultural assumptions about the body, particularly various aspects of sexuality. Activists in the culture war struggle to define what Americans believe a human to be and how human life is to be rightly ordered. (Lucke 4268)

In essence, this "war" was a clashing of intense debates and targeted attacks between a traditionalist and Christian right and a progressive left that challenged a variety of social norms. While throughout the 1980s the right focused on condemning "mass and even marginal media—commercial television, rock and roll, pornography" (Gross 189), the focus now shifted towards elite culture, including issues such as progressive educational policies, but also the arts at large. These campaigns to ban and censor were meant to upkeep a supposedly moral society with its traditional family values (Eaklor 191; Hallenbeck 167; Lucke 4269).

These battles took on many forms, though the "[m]ost notorious was the series of attacks in 1989 on the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) for funding arts programs that included Andres Serrano's photograph, 'Piss Christ,' and Robert Mapplethorpe's explicitly sexual photographs of gay men" (Gross 190). Indeed, these anti-smut campaigns resulted in grave issues for the NEA who was forced to stop providing federal grants to art that was considered indecent or obscene (Gross 190; Haggerty & McGarry 5). The effects of this can still be felt today. Leading all the way back to 1990 when "the agency added 'general standards of decency' to the factors under consideration when awarding grants with decency functioning in this context to preclude sexually suggestive or politically oppositional art from eligibility" (Meyer 88), the censorship and restrictions only became more and more pronounced. Eventually, "[i]n 1995, the NEA discontinued all grants to individual artists, museum professionals, choreographers, composers, and solo performers" (88). This witch-hunt within the arts also greatly affected film culture. Even big-name directors like Scorsese were attacked, whose *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) was pronounced blasphemous and sacrilegious (Bowman 286).

In a comparable way, many NQC movies were targeted in the censorship war as being too pornographic, obscene, depraved and were consequently presented as needing to be defunded (Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 220). In the year 1990, e.g., "the San Francisco International Lesbian and Gay Film Festival came under federal investigation. […] While the NEA eventually exonerated the festival, public pressure […] led the festival to withdraw future grant applications" (223). A similar fate befell Marlon Riggs' short film *Tongues Untied* (1989): massive protests ensued when it became known that the film had been granted $5000 (out of a total budget of $175,000) *indirectly* from the NEA (Gross 190). It was "later estimated that nearly two-thirds of the 284 stations [supposed to broadcast the short] declined to air *Tongues Untied*, an unusually high number of cancellations that included many of the nation's largest markets" (Gross 190). In the same way, *Paris is Burning* and *Poison* were protested by religious groups, especially because part of the films were also funded by NEA grants, both

titles thus becoming another piece in this fight (Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 240). All these polemics had deep-cutting effects for the film wave as federal funds soon dried up (223).

Going back to my discussion of factors that mark New Queer Cinema as a *new* form of cinema after this short digression, it needs to be emphasized that one of the main elements of novelty gracing the film wave was the fact that it ascended *because of* and *during* a global health crisis. Indeed, building on discussions by Arroyo (1993) and Pearl (2004), I would go as far as to declare New Queer Cinema as AIDS cinema. This rather bold statement derives from several reasons: firstly, as discussed at length, AIDS created a demand for visibility, information and education, justice, and accountability, as well as a need to rewrite and set straight a community's own history. Bearing in mind that the AIDS pandemic had been causing havoc for over an entire decade at that point, an outlet was needed to express one's anger, frustration, fear, and feeling of marginalization, to process the loss and suffering, to fight back in radical ways, to reclaim agency and empowerment, while also providing hope and comfort. AIDS activism was naturally one of the ways to channel these emotions, but so was its creative ally New Queer Cinema[112].

The relation between NQC and HIV/AIDS goes even deeper as the immunodeficiency permeates the movies of this wave – either literally[113] (*The Living End*, *Blue*, *Chocolate Babies*), or in form of subtext, a general context, or a certain type of sensibility. Indeed, it was José Arroyo who first presented the very idea that AIDS is always lurking beneath the surface of New Queer Cinema: he does so by analyzing Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho*[114], explaining that overt nods to the crisis are almost completely absent from the movie, except for one scene in which the protagonist Mike (River Phoenix) takes a condom out of his pocket (Arroyo 79). While HIV/AIDS is not noticeably present, a range of nods nonetheless allude to the immunodeficiency: to begin with, there are Mike's physical ailments, such as his narcolepsy or his "shivering, his lack of energy, his pallor, and his thinness", which might all be read "as a displacement of AIDS" (Arroyo 79). We also find various symbols of an impending death throughout the movie (personified through the weather and landscape), while sexuality in itself is portrayed as threating. After all, the reality of living as a gay hustler has become a risk to the

[112] Indeed, NQC poster child Todd Haynes has spoken about this very determination fueled by AIDS that many of his fellows felt committed to channeling in their artistic creations: "[i]t's because of that necessity, the feeling that this was a means of expression that could be made really pertinent to what was going on in our lives, made me part of that camp. That doesn't happen all the time and creative media don't usually have that extra fire motivating them" (Haynes "Todd" 197).

[113] We should also recognize that movies like *Grief* (Richard Glatzer, 1993) or *Jeffrey* (Christopher Ashley, 1995) exist that deal with AIDS very openly yet cannot be deemed NQC.

[114] For clarity's sake, Arroyo in fact discusses both *My Own Private Idaho* as well as Jarman's *Edward II* in his essay, but I have chosen to focus only on the former in my discussion to keep it brief and succinct, while staying within the realm of American cinema.

protagonist who literally longs for the safety of his mother's lap (79) – a placeholder for a safer pre-AIDS past.

Certainly, the case of Todd Haynes in particular also warrants some closer inspection in this regard as he is one of the main New Queer Cinema filmmakers who has very early on strayed away from even representing openly LGBTQIA+ characters or AIDS content on screen while nonetheless staying a part of queer filmmaking. Hereby, particularly his second feature film *Safe* is of interest as it was still produced within the generally accepted lifetime of NQC: *Safe* deals with the fate of a rich, heterosexual, cisgender housewife, Carol White (played by Julianne Moore), who is suddenly afflicted with an illness that traditional doctors are unable to diagnose. As the movie progresses, the shy and submissive protagonist takes matters into her own hands and eventually gets to the conclusion that the very environment affects her health and makes her physically vulnerable – though the validity of her suspicions is left open. Misunderstood by her community because of her ailments and theories, she finds shelter far away from civilization in a nonprofit communal settlement.

Great similarities to AIDS narratives become immediately noticeable: an illness that progresses quickly and can affect anyone, the physical and psychological changes that it implies, the process of becoming perceived as the abject Other as well as the social isolation this brings along. Like AIDS, the chemical sensitivity Carol suffers from is also an intangible illness that the scientific community does not seem to grasp and fails to give answers about. Peter Dunning (Peter Friedman), the founder of the settlement, reinforces these parallels by stating that "[e]nvironmental illness is just one of a cluster of new immune system disorders such as Epstein-Barr syndrome, chronic fatigue syndrome and, of course, AIDS – all of which continue to elude conventional medicine" (01:05:25-01:05:36).

Then again, Carol's ailments also bring about beneficial personal changes: it is through the restrictions of her disease that she begins gaining awareness of her physicality, her own needs and boundaries, and eventually starts to question oppressive structures in her life, gaining agency on her quest towards self-love. In her own way, the shy homemaker begins to rebel against societal norms, thus queering her suburban imprisonment. As becomes apparent, NQC thus continuously engages with the shadow of AIDS, mirroring its very unpredictable nature, letting it inform the entire diegetic worldview we encounter through allegory and metaphor. Lurking like a specter, AIDS ultimately becomes "understood as the 'political unconscious' of New Queer Cinema, as both an 'absent cause' and an important interpretative context" (King *American* 233).

So as to get a grasp of a world that has been utterly shattered by AIDS, but also by Western capitalism, which is "increasingly characterized by fragmentation, diversity and difference" (Arroyo 90), Arroyo suggests that NQC filmmakers turned towards postmodern tropes such as irony or pastiche to process these ruptures and "represent fragmented subjectivities" (Arroyo 90). Ultimately, we need to remember that AIDS completely upended the world for LGBTQIA+ individuals. The fact that there was always the possibility that anyone could become or was already infected without knowing it, as the scholar further explains, felt "as if we had suddenly moved from one world to another. These changes affected all aspects of our lives, for many of us markedly changing the way we live them" (91). Certainly, the constant loss and mourning disrupted traditional ways of protected living, of a futurity for queer individuals and people living with AIDS. Basing her study on Arroyo, Pearl adds that the AIDS crisis also had deep implications for how people perceived their own identity and corporeality:

> The virus - that is, the illness - also, then, disrupted identity, the ways that people could think about themselves. […] The body's attempt to save itself is what kills it. In this way, the boundaries of the body in the realm of illness, *this* illness, are no longer so clearly demarcated as they have been in the past - partly because the metaphors for what the immune system does are no longer applicable. That narrative no longer works: the story of self versus foreign object does not apply. The self as whole, sacrosanct, inviolable, and definable became, even for those who were not ill, an illusion of self and subjectivity that could not be sustained. (Pearl 24)

These forms of perceiving and trying to rationalize the virus, then again, represent a form of postmodern narrative, as the author goes on to explain:

> A retrovirus does not follow the 'traditional' trajectory of infection, whereby a foreign substance infects the body and is 'conquered' by an army of antibodies […]. HIV, as a retrovirus, is a postmodern virus. It makes the body unable to differentiate between itself and what is external, or foreign, to itself. […] The lack of coherent narrative, or genre recognition, or familiarly fulfilled cinematic expectations in New Queer Cinema, is partly a representational, or 'artistic', reaction to the nature of retroviral behaviour. In other words, representation mimics the 'narrative' of the virus. (Pearl 24)

As becomes apparent, no clear-cut traditional narrative could truly and honestly represent the unpredictability of the virus in a human body and of a reality characterized by disrupted and fragmented identities, chronologies, and truths and an ever-growing uncertainty regarding a queer futurity. Far gone were the times of gay and lesbian liberation, in which people were able to rely on essentialist stereotypes misused to represent the "community" as a unitary collective. New queer ways of narratively exploring LGBTQIA+ existences within this

new world order thus needed to be experimented with[115] (Pearl 27). In detail, this was particularly achieved by relying on an "ahistoric, non-chronological, and even sometimes anachronistic sense of time" (Pearl 33) – greatly reflecting how regular life could be suddenly unhinged and ended by the unpredictability of a mere virus. In this way, as Pearl further explains, NQC does not burden itself with the impossible task of providing certainties and answers to this chaotic and inconceivable situation, but instead merely meditates on "the experience of fragmentation, disruption, unboundaried identity, incoherent narrative, and inconclusive endings. It is a way of providing meaning that does not change or sanitise the experience" (Pearl 33).

Unique narrative strategies also helped to fight the idea of hopelessness and death that an HIV/AIDS diagnosis generally symbolized. This was commonly achieved through either humanizing ostracized people who are dying abjectly or subverting the way death is represented and understood in cinematic terms (Bronski "The Queer 1990s" 332). The examples are manifold: Todd Haynes' *Poison*, for instance, is divided into three intercut different stories, each exploring a different generic style and addressing how individuals are othered and sidelined in society. The "horror" section of this movie, which heavily relies on sci-fi and horror b-movie tropes, serves to stress my point of re-imagining the AIDS narrative through humanization: this segment deals with a scientist, Dr. Graves (Larry Maxwell), who is afflicted with a disease that spreads through close and intimate contact with another person, develops cutaneous lesions, and eventually kills its victim (a clear placeholder for AIDS).

The ending of this segment is very reminiscent of Whale's 1931 *Frankenstein* adaptation: Haynes' makes us feel for the monstrous and abject victim who is literally hunted down by a mob and deemed a "sex killer" – a clear allusion to the way the sensationalistic media mistreated people living with AIDS. In the end, having been beaten by societal pressure, Graves is driven to suicide, the oppressive masses thus, once again, having destroyed the queer. Right before his death, however, he addresses his persecutors in a speech about pride

> You think I'm dirt, don't you? Don't you? Well, I'll tell you something: every one of you down there is exactly the same! Only you'll never know it. You'll never know it. Because you'll never know what pride is! Because pride is the only thing that lets

[115] Attempts at manifesting that which is supposedly undepictable were also endeavored on a visual level. Derek Jarman thus visualized the inability to give a true account of AIDS and the HIV virus through aesthetic means by taking cinema to its fringes. In *Blue* (1993), an already greatly AIDS-affected Jarman hence chose to completely reject traditional rules of filmmaking by confronting his audience with a static blue screen – a form of imageless cinema – that is accompanied by narration, music, and a variety of sounds: "*Blue* is a refusal of representation. […] And it is because Jarman increasingly doubted the value of visual representation that he chose to intervene in the medium that is most dependent on image. Rejecting the grammar of cinematic language, he resorted to monochrome, an ever-present reminder of the impossibility of portraying AIDS" (Lawrence 252-3). After all, as the filmmaker openly expresses in his film, "the worst of this illness is the uncertainty" (00:08:24-00:08:27).

> you stand up to misery! And not this kind of misery, but the kind of misery the whole stinking world is made of! (01:16:12-01:17:11)

Despite his afflictions and the way society has scapegoated and branded him, Dr. Graves keeps pride in himself and in his humanity – and prefers to embrace his death sentence rather than to live in a world as unconscious of its all-encompassing cruelty and double standards. The real monster, as he makes clear, are the people and false morals surrounding him that force him into the role of the abject when he is solely trying to survive. It is interesting that Haynes chooses a word as charged as *pride* in this context. Indeed, it can be read as a direct nod to queerness and finding pride and empowerment therein. After all, activism and pride for many individuals were the only way to stand up against normative and oppressive forces in a time as critical as the AIDS pandemic. Though Dr. Graves dies, he dies with pride.

Kalin's *Swoon*, then again, deals with death in a completely different manner. In it, a gay couple murders a small boy simply for the pleasure and excitement of it. The movie caused quite a controversy not only due to its content but also because it was greatly based on the real-life murder story of Leopold and Loeb who killed a child in the 1920s. While the case had been turned into fiction before in Hitchock's *Rope* (1948) and Fleischer's *Compulsion* (1959), it was never done in an as openly queer way as in *Swoon* (Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 226). Most interestingly, when reading the boy as a symbol of heterosexual procreation and the perpetuation of a heteronormative future, death in this case is reclaimed by the queer as a form of retaliation, thus distancing queerness from signifiers of victimhood and oppression: "the film is focused on death, and control over death. Further, it focuses on death as the point around which a gay relationship turns" (Pearl 31) seeing that it is through this crime that the two lovers are ultimately able to form a deepened bond. This approach regarding death was, however, not primarily meant to scandalize viewers. To a greater degree, it can be understood as another allegory regarding an AIDS afflicted world as the film "tries to make narrative out of, and make beautiful, what is thought of as senseless: the historical motiveless murder of a small boy. It tries to make sense of, and aestheticise, senseless death. An AIDS film indeed" (31).

Finally, there are also NQC movies that have found utmost radical and opposing ways to deal with death in cinema. Some NQC examples namely present characters that are able to outwit or outrun death: "the ultimate defiance of death is explicitly given in *The Doom Generation* – protagonists try to escape numerous murderers and psychos – but also in *Nowhere* in the shape of teen suicide and in *Totally Fucked Up* represented by AIDS" (Roig-Mora 149). Others, like *The Living End*, showcase the other extreme on this spectrum by featuring characters with a strong death drive. Indeed, these seropositive individuals play with life and

death and deliberately put themselves in danger seeing that they have nothing else to lose in the age of AIDS and in a society that simply sees them as disposable waste.

All of this, in turn, overrides the idea of people living with HIV/AIDS as embodying helpless and hopeless victims. While in previous cinematic accounts of AIDS "there is little chance of the diseased person having a productive life" (Lawrence 243), New Queer Cinema presents seropositive and queer people filled with vitality, individuals who are living and enjoying their lives, who are strong, and not defined by their serostatus. Indeed, many HIV-positive persons still had years to live before actual AIDS broke out, not to speak of the fact that their lives, identities, and subjectivities could be defined and fulfilled by many other aspects. Deliberately opposing the images of death and decay inundating the media of the time, NQC's protagonists are thus generally physically rather good looking, without any visible ailments, and thus eroticized and made desirable to the audience. These empowering approaches of portraying HIV-positive individuals build an enormous contrast to the way Robert in *Buddies*, for instance, is presented.

These different choices ultimately turned out to be crucial as they restored and provided hope, gave back dignity, agency, and humanity to people living with HIV/AIDS. At the same time, homoeroticism and queer sexuality could be regained as a positive through these same strategies. To recapitulate my discussion in chapter 4, AIDS movies usually shied away from portraying people with AIDS in intimate and sexual relationships. This was mainly because sexual acts supposedly represented a constant reminder of queer people's depravity and promiscuity and thus encapsulated the alleged reason of their infection in the first place. Only in the context of the nuclear family home could these characters find some kind of redemption. In contrast, NQC portrays sexually active men that move within their own community while deeply eroticizing the gay body. The eroticism celebrated by the film wave thus has deeper layers of meaning: though, again, not every NQC film directly deals with AIDS, we always need to bear in mind the general connotation of gay male sex with disease, degeneracy, and death. The mere act of showing a homoerotic act in media was thus utmost radical in itself. NQC, however, went further into the realm of kinks and promiscuous relations, queering the standards of acceptability by embracing a whole range of sexual explorations: from the sadistic act of a group spitting into a victim's mouth as portrayed in *Poison* to gangbangs and bondage in *Hustler White*, there is a recurring break with universalizing and acceptable sexual norms that assimilationists amongst the LGBTQIA+ community touted.

Lastly, I identify a connection between sex and death in NQC that is commonly explored in three different, at times overlapping, ways. Firstly, as already insinuated, this connection is

presented in form of images of hope and a queer futurity. More precisely, by showing that queer (safe) sex exists, NQC filmmakers deliberately engaged with the association between queer sex and death in order to then deconstruct it. This approach also clearly signified a struggle against a total absence of queer eroticism in media. Secondly, sex and eroticism served as a form of comfort and refuge to cope with the ever-present idea of an impending death. In an utmost intimate detailing of the loss of a former lover for *Gay Community News*, queer scholar Michael Bronski describes how his personal desire became deeply connected to his friend's death sentence: "I've begun to realize that my feelings of grief seem closely tied to sexual feelings, to see that during the six months between Jim's diagnosis and death, my sense of loss was almost always assuaged by physical desire" ("Death" 20). However, it was not so much the physical decay and death of his lover that aroused him sexually *per se*, but sex, mourning, and loss became intrinsically related in his life overall, taking on similar shapes:

> This was also my way of dealing with grief over losing other friends and acquaintances who died too quickly and too painfully, and losing a whole lifestyle in which sex was relatively easy and uncomplicated. It makes sense that sex, the same sex that I had always looked to for sustenance, would help me through my grief.
> I also think grieving was constructed very much like my sexual feelings: beyond words and beyond reason. Like sexual desire, my grief came in dreams and waking fantasies. It eluded control. So similar were grief and sex to me, so enmeshed, that sickness and death were incorporated into my sexual fantasies. (Bronski "Death" 14)

Not only was sex a form of grieving or of escapism, but more so a practice to digest the reality he now found himself in. Seeing that throughout his life Bronski had reverted to sexual explorations in order to make sense of his own identity and relate to other gay men, sex not only "made grief bearable and manageable" ("Death" 14) to him, but, as he further suggests, it represented a way to collectively deal with the ubiquitous losses and grief in his community (14). In a similar way, I propose, eroticizing the queer on screen might not only have taken up a political and titillating function, but this utmost safe form of exploring sex could have also brought a similar consolation to audiences.

Lastly, the third way of coping with the relation between sex and death happened through the lens of acceptance. Indeed, embracing the idea of sex as a deathly yet erotic act represented a subversive stance of reappropriation and of returning agency to the one's afflicted by AIDS. This ranged from an embracing of death (see my discussion of *The Living End*) to the extreme erotization of death (an orgasm, after all, signifying a little death). The latter device was taken to an extreme in Dennis Cooper's literary work, in which the very act of killing was often (homo)eroticized. Cinematic prime examples would be the visceral *Frisk* (Todd Verow), a 1995 film adaptation of the eponymous novel by Cooper (1991), as well as *The Living End*,

which visually alludes to these questions by featuring a rape scene between two seropositive men in which one of them is being held at gun point. While the portrayals I just listed do mostly not fit into the idea of making queerness more accessible to the wider masses, in their diversity, however, they achieved to create a more truthful portrayal of what it meant to desire and to consummate certain desires in times of a pandemic.

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As I already alluded to, there is a deep postmodern dimension to NQC that demands further examination. Before taking up my discussion of postmodernism within the film wave, however, I would like to succinctly recapitulate some of its general characteristics already established in chapter 1. It should hence be highlighted that postmodernism is generally denoted by unraveling certainties, by a great blurring of traditional (and dichotomous) boundaries, categories, norms, and conventions. Simultaneously, a questioning of institutions has become more and more prominent since its emergence. While these certainly include traditional institutions (such as the state or the government), less tangible – yet as important – ones (including the universality of the cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied male) also generally fall under attack in the postmodern context. Indeed, master narratives that favor a very specific and limiting identity, as well as a single truth or worldview, are disrupted as the idea of continuity and progress is substituted by a wide array of smaller, diverse narratives forming a multi-perspective worldview. This ultimately allows a larger variety of individuals to explore and expose their own legitimate subjectivities, identities, and desires.

As for the arts, hierarchies that distinguished between high and low art/culture have fallen apart in a postmodern world. The challenging of these conventions has led to experimentation that is often playful and ironic at heart. Indeed, intertextuality, self-reflexivity, irony, pastiche, and parody are the go-to devices that help us in making sense of a disrupted and fragmented reality in which monolithic truths and traditions are crumbling. All these factors, as established in chapter 1, also greatly influenced queer theory as such.

When it comes to the cinematic medium, while full-fledged postmodernism mostly took shape during the 1980s and 1990s (Boggs & Pollard 159), postmodern elements and variations thereof were already employed decades earlier. Generally speaking, postmodern film often reveals a certain somber tinge best viewed in its "disjointed narratives, a dark view of the human condition, images of chaos and random violence, death of the hero, emphasis on technique over content, and dystopic views of the future" (159). All of these points simultaneously already hint towards the fact that postmodernism tends to reject commercialized rules, structures, and

formulas established by classical Hollywood, blurring the lines between mainstream and independent filmmaking in the process (163-4).

Boggs and Pollard, nonetheless, go on to explain that the stylistic and narrative transgression of postmodern directors – such as Quentin Tarantino, Oliver Stone, or the Coen brothers – is usually not translated into a similarly radical political stance (159). At its core the movement bears great potential for political commentary and exploration for the simple reason that postmodernism is contextualized in a world defined by "the post-Fordist economy, globalization, the informational revolution, heightened patterns of consumption, increasing social atomization" (160). To the scholars' regret, instead of questioning and deconstructing these issues, "longstanding ideological boundaries and conflicts have become increasingly blurred or refracted" (160), leading to ambiguous results. This very ambiguity, then again, is also – supposedly – found in the wishy-washy political points of views these films support (167).

Ultimately, in order to cope with these anxieties in film, a general pessimism and cynicism regarding the future is employed that convey postapocalyptic aesthetics and ideas of decay yet lack any critical foundation (Boggs and Pollard 161). Thus, instead of a deep interrogation of major questions pertaining society, postmodernism largely brought upon a wider interest in visual and voyeuristic pleasure derived from a film's cinematography and a "restless search for new epistemological and aesthetic paradigms" (165) to describe a world disintegrated by "urban chaos, civic violence, hyper-real media culture, ecological crisis, and a progressively disordered international politics" (165).

While this may hold true for some *auteurs* and filmmakers, Boggs' and Pollard's points are not universally representative – especially if we zoom out of the bubble of Hollywood filmmaking. Indeed, New Queer Cinema, an independent film form greatly informed by postmodern ideas and devices[116] serving to overthrow discourses legitimating dominant power structures[117], also proves that postmodern cinema reaches further than the output of a few successful Hollywood directors and the heteronormative film canon. Indeed, the same pessimism and apocalyptic touch described by Boggs and Pollard is found in Araki's work but it is inserted in a highly politicized context (that includes issues around AIDS and queer sexuality and desire as explored in *The Living End* or *Totally Fucked Up*).

[116] New Queer Cinema's relation to postmodernism was actually addressed from the get-go: Rich already declared the movement as "Homo Pomo" (*New* 18) in the article that coined the movement as such.

[117] The ambiguity and the questioning of total and monolithic truths these films put forth also allude to an interrogation of authorities in many postmodern works. Indeed, this again is key for the struggles of LGBTQIA+ communities and people living with HIV/AIDS, who have been incriminated by institutionalized authorities (government, law enforcement, scientific field) for far too long.

Lastly, I would like to add that ambiguity is not necessarily apolitical. As has been greatly expanded upon throughout this study, queerness thrives on ambiguity, embraces it and like this makes an utmost radical political statement. In the same way, the ambiguity found in the technical and stylistic devices of postmodern film could hence be read as underlining the fluidity of identities, subjectivities, and sexualities[118] in contemporary life while stressing the fact that imposing certain truths or solutions is unfeasible in an intrinsically complex and ever-changing reality. This, then again, ultimately helps to deconstruct two-dimensional, generalized worldviews, stereotypes, and tropes that have been perpetuated for too long in cinema[119].

The same goes for postmodernism's love for aesthetics, which are not necessarily devoid of political interest and believes. Indeed, we should be careful not to view aestheticism and sociopolitical critique or activism as mutually exclusive. Instead, "[a]esthetics as politics has been the historic domain of gay men, and these films continue that tradition, heightening the aestheticism of a time gone by but also excavating and reflecting on the politics inherent in those aesthetic traditions in the first place" (Mennel 85). In fact, this also goes back to the queer camp aesthetic earlier broached, which greatly relies on superficiality and visuals.

Finally, this destabilization of tradition is also present in the deconstruction, recontextualization and queering of (film) history and time. Overall, cinema has a rather interesting relation to time and causality owing to its ability to manipulate and edit the extra-diegetic time of actual events by shortening it without necessarily breaking audience immersion. To this end, several techniques are at its disposal, able to slow down, fast-forward, reverse, return, or jump in time. These very techniques are exploited and experimented with at large by queer postmodern cinema to explore questions regarding history and the relation between past and present events. By deconstructing history from a queer point of view while

[118] The breaking of boundaries in NQC, however, goes further than those of matters related to sexuality and identity. In fact, they also include the blurring of reality and fantasy, for instance in Araki's *Totally Fucked Up* and *Nowhere*, which feature a blurring of reality and drug-fueled fantasies and dreams. Similarly, the dichotomous relation of high and low/popular culture is commonly removed in NQC texts. Indeed, popular youth culture was incredibly impactful on New Queer Cinema which is filled with references to youth culture of the time, including nods to video gaming, music, youth speech, and idols – to some extent reminding us of the use of youth culture in New American Cinema and Underground Cinema. One of the most pertinent examples in this regard might be the influence of the fast-paced and dream-like quality of music videos that had become popular for teens since MTV's launch in 1981 (Lucia et al. "1976-1990" 156; Duggan "Making" 27; Mennel 65). Established conventions are also disregarded when it comes to NQC's engagement with genres, which are often queered, uprooted, deconstructed and merged. *The Living End* thus toys with expectations of road movies, while twisting the idea of a love story, whereas *Go Fish* presents the lesbian version of a romantic comedy.

[119] As becomes obvious, the postmodern devices and elements present in NQC also exhibit parallels to queer theory: this is best seen in the breaking of boundaries, the embracing of fluidity, and the deconstruction of normative and oppressive power structures and hierarchies. In its deconstruction of essentialist modes of talking about LGBTQIA+ people, postmodernism opens up a space for a multitude of voices, of desires, sexualities, eroticisms, and bodies, allowing for the merging of a plurality of subjectivities and existences without (at least in theory) placing one above the other.

emphasizing LGBTQIA+ historicity and importance, NQC attempts to invalidate and abolish the distinctions between a historical and canonical center and its margins, while uplifting and foregrounding those who have been silenced by historians. Indeed, reviewing history is utterly essential to queer existence as well as to queer theory and studies because of a deep lack of existing queer archives, historical documentation, records, and stories.

Queer memory thus becomes essential not only when dealing with forgotten and erased pasts but also regarding the lingering impact the past has on the present, their relation to one another, and their importance for the future (futurity hereby often representing an utmost important beacon of light for those living in troubled times). Hence, the excavation and reprocessing of historical facts and lived experiences is linked to ideas around heritage, of remembering, of acknowledging and cherishing one's own culture and identity. Almost as a form of solace, it is able to give individuals a sense of belonging, of having partaken in history (with all its ups and downs), of being part of a lineage of people that went through different yet similar struggles and trials. Remembering and looking for answers in the past is also of help to fight for a better present and future.

Accordingly, history as a master narrative is questioned and revised in NQC and revealed to be utmost queerphobic, centered in heteronormativity and constructed mainly by non-queer individuals. In order to reconfigure these power dynamics and to regain control over their own history and past, NQC filmmakers (being well-versed in film history) attempted to tackle and rework – often in unison – both LGBTQIA+ history at large as well as the more niche field of queer film history. In fact, one of the main objectives of the film wave was to turn visible the deliberate de-queering of history by historians and the foregrounding of historical figures and events that were related to LGBTQIA+ individuals. In this sense, Jarman's *Edward II* explores a supposed relation between King Edward and nobleman Gaveston, *Swoon* depicts the love story of Leopold and Loeb, two historical queer murderers, while *The Hours and Times* imagines a short homoerotically charged *liaison* between John Lennon and Brian Epstein.

The excavation of a collective LGBTQIA+ past became even more essential in the face of AIDS and the many-faceted threats it encapsulated. As established in chapter 4, throughout the AIDS crisis false accusations and a twisting of truths were perpetuated by the media and politicians, all of which were incredibly incriminating for LGBTQIA+ people: amongst these allegations we find, e.g., the unfounded and utterly homophobic accounts about patient zero, rumors that AIDS originated in "disreputable" and sinful sexual acts between men, or the representation of queer individuals as manic killers. So as to counteract these one-sided, accusatory fabrications, a need was felt to revise, rewrite, and rectify historical facts – an

undertaking through which a simultaneous redemption and retribution for those harshly affected by the pandemic could be attained.

With this very objective in mind, Canadian New Queer filmmaker John Greyson scrutinizes and takes apart AIDS-related misrepresentations in *Zero Patience* (1993) through the generic conventions of the musical: Gaetan Dugas, the supposed patient zero, namely comes back to life as a ghost to rectify the falsehood regarding the stories that circulate about him. Furthermore, we encounter a gay sexologist and curator doing research for a museum exhibition on the AIDS pandemic who goes about his work with the utmost negative bias, from the get-go branding patient zero as a depraved, perverted, selfish serial killer who deliberately infected others (an obvious mocking nod to journalists such as Randy Shilts). He eventually changes his mind, suddenly declaring that "Patient Zero should actually be acclaimed a hero of the epidemic. Through his cooperation in the 1982 cluster study, he helped prove that AIDS was sexually transmitted. Thus, Zero should be lauded as the slut who inspired safer sex" (01:20:01-01:20:18). Despite his new insights, he is unable to stop the opening of the exhibition, seeing that the museum director understands the scandalous and provocative depiction of Dugas to be more marketable to the public than actually listening to scientific evidence. As a form of protest, AIDS activists then break into the museum at night – a stand in for the canonical representation of history – to set right the information regarding AIDS that is shared with the general public.

As this filmic example also shows, NQC went forth to introduce an interrogation about responsibility and blame. As Pearl argues, this is not achieved by creating "films [that] are pedantic or pedagogic or didactic" but rather through "their narrative trajectory and conclusion" (29). In fact, instead of presenting clear-cut moralistic narratives and closed endings, as is the case in numerous studio productions, more subtle ways are explored. The break with linearity and the fragmentation of time and space, for instance, become devices to emphasize the already-described randomness, illogical, non-chronological and non-progressive essence of the retrovirus. Stimulated by the nonconformist structure, the viewer is thus challenged to ponder on who is to blame[120] when something this arbitrary and unpredictable happens. Nonetheless,

[120] In *Chocolate Babies* the idea of blame becomes central to the narrative, as the film presents a queer, HIV+ terrorist group that deliberately targets politicians and knowingly infects them with the virus to fight their callous passivity, which, in turn, is declared as being responsible for the quick spreading of the virus and the lack of funding towards research and education.

despite the movies' chaotic nature, through these means a sense of agency[121] and justice is restored to the community.

By mixing past and present, history is approached as being always in the making and able to be reevaluated from a present-day position, an idea New Queer filmmakers visualized and emphasized through the use of aesthetics of past eras. Haynes' *Poison* thus exhibits a grainy black and white b-horror and -sci-fi aesthetic reminiscent of 50s creature features, while both *Swoon* and *Looking for Langston* choose a sleek black and white look as a throwback to Hollywood's golden age and thus the era in which their films are set. These possibilities create rather interesting dialogues with cinema's past, especially because the directors' topics of choice would have never received the same treatment, attention, and care back then (Mennel 68-9). More so, the constructed nature of history is also highlighted by joining certain historically incongruent elements in the diegetic world and by a disregard of historically correct depictions. *Swoon*, for instance, thus uses "a court stenographer [who] is played by an African American woman (an unthinkable position in the 1920s), while other characters use push-button phones and modern tape recorders" (Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 227). Similarly, Jarman's *Edward II* presents a world based on Marlowe's play *Edward II* but simultaneously displays contemporary clothing, objects (a toy robot and dentures e.g.) and picketing queers who rally with slogans very reminiscent of those used during AIDS protests.

Very much in accord with queer theory and activism, New Queer Cinema also tries to unearth stories about those who lack visibility in an already ostracized community and who have therefore been deprived of looking back at a film history of their own. Hereby, especially the intersectional stories and histories of queer people of color come to the forefront. Indeed, films like *Looking for Langston* or *The Watermelon Woman*[122] (Cheryl Dunye 1996), for example, explore histories of black people in the early decades of the 20th century. Hereby the former transgresses history by mixing extracts from the poetic works of Harlem Renaissance poets Hughes, Nugent, and Baldwin with that of queer black poet Essex Hemphill (a contemporary of the director) or by transforming a 1920s club into a contemporary disco with

[121] At the same time, agency in queer cinema can also be achieved in another way for those who are faced with a shortened life expectancy because of an HIV/AIDS diagnosis: in this regard, the filmic medium in itself grants a means to return in time, to immortalize certain moments, and to hence regain control and power over time. Indeed, several individuals devoted to NQC productions were seropositive and died of complications from AIDS, including directors Marlon Riggs and Bill Sherwood; dancer and choreographer Willi Ninja who appeared in *Paris is Burning*; as well as poet Essex Hemphill whose poetry graced passages in *Looking for Langston*.

[122] *The Watermelon Woman* follows a young black lesbian documentary filmmaker as she dives deeper into her research of the (fictionalized) long-lost history of black lesbianism in film. Accordingly, the movie can be read as a dramatization of the very exploration NQC filmmakers undertook to unearth hidden pasts, stories, and histories. To make this point clear, Dunye ends the film with a disclaimer stating "[s]ometimes you have to create your own history. The Watermelon Woman is fiction. Cheryl Dunye, 1996" (01:19:48).

disco balls and fog machines (Pearl 31; Mennel 79-80, 82). In this way, the importance of legacy is stressed. More precisely, by focusing on the Harlem Renaissance, Julien finds a transgressive and radical interdisciplinary artistic movement that bears certain connections to the queer output of his heyday:

> The artistic movement of the Harlem Renaissance crossed literature, sculpture, painting, journalism and photography with a 'revolutionary' sensibility that advanced a 'black aesthetic', without catering to a dominant 'white' sensibility by hiding problems within the black community. Several of the important members of the Harlem Renaissance were gay and/or women. […] Both artistic movements – the Harlem Renaissance and queer art and culture – resurrected an aesthetics that derived from the margin and did not pander to dominant culture and included different genres and media because they relied on larger philosophical and political frameworks. (Mennel 79-80)

From the interdisciplinarity, to the search for an aesthetic to describe a minority's specific sensibilities and struggles, through to the queer undertones, the many overlaps between both movements immediately become apparent.

Though the interrogation of the pasts and presents of people of color are certainly part of New Queer Cinema, we should not let ourselves be misled by the idea that the representation of diversity within this film wave was as broad ranging as it appears to be. As a matter of fact, most New Queer Cinema productions – and particularly the most celebrated ones – were made by white gay cisgender men (apart from Gregg Araki) and addressed stories about the very same identities. In a move to rectify this issue and, perhaps, to better match the idea of queerness and its inherent inclusivity, "[t]he female delegates and those of colour were added in haste and retrospectively" (Aaron "New Queer Cinema: An Introduction" 7). Naturally, this raises questions about POC tokenism for the sole purpose of maintaining a pretense of diversity. Muñoz also proposes that no critical examination of whiteness exists in most NQC releases that denaturalizes the white male as the social and even eroticized norm: "[m]any films that comprise the New Queer Cinema contribute to the continual reproduction of the normative imprint—the idealized white prototype that forms not only gay male desire but, beyond that, gay male sociality" (137).

In sum, while diversity might be present in some films made by white New Queer filmmakers, the actual interrogation thereof is often missing, which would allow for radical debates about how race, class, gender, and queer subjectivities, identities, and desires all intersect. In the superficial depiction of race, grave issues are often overlooked, including the way in which AIDS ravaged in communities of color, issues of race and poverty mixed with those of queer sexualities and the oppression and discrimination resulting thereof. Naturally,

the complete opposite is also absent in a variety of NQC films, namely the positive depictions of intersectional queer community building and empowerment. Some exceptions include the documentary *Paris is Burning*, in which "not one person is marked visibly white" (Contreras 122) or the short films *Looking for Langston* and *Tongues Untied*, all of which feature deep analyses of questions regarding queer blackness, the relation between those two markers and how they relate to desire and sexuality.

In this respect, the general racism and white centrism of the film industry and the media covering NQC's output led to a lack of possibilities for people of color – a trend that was also clearly evident in the wider independent sector, though ruptures were also happening in that regard. Certainly, these evidences "do reveal a structural bias in the funding and distribution of New Queer Cinema" (Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 237), particularly when further taking into consideration that the funding of feature films dried up mostly for New Queer filmmakers of color during the 1990s (including the likes of Cheryl Dunye, Isaac Julien or Partibha Parmar), while their white contemporaries were able to take on full-blown careers (Mennel 72). As a consequence, "New Queer works by women and people of color were much more likely to be shorter than feature length or shot on video and therefore less likely to earn theatrical releases" (Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 237). Instead, many of these releases became stuck at film festivals failing to find any subsequent distribution (Pidduck "After" 268-9).

Lastly, as Louise Wallenberg explains, the rampant homophobia within communities of color in America also made it more difficult for black artists to thrive:

> While white dominant culture has left little space for black representations in general, it needs pointing out that homophobic attitudes informing black communities constitute another reason why there have been so few gay and lesbian representations produced. Critiquing black homophobia, Ron Simmons has stressed how black gays have been ridiculed and how the prevailing view on homosexuality as pathology resulting from white racist depression has made impossible any serious discussion of it. It remains a 'sin' against the race. (Wallenberg 129)

Another issue associated with racial representations is that of New Queer Cinema's western centrism as discussions about the film wave commonly only focus on anglophone productions from the US[123] (and, to a lesser extent, on a few films from Britain by Derek Jarman and Isaac Julien). To understand that these notions are reductive, we only need to look at the direct precursors of NQC (the likes of Frank Ripploh's *Taxi zum Klo*) or even the many

[123] Unfortunately, this is an issue this very project also perpetuates due to the nature of my personal field of studies: so as to stay within the limits of North American Studies and to be able to keep a more focused and precise academic work, I chose to keep this project within the bounds of US productions while recognizing its shortcomings.

international movies throughout film history that inspired NQC. Also, during the heyday of the movement, NQC-like radical talent was emerging in other parts of the world, including movies by West German Monika Treut (*Die Jungfrauenmachine* [1988], *My Father is Coming* [1991]), Canadians Bruce LaBruce (*No Skin Off My Ass* [1991]) and John Greyson (*Zero Patience*) or French filmmakers Cyril Collard (*Les Nuits Fauves* [1992]) and André Téchiné (*Les Roseaux Sauvages* [1994]) (Mennel 71; Pidduck "After" 279-80; Doty "Film" 498-9).

When it comes to the representation of gender diversity in NQC, again, we find a general preference for male filmmakers creating art about gay men[124]. Some might argue that because during the AIDS crisis homosexual men were the main targets of attack and male-to-male sexual relations were propagated as being the most debased and most dangerous form of sexual interaction (and thus the supposed origin of the pandemic), it might appear plausible that the uplifting and empowerment of gay male sex and the discussion of the issues they faced were most paramount. While there is, at least to a certain degree, validity to this point, it should not be underplayed that queer women also faced a myriad of issues that were in dire need to be addressed: not only in light of the continuous oppression and silencing they face in a highly patriarchal and LGBTQIA+-phobic society, but also because of the fact that many queer and non-queer women were also involved in the AIDS crisis, both as people living with AIDS as well as supporting allies. In turn, the thrusting aside of female voices only mirrored and perpetuated the silencing of women in cinema in general[125]. Indeed, this exclusion on the basis of gender, in the end, is everything but queer and reminds us more of essentialist ways of perceiving issues related to gender and sexuality.

In detail, early on pictures about and by queer women were generally overlooked by the market, as Rich explains: "all the new movies being snatched up by distributors, shown in mainstream festivals, and booked into theaters are by the boys," while "the amazing new lesbian videos that are redefining the whole dyke relationship to popular culture remain hard to find and marginalized" (Rich *New* 18). Only when towards the end of NQC's prime this issue became undeniably obvious through a hail of criticism, movies such as *Go Fish* or *The Watermelon Woman* started to be celebrated and promoted (Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 240-1;

[124] One of the few male NQC directors that actually centered a large part of his filmmaking on portraying women while following (and queering) the tradition of women's film with utmost care and respect is Todd Haynes, whose short film *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (1988) and feature films like *Safe* (1995); *Far from Heaven* (2002); or his 2015 picture *Carol* perfectly fit into this category (Pick 106; King 242).

[125] It needs to be furthermore noted that the inclusivity also seemed to stop in regard to trans and gender-nonbinary folks. Few are the films in which we see gender-bending people, but actual openly trans or non-binary individuals are all but missing in NQC with the exception of *Paris is Burning*, a masterpiece in intersectionality and diversity. The same goes for the complete absence of gender-nonconforming filmmakers. This, then again, shows that in terms of gender and sexual diversity NQC was closer to lesbian, gay (and bisexual) cinema than to the prospects queer theory had envisioned.

Bronski "The Queer 1990s" 336). Due to all these reasons, it comes as no surprise that female queer filmmakers, regardless of race or social standing, were unable to keep up a regular cinematic output and often got lost into obscurity (Rich *New* 202). Even the few women filmmakers who truly achieved some success – Rose Troche, Cheryl Dunye, Sadie Benning – stayed marginalized and ignored by critics (Smelik 68; Bronski "The Queer 1990s" 336).

The sidelining of queer women in New Queer Cinema becomes the more surprising when understanding that in mainstream culture and within films created by non LGBTQIA+ individuals a trend of so-called "lesbian chic" was emerging. More precisely, as Rich details, "[i]n 1984–93 instrumental factors fed its development: the prominence of an ascendant queer culture, empowered female sexuality, a new 'lesbian chic,' heightened U.S. militarism, infamous serial killings, and a couple of hit movies in the multiplex denounced by pundits for glamorizing the murder of men by women" (*New* 103). Yet, not only violent and gory events such as the serial killings by Aileen Wuornos inspired this trend, but stars like Madonna and the media craze around her during the 80s and 90s were crucial in this regard. In fact, Madonna and comedian Sandra Bernhard made waves by insinuating to be romantically involved with one another. What arose from this was a commodification of a new (stereo)type of lesbian women, one that was appealing to a wider audience:

> This newly stylish lesbian didn't have to wear flannel shirts anymore or announce ideological positions; she could just buy clothes and go to dinner parties. The fad culminated […] with the media invention of Lesbian Chic, which appeared in 1993 in cover stories in three magazines, nearly simultaneously. […] No fame comes unencumbered. Lesbian visibility was attained at long last, freed from the stale stereotype of asexual spoilsport, but the terms of visibility were set by the media and would eventually prove problematic. (Rich *New* 104)

As a result, mainstream cinema, eager to get a piece of this fashionable pie, released an international wave of violent lesbian films (mostly directed by straight men), in which seductive femme fatales bonded over acts of killing, including *Thelma and Louise* (Ridley Scott, 1991); *Basic Instinct* (Paul Verhoeven, 1992); *Sister My Sister* (Nancy Meckler, 1994); *Heavenly Creatures* (Peter Jackson, 1994); *Fun* (Rafal Zielinski, 1994); *La Cérémonie* (Claude Chabrol, 1995); *Butterfly Kiss* (Michael Winterbottom, 1995); or *Bound* (Lana Wachowski & Lilly Wachowski, 1996). To some degree, this trend could be viewed as mainstreams answer to NQC, particularly for featuring an eroticized queer violence as found in male-led films like *Swoon* or *The Living End* (Smelik 68; Pick 104-5). After all, the films' provocative nature was even publicly discussed in similar ways: did these lesbian killer films perpetuate certain stereotypes through a commodification of queer women by non-LGBTQIA+ individuals? Would

mainstream audiences be able to read the cultural critique underlying these films? Or should they rather be viewed as a form of *queersploitation* cinema in which marginalized individuals finally gained power, an assertive sense of authority, and agency?

While the manifold points of contestation I have listed are utmost important to relativize the incredible optimism that was generated around the film movement, we should nonetheless not downplay New Queer Cinema's importance for the realm of cinema in general. First, while the film wave might not have turned out to be as idealistically diverse as many hoped it would be when it first emerged, it nonetheless created new standards for representing LGBTQIA+ matters in film. These, as already explored at large, went beyond the mere focus on positive images, instead embracing taboos and re-appropriating stereotypes that LGBTQIA+ people had vehemently contested in the past. Like this, filmmakers enabled the breaking of rules the community had imposed on itself regarding how cinematic representations should be handled. By creating a wider spectrum of LGBTQIA+ representations and stories, coupled with the great media attention the movement received, NQC, to a degree, also became a blueprint for future independent queer cinema. Indeed, just in the same way underground and other queer filmmakers of the past had inspired NQC, so did it inform the filmmaking of future independent and experimental queer talents[126].

Notwithstanding the fact that other countries worldwide had their fair share of radical queer filmmaking even prior to the rise of NQC, as exemplified earlier, the American wave nonetheless was one of the main catalysts to turn politically charged, transgressively queer filmmaking into a global phenomenon:

> In the last decade of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first, […] a New Queer Cinema emerged within the resurgence of energy (and outside interest) in Latin American cinemas [and cinemas around the world], and in fact has provided a crucial counterweight to the drift toward global movie industry norms in national cinemas which once had been the site of innovative, groundbreaking experiments in political and aesthetic oppositionality. (Rich *New* 142)

Prime examples include the Argentinian production *La Ciénaga* (Lucrecia Martel, 2001); the Argentinian-Dutch movie *Tan de repente* (Diego Lerman, 2002); Mexico's *A Thousand Clouds of Peace* (Julián Hernández, 2003); France's *Gouttes d'eau sur pierres brûlantes* (François

[126] This development is best seen in films like *Boys Don't Cry* (Kimberly Peirce, 1999) or *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (John Cameron Mitchell, 2001). Even non-LGBTQIA+ directors mastered to partially capture a certain NQC essence in their films, best achieved in titles like *Happy Together* (Wong Kar-Wai, 1997), *High Art* (Lisa Cholodenko, 1998), *Being John Malkovich* (Spike Jonze, 1999), or *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (Anthony Minghella, 1999) (Rich NQC 130,133,135). All of these, however, to different degrees walk the line between radical and marginal cinematic ideas and a more mainstream-oriented execution.

Ozon, 2000); or Thailand's *Tropical Malady* (Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2004) (Rich *New* 176-7; 215).

Simultaneously, as many critics agree on, NQC also aided in raising the studios' awareness and interest regarding queer audiences' pink money. After all, as Todd Haynes puts it in the documentary *Fabulous!*, New Queer Cinema "was a discovery of a market. People began to invest in these films and put them into more reliable forms of narrative" (00:49:22-00:49:30). The interest was initially particularly fed through festival buzz and the fact that a variety of NQC films found wider distribution both in the theatrical and home video markets. At the same time, NQC directors were suddenly enabled to launch full-fledged careers, some of them being backed by larger production companies (Griffin 58; Aaron "New Queer Cinema: An Introduction" 8).

Ultimately, however, NQC's greatest point of influence can be found in all the direct cash-ins produced by the big studios as well as independent producers (both of which were, to different degrees, in a process of merging as we have learned in chapter 2). This trend, however, very soon saturated the market with the result that "the sheer volume diluted the quality" (Rich *New* 132). Furthermore, as will be explored in detail in chapter 8, this wave of quickly produced films lost their radical political and activist charge, their love for diversity, their direct links to the community, their raw edge and creative experimentation, ambiguity, and deconstructive power[127]. Instead, they mainly consisted of happy-go-lucky and essentialist LGBTQIA+ themed romcoms and coming out stories, including titles such as *Jeffrey* (Christopher Ashley, 1995); *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar* (Beeban Kidron, 1995); *The Incredibly True Adventures of Two Girls in Love* (Maria Maggenti, 1995); *The Birdcage* (Mike Nichols, 1996)*; In & Out* (Frank Oz, 1997); *Billy's Hollywood Screen Kiss* (Tommy O'Haver, 1998); *Edge of Seventeen* (David Moreton, 1998); or *Better Than Chocolate* (Anne Wheeler, 1999) to name but a few[128]. Simultaneously a wave of "gay best friend" movies surged, in which gay men were treated like fun and sophisticated sidekicks to their female best friend (*My Best Friend's Wedding* [P.J. Hogan, 1997]; *As Good as It Gets* [James L. Brooks, 1997]; *The Object of My Affection* [Nicholas Hytner, 1998]; *The Next Best Thing* [John Schlesinger, 2000]). The gay bestie of Julia Robert's character in *My Best Friend's Wedding* synthesizes this trend

[127] Interestingly, this mainstreaming and commercialization of LGBTQIA+ (or rather L&G) stories throughout the 1990s, to a great extent deeply resembles and reflects the way independent cinema with all its marginal ideas, methods, and quirks was absorbed by Hollywood during the decade. Naturally, these developments had both positive and negative impacts, a discussion I will revert to later in chapter 8.

[128] While there had been attempts at creating LGBTQIA+ comedies in the 1980s (*Zorro: The Gay Blade* [Peter Medak, 1981]; *Victor/Victoria*), some of these new romcoms distinguished themselves from their predecessors by the fact that they take place within LGBTQIA+ communities (*Jeffrey*; *Billy's Hollywood Screen Kiss*).

best when he describes himself as "sleek, stylish, radiant with charisma," (01:38:59-01:39:05) further noting that he is unmistakably "gay like most devastatingly handsome single men of his age are" (01:39:23-01:39:29).

Lastly, Michele Aaron introduces the intriguing idea that NQC might have had a hand in creating a new form of queer spectatorship. Underlying this statement is the notion that throughout history queerness has been toyed with to create certain tensions and levels of meaning through subtext. While general audience members might have missed out on these subtleties in the past, due to rising representations and the diversification of queer content today "the contemporary spectator, can be seen to willingly avow homosexuality rather than disavow it" (Aaron "Spectator" 198). Though NQC should not be credited as a sole influence in this regard, it nonetheless had a certain impact on mainstream media, which, in turn, began adapting more and more LGBTQIA+-themed content. Hence, not only the machineries behind the production of cinema and the LGBTQIA+ community as such were ultimately changed by NQC, but even the everyday American audience member might have gotten their minor share of queer awareness.

As earlier explored, most movements and waves tend to be unable to go on forever. In the case of New Queer Cinema, as I have detailed at large, it not only stopped being perceived as *new* but also began evading its *queer* roots. Naturally, the assimilation to Hollywoodian norms had much to do with this. We namely need to consider that this type of marginal queer cinema was only able to emerge in direct opposition to the mainstream. Like independent cinema as a whole, it thus always stood in relation to the norms dictated by Hollywood and the studios which it deliberately fought and broke. That being said, though belonging to the margins, this fringe cinema at the same time always strove to share its political messages with and to be heard by as many people as possible so as to multiply the voices of its members and subjects. Ultimately, as shown, it succeeded in this regard, turning queer cinema into a relatively popular cinematic form. This newfound popularity, then again, unearthed further questions, such as how long a fringe cinema can stay marginal or radical if the center becomes attracted by it and whether the line between margins and center is disappearing.

Even some New Queer Cinema talents ultimately assimilated and became more traditional in their filmmaking: Gregg Araki, who was known for his edgy topics, softened, releasing friendly movies like *Splendor* (1999) that lacked the raw queer sexuality and violent depictions he had become known for[129]. In this respect, as Bronski argues, the empowering

[129] Naturally, this also has to do with opportunity. Many directors choose to create something out of the box while making their first features in order to distinguish themselves. When their careers steady, things often change – a tendency that can be observed in the artistic development of several well-known directors.

dimension around the reclamation of queer sex and promiscuity as positive and empowering became less and less of importance in LGBTQIA+ film, the discussions instead not only turning towards lesbian and gay love stories and coming out stories, but also to a batch of family-friendly films about drag and gender:

> This de-sexualization also allowed mainstream films to discuss issues of gender, as opposed to sexuality. […] This coalition of cultural concerns and imperatives produced three very popular films about gay men in drag – *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994), *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar* (1995), and *The Birdcage* (1996) – and also produced two mainstream films about women, sex, and gender: the 1995 road adventure *Boys on the Side* and the 1996 faux-noir thriller *Bound*. (Bronski "The Queer 1990s" 336)

While topics around the challenging of gender norms can certainly be highly queer and important to the discussion of queer existences, these developments also represented "a backlash to the experimentation and sexual explicitness of much of New Queer Cinema" (Bronski "The Queer 1990s" 339).

The absence of discussions related to sexual and corporeal matters in these pictures can, moreover, be greatly related to the successful advances in AIDS medication that emerged in the mid-1990s, which helped reduce the levels of HIV found in a person's system so that they become undetectable. This does not mean that the AIDS crisis suddenly ended. Indeed, a large portion of patients remained uninformed, untreated, many did not have access to the medication, while others greatly suffered from its side effects. Additionally, the stigma and discrimination around HIV/AIDS continued. Nonetheless, a wave of optimism spread, giving the wrong impression that HIV/AIDS was not as much of an urgent matter and thus not a hot topic in need of being tackled.

Indeed, now that HIV/AIDS turned from a definitive death sentence into a lifelong chronic illness, even "AIDS activist groups were far less in the forefront of either creating or being subjects of news reports" (Bronski "The Queer 1990s" 336). The same could be said for the film wave: "[t]he urgency that had fueled the NQC was gone. So was Reagan, replaced by eight years of a Clinton White House (1992–98) that lessened rhetorics of damnation to such an extent that even eight years of George W. Bush couldn't roll back the tide. […] Activism gave way to lifestyle, as the old defiance faded into homonormativity" (Rich *New* 261). In the end, these developments are utmost comprehensible. After a decade and a half of fighting, the community was tired of having to be constantly reminded of their loss and pain. People simply wanted to live and enjoy life.

7) *Keep the Motor On*: Sexualized Queer Drifters in NQC

7.1) "He Rode the Rails, Hopped the Freights:" The Eroticized Transient Body in Van Sant's *Mala Noche*

As already discussed at large in the previous chapter, throughout the 1980s, Ronald Reagan's politics were especially harmful to LGBTQIA+ individuals since they were greatly based on ultraconservative Christian values, in effect leading to a new and open demonization of queer and HIV positive individuals on all fronts (Eaklor 169; Fernandez 185). Not only did the queer community suffer higher rates of harassment under Reagan's administration but so did other ostracized identities. Most importantly for the present study, Ronald Reagan took a similar conservative stance about ethnic and racial minorities, as Fernandez further argues:

> Indeed, President Reagan seemed to favor the racial status quo that existed before the civil rights movement, not the reforms that had sought to change it since 1954. For many Americans, he represented the nostalgic longing for a simpler past when racial minorities, immigrants, and women had not been so prominent in the public sphere, demanding rights or changing the nation's common culture. (188)

Similar to his political programs that helped to further ostracize the racialized "Other", immigration control became part of the President's agenda. As a matter of fact, undocumented migration from Mexico and Latin America had been constantly rising since the 1960s and 1970s, particularly due to fast-growing urbanization, economic difficulties as well as political persecution in several South and Central American countries (Payan 12; Fernandez 198). As a result, stricter immigration laws and a reduction in the amount of immigration allowed into the United States were rising in the following decades to come (Fernandez 198-9). In addition, by the mid-1980s America faced new "threats" from its Southern borders as Colombian drug cartels were smuggling drugs in rapidly increasing amounts through the Mexican Border as well as the Caribbean into the US, giving rise to even stricter border control (Payan 12). As Payan further describes, this situation "added to the problem of immigration, which had already been redefined as a law enforcement problem and concentrated in the Justice Department, made the border a place where law and order had to be imposed from above" (12).

While reluctant to address issues regarding immigration at the beginning of his presidency, "Reagan [soon] conflated the threats of illegal immigration, communism, terrorism, and drugs" (Fernandez 199). Eventually, this anti-immigration wave led to the passing of the Immigration Reform and Control Act in 1986 that served to "(1) [establish] employer sanctions

for knowingly hiring illegal workers; (2) it increased border patrol funding dramatically; (3) it authorized the president to declare 'immigration emergencies' as needed; and, (4) most importantly, it created an amnesty program for those who could prove five years of living and working in the United States" (Fernandez 199-200). While the latter point appears to be a concession to immigrants, Fernandez clarifies that it was rather a compromise to soothe the opposition during the Iran-Contra affair (200). Generally speaking, however, immigration not only became greatly restricted and visas and work/residence permits harder to achieve after the passing of the reform, but these actions furthermore indirectly fueled an anti-immigration stance in society.

Mala Noche deals with the above-described tensions by concentrating on Portland liquor store clerk Walt's (Tim Streeter) obsessive desire for an underage Mexican hustler called Johnny Alonzo (Doug Cooeyate). Although Johnny hustles for men, he decisively refuses to identify as gay and consequently rejects Walt's persistent advances. After a few weeks of teasing and rejecting his American admirer, Johnny suddenly disappears without a trace. Heartbroken, Walt takes up a twisted sexual relationship with Johnny's friend Pepper (Ray Monge), using him as a substitute for his actual object of desire. Johnny finally returns, explaining that he was deported from the country by immigration authorities, only to find out that during his absence Pepper was shot to death by a policeman.

At the center of this complex triangle stands Johnny, a young man who is adored and desired by both Walt and Pepper, although in different and ambiguous ways. The Mexican boys' relation to Walt, in turn, is particularly propelled by the American store clerk who claims to have fallen in love with Johnny the moment he first stepped into his store. Unable to forget about the teenager, Walt seeks him out twice that very same day: first he finds Johnny hustling in front of a large shop window adorning a car dealer (a motif that will be of importance further on) and later in an arcade, where he eventually convinces the youth to have dinner with him and a female friend.

Knowing about Johnny's "gay for pay" hustling deals, the evening ends with Walt offering him 15 dollars to sleep with him, while declaring his love to the youngster. Interestingly, the previous scene in which the two characters first met in the shop predicted Walt's abrupt and somewhat barsh offer: after all, the store represents a microcosm of America as a capitalist-driven country, in which anything can be purchased for a certain value. The idea of an easy transaction is even visually underlined through montage and a number of very quick cuts. More precisely, customers are seen coming in and out of the store, while close ups of dollar bills and goods being handed from one hand to another as well as of the cash machine

opening and closing are repeated in almost rhythmic form. The fragmented body parts not only heighten this depersonalized form of business but also foreshadow the way Walt wants to consume Johnny by making an easy and clean exchange of money for an objectified human body. The language the store clerk uses to describe his longing for the teenager further evokes the notion of human consumption as he fantasizes about "drink[ing] this Mexican boy" (00:01:55-00:01:56). Most significantly, moments later a close-up of an advertisement adorning the store entrance is shown reading "7UP Likes You," thus further creating a parallel between the commodity and the commodified human body. The equation of a human being as a purchasable object for sexual release with the goods in the store is taken even further in a later scene, in which Walt tells a customer that he will not accept customer credit but only cash since "[c]redit's like sex. Some get it, some don't. Sorry, mate" (00:34:29-00:34:32).

Taking into consideration that Walt lives at the bottom of the social hierarchy, one could conclude that he seeks to claim ownership over another human being by purchasing him like a commodity in order to temporarily gain a sense of power, superiority, and domination. After all, as John Vincent and José Muñoz explain, the Mexican boys "are even more abject than himself, which both reinscribes his lowliness but simultaneously sets him at the level of a purchaser of goods, who, no matter how lowly, is elevated by his ability to buy" (31). Yet, as will be shown, Walt's sexuality is not as straightforward but more intricate than it might appear at first. Since his sexual desires are closely linked to the way he is mistreated and degraded by his love interest, it becomes of significance to first look into Johnny Alonzo's sexual mores in order to get a deeper understanding of the character of Walt.

Walt's plan to buy the Mexican youth is easily defeated as Johnny rejects Walt's offer by making clear that his services have the fixed and unnegotiable price of 25 dollars. By doing so, the young hustler finds a way to deprive his potential john of any sense of entitlement, while gaining agency and distancing himself from the position of a passive sex object. However, when his friends chime in and try to convince him to sleep with his admirer for a reduced price, Johnny grows visibly uncomfortable and humiliated. Eventually, the boy takes a tough stance by determinately refusing Walt, stating that he does not sleep with *putos* ("faggots"). In his place, Pepper is invited to stay at Walt's and the two end up consummating the sexual relation Walt is longing to have with Johnny.

As becomes apparent, the young hustler decisively queers sexual boundaries by separating the sexual orientation he identifies with (heterosexuality) from the same-sex relations he has with customers in order to make ends meet. His principles for engaging in sexual acts become even more complex when taking into account his refusal of Walt's advances

due to the fact that he pejoratively perceives Walt as a "queer". This places Johnny at a very interesting intersection: while the film does not give us any conclusive answers regarding Johnny's sexuality, what can be gathered from the above-described interaction is that Johnny seemingly identifies as heterosexual yet chooses to have sex with men as long as his customers keep up the roleplay of being heterosexual themselves. Like this, he finds a way to refuse the identificatory markers "queer" or "gay".

In this respect, Vincent and Muñoz address the question of "trade", which is a term taken from "the linguistic and fantasmatic vernacular of North American gay male subculture, [that describes] a particular hustling pose, where the hustler appears to be a straight male who is hustling for the money" (19). As the scholars further explain, while this posture might seem rather paradoxical at first glance, what lies behind it is the deconstruction of the homo vs. hetero binary by forming "two registers: that of *identity* and that of *acts*" (19-20). More precisely, while sexual orientations are *de facto* not delineated by particular behavioral or gendered norms, in the public mind heterosexuality is often connected to a hegemonic and confining form of hypermasculinity. In contrast, in misogynistic Western cultures the stereotyped perception of gay men has been that gays are failed men since they are prone to femininity. A gay individual thus poses a certain discomfort to heterosexuality: "[t]he gay man is a threat to the macho man, since he reveals explicitly that which the macho man must suppress as deeply as possibly: his need for the love of other men, and the possibility of taking the feminine role" (Horrocks 91). Naturally, these generalizations are at odds with the diversity of identities found in both sexual orientations.

Accordingly, "trade" appears to have a deep understanding of the fact that signifiers attached to sexual orientations are connected to the idea of gender as a performative act (in the Butlerian sense) and can be consequently mimicked to attract a certain clientele. That is to say that by performing certain behavioral patterns of hypermasculinity falsely associated to heterosexuality, a male hustler is not only able to "pass" as straight but, furthermore, "[his] self-identification bolsters the john's own pretense of also being straight. After all, a straight man, in most interpretations, is one who doesn't have sex with queers" (Vincent & Muñoz 9). In *Mala Noche*, this relation is turned upside down as in place of a customer, we find a prostitute who is clinging onto the signifiers of heterosexuality.

Johnny's insistence on not being labeled as queer can be related to the fact that he perceives prostitution merely as a job to make ends meet. The dilemma of having to defend his sexual identity can thus be further associated to the discrepancy between a prostitute's and a customer's perception of the sexual act, as Ann M. Lucas illustrates: "[f]rom the point of view

of the prostitute, prostitution might be analyzed more usefully under the rubric of work rather than sex. That is, the exchange of money makes what she [or he or they] does illegal, and the exchange of money is why she does it. However, from the point of view of her customers, prostitution is usually about sex" (48). Johnny thus accepts same-gender sexual services only in exchange for money and, therefore, does not necessarily identify as queer. Yet, he demands his customers to keep up the same performance.

By obsessively following, constantly touching, and eventually declaring his love to Johnny, Walt breaks the spell of this make-believe performance and becomes ineligible as a john, since he would, in effect, make Johnny *feel* gay. Most conspicuously, henceforth Johnny opts to only refer to Walt by using the pejorative marker *puto*. By reducing his admirer to his homosexuality, the youth finds a way to achieve a feeling of superiority to the supposed inferiority gayness represents, while simultaneously distancing himself from accusations of being gay himself due to his hustling for men.

The way *Mala Noche* chooses to represent questions concerning sexual identity become even more tricky when considering that Walt himself does not necessarily define as either gay or bisexual. He therefore tells his friend Sarah that "[he has] to show [Johnny] that [he's] gay for him" (00:04:46-00:04:49), while at a later point during one of his voiceovers, Walt defends that "[he's] not an invert" (00:53:24-00:53:25). Both characters are thus shown to hold on to the constraints of the hetero vs. homo binary. Their inability to accept sexuality as fluid makes them live in a fantasy world of supposed unshakable heterosexuality. In both characters we hence detect clear cases of internalized homophobia and the fear of being pigeonholed as gay. Ultimately, performing and identifying as heterosexual represents a shield against discrimination.

As previously mentioned, the power plays defining Walt's sexual proclivities, however, run deeper into a form of masochism. He thus continuously looks for moments in which he is able to be rejected by his object of desire, just so that he can make a move on him again. Walt's yearning for the Mexican hustler is therefore a circle of lust and expectation, leading to a form of suspended release through rejection. Walt's masochistic tendencies are most directly addressed in a scene, in which he fantasizes about visiting Johnny in his hotel room in order to "lay at his feet like a dog" for an hour with the sole purpose of making the teenager understand how much the store clerk wants him. Most importantly, prior to this scene, Walt told Pepper that he "lead[s] a dog's life" (00:21:56-00:21:58) due to the hardship Pepper encounters as an unemployed Mexican illegal immigrant. Choosing to become the dog himself highlights Walt's obsessive desire in being mistreated by those positioned lower in the social hierarchy. It is in

this way that he can temporarily *feel* degraded for the purpose of sexual arousal without having to deal with the actual misery a life in poverty and exile represents.

At the same time, in his mind the act of kneeling before his sex object has an almost heroic and martyring quality to it as it serves to elevate his masculinity in front of Johnny: "How many gringos have acted that dramatically toward him ever? […] He would think of it as a dramatic macho act" (00:35:44-00:35:53). Once again, this demonstrates the paradoxical and confusing workings of his fantasy: Walt places himself in a degrading position of inferiority to display his virility to Johnny, like this hoping to become an adequate sex partner by repudiating the descriptor *puto*. To put it in another way, it appears as if the American store clerk tries to connect his desire to be dominated and mistreated to a twisted form of virility which his love interest demands from his sexual partners. This entire interaction, however, only stays in the realm of fantasy, since once Walt knocks on the door of Johnny's hotel room, he finds it empty. Indeed, unbeknownst to either Walt or Pepper, at this point Johnny has already been deported to the Mexican border by immigration authorities. His impending absence, however, has been a lingering feeling, even prior to this incident, as Johnny represents an unreachable object of desire to Walt.

Johnny's unapproachability and inaccessibility, in turn, are stressed through his abiding state of transience. In other words, Johnny is a transient body as he is continually associated with movement and the crossing of various types of borders. In this respect, it is of interest to call attention to the way Jane Blocker uses the concept of *travel* when addressing the work of Chicana artist Ana Mendieta. In fact, though not directly related to the film at hand, by applying her ideas to *Mala Noche*, more insight into the character of Johnny Alonzo can be gained. According to Blocker, travel is an intrinsically disruptive process as it consolidates borders while eroding their possibilities. In this regard,

> [t]he mere fact of traveling from one nation to another simultaneously emphasizes and disrupts the border between them. In order to travel to a foreign country, I must first establish my citizenship; I must define myself within national borders. By crossing those borders, however, I demonstrate their elasticity. (94)

Similarly, while Johnny has passed the border from Mexico to the United States illegally and therefore was never required to officially "establish his citizenship," his entire journey and sojourn in the US are defined by what his Mexican citizenship represents (the unwelcomed Other), or rather what it lacks (having a visa/ a permit of residence). More than any other type of traveler, he simultaneously best embodies the "elasticity" of borders Blocker mentions by disregarding the idea of borders altogether. Coming into the United States as an illegal alien

makes him a subversive border crosser *per se*. Consequently, as seen in the movie, once he is captured by the authorities and deported, he "simply" breaks these borders again by returning to Portland.

Jane Blocker takes the concept of travel further by applying it to a variety of other, intangible borders, thus turning travel not only into a "point [of departure from] a geographic location but also any established norm from which one 'departs,' such as gender, sexuality, or race" (93). Similarly, on a sexual level Johnny is able to disrupt traditional boundaries: as previously addressed, while he considers himself a heterosexual male, the youngster is able to transcend the borders of sexual orientation by appealing to and sleeping with other men without shaking his supposedly stable heterosexuality.

Indeed, this goes hand in hand with Rosi Braidotti's ideas concerning "nomadic subjects", or rather, the idea that in a fleeting and rapidly changing world we find countless hybridized subjectivities that are "nonunitary and multilayered" but also "dynamic and changing entit[ies]" (Braidotti 5). When addressing nomadic subjects Braidotti does not necessarily refer to a people or a tribe constantly moving from place to place but rather "the nomadism in question here refers to the kind of critical consciousness that resists settling into socially coded modes of thought and behavior. […] [It is] the subversion of set conventions [that] define[s] the nomadic state, not the literal act of traveling" (Braidotti 26). Just like the constantly-adapting and -moving Johnny, "the nomadic subject functions as a relay team: she connects, circulates, moves on; she does not form identifications, but keeps on coming back at regular intervals. The nomad is a transgressive identity whose transitory nature is precisely the reason why she can make connections at all" (42).

Johnny thus represents both Blocker's idea of physical travel as well as the challenging of norms both Braidotti and Blocker identify with hybrid and transient beings. On a larger scale, by presenting various characters belonging to different minorities, playing with intersectionality, and challenging hegemonic power relations as well as ideas regarding normative sexualities, *Mala Noche* becomes a prime example of queer subversion, seeking to go against "[m]ainstream subject positions" (Braidotti 5) and instead recognizing the world as a "pluriethnic, polylingual, and multicultural social space" in constant flow (8).

Finally, Johnny might thus be best described as living in the *Borderlands*, a concept coined by Chicana writer Gloria Anzaldúa. In *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza* Borderland identities are described as marginalized hybrid individuals defined by a flexibility that enables them to transcend and inhabit seemingly opposed and contradictory notions of identity. In other words, "[t]o live in the Borderlands means you" are a "half-breed/ caught in

the crossfire between camps […]/ not knowing which side to turn to, run from," while simultaneously embodying a "forerunner of a new race,/ half and half–both woman and man, neither–a new gender" (Anzaldúa "El Retorno" 194). Indeed, Anzaldúa's body of work is often considered a forerunner of queer theory particularly due to her continuous "interrogat[ion of] the way in which western social orders deploy rigid standards of gender and sexual intelligibility as a method of social regulation" (Meeks 3735). Notwithstanding the fact that *Borderlands* was published prior to the emergence of queer theory as an academic field in the early 1990s, its gender-bending ideas can nonetheless be described as utmost *queer*. Consequently, Anzaldúa's notion of hybridity might be extended to sexuality in more general terms, including Johnny's above-described unconventional sexual dealings.

Simultaneously, borderland identities possess a certain intuitive awareness, an instinctive feeling for danger, which Anzaldúa calls "*la facultad"*:

> *La facultad* is the capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities […]. Those who do not feel psychologically or physically safe in the world are more apt to develop this sense. Those who are pounced on the most have it the strongest–the females, the homosexuals of all races, the darkskinned, the outcast, the persecuted, the marginalized, the foreign. When we're up against the wall, when we have all sorts of oppressions coming at us, we are forced to develop this faculty so that we'll know when the next person is going to slap us or lock us away. ("Entering" 38-9)

It is of importance to remember that, as a hustling illegal Mexican immigrant, Johnny faces constant danger: amongst others, that of being deported by authorities, that of being discriminated against due to his nationality and ethnicity, that of being a man who has sexual interactions with other men in a homophobic society, that of being forced to accept the vulnerable position of illegal prostitution, and finally that of having no social benefits and securities. Consequently, "[t]o survive the Borderlands," or rather, in order to be able to live on hostile American ground, "[he] must live *sin fronteras*/ be a crossroad" (Anzaldúa "El Retorno" 195). Due to their instinctive ability to adapt to a variety of different surroundings, Anzaldúa perceives these hybrid individuals as more developed than those adhering to binary worldviews – a difference taken up by the film when it comes to the contrast between Johnny and his inflexible friend Pepper (a comparison that will be closely discussed later on).

Right from the very first shot of the movie, Johnny is associated to travel and to movement while sitting in a train wagon on his way to Portland with Pepper and a third, unnamed friend. A variety of point of view shots of Johnny observing the shifting landscape introduce him as a person who is well-aware and alert of the constant changes around him. In comparison, Pepper seems distracted, sitting on the floor of the wagon, reading a comic book.

As will be discussed further below, his inaptitude to stay in constant movement will eventually cause Pepper's death. Being alert, flexible, and nimble hence becomes a matter of life and death to the boys – a way of living epitomized by the tragic story they tell about a friend and former traveling companion who was caught by three policemen that "grabbed a bat and […] let him have it in the head. They had nails in their boots. And they kicked him. There was blood here and his leg here. […] They almost killed him" (00:09:43-00:10:07). To defend himself from such violent raids, Johnny even goes to the length of obtaining a gun for self-protection.

Most conspicuously, the fact that these kids are living desperate and dangerous lives is a tragedy that Walt as a consumer does not necessarily recognize. While during the course of action Walt comes to the realization that "[a] gringo like [him] has an easy life, a privileged life and just because [he] see[s] someone attractive like Johnny doesn't mean [he] should be able to have him, to buy him or whatever, just because he's hungry and on the street, desperate, good-looking" (00:30:12-00:30:25), his actions throughout the rest of the film speak louder than his words. In the previously discussed scene, Van Sant emphasizes Walt's ignorance of the boys' hardship by interrupting Johnny's story about his friend being almost beaten to death with Walt's monologue criticizing America's cold consumer culture:

> It's like you walk into McDonalds and they just line the cows up and they bump 'em all off for you and you never have to see it happening. If you had to go out there and kill every piece of meat that you ate, that's a little easier for me to buy, you know, because you experience the death. […] But when you walk into a McDonald's and say, "Uh, give me a Big Mac", you know, you're just getting a dead cow and you never see the cow die. (00:10:28-00:10:52)

Curiously, what Walt fails to see in his critique of the American meat industry is that he himself has become part of this market by preying on "human flesh", or, more precisely, by treating Johnny's body as a consumer good. Just as the American consumer rejects to see the slaughtered animal in the food he/she/they consume, so does Walt ignore the tragedy that leads Johnny to hustle for money. The parallelism between the Mexican boys and animal slaughter becomes even more apparent as Van Sant cuts between Walt's and Johnny's faces during Walt's speech, associating Johnny with the animals in the story. Indeed, the equation with livestock not only objectifies the boy but further highlights the degrading way Mexican immigrants are seen and treated in the United States. Simultaneously, the mention of animal slaughter evokes the upcoming assassination of Pepper by a policeman, an incident that will be closely analyzed further below.

The boys' journey by train also suggests deep relations to American history, seeing that in US culture, the railroad connotes nineteenth century expansionism: "[t]he expanding network

of railroads across America became a tool for 'territorial conquest' as areas of wilderness were annexed to railroad companies and razed to put down tracks; Native American populations were aggressively displaced" (Brinded 2). Amongst these annexed and exploited territories were not only those belonging to Native Americans but also some Hispanic lands were invaded as Nicolás Kanellos describes:

> On the one hand, the ideology of Manifest Destiny did much to justify United States expansion westward and southward and its grabbing of former Hispanic lands, with attendant displacement of Hispanic occupants and their gradual proletarization in an effort to develop those lands and the resources they contained. On the other hand, US industrialization from the late nineteenth century on and its ever-increasing need for manpower led to the incorporation of workers via immigration from Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean to operate the industrial machine and to perform as service workers. [….] From the late nineteenth century, Hispanic workers have struggled for a living wage, humane treatment, and health benefits. (144)

Indeed, US interventions in Mexico not only occurred during the above-referred US-Mexican War in "1848, in which [Mexican authorities] ceded almost half of their territory to the victorious Americans, including present day California, Arizona and New Mexico" but happened again during the Mexican revolution in 1914 and 1916 (Kozák 51-2). As becomes apparent, these interventions are deeply related with a sense of supremacy the US feels over its bordering country, leading to a continuous exploitation of Mexican lands and bodies for the benefit of the US market.

As a result, and going back to *Mala Noche*, Johnny as an illegal alien refusing to accept the border separating Mexico from the US becomes a body inscribed with political and historical meaning. More precisely, bearing in mind that Johnny travels by train and thus resorts to the symbol of American expansionism in order to "infiltrate" the United States, his journey into the country speaks of a direct confrontation with America's imperialist past, or rather a refusal to accept American supremacy over his mother country. Consequently, this opens up a space to draw parallels between America's self-proclaimed imperialist prerogative of having the right to invade foreign lands and Walt's desire to take charge of Johnny's body. This is to say that in very similar fashion, Walt nurtures the constant belief that he will be able to penetrate Johnny's "inferior" Mexican body by persistently harassing the boy. Consequently, Walt's relation to Johnny becomes an allegory of the relation between the two neighboring countries. As a result, Johnny's continuous teasing and refusal as well as his exploitation of the American store clerk bear a profoundly counter-imperialist dimension, as the formerly oppressed is able to use the traditional oppressor for his own benefit.

The association of Johnny with railroads is further stressed by the sound of chiming trains that is repeated throughout the course of action as well as actual trains that are shown during the protagonists' road trip. Bearing in mind the previously discussed idea of Johnny as a transient body, the train motif might well be interpreted as a constant reminder of the possibility of Johnny's disappearance. Since his life in Portland is only defined by misery, the young Mexican could always leave through the same means he came into Walt's life. Walt even voices this concern by stating that "[Johnny] said he was gonna return to L.A. in fifteen days as soon as he got traveling money together" (00:20:34-00:20:38). The repeatedly heard train sounds thus bear a second layer of association, namely that of reflecting on Walt's desire for the inaccessible.

Furthermore, the movie repeatedly relates Johnny to (racing) cars. In the United States context, the automobile bears deep cultural meaning: this utmost American commodity not only represents mobility and the possibilities of freedom, but also embodies the idea of American progress, individualism, and self-realization. Andrew Wernick further elucidates this by stating that "[p]arked at home, like furniture, like the domicile itself, [cars] project a sense of their owner's relative social standing. Out on the road they carry that same sense of class/cultural identification into the wider cultural domain. Cars, in this respect, are similar to clothes, constituting indeed a kind of third skin for ambient industrial man [sic]" (79). Johnny's obsession with cars might thus, on the one hand, represent a certain longing, i.e. a sense of belonging and being able to partake in the American capitalist system. On the other hand, the (real and virtual) cars Johnny is allowed to ride but never able to truly own, simultaneously always speak of what he is being denied in US culture as an illegal border-crosser living in poverty: stability, status, and the liberties and possibilities needed for self-fulfillment.

Johnny is first associated with automobiles when Walt finds him hustling at night in front of a closed car dealer's showroom. The youngster is seen leaning on the enormous display window, which in turn entraps him and therefore might comment on him being locked in a life with reduced possibilities. Simultaneously, the framing of the hustling boy in the shop window turns him into a product on display. That same night Walt encounters him in an arcade absorbed in a game of racing cars.

The video game takes us into the realm of temporary wish fulfillment as it allows Johnny to dwell in the fantasy of being a car owner instead of a body "driven" by others. Playing the video game, he becomes the person in total control of his journey and, ultimately, a consumer instead of a consumed good. Interestingly enough, Johnny's preference for racing games also alludes to his previously addressed struggle of having to prove his virility, seeing that "the

racing car […] has emerged as an almost perfect symbol for masculinist technology values racing itself celebrates: a male-identified machine, shaped like a bullet, and experienced from within as an exhilarating rush towards orgasm, death, and the future" (Wernick 81). While Johnny's association to machines speaks of the essential need to prove male potency in heteronormative culture, cars (as well as trains) at the same time can refer to change (the machines' motion through time) and movement (their motion through space), thus intersecting the possibilities of subversion the Mexican character reflects as both a nomadic subject and a Borderland identity.

The teenager's fantasy of car racing is then soon turned into a reality when Walt lets the youngster drive his vehicle after dinner. Johnny takes the chance to put into action what he experienced at the arcade, insanely racing Walt's car through the streets of Portland. It is noticeable that this scene is intercut with actual images of the video game, thus further blurring the line between fantasy and reality. The fantasy is not only enjoyed by Johnny, for Walt as well starts to sexually fantasize about the boy, commenting that "[t]he look on his face is pure ecstasy. The incredible, beautiful, turned-on face of an ignorant Mexican teenager" (00:11:41-00:11:48). Walt's comment makes very clear that the equation of the car and the boy has entered the realm of sexual power plays. As addressed earlier, it is thus within the confines of the car that Walt makes his first move on Johnny and offers him 15 dollars. Johnny's rejection and sense of hurt pride gives way to the next and last scene in which the characters share a car.

In this scene Walt takes Johnny and Pepper on a road trip to the Pacific Ocean. During the drive, Johnny jumps onto the driver's seat and takes over the steering wheel. After Walt nervously exclaims that "driving is not a game for kids" (00:27:16-00:27:18), in a mischievous moment of revenge for Walt's insistent harassment, Johnny drives the car against the guardrail, scratching the car paint. Disgruntled, Walt takes the key out of the ignition and stops the vehicle. In order to probe the limits of Walt's patience, Johnny continues his game by walking off and boyishly pretending to be upset until Walt returns the key. Later that very same day, Johnny lures Walt out of his car, steals his key and drives it just out of reach before stopping. He then provocatively lies on top of the car while Walt follows the two Mexicans by foot. As soon as he approaches the vehicle, Johnny jumps right back into the machine to repeat this maneuver. The game is only stopped when the teasing, which first intrigued Walt, turns into something more serious. Impatiently, he eventually bursts with anger and gets his car back.

This interaction epitomizes the relation of the two characters for various reasons. Firstly, by taunting Walt until the acceptable limits of his desire, Johnny is able to make a point about not letting himself be placed in the position of a sexual object. Instead, he makes clear that he

holds control over Walt since, after all, Walt's desire provides him with power. In this regard, Justin Vicari comments on the wrecking of Walt's car as a form of taking a political stance:

> Instead of Walt's body, he drives Walt's car, fast, recklessly, out of control […]. He fucks Walt's property, his possessions, his status, rather than him personally. It is canny that white U.S. manhood is symbolized by car-ownership, although Walt's car is, of course, a clunker; Walt does not represent white privilege so much as the willingness of a (gay) white male to jettison white privilege in the presence of the Mexican boys 'superior manhood.' […] Thus, for Johnny, battering Walt's car as an idle game is both an overtly political act and a covertly sexual one. (97)

As becomes obvious from this quote, Johnny once again finds a way to turn traditional power relations upside down. Nonetheless, while Johnny's power plays give him a certain sense of dominance and authority, in the end, despite all, the actual power never ceases to remain in Walt's hands as he is the one able to end the charade without losing his position in society.

All in all, the power play is thus revealed to be of interest to both parties: as a marginalized, unprivileged, politically and socially disenfranchised immigrant, Johnny is able to hold a certain degree of power as long as he feeds Walt's fantasies of domination/subordination, while not crossing the line of acceptability or making Walt feel threatened. Furthermore, he uses Walt's lust for economic benefits, on various occasions visiting the store to get free groceries. Consequently, the film refuses to judge either character or the power plays they engage in as they are nourished by both sides and can only continue if both john and trade keep up their respective performances.

This reciprocal relation is only disrupted when Johnny finally vanishes due to reasons beyond the characters' control. His disappearance forces Walt as well as Pepper into a limbo of pondering on Johnny's whereabouts. Indeed, the film shows Walt driving through Portland, desperately asking people whether they have, by any chance, spotted the young Mexican hustler. Unable to locate his love interest, the American clerk eventually asks himself whether he really "need[s] him that badly" and whether he is "that desperate" – a question he quickly answers with a simple "[o]f course I am" (00:43:59-00:44:06). With Johnny vanished from his life, he eventually must turn to the next best person to satisfy his strong sexual urges.

Just like Walt, Pepper as well begins struggling after his best friend disappears without a trace. Having relied on Johnny's company and advice, the youngster suddenly finds himself on his own, emotionally as well as financially. From selling stolen kitchen utensils to eventually asking another prostitute for advice on how to sell his body, Pepper attempts a variety of ways to scrape up a few dollars to pay for food and rent. Ultimately, the youngster is unable to overcome his financial difficulties and loses his hotel room. The character's downfall goes even

deeper as, beside his financial distress, he also suffers tremendously on an emotional level, longing intensely for his friend. Indeed, the Mexican teenager becomes growingly passive, despondent, and lethargic. Even Walt notices Pepper's depression, observing that "[he] can't help feeling that [Pepper's] well-being depends on Johnny coming back" (00:55:56-00:55:59).

Being unable to live without his best friend, Pepper gets physically ill. Overcome by a high fever, the bedridden young Mexican has to turn to Walt, the only person left that seems to care about him. Indeed, Walt immediately takes up the role of Pepper's caretaker, giving him money, providing him with medicine, installing a TV set in his room, and washing his sweat-drenched body. Walt even goes as far as to approach some farmers to procure employment for Pepper outside the sex business. His efforts are to no avail, proving that the immigrant indeed has become trapped in a life with limited possibilities.

As a temporary solution Pepper thus moves into Walt's apartment. Though sleeping separately, the couple nonetheless begins to form a sexual bond. While Pepper's reasons to engage in a sexual relation with Walt remain uncertain, Walt clearly uses Pepper as a figurative band-aid to soothe his longing for Johnny. Indeed, Walt voices his ulterior motive very openly after his first sexual experience with Pepper, explaining that he now feels part of a chain of sexual partners that ultimately connect him straight to his true object of desire: "[Johnny] lives with nine or ten brothers. Maybe when they're making love they can think about Roberto having fucked me. Roberto's cock fucks Johnny, fucked me. That's about as close to Johnny as I'll ever get. Unless I had the money[130]" (00:20:39-00:20:51).

Interestingly, their first sexual encounter happens after Johnny rejects Walt's offer of sleeping with him for 15 dollars, further highlighting Pepper's position as a second-choice sex partner. Seeing that Pepper gets locked out of his hotel room that same night, he accepts Walt's offer to stay at his place. Without stipulating a price or establishing a prostitute-client relation, they have consensual sexual intercourse. This is visually underlined as the scene begins with rather intimate and tender close-ups of Walt's hands caressing Pepper's skin. When Walt chooses to orally please Pepper, the viewer even sees the youngster smiling brightly. Yet, the gentleness of the scene is soon upturned when Pepper suddenly starts to forcibly penetrate his sexual partner until Walt stops him to grab a bottle of Vaseline to lower the pain during sex. Again, earlier described traditional power structures and hierarchies are subverted in this scene when looking at these bodies as representatives of their respective countries. In other words, an American body is violently penetrated by a Mexican one, in effect not only reversing the

[130] To an extent, this image is reminiscent of the chain of HIV transmission certain fractions of the bareback community seek out, as explored in detail in the next subchapter.

historical invasion of Mexican lands by the US, but simultaneously also challenging the hegemony of US power over its neighboring country. Although the sexual partner assuming the receptive role in intercourse should not necessarily be perceived as either subordinated or passive, this notion is still widely spread, particularly in Latino communities.

More precisely, as this scene further illustrates, Pepper's homoerotic tendencies seem deeply scarred by *machismo*: while the youngster willingly engages in sexual acts with Walt, he simultaneously needs to prove his virility while in bed with another man and thus takes the role of the violent and dominant "top" (the sexual partner who penetrates or takes control). Most strikingly, the day after this sexual encounter Walt complains that he feels "fucked, violated," that "[his] ass [is] sore" (00:19:55-00:20:07) and that "[Pepper] tried to use his cock like a weapon on [him], macho fucking prick" (00:21:09-00:21:13). As Ernesto Vasquez Del Aguila explains, this behavior is rather common amongst men who have sex with men in Latin American societies:

> hierarchies of gender and sexuality equate masculinity with the act of penetration, so those men who are penetrated, or are suspected of being penetrated, are at the bottom of the male gender and sexual hierarchy. […] [T]here is a hierarchical system of sexual acts and sexualities, where the *pasivo* (bottom) partner carries the stigma of homosexuality, while the *activo* (top) keeps his masculinity and sexuality 'intact'. (Aguila 141-2).

A further way in which Pepper tries to deflect his homoerotic tendencies is by stealing ten dollars from Walt's pocket the morning after their first hookup. Just like Johnny, the youth tries to reduce the sexual encounter to a job that requires payment, and therefore has no bearing on his sexual identity. Pepper's closeted behavior becomes even more evident when Walt meets him and Johnny the next day and notices that "Roberto never acknowledges the fuck of the night before. It's as though it never happened" (00:25:59-00:26:04). In this respect, Aguila mentions that amongst Latino communities "gay or homosexual identities are feared and rejected due to potential hostility, violence, and stigma; hence, male homosexual behavior in Latin America is generally clandestine, tacitly accepted, or ignored by family members and social networks" (142). Keeping this one-night stand a secret, particularly in front of his friend, might thus be another strategy to conceal his homosexual tendencies and prevent further ostracism within his marginalized community.

Most strikingly, the above-described sexual act is visualized through quick, incohesive and disorienting cuts, reducing the sexualized couple to desirable and fetishized body parts: not only might this serve as a self-reflexive commentary on the voyeuristic art of cinema itself, but it could also address the audience's scopophilic involvement in the sexual power plays

happening on screen. After all, as passive observers, audience members are granted the ultimate power of seeing without being seen or being directly involved in the action. Therefore, they become part of the fetishization and exploitation of disenfranchised minorities and of sexual acts with the underage racial "Other". Bearing in mind the issues of intersectionality broached by this film, viewers are thus simultaneously made aware of their own involvement in the power plays portrayed in *Mala Noche*.

The sexual relation between Walt and Pepper is revitalized as soon as he moves into Walt's apartment. However, the nature of their sex life remains defined by the violent acts of a closeted and shamed teenager in need to prove his virility, as Walt observes: "[h]e only wants to have sex at night, not during the day. And certain aggressive acts, that's what he wants and needs. That's not what I want" (00:53:13-00:53:22). One night, after another intense sexual experience, Walt tries to lighten the mood between the two of them by mocking Pepper for using a pimple cream. Curiously, the youngster grows angry and eventually begins slapping Walt. Certainly evoking my discussion of *My Hustler*, Pepper's dismay might be related to the fact that the use of beauty products is traditionally associated to women and thus Walt's teasing once again puts Pepper in the position of having to defend his manhood. After all, "gay men who exhibit feminine behavior are associated with passive homosexuality and are the ones who embody the stigma of subordinated masculinities, while those who perform as 'straight gays', increase their masculine capital, dilute doubts about their homosexuality, and defend themselves against discrimination" (Aguila 142). It is also noteworthy that Pepper dates girls while sleeping with Walt – whether he does this to boost his heterosexist ego or whether he dates women out of genuine interest, however, remains unclear.

Generally speaking, Walt is everything but satisfied with their sex life. While Pepper might represent the closest the American will ever come to being with Johnny, in the end Pepper only represents an "inferior" substitute of Walt's true object of desire. To a certain extent, this might be related to the great discrepancy between the boys' sexual availability, seeing that Johnny was never sexually accessible to Walt, while Pepper is usually on hand, yet epitomizes an aggressiveness in bed that Walt simply does not approve of. Reminiscent of Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, in which Scottie Ferguson (James Stewart) tries to turn Judy Barton into his lost love Madeleine Elster (both played by Kim Novak), the American clerk tries to reconstruct his former relation to Johnny through his double Pepper. Yet, his attempts utterly fail. This becomes most obvious in a scene, in which he teaches Pepper how to drive a car. Not only does this scene hark back to the protagonists' road trip during which Johnny was temporarily driving Walt's car, but, on a figurative level, Walt might also be trying to turn the youngster into a

transient being by connecting him to automobiles and movement. After all, it was Johnny's inapproachability warranted by his constant movement that intrigued and sexually stimulated the American. Just like Johnny, Pepper has an accident and crashes Walt's car. This time, however, Walt is not as easily appeased. He gets furious at the youngster, exclaiming, "Shit. You drive like you fuck!" (00:55:10-00:55:13). While Pepper might drive as recklessly as Johnny (both in a literal and in a sexual sense), the sexuality he is able to offer Walt in the end is not what the American is looking for. Pepper thus always remains in the shadow of his best friend, representing Johnny's inferior sexual double.

Despite their twisted sexual relation, the two remain roommates and slowly start to build a form of companionship. Hence, at one point, Van Sant shows them in a very mundane, domestic scene cooking together, while translating each ingredient they use into both Spanish and English. Indeed, this attempt to communicate might well represent a way of getting to know one another. However, Pepper's growing sedentariness and attachment to a person that is unable to stay in movement will eventually bring his downfall. In fact, by moving from a hotel room into Walt's apartment, Pepper chooses to switch from a life in a *non-place* to a life in a *place* as defined by Marc Augé: "[i]f a place can be defined as relational, historic and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place" (Augé 77-8).

Non-places, such as airports, hotel rooms, or train stations, are thus defined by a deep transitory nature, their anonymity and the lack of individual identity. Instead, non-places represent "a world […] surrendered to solitary individuality, to the fleeting, the temporary and ephemeral" (78). Most conspicuously, when Pepper enters Walt's humble abode for the first time, a point of view shot stresses his observation of several personal objects found in the apartment that inscribe Walt's identity and personality onto this *place*: a small buddha statue, a hollowed-out jack-o'-lantern, several photographs. By moving into this *place*, Pepper thus gives up a fluidity ensured by his state of transience, which has been paramount for his and Johnny's survival up to this point. Eventually, he becomes trapped by his domesticity, while slowly losing his sense of *la facultad*.

One evening neighbors spot a strange-looking man in the building and call the police. Taking notice of the turmoil outside his door, Pepper believes that he is the one being chased. Alarmed, he takes the gun Johnny left behind and tries to escape from the authorities, only to find himself trapped within the building complex: his newfound domesticity hence literally becomes his pitfall. Ultimately, the faceless silhouettes of policemen shoot him to death. Pepper dies anonymously and alone in a foreign country, unknown even to the person closest to him,

as Walt's voiceover reveals: "[t]hey're people like we are. I found out they call him Papas, not Pepper, because he likes to eat papas – French fries" (01:01:51-01:02:00). Though having shared a bed with the Mexican, Walt's knowledge of the boy never went beyond the physicality of his body. Most strikingly, when the store clerk eventually returns to his apartment, the only reminder left of their relation is Pepper's used underwear he finds on the floor – an object that perfectly summarizes a relationship that was merely propelled by and thus became reduced to sexual desire.

Walt's everyday life quickly resumes, and he goes back to his usual routines until one day Johnny surprises him in his apartment. The young Mexican explains that although he had been deported by immigration authorities, he was able to return to Portland by "swimming the Rio Grande by moonlight, he's back in less than two weeks. He rode the rails, hopped the freights" (01:07:28-01:07:34). In an utmost festive mood the two thus celebrate Johnny's long-desired return. Finally, the Mexican youth inquires how Pepper is doing only to learn that his friend was shot by the police. Incredulous at first, he eventually storms to Walt's entrance door and carves the word "*puto*" with a knife into the wood.

This action can be interpreted in various ways: firstly, Johnny seems to blame Walt for his friend's death, perhaps realizing that Walt's stable living condition brought Pepper's downfall. By marking him with the descriptor *puto* – as earlier explained, one of the lowest-range positions possibly imaginable to the Latino youngster – he shows his dismay for the American in a small gesture of vengeance. Secondly, by carving the word *puto* into his door, he furthermore permanently marks Walt as someone he will never sexually engage with and as someone he cannot share his life with. The inscription thus becomes a statement of casting the American store clerk out of his life for good. Completely determined to end his bonds with Walt, he leaves the apartment, literally as well as symbolically closing the door behind him.

While this action seems to put an end to their relationship, the two of them meet again. Some time has passed when Walt drives through Portland and sees Johnny hustling on a street corner. The American stops his car and tells him to "come down to the store and see [him] sometime" (01:10:45-01:10:47). Although Johnny does not respond to Walt's invitation and merely looks down, Walt's behavior shows that he has not given up on pursuing his object of desire. Indeed, when he slowly drives on, we see him fixatedly observing the young hustler through the rearview mirror of his car. The circle of rejection and persistent obsession thus starts anew.

Mala Noche then ends with a Super 8 home video showing the three main protagonists, Walt, Johnny, and Pepper, being goofy and enjoying themselves. Most strikingly, ending the

movie with smiling images of the characters is an utmost interesting choice, particularly when considering the characters' poverty and misery that the audience witnessed throughout the course of action. Not only does the placing of the home footage at the end of the film highlight the artificiality of what is being depicted but this film within the film also gains an auto-reflexive dimension, addressing the performative quality of the characters' relation. Just as they are playacting in front of the Super 8 camera, pretending to lead happy lives, their relation in the end was always one of playing roles to gain certain benefits from on another: titillation, economic benefits, housing, food. At the same time, seeing that this footage is presented after Pepper's death, it simultaneously greatly stresses his absence. Even though this friendship might have brought some comfort and benefits to the ones involved, in the end, the tragic reality in which all three marginalized characters live cannot be escaped from or sugarcoated in any way.

In conclusion, *Mala Noche* presents manifold circumstances in which sexual relations between characters are presented as deeply scarred by hegemonic discourses concerning alterity: as has been shown in detail, Johnny is deeply affected by homophobic and dualistic discourses presenting homosexuality as the inferior opposite to heterosexuality. Consequently, he goes on disrespecting Walt for his homoerotic tendencies, while incessantly needing to prove his own masculinity to compensate for the fact that he sleeps with other men for a living. Plagued by Mexican *machismo* and homophobic US culture, Pepper feels the same need to hide his queerness and thus becomes stuck in unhealthy and violent sexual behaviors to affirm his virility. On the other hand, we see the underprivileged white American store clerk Walt fetishizing the ethnic Other by reducing his erotic interests to mere sexual and purchasable objects. More precisely, as earlier described, he is sexually aroused by being inferiorized by those he perceives as lower in the social hierarchy. All of these instances show that sexuality is deeply intertwined with privilege and social status. What these sexual relations thus reveal time and time again are not just debates concerning intersectional identities within US culture but also how minorities of various forms perpetuate the process of marginalizing one another.

Furthermore, by highlighting how human interactions of sexual nature are deeply defined by sociopolitical hierarchies, Gus Van Sant is able to approach and reflect on wider issues that were afflicting the United States in the 1980s. Most conspicuously, issues concerning the ostracizing of queer individuals and immigrants are taken up by the film and are simultaneously shown to be part of a long lineage of discriminatory actions within US history, particularly when talking about the relation between the United States and its neighboring country Mexico.

By refusing to represent static and passive characters, traditional power structures are simultaneously challenged and subverted during the course of action. Indeed, this is best represented by Johnny, a nomadic Borderland identity whose fluidity and transitory nature become essential to his survival. Ultimately, instead of relying on binary oppositions, the movie chooses to embrace the pluralities and intersectionalities that form identities, like this becoming a document representing a form of nomadic consciousness. After all, recognizing nomadism as a defining part of late-20th and 21st century life is of utmost social urgency since "[t]hese complex in-between states of social (im)mobility and stages of transit are crucial in that they challenge the established modes of theoretical representation and ask for an extra effort on the part of the social and cultural critic. Cartographic maps of multiple belonging and of power relations can help identify possible sites and strategies of resistance" (Braidotti 10).

Accordingly, *Mala Noche* creates a counter-discourse to discriminatory hegemonic ideas concerning alterity that proves to be still of utmost relevance in today's world. The constant fear of deportation and discrimination felt throughout the film, unfortunately, became a growing reality in the US under the Trump administration: in a climate in which the US administration, amongst many other atrocities, deliberately und systematically spurs an anti-immigration and queerphobic atmosphere in American society by threatening to build border walls to Mexico, tearing apart immigrant families, and ostracizing and demonizing queer individuals, taking a stance by showing a different façade of these scapegoated minorities and forms of resisting the harassment and injustices felt on a daily basis have once again become essential and vitally important to a variety of individuals. Shifting the focus towards the pluralities of identities constituting the United States of America thus represents a highly pressing step to challenging official discourses prone on spreading hatred and segregation. After all, by addressing a relation between two illegal Mexican immigrants and a lower-class American queer man, *Mala Noche* reveals how the margins are able to infiltrate and uproot taken-for-granted structures and hierarchies of power, even if only on an interpersonal level.

7.2) "Suddenly I Realize, We Got Nothing to Lose": Regaining Queer Agency in Araki's *The Living End*

The Living End tells the story of a young film critic, Jon (Craig Gilmore), who receives the overwhelming news that he is HIV-positive. Soon after his diagnosis he meets the outlaw Luke (Mike Dytri), a seropositive hustler, who is running from the law for having shot a variety of people, including a police officer. Sexually drawn to this fugitive, Jon decides to accompany Luke on a road trip to escape his lover's incarceration. Lacking any specific plan, the two men simply take the road without knowing where their journey will lead them. What they know, however, is that in order to make sense of a hostile and unraveling world, they need to escape their lives and routines that have been overshadowed by the impending death sentences their diagnoses represent.

The film stands out as a paramount example for New Queer Cinema due to its interest in breaking heteronormative traditions of film. This is particularly achieved through Araki's engagement in revisiting and deconstructing certain genre conventions. The director accomplishes this in twofold ways: firstly, in very postmodern fashion, he makes constant references to specific filmmakers and films that feature similarly transgressive dimensions, thus creating a link between his cinematic forebears and his own art. Secondly, Araki not only alludes to diverse film genres in his *oeuvre,* but he actually mixes a variety of genre conventions with the objective of, eventually, subverting them. In other words, the filmmaker "work[s] with and against the conventions and practices of the mainstream industry" (Moran 19) by using tradition to create something fresh and new.

The cinematic texts Araki takes inspiration from in *The Living End* are numerous. To provide an example, in Jon's apartment we find a poster of Andy Warhol's *Blow Job* (1963), the earlier-explored notorious short film that features an unedited long take of a man's face while he appears to receive oral sex from someone off-screen. The poster does not only serve as mere pastiche but furthermore becomes an homage to Araki's cinematic queer precursor and the experimental and sexualized texts he and his fellow NQC filmmakers took cues from. Through the image of Warhol's film, Araki is thus able to place *The Living End* in a long lineage of subversive and low budget queer filmmaking, while also alluding to the highly sexualized content we are about to engage in as viewers.

Most importantly, however, are his constant references to the French *nouvelle vague* filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard. In fact, Araki has stated on various occasions that his films are greatly influenced by Godard's cinematic output and the French filmmaker's concept of

"work[ing] within the institution of cinema in order to change it" (Moran 20). Accordingly, what immediately catches our attention is the fact that the protagonists' names, Jon and Luke, suggest Godard's first name, while we furthermore see a *Made in USA* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1966) poster in Jon's bedroom, which again establishes a clear connection to the French filmmaker. Just like the filmmakers of the French New Wave, he also works as a film critic. More importantly, however, as James M. Moran notes, is the name of an article Jon is working on bearing the title "The Death of Cinema" (20). Araki herewith establishes a clear link to Godard's 1967 film *Weekend*, in which the *nouvelle vague* director ponders on the idea of "the 'End of Cinema' and the revolutionary potential of alternative filmmaking" (Mills 309). More specifically, Godard used the idea of the death of traditional ways of filmmaking as a symbol for the dawn of a new cinematic era. According to the French mastermind, traditions thus needed to be destroyed so that fresh forms of film could be born (312).

The concept of killing the past to give way to a new – and possibly better – future is then further explored in a scene in which Luke is encircled by a group of homophobe skinheads trying to assault him. Yet, in Araki's world the typical victim-victimizer relation is inversed as it is Luke who shoots this group of "gay-bashers", thus giving agency to a type of character usually seen as inferior and in need of punishment. Most conspicuously, however, is the fact that the men he shoots are wearing shirts that display the film titles *Drugstore Cowboy* as well as *Sex, Lies, and Videotape* – the former being a 1989 film by queer filmmaker Gus Van Sant, while the latter is a movie by Steven Soderbergh that was released the same year. Above all, both are independent films that were highly successful, a fact that Araki seems to emphasize through a critical lens.

In other words, by choosing to "shoot" these films, Araki comments on the state of independent cinema in the early 1990s. The filmmaker namely expresses his dismay regarding the fact that independent movies produced outside the confines of the big studios started to embrace and rely on certain crowd-pleasing mainstream conventions instead of using their position outside of the oppressive Hollywood system to create something with political urgency or of actual necessity. This, then again, goes hand in hand with Godard's idea of opposing traditions for the purpose of opening up avenues for something that bears sociopolitical significance. At the same time, it is of utmost importance to remember that Araki's film was produced in a *literal* era of death. On a figurative level, *The Living End* as a whole could thus be understood as reversing the notion of AIDS as a devastating death penalty, instead perceiving it as an opportunity for a new beginning (an idea that will be taken up again in the final scene). Following this reasoning, Gregg Araki takes the death of an entire generation to transform it

into meaningful art, in doing so revealing that tragedy can lead to new forms of creativity.

Besides referencing a variety of films and filmmakers, Araki simultaneously establishes numerous connections to specific genres, which he then reworks, suchlike the gangster film or AIDS movie. For the discussion at hand, however, I would like to lay particular emphasis on the transgressions of the road movie: while films that played with the idea of being "on the road" certainly existed at least since the 1930s (if not earlier), the genre of the road movie particularly came into being in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Especially two films are often deemed as pioneers of the road movie genre, namely Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider*[131] (1969) (Laderman "Road Movies" 417-8). As both examples clearly attest, ever since its beginnings the genre was greatly influenced by certain countercultural ideas that shook up the *status quo*, "expos[ing] the stifling repression of conservative America" (419), while also reflecting on sociopolitical crises such as the Vietnam War or the Watergate scandal.

In a nutshell, "[r]oad movies feature characters on the move, often outsiders who cross geographic borders but also transgress moral boundaries. With their reflexive focus on the interplay between automobile and camera technology, road movies mobilize a dynamic cinematic spectacle of movement and speed" (Laderman "Road Movies" 417). While many of these tropes have already been explored in Van Sant's *Mala Noche*, they will become even more central in Araki's film. As Laderman further suggests, road movies can also be divided into two particular subtypes, namely "the quest" and "the outlaw" road movie. While the former "probe the mysterious experience of discovery," the latter commonly feature sexualized and violent outlaws and are thus "more desperately driven by crime, where characters hit the road fleeing from the police" (418). As will be shown, *The Living End* features the idea of the journey as a quest to self-realization as well as the road as a last refuge for social outlaws rebelling against societal norms, both ultimately serving as a critique of the state of the American nation by particularly focusing on the marginalized HIV-positive queer. Simultaneously, the road is also used as a symbol of uprootedness and instability, hinting towards the idea that the characters can never really settle.

This very connection between the road film and the queer issues Araki seeks to address in *The Living End* becomes especially apparent when looking at the subversion of the so-called "buddy convention". The road movie, after all, is a traditionally male-dominated subgenre as it usually features two males traveling together, who are only occasionally "distracted" by women

[131] Interestingly, both films are part of New Hollywood, a time in cinema that displayed a high sociopolitical awareness and, in turn, has inspired several NQC filmmakers. Again, the extensive lineage of NQC can be found all over the history of independent cinema and its many maverick filmmakers.

when on the road (Howell 128). *The Living End* transgresses the buddy convention by crossing the delicate line between "homosocial" and homosexual bonding: more precisely, according to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, homosociality[132] "is applied to such activities as 'male bonding,' which may, as in our society, be characterized by intense homophobia, fear and hatred of homosexuality" (*Between* 1). Accordingly, by replacing male "buddies" with two homosexual lovers, Araki plays with the fluidity of desire, suggesting that the relations between two men on the road can be easily interpreted as homoerotic. He thus proposes a re-reading of the genre from a queer perspective – an approach that was similarly offered in *Thelma & Louise* (Ridley Scott, 1991), a film with a strong lesbian subtext that was released a year prior to *The Living End*. Both movies, then, present a strong break with convention by queering their fugitive heroes.

Simultaneously, the idea of an "outlaw couple" gets a double meaning due to the film's context. This is to say that, firstly, Jon and Luke are delinquents because Luke shot several individuals, including a police officer, and Jon has become an accessory to the crime since he accompanies Luke during his escape from the authorities. Araki, however, refuses to take the convention of the ruffian outlaws too seriously – thus not falling into the trap of insisting on overly-virile and stoic drifters. Quite the contrary is the case as the filmmaker does not shy away from even appropriating gay clichés: being on the road for quite some time, one of the protagonists, Jon, starts to complain that "[a]ll I know is if I don't take a shower and brush my teeth in about two minutes, I'm gonna fucking kill myself. I'm a fag, okay? I can't stand being dirty" (00:40:23-00:40:37). Unlike rough and sweaty buddies, in this scene we encounter an overdramatic queen. This is not to say, however, that the film imprisons the character in stereotyped categorizations – but Jon's gender expression shows range as he will be as gritty and as much of an outlaw in other facets as common cinematic hoodlums on the road.

Secondly, these characters are considered an outlaw couple for being HIV-positive gay men in a society that scorns their mere existence. Unable to find a footing in a severely sero- and homophobic culture, the two men engage in a rocky and twisted form of bonding outside the confines of heteronormative life by creating a bubble within the safe space of their car in which they can express their love and desire for one another and explore their personal form of kinship. After all, it is in Luke's arms that Jon has found a person who, though having a completely different worldview from his own, understands the situation he finds himself in and does not reduce him to or pity him because of his serostatus: during their first hookup, Jon, who

[132] The fine line between platonic homosociality and erotic or romantic homosexuality will be further looked into in chapter 9.2 when addressing Andrew Ahn's *Spa Night*.

just received his diagnosis that same day, is about to confide in Luke that he is HIV-positive, but fails to even vocalize his own condition. Luke, immediately understanding, simply replies that Jon shouldn't "worry about it. It's really no big deal. Welcome to the club, partner" (00:22:34-00:22:55).

Their place as outsiders is further demarcated by a clear separation between the couple and the few heterosexual individuals that appear throughout the narrative. More specifically, while the lovers represent three-dimensional characters with depth, most straight individuals in the movie are caricatures of campy and/or extremely violent individuals: early on in the narrative, Luke is caught *in flagrante delicto* by a john's wife who immediately stabs her husband. Later on, Jon and Luke encounter a straight couple in a parking lot fighting in utmost ridiculous manner, while several instances of homophobia and attempted gay-bashing are also presented in the movie. The incredibly campy and silly way in which these characters are portrayed, then, creates a strong opposition to the duo. In a way, this could be interpreted as an inversion of the campy, irresponsible, overly emotional, and dramatic sissy stereotype that queer viewers have been exposed to throughout most of the 20th century.

In Araki's film it is thus the heterosexual world that is completely absurd. Camp is reclaimed to be used as a weapon against those who used to ridicule the queer. The only bridge between these two realms is Darcy (Darcy Marta), an artist who deeply cares for his best friend Jon's well-being. Darcy also symbolizes a form of chosen family to Jon, someone he can confide in and who is available to help, someone he can call without receiving judgement. The nihilistic Luke, on the other hand, lacks social connections[133] and, moreover, seems to be completely done with much of humanity, preferring to kill anyone who gets in his way.

Bearing in mind their outsider status, the road thus symbolizes a space in which the characters can escape from authoritarian institutions but also from society's heteronormative expectations and rules altogether. While our protagonists are attacked on a variety of occasions by their fellow human beings whenever they find themselves in urban centers, it is on the road that they can live without being punished for who they are, even if only temporarily. Thus, the road becomes a symbol for the characters' attempt to escape discrimination, besides offering a possibility to find themselves and to come to terms with their fates – a motif I will return to when considering the omnipresent threat of an impending death overshadowing the film.

Interestingly enough, "[e]ven though they are fugitives, and the major portion of the film takes place in a car, they just don't have the relationship to the road, to the joy of mobility,

[133] This is heightened by the fact that after shooting a policeman, the sole person he can think of to give him shelter is a hookup he met years ago during a pride parade who does not even remember him.

or to the landscape which characterizes many road films" (Mills 311). This is especially highlighted in the way in which Araki chooses to shoot the scenes on the road. As David Laderman notes, Araki mostly uses "tight close-ups during their drive," whereas "typically, the road movie uses extreme long shots to visually emphasize the characters passing through landscape" (*Driving Visions* 216). Additionally, instead of a moving camera that is commonly used in the genre as it "helps represent plot-driven motion and also affords the viewer a kinetic sense of being on the road" (Laderman "Road Movies" 417), the camera is held statically, refusing to portray the landscape, thus further creating distance to traditional road movie conventions. Ultimately, both the framing of the characters in the enclosed space of the car as well as the immobility of the camera suggest that although these characters seem to have found freedom on the road, their status as "second class citizens" in a homophobic and AIDS-phobic society denies them to experience the same ease while traveling the country as their heterosexual peers are granted in other road films. After all, they carry a heavy burden within their blood, no matter where their journey leads them.

In other words, Jon and Luke take the road to escape from their lives and from a reality they are unable to cope with. Driving thus becomes an escape from time (as in the ticking clock of a shortened life expectancy) and from the space of the city as an imprisoning reminder of an inaccessible past life. Nonetheless, as shall be seen, this bubble is unable to last forever as reality will eventually catch up with the couple. Jon's answering machine in specific symbolizes the life left behind, hints towards the character's absence, and foreshadows the void his death will leave. After all, Jon abandoned his friends, family, work, and even a pet fish – all of whom are eventually affected. Darcy's life and sanity begins to crumble out of worry for her best friend, Jon's doctor is trying to reach him, his employer is awaiting an article, and most blatantly, his fish, unfed for days, has jumped out of his tank and died. Life will go on for his peers, yet an emptiness remains as only the shell of his existence lingers in form of his flat, his belongings, and in memories.

The very threat of death the characters are trying to escape, is, however, omnipresent and omnipotent and continuously captured in the American landscape: while in traditional road movies one usually finds "a romantic, pastoral attitude [that] inspires characters to leave culture behind and rediscover nature" (Laderman "Road Movies" 417), *The Living End* mostly presents impersonal desert landscapes and extremely infertile lands. During the first half of the characters' trip, we mostly get to see the blackness of night – again representing a break with road genre conventions –, which is penetrated by cold neon lights and headlights. In a way, this very image parallels Jon's ideas about death, as far as he believes that "[t]here's nothing out

there. It's just black, cold nothingness" (00:54:05-00:54:10). Accordingly, the viewer is presented a dark country in decay, reminiscent of a dystopia, which, in turn, mirrors ideas around disease and death that are all too familiar to the main characters.

The few green spaces our protagonists go past on their trip are usually out of reach. In one scene in particular, Luke stands in front of a park, urinating, while a gate that fills the entire screen separates him from this blossoming piece of land. Again, this highlights his marginal position, symbolically stressing that the figurative greener pastures are inaccessible to seropositive queer demographics. The world these characters instead inhabit is "a post-modern wasteland of fast-food joints and ominous highway overpasses" (Mills 311). Just as presented in my discussion of *Mala Noche*, we thus again encounter a variety of non-places, not only in the form of the spaces mentioned by Mills, but also through continuous scenes set in motels, gas stations, or parking lots.

On the one hand, these spaces might grant Jon and Luke some degree of anonymity and ultimately serve as places of rest, refuge, and revitalization, seeing that the couple is able to, temporarily, strip away their "burdened" identities. Simultaneously, these ever-changing non-places evoke the same idea of transience we encountered in Van Sant's film, especially when juxtaposed with the domestic space of Jon's apartment filled with items and memorabilia reflective of his personality. Yet, while Johnny Alonzo needed to stay in literal movement to ensure his survival, the pair's constant effort to stay in motion seems like an almost tragically futile form of escaping reality, as, after all, both characters can flee for as long as they want, they in the end remain ticking "time bombs" (00:24:35), as Luke puts it.

As the characters' arc will reveal, despite its all-encompassing somberness, the film denies an out-and-out submission to the virus. *The Living End* namely celebrates two HIV-positive gay men that are neither weak nor submissive. On the contrary, Araki opts to represent queer individuals with agency, ready to defend themselves against heteronormative oppression. Consequently, these individuals are not pitied because they are sick, but rather transcend their disease. Above all, even though the audience knows that the characters are HIV-positive, if we look at Luke, we see an energetic person full of life with a strong physique and not someone who is slowly decaying. In other words, Araki deliberately chooses not to portray individuals in the last stages of AIDS but instead depicts them as vivid men in order to offer much-needed counter-representation, which provides hope and offers dignity, highlighting a different side that media usually refused to depict.

The protagonists' journey into the above-described twilight realm could, to an extent, also be broadly understood as mirroring Jon's descent into Luke's world of carelessness and

Luke's loss of independence. Right from the beginning of the film, as an HIV-positive gay street hustler, Luke is perpetually associated with the role of the social outcast[134], inhibiting spaces that belong to the underground and the marginalized. The film thus opens with a shot of a graffiti piece that reads "Fuck the World", while we see Luke spinning around in a desert landscape in the outskirts of Los Angeles. He then turns towards the city's skyline and throws his graffiti spray can at the Californian metropolis. This image not only introduces Luke as a lonesome outsider living on the margins of society but also as a social rebel working against the system. The scene moreover establishes a clear physical separation between him and life in the city, already foreshadowing the type of escapism the narrative then takes up through the transience of the road trip.

His dismay for a society that rejects his identity is further seen in the messages Luke continuously scribbles with permanent marker in public spaces. Captions such as 'I Blame Society' speak of a profound need to express his fatigue and dismay regarding the discriminating *status quo*. As a result, the character completely rejects living by the rules and instead cheats the system whenever he can: he kills, he steals, survives by using strangers' credit cards, he drives without a license. More than that, Luke does not shy away from physical violence or more radical tactics of survival when needed. As previously noted, Luke is introduced as a drifter who needs to be in constant movement so as not to get into precarious situations. This is highlighted by the fact that whenever he gets stuck in a city or in an interaction with another person, his problems amass and find a violent ending.

As was the case in *Mala Noche*, we are again faced with an othered character who, against all odds, is able to take control, define and choose his own path by taking the steering wheel. Unlike Johnny Alonzo, though, Luke is not as constantly aware of his surrounding but somewhat inattentive and negligent. When something goes awry or against his will, he simply confronts the situation head on, mostly by shooting people. His carelessness, in turn, speaks of a certain privilege he still holds as a legal, white American citizen (as opposed to the alien Johnny). On the other hand, the character also does not shy away from standing his ground,

[134] It is noteworthy that Araki equates a queer marginalized individual with the American outlaw, a figure that is commonly widely cherished in cinema and American culture. America, after all, has a morbid fascination with crime and mass murderers. Evidence of this is, e.g., found in the fact that crimes receive major media attention (there are actual TV channels completely devoted to crime stories, such as the Crime & Investigation Network). Most strikingly, however, it is in cinema that real life crimes are glorified over and over again, as can be seen in a movie like *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn, 1967). Charles Derry hence argues that violence has become an inherent part of everyday American life that is desired by many as a form of entertainment: "[i]n fact, violence is now so common and expected as to routinely go unreported by the media unless a specific violent act incorporates a mind-boggling, grisly variation theretofore unheard of, or some spectacularly high body count, in which case the media exploits the violence in *Guinness Book of World Records* style" (119). The violence the queer couple in *The Living End* suffer and return hence also becomes a commentary on America's fascination with violence itself, thus revealing that Luke's killing spree is very much informed by the culture he was brought up in.

from retribution as he feels he has nothing to lose. In his mind, death awaits him anyways anytime soon.

This becomes particularly clear during a conversation the lovers have at the breakfast table where Luke preaches: "there's thousands, maybe millions of us walking around with this thing inside of us, this time bomb making our futures finite. Suddenly I realize: we got nothing to lose. We can say, 'Fuck work. Fuck the system. Fuck everything.' Don't you get it? We're totally free. We can do whatever the fuck we want to do" (00:24:30-00:25:02). Seeing that his life expectancy has been radically reduced due to his serostatus, Luke has realized that he does not need to adapt to a system that completely disrespects and even penalizes him for being who he is. He thus concludes that he has "got nothing to lose" and consequently chooses to enjoy a hedonistic lifestyle outside of society.

Through Jon, however, Luke is eventually able to build a bridge between his lonely life as a nomad and one with human connection and intimacy. Indeed, Luke falls madly and violently in love with the film geek to the extent of possessiveness. Jon, then, becomes both his partner in crime, helping him to escape from the police, as well as the sole person he is able to bond with. Their relationship, however, is everything but rosy. Jon namely not only stands for a saving romantic interest, but he simultaneously breaks Luke's bubble of complete independence and carelessness, seeing that the latter becomes deeply emotionally and sexually dependent on him. In a twisted fate, Luke eventually binds his lover to him, taking away Jon's liberties so as to continue to uphold the illusion of his own endless freedom and control.

In detail, once meeting Jon, Luke quickly develops a rather toxic behavior, growing more and more possessive of and obsessed about his companion. Clinging to him every minute, Jon is even unable to phone a friend without being interrupted or distracted by his partner. While Luke's displays of affection appear charming at first, Jon eventually grows tired of these mind games and decides to leave the drifter. Luke then exceeds the limits of his manipulative behavior by cutting open his wrist to make Jon stay. The height of this domineering dynamic, however, happens next: understanding that Jon refuses to budge, Luke attempts to commit suicide while raping Jon (a key scene I will return to further below). Having him bound up and motionless – the utmost form of physical control – he vividly declares his obsession to his partner by stating that "[y]ou'll never ever find anybody who cares as much about you as I do. Don't you see that?" (01:16:00-01:16:11). As Luke is literally inside Jon when he presses the

gun[135], he is the most intimate and close to someone – at least physically – he can be right before death. His suicide attempt ultimately fails, though, as there are no more bullets left in his gun.

Jon, in his own right, greatly counterbalances Luke. The film critic is namely an introverted, unobtrusive, and non-confrontational everyday person whose life could not be more different from his lover's: notwithstanding the fact that he is a gay male living in a deeply homophobic country, Jon is nonetheless well integrated into American society. He holds a job that enables him to rent an apartment, he owns a car as well as a pet fish – all of which speak of a certain kind of responsibility and domesticity. The only "irresponsible mistake" he seems to have committed in his life was getting infected with HIV – a simple slipup that eventually turned out to be a complete life changer.

As soon as Jon meets Luke, two worlds collide and "[w]hat's at stake, as the film makes clear, is that Jon learns to leave his responsible rut and shed his self-incriminating response to being HIV-positive" (Mills 311). Strictly speaking, Jon goes through this rupturing experience because he falls for Luke. His infatuation, which is of highly sexual and carnal nature, is further heightened by his own fragility after his overwhelming diagnosis. Luke's confrontational being, then, creates a stark contrast to Jon's own contemplative disposition in dealing with the lethal virus, while simultaneously titillating the submissive character.

As the course of action unfolds, he thus learns to embrace his irresponsibility as a form of rebellion, of empowerment, and as a way of making his own voice heard by helping out a complete and utter outlaw. Obviously, hereby Jon is greatly influenced by Luke's hedonistic vision of life on the fringes; Jon as well gradually becoming more and more uninhibited. This growingly rebellious nature in Jon[136], naturally, reflects the road movie's motif of the "inner" journey towards self-discovery, simultaneously serving as a critique of the nation with its anti-establishment stance.

Nevertheless, even this cliché is then subverted. Jon is allowed to enjoy this bubble of cinematic lawlessness as a distraction from his fate merely for a brief period of time before the

[135] This, then again, harks back to an earlier scene in which Luke returns into his lover's arms after having killed a policeman. Luke shows up in the middle of the night with a blood-spattered face, holding a gun in his mouth, asking for Jon's help as Jon, after all, is "the only person [Luke] know[s]" (00:34:01-00:34:04). Provoking Jon to help him by threatening to kill himself, Jon feels obligated to serve as an emotional support system and an accomplice from running from the law. This being said, though, it is also Jon's sexual attraction towards Luke that keeps him returning to this self-destructive relationship, as I will return to later on.

[136] The viewer is further guided through Jon's changes in attitude via his calls back home to Darcy. While the character at first still agrees with his friend that he has "bitten more than [he] can gag on" (00:43:57-00:44:01) and that he has "made the worst mistake of [his] life" (00:55:46-00:55:49), during the next phone call he already marvels at the fact that "nothing is the same anymore. Everything has changed" (00:56:17-00:56:20). Given that Luke's propensity for violence and crime is uncontrollable and completely irrational, Jon, however, quickly begins to fall back into old, protective habits, eventually losing his patience.

cracks start to show. By taking Luke's invitation to go on the road, he believes he is emancipating himself from societal convictions but crumbles time and time again at the thought of all the disorder the couple is causing. After all, the character is never able to completely embrace death (or the hedonistic carelessness that Luke derives from his death sentence) and to consciously accept that his life will, perhaps, end in the near future. His deep-seated fears, in turn, are best represented by the fact that the threat of death always lurks subconsciously through its many signifiers that are strewn throughout his apartment: there is a Halloween skeleton decoration in his closet, articles about the HIV-positive filmmaker Derek Jarman, and an essay on the death of cinema he's in the process of writing. Jon's freak-outs every time he sees Luke's gun – a phallic reminder of death that I will return to further below – further underline his complete and utter fear regarding his finite future.

The omens of an impending death soon, however, stop existing only on a symbolic level: the very idea that the reality of his mortality will catch up with him materializes when Jon gets sick midway through the road trip, fighting an uncontrollable cough for the rest of the movie. Naturally, it dawns on him that his physical strength and condition are not permanent, that he will eventually get weaker, and that having met Luke has put him in an incredibly precarious and self-destructive position: "I'm fucking over this. My mind is fucked up. It's like I have this vision of you as this vampire. You're sucking the life force out of me. I mean, it really scares me," the character bursts out. Indeed, Jon was comfortable with living out danger through Luke as long as it fed into his rebellious fantasy, but the more he becomes aware of how his lover's recklessness is affecting his own life and safety, the more he feels threatened by it. Literally and figuratively sick and tired of this escapade, he calls Darcy and decides that he is "coming home" (01:13:15-01:13:16), finally coming to the realization that their marginalized position is not enough to bridge the deep-rooted differences between them. When informed by his lover about his decision, Luke explicitly makes clear in an outburst of emotions that the stability and comfort Jon longs for are completely irrelevant, even naïve, to him:

> You really want to go back to your 'I'm HIV-positive and everything's normal, hunky-dory' life? Well, go fucking right ahead. Just don't forget to have sex in a plastic bag and don't plan anything too far in the future. Don't you get it? We're not like them. We don't have as much time. So we got to grab life by the balls and go for it. You can piss it all away in that stupid job of yours until you wither away and they feed you to the worms. I say fuck that shit, man. (00:59:22-00:59:58)

As becomes apparent, being HIV-positive, so the outcast, has opened up new possibilities that the two must claim and go for, especially because their former life is not accessible to them anymore.

Before engaging with the final part of the film and the further development of this twisted love affair, it is also crucial to look into the characters' sexually charged relationship. After all, as already alluded to, it is Luke's sexual appeal that also heavily contributes to Jon's staying with him. Early on, we learn of the infectiously erotic physical attraction he feels regarding the fugitive when he confides in Darcy that "I just can't get him out of my head. Just thinking about him gives me a fucking boner. The way he smells, the way it feels to touch him" (00:28:39-00:28:50). Interestingly, it is on the road that the characters truly begin to live out their sexuality and to sexually experiment. While still in the confines of Los Angeles, sexual intimacy is only able to be experienced in Jon's apartment. Each time the couple expresses their gay identity or affection in the public sphere, they suffer immediate retribution.

This, then again, can be read as a comment on the societal requirement that seropositive individuals lead asexual lives. On various occasions Luke is thus threatened – be it in form of verbal or physical violence – because of his sexual desire: an earlier-mentioned scene in which he is having sexual intercourse with a married suitor ends with Luke's sexual partner being killed by his wife. In another scene, an individual that sees Jon and Luke kissing on the street immediately insults them with the words "Adios Infected Dick Suckers" (00:25:52-00:25:55), a play on the meaning of the initialism AIDS. This then shows that, to an extent, these characters, again, must develop a sense of *la facultad*, to live authentically in a society that bears perpetual dangers. Like the Mexican boys in *Mala Noche*, they need to be constantly vigilant, they are continuously reminded of their status as outsiders and hence need to be prepared, aware, ready to escape or fight.

Nonetheless, when on the road, things drastically change: since less social control prevails outside the urban space, the couple is able to act out their sexual desires in more uninhibited and tender ways, taking full advantage of their newfound sexual liberation in the public space. As Laderman argues, Araki "creates a space for their intimacy, an outlaw intimacy that is cramped but nevertheless protected and nurtured by the traveling car. In this way, *The Living End* develops an antiromantic but politicized image of the desert landscape and open highway" (*Driving Visions* 216). One scene in particular, in which Jon drives by policemen patrolling a highway while he receives oral sex from Luke, highlights this newfound form of freedom. Since this infringement goes completely unnoticed, this moment specifically underlines the anti-authoritarian stance of the movie, clearly hinting at the idea that sex should be de-policed. This is to say that, despite the image of a literal patrolling "sex police," queer, seropositive, public sex continues to exist and to thrive unnoticed under its very watch.

To further these notions, the protagonists are highly sexualized, highly sexually active,

and presented as erotic beings, thus creating a stark contrast to other AIDS films as well as prevalent trends in media of the time. In point of fact, Luke stops the road trip on several occasions to sleep with his partner. Not only is the movie therefore very frank and unrepentant about it, but it also celebrates the literal *joie de vivre* found in sex in the face of an impending death. The camera in *The Living End* also plays a major role in fetishizing the protagonists' bodies, especially by continuously presenting Luke's athletic physique, like this turning these HIV-positive men into objects to be gazed at. The movie, indeed, also bears certain nods to pornography as well as underground cinema, perhaps best seen in the focus on buff, shirtless, and always-horny men. This pornographic sensibility is then enhanced through the bad, campy acting, the cheesy dialogue, or the gritty, low-budget quality of the filmic material *per se*.

All these factors, then again, are crucial to the film's commentary regarding homoeroticism during the AIDS crisis seeing that "by making us desire Luke, Jon, or both of them [Araki] also makes us realize we have lost our inalienable right to desire. This is where the film becomes really queer. Luke and Jon's mutual infatuation is like a disease. Luke infects Jon like a virus, and we are infected along with him" (Grundmann 27). Not only are audience members placed in a position in which they desire someone who was (and still commonly is) perceived as undesirable or dangerous, but in the process the film also questions the validity of blaming seropositive individuals for getting infected through sexual intercourse as it highlights the intricacies and complexities of desire, making the viewer complicit in the seropositive eroticism on screen.

Naturally, this leads to the question whether *The Living End* is an "irresponsible"[137] or harmful movie, particularly due to its images of bareback sex at the height of the AIDS crisis as well as for referring to the long-standing and deeply damaging trope of homicidal, criminal LGBTQIA+ individuals. Considering the sociopolitical turmoil of the times, it can be said that Araki uses provocative images with the aim of inquiring "why straight irresponsibility is OK (and therefore not irresponsible) and gay irresponsibility isn't" (Grundmann 27). Certainly, the straight irresponsibility Grundmann refers to is linked to the fact that the government as well as large parts of American society during the 1980s and the early 1990s were comfortable with letting a great number of people die while scapegoating them as diseased predators and lesser citizens. To a degree, Luke's murderous behavior thus mirrors the wider coldblooded attitudes of the times.

[137] As becomes apparent right at the beginning of the film, Gregg Araki was very aware of the negative impact his film could have, seeing that he added a disclaimer describing his feature as "An Irresponsible Film" before the main titles appear. While serving to acknowledge the controversial content of this feature film, the disclaimer, however, could also be understood as a tongue-in-cheek mockery of prudish audience members' reaction to the images displayed.

When it comes to the breaking of sexual taboos, one scene in particular stands out: although the movie is very reluctant in exposing too much of the protagonists' bodies during sex scenes (which are, in turn, mostly restricted to the characters' faces and feet), the film makes sure that the audience knows that the characters on screen are engaging in condomless sex: while showering in a motel, Luke asks Jon to "fuck him". When Jon, alerts his lover that he does not have a condom, Luke simply responds with "I don't care" (00:52:04-00:52:06). The two then go on to have kinky sex in the shower. With its unrepentant depiction of bareback sex, this short scene openly broke very deep-cutting taboos in LGBTQIA+ communities and media representations thereof (especially when considering that it was released in the early 1990s). More precisely, it blatantly transgresses the powerful disciplining discourses directed towards new sexual standards for LGBTQIA+ individuals during the pandemic that brought about a health craze amongst gay men.

By embracing anal sex without protection, the movie thus reveals that over a decade of health mandates with a deeply demonizing, "simplistic, patronizing, disempowering, sexphobic, and homophobic" (Rofes 4) tone, ultimately backfired as people began to question the restricting lives they were supposed to lead. After all, the way sex ed often worked was through a dividing line between respectable and unrespectable sexual acts that, in turn, considered individuals to be either decent and responsible *or* disreputable, perverse, and dangerous. In other words, there were those who assimilated to societal and heteronormative standards of "healthy" living and those who chose to deviate from them through "unsafe" practices as acts of rebellion (Greteman "Queer" 252-3; Rofes 4).

There are moments that criticize these health decrees right at the beginning of *The Living End* when Jon receives his HIV diagnosis from his doctor, who, in a bored voice, recites empty clichés of the likes that Jon can still lead a "perfectly healthy, normal life" (00:02:07-00:02:09). Simultaneously, he condescendingly informs him about safe sex, "which as a member of a high-risk group [Jon] ought to be practicing anyway" (00:02:18-00:02:22). "By no means you should consider this a death sentence" (00:02:11-00:02:14), the doctor further preaches, while the campy inflection in his voice is tinged with a touch of irony and further suggests a parody of his own sayings – as if the movie itself fails to really believe in any of this a decade into an, at the time, seemingly unstoppable lethal pandemic. Early on, the film therefore establishes the dos and don'ts of respectable queer sex, only to then break these instructions.

Although health is commonly something we strive for to better our living conditions, it can also be a restrictive and oppressive regulatory system. This is to say that health has become

a policed, disciplining, and demanding ideal in itself, representing "something for which one must strive; it is no longer something one simply possesses" (Dean *Unlimited* 63). Indeed, this insistent quest for perfect health and a perfect, normative body exists in

> a precarious state that needs constant monitoring and assessment. Being a middle-class U.S. citizen today entails perpetual self-surveillance regarding diet, exercise, and medication; bourgeois identity requires the vigilant practice of a kind of corporate risk management with respect to one's body and its pleasures. Every meal is a potential minefield for health maintenance, since daily nutrition has become larded with risks unknown to previous generations. Our increased knowledge about nutrition, disease, and medicine has not produced a greater sense of security but, on the contrary, a heightened sense of risk. (Dean *Unlimited* 62)

Eventually, the pursuit of perfect health coupled with that of a perfect body becomes essential to align with normative societal demands (Dean *Unlimited* 63; Robinson 102-3). Death, then, as the opposite of health in western society, is seen as the failure to do so and becomes one of the ultimate "health hazards to avoid" (Dean *Unlimited* 65).

Striving for or embracing death, in effect, is a highly risky way to fight against those very standards set by modern medicine (Dean *Unlimited* 66). Bearing in mind that bareback sex was almost invariably linked to suicide in the early 1990s, Jon and Luke's behavior speaks of the same death drive. As a consequence, as Dean goes on to argue, to some individuals barebacking is a form of counteracting the idea that an HIV-positive person is ill, defined by their serostatus and thus worth less. It moreover represents a means of regaining pride and showing that believing in one's humanity is not opposed to empowering sex, intimacies, and bodily desires of HIV-positive individuals. After all, living with a constant reminder of one's mortality and the terror of HIV/AIDS becomes an overwhelming and unhealthy mental struggle after a while (Dean *Unlimited* 54-5; Robinson 104). By risking it all, in the same way that the characters in *The Living End* have, barebackers "feel that they have (re)gained control over their sex lives and from HIV that has dominated their sexual relations for so long" (Robinson 104).

There is clearly an eroticization of risk itself present in bareback cultures[138], even if many individuals do not seek to be seroconverted in the first place. Others, eroticize the very

[138] Naturally, the topic at hand presents an utmost conundrum. On the one hand, arguments speaking out against barebacking are more than obvious after having related the issues of the HIV/AIDS pandemic at large in the last few chapters: there is a direct responsibility and risk for one's personal health, the health of one's sexual partner, and for public health at large, which should not be undermined. Therefore, those who willfully spread HIV without the consent of others should not be perceived as living out just another kink or fetish seeing that HIV prevention still today is of utmost importance, even in times of medication and PrEP. We should also not forget that the images and stigma associated to barebacking can be harmful to HIV-positive individuals wanting to live peacefully in an already serophobic society. It can also have vaster issues seeing that "the bareback phenomenon endangers public funding for AIDS research, treatment, and education" (Dean *Unlimited* 10). Then again, an individual

act of infecting or getting infected, and, finally, there is also the erotic charge of barebacking as an act of rebellion and resistance (Dean *Unlimited* 17, 68-9; Robinson 104; Greteman "Raw" 242). Be it as it may, and though I will not further dissect these forms of high-risk pleasure-seeking as it would go beyond the scope of this project, we can deduct that, overall, the virus itself becomes an erotic element in the sex life of these people[139]. Simultaneously, barebacking also represents a careless disregard of risk (or a deliberate seeking out of risk) as well as a way to engage in sexual relation without having to consider communal and societal responsibilities, all of which grant barebackers unlimited hedonistic pleasure of "natural" or "raw" sexual intercourse (Dean *Unlimited* 60; Robinson 104). These attitudes, in turn, immediately evoke Luke's own hedonism devoid of any responsibilities, including responsibilities to his own well-being.

The association of sex, death, and violence[140] is an intricate relation that Luke seems to have adapted to his personal form of sexual expression. Hence, the first time he seduces Jon, he does this by threatening him, fantasizing about cutting up his body. The ever so fearful Jon also gets to relish in these fantasies. Turned on by Luke's violent impulses during this specific scene he tells his lover to "definitely not [stop]" (00:22:13). In another scene Luke wants to be choked during sex (which again conjures the idea of playing with his life). His fetishization of

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should be able to maintain agency over their own body and sexual life (as long as one does not hurt others). The matter, however, not only stretches into the realm of personal agency and freedom of bodily and sexual choice, but furthermore into the sexual politics and history of queer communities that have been associated to shame and oppression and have been pathologized since, at least, the late 19th century. Indeed, it is this very connection between queer sexualities, bodies, HIV/AIDS and shame and stigma that barebackers attempt to counteract. Shaming and othering people furthermore has the effect of driving certain sexual practices underground where they will bloom one way or another – perhaps even in less safe environments. Lastly, as Dean repeats over and over again, most barebacking men do not seek out to infect a partner or to be infected.

[139] The erotic dimension of barebacking, especially within those smaller circles that seek out seroconversion, is also linked to the fantasy of creating kinship ties. More precisely, Dean reasons that not only did barebacking spring out in opposition to same-gender marriage debates, but that it was, in certain contexts, also inspired by it in its own radical, queer way. Kinship, in this regard, is namely formed through viral transmission, creating a bizarre and twisted *pendant* to heterosexual marriage (Dean *Unlimited* 51-2). Given that "membership is etched into the body like a tattoo" (77), the virus becomes somehow akin to wedding rings representing life-long bonds and commitments (85). To an extent, this is also seen in *The Living End*, yet in a different form: after all, the protagonists find a connection especially through their diagnosis, their status as belonging to the dregs of society, and through their criminal involvement. The link they establish between themselves is almost a form of queer, twisted, and obsessive matrimony. Luke even writes the words "Jon + Luke – Till Death Do Us Part" with sharpie on a phone booth, encircling it with a heart. As we will see, Luke takes this oath very seriously and will choose death the moment that Jon decides to leave him.

[140] In fact, Luke plays with death in two ways – namely as a giver and a receiver: while constantly putting himself at utmost risk and in life-threatening situations, he also goes on a killing spree, remorselessly retaliating against a system that is constantly failing to recognize his worth and harming him. The same notion is channeled through his fantasy about going to Washington to inject President Bush with his blood. It is clearly an outcry from someone who has been beaten and ostracized time and time again by an utmost queerphobic establishment. In a way, Luke thus plays with his mortality to get a sense of control over life and death – a control that his HIV status has taken from him. Instead of endorsing this kind of violent behavior, the movie seeks to engage with people on the verge of breaking after being mistreated for too long. Consequently, *The Living End* proposes a need to express this in radical ways to break the silence. While certainly provocative, the film's true aim lies in alerting its audience of these inhumane conditions.

ending his life becomes even more apparent when he directly equates sex and death by describing death to be "a lot like coming. The same chemicals and stuff get released in the blood stream" (01:02:00-01:02:05). He then goes on to describe that "[t]hat's how I wanna go. With a big bang and a big fucking smile on my face" (01:02:18-01:02:24).

There are also numerous allusions to suicide present in the movie that further play into this notion: Jon's fish that jumped out of his fishbowl, a story Luke tells Jon about a homeless lady that jumped off a skyscraper, and most of all Luke's gun, which he calls his "security blanket" (00:40:59). By choosing these words Luke implies that he will end his life before AIDS forces him into a state of weakness or dependance, an attitude that, in turn, again reinforces a sense of having control and a choice. Holding the trump card of suicide, the seropositive character has a means to take away the power of the virus, refusing to succumb to or be a victim of his health condition while keeping his autonomy: "I swear, the first symptoms, the first sign of anything – I'll just off myself straight away. No way am I going to go through all that horrible shit you hear about," (01:01:14-01:01:24) the character thus pronounces, already foreshadowing his ultimate suicide attempt at the end of the movie. His gun, then, becomes a constant present reminder of death (and Luke's possible suicide) to both Luke and Jon. Whereas Jon is completely freaked out by the weapon (and the idea of death overall), Luke indulges in it, even taking it into his mouth and thus further linking the lethal phallic object with erotic pleasure.

Luke's eventual suicide attempt represents the ultimate climax of his hedonistic and deathly phantasies: having grown deeply emotionally dependent on Jon, his lover has become the only person worth living for. Understanding that Jon has made up his mind to leave him, he attempts suicide before having to go through the pain of loss: "[c]an't you see? I love you more than life! […] I don't care about anything anymore," Luke urges his lover, trying to prove his unshakable love to him. This scene, again, harks back to an earlier moment in the narrative in which Luke proposes to Jon that "if [he] had to choose, which would [he] rather die for? Sex or love?" (00:48:39-00:48:48). While at that point, the character development of the hedonistic, self-centered Luke would still suggest that he would always prioritize sex, in a tragic twist the always-lusty Luke now opts for love.

In a rather destructive form of showing his affection, Luke then rapes a bound Jon and decides to end his own life during sex. As a last refuge, this nihilistic character that completely devalues his life thus chooses a suicide during the sexual act as it mirrors the way in which his life started to fall apart to begin with: i.e. through a sexually transmitted infection. To heighten the idea of the destructiveness of his affection, of his phantasies, and of his seropositive sexual

existence, Luke holds a gun in his own mouth and pulls the trigger, only to realize that the weapon ran out of ammunition. This detail, eventually, is the most politically and cinematically profound break with conventions Araki presents: as penetration – both embodied by the actual anal penetration of Jon and the penetrating gun – does not lead to an instant death, so is queer sex not represented as a death sentence in this ultimate twist.

Knowing the traditions of AIDS movies as well as of road movies, a viewer would expect that the symbols of death strewn throughout the film serve as a form of foreshadowing and that the protagonists, after all, will not survive. Not only do AIDS films traditionally end with the passing of an HIV-positive character but also the protagonists of road movies often find death at the end of their journey: "[r]oad narratives are constituted by a search for life, the characters running from death which always threatens at either end of the road. A romantic notion, death here may work to give meaning to life, much as form gives shape to art, and darkness gives definition to light" (S. Roberts 55). This interesting intersection between both genres, however, aims at very different, oftentimes even opposing readings: while in road movies death gives meaning to the life on the road as the protagonists' journeys are ended before the characters are forced to return to an oppressive life in society, in AIDS film death usually represents an unwelcomed punishment and an abrupt and tragic end of life.

The Living End ultimately once more subverts audience expectations by letting its protagonists survive at the end of the film. While Luke tries to kill himself, his suicide attempt fails as there are no more bullets left in his gun. It is in this moment that he appears to realize the importance of life – even though only a finite future awaits him. In literally throwing away his gun, or rather the symbol of his (self-)destructive behavior, Luke seems to realize that there might be, after all, something worth living for, even if it is only found in a rocky, twisted, and doomed form of bonding with another queer man outside of society. Eventually, as the death of the protagonists is suspended, Araki gives the couple a *living end* – an ending in which they are able to go on living united, even if probably only for a limited period of time.

The film's very last shot is quite ambiguous: on the one hand, the filmmaker is able to create a message of hope, which means that there might be a future for the couple and that maybe there might be a way to survive this crisis as medical science is continuously evolving. However, the ending is not clear-cut as the couple is embracing in front of a setting sun, a clear symbol of death. Ultimately, the juxtaposition of images of optimism and demise can be perceived as a plea to audience members not to give up on hope while simultaneously not to retreat into a form of apolitical escapism that would deny the tragic reality of the early 1990s AIDS crisis. The two characters sit alone, embracing one another, looking out into the horizon

at the setting sun. The extreme wide shot makes them appear small, meaningless, purposeless almost. While a life-saving revelation or miracle is thus suspended, they have nonetheless changed as people, now more aware of what they are looking for in the time that remains: Luke has found love and is unwilling to let go of human connection while Jon has learned to cherish his everyday life, comfort, and security after seeing death in the eye.

8) *The Bloom Generation*: Homonormative Tensions in 21st Century Queer Cinema

8.1) *Appropriate Behavior*: The Queer 2000s

Whereas the 1990s are generally described as "the gay 90s," in terms of LGBTQIA+ history the subsequent decade is often reduced to a conservative backlash caused by the Bush presidency, which is followed by an era of revitalization during the Obama years. But history is more complex and nuanced than these accounts usually make it out to be: one way to access the whirlwind of (hi)stories and struggles defining 21st-century LGBTQIA+ America, is through the lens of homonormativity as well as the rejection thereof. As will be seen, these developments were not new, but rather informed by decades of divisions within LGBTQIA+ movements and, to a great extent, they also embodied direct reactions in regard to the rising stigmatization during the AIDS crisis and the militancy of AIDS activism.

In a nutshell, homonormativity, a concept first introduced by Lisa Duggan in "The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism" (2002), describes an ideology of "new neoliberal sexual politics […] that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption" (Duggan "The New" 179). Consequently, this phenomenon generally entails the creation of a respectable, unthreatening LGBTQIA+ citizen who follows and perpetuates (hetero)normative standards of living without contesting them.

This ideal, then again, finds its epitomized form in monogamous, childbearing marriages between two white, cisgender partners – who, not only represent the societally accepted norm, but also serve as beacons to further anti-promiscuity and -sex campaigns, the restriction of non-conforming queer identities, communities, and ways of living and being. This ideology modeled "around a state-endorsed heterosexual primacy and prestige" (190), in consequence, has a clear preference for cultural and personal homogeneity over a culture of plurality, or rather "the 'aren't we all just human beings' position that reduces cultural specificity to a bland sameness that ends up assuming and asserting the desirability of the mainstream" (S. Walters 15). The crux of the matter is that these developments also entail a process of domesticating and depoliticizing these model LGBTQIA+ citizens so that they can be accepted by a wider general public, by politicians, and by the market at large so as to achieve recognition, tolerance, or acceptance without persecution (Duggan "The New" 180).

If we go back to the discussion in chapter 3, we need to recognize that these ambitions are not necessarily innovative, particularly when remembering the early homophile movements that began gaining traction in 1950s America. Not only did they follow very similar goals, but also the attitudes they propagated never vanished over the years – even in times of most radical political activism, as represented by the years right after Stonewall or during the AIDS crisis. The great difference to these early homonormative emergences, however, is the fact that in the past, radical and assimilationist voices co-existed on the margins in the fight for queer rights. Why did a homonormative worldview, then, begin to become so prevalent in LGBTQIA+ discourses and activism inside *and* outside of the community from the 1990s onwards? The answer to this question, as will be seen, is far more complex than an overall conservative sociopolitical backlash.

Firstly, as Bronski notes, the wave of assimilationism might have been a direct reaction to the demonization of LGBTQIA+ individuals throughout previous decades (*A Queer History* 240-1): as detailed in the last few chapters, these ranged from discriminatory practices such as equating homosexuality and child molestation, the treatment of LGBTQIA+ individuals as second-class citizens by the state, the refusal to grant them the same rights as heterosexual citizens (such as marriage or adoption), to day to day legal issues that surfaced or became more apparent throughout the AIDS pandemic. The latter point is essential to this discussion as at the height of the AIDS crisis many individuals suddenly found themselves in utmost precarious and previously unimaginable situations concerning their personal relationships: "[u]nable to visit their sick partners in the hospital, make medical decisions, or deal with complicated finances, they were legal strangers to their lovers and often treated horrendously by medical professionals and their lovers' families. These examples demonstrate beyond a doubt that same-sex relationships need some sort of legal protections" (Bronski A Queer History 240-1).

When furthermore taking into account that after 9/11, the US "arguably bec[a]me more cautious and conservative" (Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 269), the reasons for a greater tendency towards assimilating seem even more valid, pertinent, and understandable. The point of the matter, however, is that these mindsets, in turn, started to gain discriminatory traits by imposing homogenized ways of perceiving LGBTQIA+-related issues, in the process ostracizing everything "deviant" that did not fit the mold. More precisely, when looking at the model LGBTQIA+ citizen, we need to recognize that this ideal is clearly pitted against othered, "extremist" queers – i.e., the ones "boogying in bars, parading on the street, demonstrating, kissing in public" (S. Walters 77). This very same separation between moderate centrists and

radical leftists was also felt regarding political matters and the priorities of struggles in need of being tackled[141].

In a rather harsh twist, individuals now suddenly deemed "extremists" for not fitting into the clean and respectable norm, were the ones who had vastly fought on the frontline in earlier struggles, allowing for many sociopolitical changes that favored LGBTQIA+ individuals on a wider scale. Instead, in the course of the 1990s "alongside radical and progressive AIDS activism a new strain of gay moralism appeared" (Duggan "The New" 182) that transformed LGBTQIA+ activism into softer political attitudes with mass appeal, ultimately becoming a domineering trend in the 2000s and 2010s with the objective to improve "same-sex marriage and family recognition rights, market/cultural visibility, access to the military, and hate crime/safety legislation" (Weiss 108). The resulting limited scope of LGBTQIA+ activism, unfortunately, has led to a flourishing of forms of discrimination, oppression, and segregation[142] and the perpetuation of certain unjust realities[143] that queer theorists, activists (and even New Queer filmmakers) had worked hard to dismantle.

To further dive into the injustices caused by homonormativity, it is also of essence to address the popularization, commercialization, and commodification of queer culture that gained momentum in the 1990s and has grown ever since. More precisely, activism has

> been replaced with more or less corporate strategies that attempt to effect progress for queers from within dominant institutions. Powerful lobbying groups, such as the Human Rights Campaign, and educational/support programs, such as those run by PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) and GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network) have to a great extent replaced militant marching in the streets. Americans are today encouraged to celebrate diversity and fight for civil rights through consumerism and check writing (Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 268)

[141] In comparison, though AIDS activism displayed a myriad of – at times opposing – forms of fighting and resisting (as greatly detailed in previous chapters), the various communities were, however, unitedly struggling for a singular goal as AIDS could, after all, affect anyone the same way.

[142] This fragmentation of a privileged center and the silenced margins also leads to a break of communitarian ties, a phenomenon we witnessed in the 1970s, deeply weakening the power of LGBTQIA+ activism.

[143] To be more exact, reducing the multitude of identities pertaining to the initialism LGBTQIA+ to an undistinguishable mass (where everyone is like everyone else – with the sole difference that gays and lesbians love someone of the same gender) eventually leads to the systemic elimination of diverse and intersectional queer communities, identities, and cultures. Those who do not fit the mold are consequently implicitly referred to as being dissidents – their existence and presence becomes illegitimate and in need of being policed or punished. In consequence, ideas around equality and freedom are also reduced to a select few (Duggan "The New" 190). In the end, even though I completely agree that the fight for marriage equality, the right to serve freely in the military, or to adopt are incredibly important to a democracy, there are nonetheless other real, significant, and drastic issues plaguing queer individuals and communities that have become secondary – if not ignored or forgotten. Furthermore, creating a whitewashed idea of social and political inclusion does not brush away some deep-seated issues around homophobia, queer-bashing and murder, or the deeply discriminatory, racist, classicist, and sexist policies harming disenfranchised communities.

The commercialization of LGBTQIA+ communities became increasingly evident in the media. As explained in a previous chapter, throughout the 1980s, queerness was mostly represented unfavorably and viewed as unmarketable. Only very few television shows like *The Golden Girls* (Susan Harris, 1985-1992) thus dared to speak about homosexuality at all, while the printed press generally stayed silent or was looking for shocking headlines to beat down queer causes even further. Yet, in the 90s things began to change, as gay people suddenly penetrated public media spaces "[f]rom cover stories in *Time* and *Newsweek* to TV talk shows and editorials in national and regional newspapers" (S. Walters 3). Out (and outed) gay celebrities like Elton John, Ellen DeGeneres, RuPaul, or George Michael began to be celebrated and found actual wider success, even though they presented as openly gay. Hereby, especially the medium of television played a crucial role as a harbinger of change. Indeed, as Suzanna Walters points out, in the 1990s and 2000s television still represented a "national cultural meeting place, a site of profound social meaning and effect" (27).

Due to the omnipresence of the medium inside American households, queer characters on national television became harder to avoid and were, in effect, more present in the lives of everyday Americans (as opposed to cinema, for instance, where viewers can pick and choose the content they want to consume) (S. Walters 27). This greater presence, in turn, was further propelled by an explosion of gay and lesbian content on prime-time television. While the first gays and lesbians started to pop up on American screens as early as the 1970s (Bronski *A Queer History* 237), it was only in the 1990s that the trend of "gay and lesbian" episodes within popular series became more and more frequent, some series even deciding to include recurring queer characters[144].

Eventually, sitcoms and series that centered on queer protagonists also began appearing. Leading the way was Ellen DeGeneres: Ellen came out both as a character in her sitcom *Ellen* (Carol Black et al., 1994-1998) as well as in real life in April of 1997. Both events garnered an explosion of media attention (S. Walters xiv-xv). Though her show was ultimately cancelled a year later, Ellen not only represented the first queer leading role on American television, but also spawned hit shows such as the highly popular *Will & Grace* (David Kohan & Max Mutchnick, 1998-2020), whose incredible success led to cameos by celebrities such as Cher,

[144] Popular examples include sitcoms and series like *Roseanne* (Roseanne Barr & Matt Williams, 1988-2018); *Friends* (David Crane & Marta Kauffman, 1994-2014); *Buffy* (Joss Whedon, 1997–2003); *Dawson's Creek* (Kevin Williamson, 1998–2003); *The Education of Max Bickford* (Dawn Prestwich & Nicole Yorkin, 2001-2002) (which features the first recurring transgender character on American television), as well as cartoons such as *The Simpsons* (Matt Groening, 1989-); *South Park* (Trey Parker & Mat Stone, 1997-); or *Family Guy* (Seth MacFarlane, 1999-). HBO's *Six Feet Under* (Alan Ball, 2001-2005) particularly stood out of these for its depiction of the character of David Fisher, one of the series' protagonists that represents a flawed, yet more serious and nuanced three-dimensional character.

Madonna, Britney Spears, Matt Damon, or Glenn Close – an idea completely unconceivable only a few years earlier.

Though incredibly important and groundbreaking in creating awareness of lesbian and gay people, and in terms of propagating for acceptance through familiarity, the depictions in these series are also exceptionally limiting in terms of diversity of their casts and, as I already alluded to, in terms of stereotyped (mis)representations. The queerness depicted is easily sellable, digestible, and ultimately tolerable. More precisely, this superficial celebration of acceptance through entertainment completely misses the mark when it comes to real life political and social struggles of LGBTQIA+ individuals. In the end, most series of the time were essentialist at heart, lacking the inclusivity and fluidity of sex, gender, and sexual orientations that queerness stood for (which becomes most poignant when realizing that there was actually a separation between a show for gay men [*Queer as Folk*] and one for lesbians [*The L Word*][145]). This then shows that, in the end, visibility can provide a false impression of actual social and political change and of inclusion.

More specifically, the extinction of difference, in turn, stimulates the dominant culture's hold, allowing it to "assimilate marginalized groups in an effort to remain principal" (Yaksich 27). The dominant position hence becomes a place of policing and silencing others by promising visibility, inclusion, and acceptance – all of which are only available if one is ready to accept a passivity towards deeper injustices and inequalities. At the same time, this commodification and aestheticization of queerness also stimulated a fetishization and objectification of LGBTQIA+ individuals and culture. To be more precise, the "gay (life)style" namely "has become a mass-mediated commodity, a culture of beautiful objects (bodies,

[145] *Queer as Folk* (Ron Cowen & Daniel Lipman, 2000-2005) is an adaptation of a British mini-series (Russell T. Davies, 1999–2000) bearing the same name. Although the show might have been as problematic as the previously described ones, particularly for focusing on oversimplified, white, middle-class, attractive, able-bodied, cisgender males living in Pittsburgh, it was nonetheless groundbreaking for being a series that almost solely focused on queer characters – while only very few straight returning characters were actually part of the cast. In addition to this, its five seasons (running on the paid cable network channel Showtime) completely upturned what television viewers were used to: *Queer as Folk* included several HIV-positive characters (including a teenager) and found a balance between frank talk about safe sex, explicit (yet softcore) and utterly promiscuous gay sex, the inclusion of queer spaces (like bars, clubs, baths, or dark rooms), and deeper problems that have scarred queer communities such as drug use and abuse. Many of these depictions were only found in NQC films up until that point (though the narrative's and characters' simplicity found in *QAF* were not at all reminiscent of the film wave). In 2004 *The L Word* (Michele Abbott, et al. 2004-2009) was released as a lesbian answer to *Queer as Folk*. Though the show featured a transgender man (whose treatment was not the most flattering), just like *Queer as Folk*, the show clearly lacked certain intersectional nuances. The same issues graced Bravo's highly popular *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (David Collins, 2003–2007), a format that let loose five gay men to vamp up the lives of heterosexuals. Indeed, countless reality TV formats that included LGBTQIA+ individuals surged alongside these shows, ranging from MTV's *The Real World* (Jonathan Murray & Mary-Ellis Bunim, 1992-)*; Survivor* (Charlie Parsons, 2000-)*; The Amazing Race* (Elise Doganieri, et al., 2001-)*;* to the incredibly popular and influential reality competition show *RuPaul's Drag Race* (RuPaul Charles, 2009-) – all of which helped to bring LGBTQIA+ characters out into the public sphere.

fashions, food, and furniture)" (Eng 43). Again, queer culture could be marketed as chic, edgy, stylish, cool, or different, as long as it was consumable in an apolitical, desexualized, and tamed package that allowed for the branding of certain products in need of a daring or fashionable do-over (Eng 43; Walter 244)

Finally, the rising visibility of queerness in the media comes with another abhorrent side-effect as with higher LGBTQIA+ visibility, higher rates of hate crimes and discrimination have been observed. Indeed, visibility for minority groups represents a double-edged sword: on the one hand representation is a necessary basis for fighting for equal treatment, inclusion, for a seat at the table, and for recognition. After all, as Suzanna Walters perfectly synthesizes, "[t]here is nothing worse than to live in a society in which the traces of your own existence have been erased or squeezed into a narrow and humiliating set of stereotypes. The power of cultural visibility and memory is potent, and the absence of that public face can crush even the hardiest souls" (13). On the other hand, while visibility gives the impression of social change and progress, it does not necessarily correlate to a ceasing of discrimination, oppression, and violence exerted against LGBTQIA+ communities.

Limiting, curating, and censoring images can, in turn, create new forms of widely circulating harmful stereotypes of a group that used to be anonymous or invisible (and thus went under the radar of public scrutiny and policing). Especially the case of rising trans visibility throughout the 2010s has made this highly noticeable: "the total number of transphobic hate crimes has increased year on year since it was added to the list of monitored categories in 2009. It is likely that official statistics significantly underestimate the prevalence and extent of transphobic hate crime, and studies have shown significantly higher rates of victimisation[146]" (Colliver & Silvestri 2). As twisted as these insights might seem, they show us that visibility for visibilities and quantities sake are not the ultimate goal, but that the forms of diverging information, representation, and quality thereof become as expedient.

Despite all these setbacks, the wider media visibility, achieved with the help of corporate players and advertising, ultimately helped catapult queerness into the wider market (Vider 352-3; S. Walters 235-6). Yet, these corporations and their advertising companies would take a similar route as other media outlets at large, implanting ideas of homosexuals as desexualized, clean, and as "just-like-heterosexuals" into the minds of Americans, while targeting the buying power of gay and lesbian consumers. Even events with a clearly political background have been affected, which is especially visible during Pride season when big companies spend large

[146] Though Colliver and Silvestri initially refer to cases of transphobic violence in England and Wales in their writing, in the end, their observations can be extended to a global scale.

amounts on floats as advertising spaces, while the selling of merchandise, of parties, and other happenings turn them largely into consumer events[147].

Similar strategies of pinkwashing have also been used by governments that present themselves as LGBTQIA+-friendly and as allies for diverse reasons. In the context of the United States, the first government that widely campaigned as queer friendly was that of Bill Clinton (Duggan "The New" 176). After over a decade of Republican leaders demonizing and scapegoating LGBTQIA+ individuals on a political level, Clinton's government chose to greatly distance itself from the rhetoric and actions of America's past two presidents. President Clinton therefore not only campaigned with LGBTQIA+ votes in mind (something unheard of at the time) by showing warmth and humanity towards the communities, but he also promised social and political inclusion by overriding the ban on gay and lesbian members in the military (Eaklor 198-9; S. Walters 31-2, 34). In the end, during his presidency he was able to achieve actual positive measures, e.g. by "appoint[ing] openly gay and lesbian people to federal positions, and […] declar[ing] June 1999 (and again in 2000) Gay and Lesbian Pride Month" (Eaklor 212) while furthermore introducing several anti-discrimination bills (S. Walters 31-2).

Nonetheless, in terms of furthering popular LGBTQIA+ causes, his administration was ultimately not as successful as his promises made it out to be. In fact, some of the President's actions were highly disappointing, especially when it came to the treatment of gays and lesbians in the military and the implementation of the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA). While DOMA sent out a very clear anti-LGBTQIA+ message as it limited marriage on a federal level between a man and a woman and simultaneously implied a prohibition of same-gender marriages, Don't

[147] Having said this, the commodification of queer culture is not new. In actual fact, it already arose after Stonewall alongside radical, anti-capitalist voices that were worried about its influence and inherent destructive potential (Davidson *Queer* 2-3). Building on ideas by John D'Emilio (that I have presented in chapter 3), Davidson thus concludes that, historically speaking, "gay and lesbian identities and desires may [never] be meaningfully disentangled from commodification" (2). To further emphasize this point, the author hints towards the idea that the advance of capitalism in the late 19th century helped LGBTQIA+ individuals to create new forms of shared living outside the family, to build communities, and to create institutions (like bathhouses, bars, clubs, bookshops) that were oftentimes based on consumer-oriented notions (5-6) (see chapter 3 for my personal discussion of these developments). This, ultimately, leads the author to conclude that "commodification of homosexuality, far from being a recent phenomenon, is in fact integral to gay and lesbian life" (6). While I largely agree with the idea that a link between LGBTQIA+ culture and consumerism always existed and was even important to its development, I would simultaneously like to point out that the commodification that came to be towards the end of the 20th century changed in a crucial way: instead of being driven by marginalized queer individuals and communities, this new type of queer-oriented consumption was propelled by larger, heteronormative, and -sexist corporations and institutions that amped up the trend towards assimilation. Furthermore, it needs to be underlined that while there certainly is a basis in a consumer-oriented culture that helped the emancipation of queer communities, this does not mean that it should not be challenged, especially when it becomes harmful and normative. Simultaneously, as Vider puts forth, LGBTQIA+ consumers can still be critical of their consumption and of the larger market system, while "reclaim[ing] the market from within" (354).

Ask, Don't Tell[148] hid behind a veil of compromise that ultimately might have been more damaging than it was helpful. Despite the setbacks that the Clinton administration suffered regarding these issues, the president nonetheless introduced ideas that would become prominent within the mainstream political arena during US elections (including issues pertaining the recognition of same-gender families, partnerships, adoption rights, and the fight for anti-discrimination and -hate crime policies) (Richardson & Seidman 9-10).

Unfortunately, under the conservatism of the Bush administration and a post-9/11 world, things would overall get even more critical for LGBTQIA+ communities seeing that America was now faced with a president that was openly speaking out against LGBTQIA+ rights (Osinubi 2704-6). Only with President Barack Obama the country went back to being administered by a government that was favorable in regard to queer communities. Not only did Obama campaign openly about his LGBTQIA+ support, but he achieved groundbreaking changes, including the aforementioned repeal of DADT[149], as well as marriage equality. Naturally, this was solely achievable due to the fact that the social and political landscape – on all levels – had changed drastically since the 1990s: one only needs to take into account attitudes within the US military itself, which is known to be a historically conservative institution. Not merely did "some top military leaders publicly support[] gays serving openly" (Schultz 6020), but also by 2010 "a majority of Americans were in favor of allowing homosexuals not just to serve but to do so openly" (Schultz 6022). This focus on military activism once again highlights the assimilationist dimensions rising in some LGBTQIA+ circles, especially when considering that institutions like the military were not part of queer activism in times of greater radicalism.

This extends to the fight for marriage equality, which also stood in stark contrast to the overall values of earlier radical queer and feminist groups who perceived monogamous

[148] Don't Ask Don't Tell, a military-related issue, dealt with the fact that "[f]rom the 1940s to the 1980s, tens of thousands of [LGBTQIA+] men and women were denied benefits due to being discharged dishonorably; only in the early eighties were honorable discharges more available. To serve as openly gay or lesbian, however, remained a goal unrealized through the nineties and beyond" (Eaklor 199). While President Clinton had promised to repeal the ban throughout his electoral campaign, he would soon run into major obstacles, especially when faced with the right wing and the military itself. In the end, the president gave in and accepted a "compromise" that became known as "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" and, ultimately, turned out to be less of a compromise than was intended: if you remained in the closet, you were allowed to serve. In return, officials were not permitted to actively investigate or inquire about your sexual orientation (Osinubi 2701-2; Schultz 6014; Eaklor 202-3). While this measure was established to prevent the continued firing of gays and lesbians in the military, it ultimately led to the opposite, since "[d]ischarges of gays and lesbians from the military have increased 67 percent since 1949 and it is apparent to most that the policy not only is illogical but has fostered witch-hunts of post-WWII proportions" (S. Walters 37). Don't Ask, Don't Tell was only eventually repealed in 2011 during the Obama administration.

[149] Even so, transgender, intersex, and non-binary individuals were usually not included in these debates as they were "deemed medically and/or psychologically unfit" (Schultz 6026), therefore only being able to serve while staying in the closet. Trans individuals were eventually allowed to serve in 2016 (6028-9), but things were complicated already a year later when several obstacles were laid in the way under the Trump administration. Only since 2021 trans individuals have been able to serve again without constraints.

marriage as a patriarchal institution that upholds social hierarchies of deserving and less deserving citizens, relationships, and intimacies. Indeed, until the 1990s marriage was essentially seen as a minor issue in the fight for LGBTQIA+ rights (D'Emilio *In a New* 240). Most strikingly, while queerness was long comprehended as being the downfall of the heteronormative institution of the nuclear family, LGBTQIA+ communities along with actual politicians suddenly began to drastically change this perception[150].

On an emotional level, the idea of celebrating a couple's love for one another undoubtedly represents an incredibly important, personal, and joyous event. Marriage also brings along many other benefits that same-gender couples have been withheld for too long. As Eaklor perfectly sums up,

> [s]ame-sex couples, in fact, are barred from over 1,000 benefits available to legally married couples. Many are economic, such as tax breaks, insurance breaks, or the right to a deceased spouse's Social Security payments, and many concern families and children. Not only do married couples have the right to adopt children, for example, but as a rule do not face separation from their children because of the choice of a partner. (Eaklor 214)

Yet, these progresses are not solely beneficial[151]. Marriage equality namely has become a limiting and restrictive concept. In other words, if one is to attempt to fully integrate into society, to shed the stigma of being a second-class citizen, it is through state-sanctioned marriage that one can come closer to these goals. The main problem hereby is not marriage *per se*, but rather the wider ramifications of marriage as linked to heteronormativity and to hierarchies that limit our forms of living (as in "acceptable" and "non-acceptable" citizens).

Marriage as "limited and limiting forms of state-sponsored intimacy" (Love 80) furthermore represents but one of many ways of queer intimacies, relations, and sexualized or eroticized experiences. Indeed, diverse queer forms of kinship, community and family building are not only of historical value to LGBTQIA+ experiences but are also a necessity in an utterly

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[150] Throughout the 2000s, the fight *for* and *against* marriage equality began to gain momentum when states like Vermont, Massachusetts, and California (temporarily) provided same-gender unions or marriage rights, while other states passed anti-gay marriage amendments (Streitmatter 160; Eaklor 240), ultimately "bringing the total to thirty-eight states banning legal recognition of same-sex couples" (Eaklor 240). Hereby, the case of California received high media attention as a court ruling granting same-gender couples the right to marry would be overturned in 2008, creating a media frenzy and wide debates about the matter. This spurred even greater determination in marriage equality activists, precisely because "this taking away of a right already obtained, coupled perhaps with the mood of hope that Obama's election induced, finally began to provoke significant grass roots mobilizations to secure the right to marry" (D'Emilio *In a New* 242).

[151] The idea that marriage equality is anything but a cure-all fix against homophobia is also most perceptible in the fact that the continuous targeting of LGBTQIA+ individuals has not ended – epitomized by the cruel case of Matthew Shepard who was beaten up, tied to a barbed-wire fence, and left to die in 1998, or the Pulse nightclub massacre in a Latinx LGBTQIA+ bar that happened in Orlando, Florida in 2016. Naturally, these are just two isolated examples that received enormous media attention and only represent the tip of the iceberg of LGBTQIA+-targeted hate crimes happening on a regular basis.

queerphobic society (a theme that will be explored further in my discussion of *Spa Night*). After all, it was by means of these manifold bonds that individuals found a sense of care and belonging – a fact that strengthens the necessity to cherish and protect these forms of living just as much as any other state-accepted relationship. When letting the state – a state that mistreated these communities for so long – establish certain hierarchies of kinship in form of registered partnerships that grant specific benefits and protection, we reach a form of institutionalized regulation, disciplining, and policing of queer relations. D'Emilio, in the end, hits the nail on its head when suggesting that "[i]nstead of thinking 'same-sex marriage,' we should think 'security for all families and households'" (D'Emilio *In a New* 45) and "fight[] for public policies that value all family forms and make benefits a function of personhood rather than marital status" (61).

Homonormativity has even infiltrated ideas around HIV/AIDS, the prevention thereof, as well as queer sexual practices overall. Generally speaking, the relation regarding the immunodeficiency has vastly changed since the late 1990s. Though it is still stigmatized, there is also more information, medication, there are greater numbers of actual representations and experiences of people living with HIV/AIDS that tell a completely different story, especially since the introduction of protease inhibitors in 1996. In the semi-autobiographical *Dry Bones Breathe*, Eric Rofes describes in detail how the general feeling amongst gay men regarding AIDS changed throughout the decade. As the author elucidates, with the legalization of the "AIDS cocktail," small, but groundbreaking changes were suddenly experienced in the daily lives of LGBTQIA+ individuals that propelled the erroneous belief that the AIDS pandemic was finally over:

> a variety of subtle, seemingly unrelated changes in urban gay cultural life coalesced to confirm our sense that a transformation was occurring. During our walks through gay neighborhoods and visits to gay venues we saw few young men using canes. When was the last time we saw a man pushing his lover down Castro Street in a wheelchair, once an everyday, poignant reminder of the epidemic? The obituaries that just a few years earlier had filled two or three pages of weekly gay papers had dwindled to half a page; some papers had stopped printing them entirely, eliminating the section, as if declaring it a product of a bygone era. In several cities, AIDS hospices and housing programs began to shut down, close wings, or accept non-AIDS patients, providing many with what seemed like tangible evidence that the epidemic was coming to an end. (Rofes 3-4)

The end of nonstop images and experiences of loss and mourning finally gave way to respite and to relief – or, as Rofes puts it, a feeling "like we are taking our first deep breaths since 1981" (10). The media, so very damaging throughout the AIDS crisis, now also went with this narrative and would proclaim AIDS to be *passé* in misleading headlines (29-30).

Rofes, however, also warns us that behaviors within gay circles did not suddenly change only due to the advent of protease inhibitors. On the contrary, he states, years prior men had already begun adapting themselves to this new reality, while "creat[ing] strategies to maximize their safety, and have gotten on with their lives" (26). Indeed, revitalizing sexual cultures was essential to the mental survival of many:

> gay men faced a stark choice: to continue to cycle zombie like through the burnt-out wreckage of our lives or to get off our butts, reclaim our psyches and our sexualities, and reconstruct our identities and communities. I believed gay male culture was reemerging powerfully in the 1990s, as vast numbers of gay men stripped off the sackcloth of the 1980s and reentered the land of the living." (Rofes 33)

Certainly, living with the virus for over a decade helped to adjust to the overall situation. After all, as the ongoing COVID pandemic further validates (although the general context and overall reaction to it are incredibly different), "[t]o expect human beings to remain in an active state of crisis for a period approaching two decades is to introduce an appalling quality of life that might take a powerful and permanent toll on mental health, intellectual development, and the broader psyche" (Rofes 44).

Be it as it may, with the introduction of a successful AIDS cocktail an even stronger push towards a new normal was achieved, especially when talking about the bareback culture that emerged towards the late 90s. As already broached in the context of *The Living End*, these developments of men engaging in risky sexual behavior naturally stood in great contrast to the wider safe sex culture that saw protected sex as "not only a public-health mandate but also a categorical imperative" (González 47). Even in media representations, sex without protection had become scarce and was henceforth "stigmatized and pushed both underground and out of the spotlight to ensure that narratives and representations of gay sexuality remained commensurate with meta-narratives concerning healthy, responsible, and productive citizenship" (Tziallas 141). As we will see further on in this chapter, these very standards would be vastly questioned and broken within the New Queer Cinema Renaissance.

Though my discussion of barebacking in chapter 7.2 was limited to the context of NQC, the evolution of condomless sex did, naturally, not end in the early 90s. With a rising interest in the badly regarded practice of barebacking, an entire subculture with "its own language, rituals, etiquette, institutions, iconography, and so on" (Dean *Unlimited* x) eventually formed in underground and online communities, especially amongst HIV-positive men who have sex with men (González 48-9). Accordingly, Dean concludes that "erotic risk among gay men has become organized and deliberate, not just accidental," resulting in "not only an unprecedented

situation in the history of AIDS but also a new chapter in the history of sexuality" (*Unlimited* ix). Eventually, by the mid-2000s the practice became widely known and visible due to the influence of bareback gay pornography, turning from an underground subculture into a more prevalent sexual practice (González 49).

This rebellious subculture or community also becomes of special significance to my discussion since it inherently stands in relation and opposition to dominant culture. In this case, once again, the dominant culture is not only embodied by hetero- but also homonormativity with all its policed standards, morals, and values and its strive towards monogamous, child-bearing marriage. Consequently, public images of barebackers existing on the margins of acceptability were perceived as harmful, particularly when activists were trying to attain rights through assimilating, desexualizing, de-pathologizing, and sanitizing queerness (Dean *Unlimited* 19-20).

Today the sexual risk of barebacking has dropped and other forms of risk prevention have become more stable in comparison to the situation prior to the mid-1990s[152]. Ultimately, from the privileged position of 2022, it is possible to see the issue from a different angle and to open a wider cultural dialogue to demonstrate that things nowadays are not as black and white. Indeed, these debates do not have to decide between life and death, between social inclusion and being an outcast as times, information, and medical advances have changed the overall situation. In a similar way, the discussion at hand does not attempt to give clear answers, it is not meant to condone nor to demonize certain behaviors, but rather to point out that these developments happened as a reaction to the rise of a normative way of being *gay*.

8.2) *Touch of Pinkwashing*: Homonormative Queer Filmmaking in the Early 21st Century

As mentioned in chapter 6, the late 90s brought forth a flood of unthreatening LGBT-themed feel-good pictures with happy endings (produced both by Hollywood and even independent outlets) that took over large and small American screens. As opposed to LGBTQIA+ films released at the beginning of the decade, these texts almost completely missed

[152] Pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) first became available in 2012 in form of antiretroviral medication that is taken on a daily basis by an HIV-negative individual so as to prevent infections with HIV. Furthermore, in 2017 the CDC confirmed ideas that had been debated in scientific communities since the 2000s, stating that individuals on HIV treatment with an undetectable virus load are unable to transmit the virus (an idea commonly referred to as "undetectable equals untransmittable" or "U=U"). Naturally, PrEP as well as the idea of U=U have deeply changed the narrative of condomless sex, leading some to claim that "we are entering a new era in the history of sexuality, a new gay sexual revolution, based on the widespread uptake of prep primarily among gay and bisexual men" (González 50). Indeed, these advances have completely revolutionized serodiscordant sex – i.e. as long as an individual has actual access to these types of medication and treatments.

the challenging questions, intersectional and progressive sexual[153] and political aspirations that NQC had put on the map. Instead, most of these movies relied on predictable, linear narratives and formal approaches, and well-known genre formulas, while emulating gay and lesbian tropes seen on television at the time (most prominently, the cliché of attractive, witty, conformist, and stylish homonormative characters). Though beginning in the 1990s, this trend really boomed during the 2000s[154] with movies such as *The Broken Hearts Club: A Romantic Comedy* (Greg Berlanti, 2000); *Sweet Home Alabama* (Andy Tennant, 2002); *Eating Out* (Q. Allan Brocka, 2004); *Touch of Pink* (Ian Iqbal Rashid, 2004); *Saving Face* (Alice Wu, 2004); *My Summer of Love* (Pawel Pawlikowski, 2004); or *Loving Annabelle* (Katherine Brooks, 2006).

The messages these movies transmitted clearly reflected the earlier described tendency towards fitting in, assimilating, as well as the idea of queers being "just like anybody else" through the propagation of affirmative and upbeat imagery. These notions were additionally promoted and disseminated through positive press coverage – a trend that simultaneously also cemented and policed specific norms and standards for queer filmmaking, further establishing a new blueprint for LGBT characters on screen (Bronski "The Queer" 341).

Above all, LGBTQIA+ cinema became just as entangled in the web of commodification as every other part of queer culture. In fact, many movies at the time leaned into this very commercialization and aligned with homonormative ideologies by "rework[ing] fantasies about people overcoming subordination through force of will, achieving happiness by amassing wealth and finding love" (Griffin 54). Not merely do these choices "perpetuate other hierarchies, most notably those of race and class" (54) but also "one's ability to amass wealth is thought to be the best way to supersede any experience of disempowerment" (76).

Despite their many inherent problems, these uber-positive images on the flip side also helped political movements in their fight for sociopolitical acceptance, equality, and a life

[153] While in the late 90s/ early 2000s Hollywood and many independent producers generally desexualized their lesbian and gay characters, a batch of assimilationist LGBT (and especially gay) independent films (like *Eating Out*) began presenting hypersexualized characters, seeing that their product was specifically catered to a niche audience and did not need to seek crossover appeal. They very much followed the examples set by shows like *Queer as Folk*, consequently relying on highly normative bodies and sexual acts that looked clean, shaven, white, and proper. Even the "DVD box covers for these newer titles frequently featured shirtless men, soliciting home video consumers with titillating appeals, promoting a homonormative ideal of physical attenuation, stemming (as most physical types within gay culture have historically tended to) from porn conventions. GLBTQ narrative filmmaking then, in certain aesthetic and consumer capacities, began to echo many elements of spectatorship with the pornographic moving image" (Nordeen 11-2).

[154] This explosive upsurge had its fair share of criticism as, eventually, "the sheer volume diluted the quality" (Rich *New* 132), a trend that was further propelled by "the home video boom of the mid-2000s" (Nordeen 11). The utter overabundance becomes most obvious in the emergence of parodies of cheerful and bubbly gay and lesbian comedies, indicating that audiences were familiarized with the films' conventions to a degree that they were able to understand a parodic portrayal (most notably in *Another Gay Movie* or *Another Gay Sequel: Gays Gone Wild* [Todd Stephens, 2006 & 2008]).

without constant threats. Just like television shows of the time, these movies certainly also contributed to more tolerance within certain parts of society regarding *certain* identities belonging to the LGBTQIA+ umbrella. Sappy and upbeat LGBT movies also mirrored the general feeling of a new beginning after HIV/AIDS had become more controlled through medication. As actor Billy Porter puts it in the documentary *Fabulous!*, "we had lived for more than a decade in death. I think the romantic comedies were all about reintroducing the idea of hope into an entire culture of people" (00:49:42-00:50:01).

This newfound interest in LGBTQIA+-themed movies and Hollywood's greater willingness to invest in queer filmmaking was also vastly reflected in (I) the fact that more and more well-known and established straight actors began taking on queer roles and (II) in the numerous nominations and wins at award ceremonies:

> all of the following films with queer content have been recent Oscar contenders and/or winners (in various categories): *Gods and Monsters* ([Bill Condon,] 1998), *American Beauty* [Sam Mendes, 1999], *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, *Being John Malkovich* (1999), *Boys Don't Cry*, *Before Night Falls* ([Julian Schnabel,] 2000), *Mulholland Drive* ([David Lynch,] 2001), *Far From Heaven* [Todd Haynes, 2002], *The Hours* [Stephen Daldry, 2002], *Frida* ([Julie Taymor,] 2002), *Monster* ([Patty Jenkins,] 2003), *Kinsey* ([Bill Condon,] 2004), *Capote* ([Bennett Miller,] 2005), *Transamerica* ([Duncan Tucker,] 2005), and *Brokeback Mountain* [Ang Lee, 2005].
>
> (Benshoff & Griffin *America* 873)

Though LGBTQIA+ cinema would continue to be a fringe form of moviemaking, the unprecedented amount of attention many of these films achieved, nonetheless, proved how much had changed in a decade and, furthermore, aided in the wider distribution of queer films. None of the above listed titles, however, would change the cinematic landscape as strongly as Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain*, a movie that was not only widely praised by critics, but also "received seventy-five awards internationally, including three Oscars (for director, original score, and adapted screenplay)" (Eaklor 237).

Brokeback Mountain tells the story of Ennis Del Mar (Heath Ledger) and Jack Twist (Jake Gyllenhaal), who meet and begin a love affair in the summer of 1963 while tending a herd of sheep in Wyoming on the fictitious Brokeback Mountain. Completely rejecting their queer desires when returning to their regular lives, both men struggle to come out of the closet and to live out their truths. Indeed, the time spent on the mountain becomes a pivotal experience that influences the rest of their stories. Although Ennis and Jack marry and raise heteronormative families, they start their secret affair over again and begin meeting each other secretly once or twice a year until Jack tragically dies in the early 80s, leaving Ennis to live a lonely life.

The film is quite interesting for its daring deconstruction of masculinity and of the western genre. We need to remember that in the American collective imaginary the American West is intrinsically connected to masculinity – the western thus being commonly deemed one of the paramount virile and compulsory heteromasculine genres of all time. The movie (just like the short story by Annie Proulx it is based on) thus tackles the myth of cowboy virility by presenting an alternative American West that reveals a crippling reality behind the façade of contemporary cowboy culture that oppresses those who do not fit into the framework of dominant heterosexual, cisgender masculinity.

Although superficially both protagonists seem like exemplary rugged cowboy clichés at first – Ennis being a loner, rough, stoic, and an uneducated man of few words, while Jack tries his luck not only in herding jobs but also as a rodeo star – when looking closer, the façade quickly stars to crack. This is best seen in the ironic twist that "the two men are tending 'lower-rate' sheep instead of cattle, already signaling that the lovers are not fulfilling the superior cowboy example to its fullest," (Klein Martins "Annie" 57-8), as I have described in a previous publication. Yet, the ultimate deal breaker is represented by the feelings the sheep herders harbor for one another – seeing that, as discussed at length in previous chapters, homosexuality is supposedly incompatible with the American ideal of masculinity. Thus, even though the protagonists

> publicly try to keep up a heteronormative lifestyle by marrying and raising children, their same-sex desires never fully dissipate. […] Since manhood implies heterosexuality, every attempt to build up a virile façade will fail as the characters are indeed aware of their true inner feelings. Ennis' double negation [found in Proulx's short story] "I'm not no queer" (Proulx, 2006, p. 291) thus gains an ironic double meaning, seeing that one negation cancels out the other. He will always remain a "queer" despite all efforts of covering up his true identity[155]. (Klein Martins "Annie" 60-1)

In a similar way in which *Philadelphia* had been deemed *the* cross-over hit of the 1990s, so was *Brokeback Mountain* a film that resonated with both straight and queer audiences. Regrettably, though, just as was the case with *Philadelphia*, the greatest queer love story of the 21st century still had to be a heartbreaking one and end in tragedy. Likewise, one is to wonder whether the film would have achieved the same success (and funding to begin with), had it not adhered to more subdued and homonormative representations of queerness. After all, despite its social critique, *Brokeback Mountain* is a romance about two white all-American men that

[155] As becomes apparent, the movie plays with concepts around the fluidity of gender, sexual orientation, genre and cinematic tradition, all of which were already found in New Queer Cinema, yet never reached as much of a wide audience. That being said, the movie never achieved the same extremes in terms of style and narrative experimentation that NQC had put forth.

"remain[s] true to the scripts of family, romance, and nation. […] It does not disrupt anything so much so it blends right into the national landscape[156]" (Manalansan "Queer Love" 83). Indeed, like in most queer cinematic texts of the time, cisgender whiteness is not questioned, but rather maintains its hegemonic position as the invisible norm. Simultaneously, despite the fact that the story takes place in utmost tumultuous decades in regard to LGBTQIA+ history, it is completely taken out of this context and thus remains largely de-politicized. The same goes for depictions of actual eroticism in the film. While it was certainly a bold move to include a scene of anal intercourse very early on in the script, it is, however, but a short shot that borders on rape and remains the only sex scene within the entire film. This, then again, uncovers to what extent the general straight moviegoer's fears of queer sex[157] were still being considered and that, in some respects, not as much has changed since 1982's *Making Love.*

Finally, *Brokeback Mountain* also perfectly encapsulates the attention Indiewood suddenly paid to LGBTQIA+ stories and content. Thus, it is crucial to recall that during the 1990s the major Hollywood studios either acquired independent companies or created their own independent subsidiaries. While this, in effect, created a separation between Hollywood's indies and more niche independent films, it is, however, difficult to generalize these distinctions seeing that independent and mainstream cinema became more and more blurred in the 21st century[158]. As I concluded in chapter 2, media conglomerates specifically used the label of independent film as a marketing strategy, claiming to promote high-brow, arthouse-like cinema for the cultivated audience member. Similar strategies were used when selling movies with LGBTQIA+ content to wider audiences[159], often marketing them as "quality" films (commonly associated to prestigious literature and featuring celebrated actors) that stood in contrast to "low-brow" blockbuster cinema (Richards "Overcoming" 22; Richards "A New" 218-9). These

[156] *Brokeback Mountain* was indeed deliberately promoted as a "universal love story" as opposed to a "gay love story" to appeal to wider audiences (Richards "Overcoming" 27; Benshoff "(Broke)" 203).

[157] Even if we defend Lee's decision to tone down the queer sexual pleasure of the two characters as it might make sense within the roughness of the character's oppressed relationship, we cannot ignore that the trend of de-sexualizing main characters in Hollywood film remains an issue until today when taking into account big budget productions with massive success such as *Moonlight*; *Call Me by Your Name*; *The Kids Are All Right* (Lisa Cholodenko, 2010); *The Imitation Game* (Morten Tyldum, 2014); *Bohemian Rhapsody* (Bryan Singer, 2018), or *Rocketman* (Dexter Fletcher, 2019).

[158] Just like many queer pictures distributed by smaller companies at the time, these studios produced LGBTQIA+ indies clearly shied away from experimentation. Not only were they traditionalist and ordinary in form and style (embracing continuity editing, invisible cuts and storytelling), but also in terms of ideology, leaning towards white-centric narratives, a perpetuation of the gender and sexual binary, while propagating homonormative, neoliberal, and "respectable" forms of living (Richards "Overcoming" 21, 24-6; Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 270; Griffin 54).

[159] With a broader audience in mind, the queerness of these media texts cannot be upfront in the films' promotion (Richards "Overcoming" 26). Instead, they "just happen to have queer content" (Benshoff & Griffin *Queer* 285). This form of de-queering the promotional material was taken to an extreme in 2009 when the trailer of *A Single Man* was changed in such a way that it "le[ft] out a few choice shots – pretty much all of which are suggestive of the film's gay content" (Knegt n.p.). Instead of following the story of an elderly gay professor, the audience was deceived into believing that the main character was in a relationship with his female best friend.

strategies eventually aided in removing queer films from the context of inaccessible fringe cinemas, making them available to larger theaters, and, eventually, turning them into cross-over sensations[160] (Richards "Overcoming" 20; Mennel 94).

Despite the many listed points of contestation, the mainstreaming of LGBTQIA+ film was not an inherently negative development *per se*, particularly if we solely concentrate on the final products and ignore the fanfare around them. After all, it is a fact that more quality LGBTQIA+ films were produced, distributed, discussed, and actually seen by audiences than ever before due to these developments. Moreover, these opportunities have also opened gates for numerous queer directors and would, ultimately, also influence the NQC Renaissance. Nevertheless, Hollywood's attentiveness to queer storytelling would soon fade: due to the financial crisis and a general decline in ticket sales, the specialty divisions of the major studios were eventually shut down and investments for low- to moderate-budgeted movies became scarce amongst the studios.

While definitely representing a crisis for the film industry as a whole, Hollywood's decision to abandon indies in the end signified an opportunity for independent LGBTQIA+ film companies and distributors to flourish and to strengthen their presence in the market, including, amongst others, "TLA Releasing, Wolfe Video, Picture This!, Ariztical Entertainment, Water Bearer Films, and Strand Releasing" (Griffin 59). Their success was further aided by the growth of new forms of digital distribution, particularly since many films were not necessarily destined for theatrical releases (59). These products never achieved "the market reach or cultural influence of the handful of gay and lesbian movies that continue to be released by larger media companies" (59).

Certainly, the very question of new channels of distribution also asks for further clarification. As already seen in the case of New Queer Cinema, new technological advances often allow for new possibilities for independent cinematic outlets. In fact, since the late 1990s, the filmic landscape has gone through drastic changes in terms of distribution methods – from DVDs, DVRs (digital video recorders), online piracy in form of file sharing, downloadable content (through iTunes e.g.), to video-on-demand services. The latter, in turn, vary from free

[160] Richards also points towards the trend of setting these prestige LGBTQIA+ films in an idealized and nostalgic past ("Overcoming" 25), including big name pictures such as *Brokeback Mountain* (set in the 1960s); *Far from Heaven* (1950s); *Capote* (1960s); or *Dallas Buyers Club* and *Monster* (both set in the 1980s). On the one hand, "[b]ecause these characters are placed in environments where queer sexuality is abnormal and socially undesirable, it is easier for these narratives to be consumed by a wider audience" (25). On the other hand, these strategies shelter audience members from being confronted with present day, real life queerphobia that might leave many uncomfortable.

platforms (like YouTube) to paid subscription services[161] for on-demand access to a large and constantly changing media catalogue (like Netflix or Paramount Plus) that can be viewed on various devices with differing sizes and capacities. While the media and methods of spectatorial consumption changed overall, we can nonetheless declare that one aspect remained stable, namely that "prerecorded video as a distribution model continues to structure motion picture production and consumption. In other words, movies are now primarily videos for both their makers and their viewers" (Benson-Allott 1).

The digital world also introduced an easier and more immediate access to filmic material on a global scale (Mennel 113-4). LGBTQIA+ cinema is naturally included in these developments and has become a part of an expanding net of content and possibilities: this phenomenon already starts on a smaller scale with the unwavering amount of (homemade) clips[162], videos, online series, and short films you can find on YouTube and similar platforms or social media outlets[163]. Then again, there is also a huge variety of cinematic gems and obscurities that have been lost to time and eventually resurfaced due to these digital platforms – either legally or illegally. Indeed, I only gained access to the NQC classic *Chocolate Babies* because the film's director made it available on the platform Vimeo.

Judy Berman tells a similar story when writing that "[i]f you wanted to see Todd Haynes's banned Barbie-doll musical *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* in the nineties, you had to wait for an arthouse theater to schedule a secret screening. Now you can usually find it on YouTube" (97). These developments, however, come with a caveat: the issue namely lies

[161] In 2016 streaming surpassed physical media sale earnings for the first time, underlining the hegemony of this new form of film-viewing (Herbert, et al. 5).

[162] In a world reigned by the internet and social media, cinema tends to be cut up, frequently being relegated to a clip, a trailer, or a meme. This thus makes us aware that internet culture has led to new ways of fragmenting cinema and has placed filmic texts in a brand new context: in her discussion of *Blue is the Warmest Color*, scholar Maria San Filippo describes that the film went through various stages of distribution (and screen sizes and film lengths), namely "from the Cannes Film Festival to the art house and multiplex, then to Criterion Collection DVD, Netflix streaming, lesbian film-streaming sites such as Buskfilms and One More Lesbian, and even to porn sites such as Pornhub and YouPorn" (*Provocateurs* 7-8). This example hence reveals that the fragmentation of cinema into specific scenes or sequences becomes of special importance when looking at the erotic potential of film, especially with respect to home video/ online consumption, in which previously fleeting moments of nudity or erotic pleasure can become permanently fixed, turned into short clips, still images, or gifs, and are available in HD more easily – thus, ultimately, decontextualizing the content as well as changing the context of consumption.

[163] These new digital platforms have also stimulated the process of merging the filmic medium and the supposedly "inferior" mass-audience medium of television which is slowly gaining a reputation of having intellectual and artistic merit (Banks & Dreiling n.p.). This is best illustrated by the fact that production companies have started "using film length in the TV format" while "HBO has 20-minute documentaries" (n.p.). Moreover, film and series are generally not only offered by streaming platforms, but both are also increasingly created by them (Amazon Prime Video having financed movies like *Manchester by the Sea* [Kenneth Lonergan, 2016] and series like *Transparent*) – making the distinction even more uncertain for some consumers. It should not be forgotten that outside these major platforms, "movies and television remain distinct industrially, as the media conglomerates that commonly own them continue to differentiate these two media divisionally, and related institutions, such as the Motion Picture Association of America and the Federal Communications Commission, distinguish film from television in a variety of ways" (Herbert, et al. 4-5).

in the transitory nature of digital media. While these new digital distributors definitely have the potential to become key in the role of cinematic archives, many of them are only temporal and vulnerable to the rapidly shifting and fleeting temporalities of internet content.

Most prominently, the increased access to queer cinematic archives through the various above-described media, offers a wide variety of queer cinematic experiences. A viewer might thus find that "a contemporary, studio-distributed melodrama might appear alongside a low-budget, independent documentary from the same period, as well as an art house movie from decades prior[164]" (Griffin 53). Furthermore, though queer narratives are still not a priority or central to these services, changes have begun to take place as even streaming services that specifically concentrate on LGBTQIA+ content are now available (such as Revry or WOW Presents Plus). The power of piracy as a way of obtaining LGBTQIA+-themed media should also not be downplayed. Though often forgotten in these conversations due to its illegal nature, in 2013 Caetlin Benson-Allott described P2P piracy as "the most important new motion picture apparatus of the early twenty-first century." The author thus comes to the conclusion that "no contemporary account of video spectatorship can be complete without addressing the unique triangulation of movie, viewer, and technology produced by BitTorrent and its ilk" (167).

8.3) *And NQC Played On*: The New Queer Cinema Renaissance

In the late 2000s a category of independent movies reappeared in the American cinematic landscape that challenged the normative depictions found in most Hollywood and independent films dealing with queerness. This trend would eventually explode into a new wave of subversive queer filmmaking during the 2010s that can be compared at length with NQC in terms of the sheer number of films, their quality, and their eagerness for experimentation and innovation. Be that as it may, it is utterly surprising that this phenomenon – which I will refer to as the New Queer Cinema Renaissance – has not received as much critical and scholarly attention and examination as the New Queer Cinema has in the past. When looking at the history of critical texts engaging with this new wave, we encounter the first attempts at establishing a rebirth of New Queer Cinema as early as in the mid-2000s: Wendy Sue Pawlak namely draws attention to the fact that critic Dennis Harvey stated in a (now inaccessible) 2004 article for the *San Francisco Bay Guardian* that a "New Queer Cinema Edition 2" was on the rise, a form of

[164] While this holds true, it is also worth highlighting that real sexual transgression as shown in films like *I Want Your Love*, *L'Inconnu du Lac*, or *Nova Dubai* are seldomly found on more popular platforms (with the exception of curated ones like Mubi that cater towards a more intellectual or adult audience). Furthermore, it should be noted that LGBTQIA+ movies and especially queer independent cinema can get easily lost in the shuffle due to the sheer quantity of available media.

LGBTQIA+ cinema that promoted tolerance for the community and was prompted by hit shows like *Will and Grace* or *Queer as Folk* (Pawlak 99).

A 2005 article for the *Advocate* claimed something similar in its title "Here comes the new new queer cinema" (Advocate.com n.p.). Like Harvey's account, this proposition mentions the success of audience darling *Eating Out*, but also takes into consideration a new batch of movies that "take Hollywood genres as old as the movies themselves and reconstitute them with gay characters and gay-themed plotlines" such as "the 'gay spy movie' *D.E.B.S.* [Angela Robinson, 2004]" (Advocate.com n.p.). Though not necessarily explicitly stated in neither of the two mentioned articles, what unites both accounts is the way in which they define a second coming of NQC through their choice of films: after all, both authors mention media texts like *Queer as Folk* or *Eating Out*, which display a particular willingness and openness to exhibit sexual matters – even though the innovative potential of these films was rather a superficial titillation that embraced normative ideals without much notion of LGBTQIA+ issues and lived experiences. Nonetheless, the progressive and open handling of queer intimacy in these titles might have led some to believe that a new chapter in queer cinema was about to unfold. Naturally, the actual evolution of radical queer film about to proceed was not yet graspable in the mid-2000s.

Jumping ahead, in the year 2010 the anthology *Coming Out to the Mainstream* was published, a collection that reassessed the NQC a decade after its absorption by the mainstream and simultaneously recognized "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" (Juett & Jones ix). Indeed, in complete opposition to the portrayals made five years earlier, the NQC revival now "is defined by an effort to redefine identity and queer gender rather than a cinematic rebellion against gay stereotypes, the deadly specter of AIDS, or even the film industry itself" (Juett 63). That very same year Maria San Filippo also mentions that filmmakers like Pedro Almodóvar, Gregg Araki, Atom Egoyan, and François Ozon "initiated a *New* New Queer Cinema, one less overtly politicized than earlier incarnations but arguably more progressive in its movement beyond identity hyperconsciousness and 'us versus them' mentality" ("Unthinking" 88). While the assessment of this new wave certainly reflects many aspects of the NQCR (at least, as far as I will define it), it is noticeable that the author only considers a variety of directors, whose career started decades earlier, thus missing out on a new batch of filmmaking talents[165].

[165] Analogously, as recounted by Sophie Mayer, a few years earlier B. Ruby Rich had made a similar statement by declaring filmmakers like "Apichatpong, Tsai and Martel as practitioners of a transnational, queer, affective 'new New Queer Cinema' during a presentation at the *Screen* conference in 2007" (Mayer 145).

The godmother of NQC, B. Ruby Rich, also soon reported about this emerging phenomenon, describing that the years 2011 and 2012[166]

> produced yet another renaissance, one that transpired right there in the festivals and theaters that are under threat. Yet again, stories of the past and present from the United States and around the world exploded into view, as urgent and captivating as ever before. This is a movement that just won't accept an obituary. New documentaries brought histories and crises into view, while new dramatic films have opened up a new generation of debate and redemption. (Rich NQC xxvii)

A rather optimistic and excited Rich thus declared movies such as *Pariah* (Dee Rees, 2011); *Codependent Lesbian Space Alien Seeks Same* (Madeleine Olnek, 2011); *Circumstance* (Maryam Keshavarz, 2011); *Tomboy* (Céline Sciamma, 2011); *Weekend* (Andrew Haigh, 2011); *Keep the Lights On* (Ira Sachs, 2012); documentaries like *We Were Here* (David Weissman & Bill Weber, 2011); *How to Survive a Plague* (David France, 2012); *United in Anger: A History of ACT UP* (Jim Hubbard, 2012); or *Wildness* (Wu Tsang, 2012) as part of this queer *nouvelle vague*[167] (Rich 278-281).

In 2016, Stuart Richards[168], in turn, declared that "[a] New Queer Cinema renaissance" (Richards "A New" 225) was on the way, consisting of unabashedly and openly queer films that were hitting festivals and theaters, where they celebrated many successes and "demonstrate[d] a natural evolution for queer film-making that challenges conventional representations of mainstream LGBTI films. These films do not share the same radical aesthetic of the films of the first wave […], since they exist within a different context of both independent and queer film" (Richards "A New" 225).

According to the author, the list of movies belonging to this wave include (besides those that Rich already described) *Contracorriente* (Javier Fuentes-León, 2009); *L'Inconnu du Lac* (Alain Guiraudie, 2013); *The Foxy Merkins* (Madeleine Olnek, 2013); *Concussion* (Stacie

[166] In the same manner in which a clear timeline for NQC was impossible to delineate, so is the case of its rebirth: in point of fact, NQC-like texts with a defiant and subversive spirit never really fully seized to exist, even within the US, as movies such as *Mulholland Drive*, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (John Cameron Mitchell, 2001), *Tarnation* (Jonathan Caouette, 2003), or *Shortbus* can attest. A larger output (outside of Indiewood's influence) undoubtedly happened to prosper towards the beginning of the 2010s, precisely with releases such *as I Want Your Love*, *Weekend*, or *Keep the Lights On*. This upsurge in unapologetically queer films has since not ceased to be prolific in its output, still coughing up numerous releases today, including the likes of *Fin De Siglo* (Lucio Castro, 2019); *Poppy Field* (Eugen Jebeleanu, 2020); *Vento Seco* (Daniel Nolasco, 2020); *Kajillionaire* (Miranda July, 2020); or *After Blue* (Bertrand Mandico, 2021). I would consequently suggest that as of the time of writing (i.e. in the early 2020s) we are still fully amidst this strong wave. Yet, as I will explore later, the NQCR has partially changed over time, some of its features having become normative in themselves.

[167] Taking into account the same movies as Rich (such as *Weekend* or *Keep the Lights On*), Ben Walters' 2012 *The Guardian* publication also observes a "[n]ew-wave queer cinema" (n.p.) with complex, innovative, and life-like features.

[168] Richards' definition might be the first that contains the closest parallels to the way I will define the New Queer Cinema Renaissance.

Passon, 2013); *52 Tuesdays* (Sophie Hyde, 2013); *Appropriate Behaviour* (Desiree Akhavan, 2014); *Love is Strange* (Ira Sachs, 2014); *Hoje Eu Quero Voltar Sozinho* (Daniel Ribeiro, 2014); *Xenia* (Panos H. Koutras, 2014); *The Skeleton Twins* (Craig Johnson, 2014); as well as the films of Xavier Dolan, such as *J'ai Tué Ma Mère* (2009); *Les Amours Imaginaires* (2010); *Laurence Anyways* (2012); or *Tom à la Ferme* (2013) (Richards "A New" 224-5). As becomes apparent from this extensive list, the development of the film wave began to move away from merely gay and lesbian filmmaking, now approaching queerness in its vast plurality of identities.

Already consciously building on these earlier voices and dialoguing with them, in 2017 Connor Winterton suggested this new batch of post-2010 international movies to be considered as "Neo-Queer Cinema" (45). In his discussion, Winterton includes various of the previously listed films and adds *Interior. Leather Bar.* (James Franco & Travis Matthews, 2013); *Blue is the Warmest Color* (Abdellatif Kechiche, 2013); *Tangerine* (Sean Baker, 2015); *Below Her Mouth* (April Mullen, 2016); *The Pass* (Ben A. Williams, 2016); and *Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau* (Olivier Ducastel & Jacques Martineau, 2016) (44). The choice of the word "neo" does not only hint towards the fact that it is a fresh, different, and/or more contemporary movement, but also implies that there is a dimension of reviving NQC tropes present (45-6). After all, "[w]ithout NQC, Neo-Queer-Cinema would not exist" (46). While many more writers have become aware of these developments, Winterton's account is utmost interesting, as it proves that the NQCR has already entered the realm of academic investigation. This being said, all in all, most of the enumerated essays are generally rather short discussions or mentions of the wave that lack a deeper definition, a consideration of wider sociopolitical and film business-related shifts – which might be attributed to the original and (still) changing nature of the movement at hand.

With the advantage of having been able to follow the development of this wave/movement[169] actively throughout a decade, while also having been given the possibility to engage with the NQC movement in depth, I have chosen the term New Queer Cinema

[169] Just as was the case when addressing its predecessor, it becomes paramount to define the categorization of the NQCR: briefly put, I would reject to define it as a genre for the same reasons as NQC (i.e. due to a lack of generic conventions or parameters) and would instead classify it as an international wave and movement. What underlines this idea is the fact that we are once again dealing with a group of (mostly) queer artists who have started to release an onslaught of subversively queer movies with similar sensibilities and an awareness of queer theory at, more or less, the same time. As is the case with NQC, these films, furthermore, speak through varied aesthetic and formal points of view. Film waves and movements furthermore commonly dialogue with the contemporary cinematic landscape and with film history at large, taking inspiration from predecessors while uprooting certain traditions and norms. In the case of the NQCR, a new batch of young talents is now able to look back at not only LGBTQIA+ history at large but can also base itself on a movement that already existed and was very much catered to queer audiences.

Renaissance (as proposed by Stuart Richards) over other denominators, seeing that it makes sense from a wider film-historic perspective. Not only does Richard's concept build a direct and obvious link to New Queer Cinema, from which it takes its queer subversive power, but it also evokes a certain association with the Hollywood Renaissance, a concept I have addressed in chapter 2.2. Thus, to an extent, the NQCR joins a wider lineage of independent filmmaking that NQC had already been a part of (see chapter 6), further taking inspiration from the realism the Hollywood Renaissance popularized in American filmmaking.

Finally, the idea of a renaissance itself is utmost fitting as it describes a new beginning, a revival of something that already happened, while being adapted to current times. As will be further explored in the following, while representing a clear descendant of NQC, the NQCR nonetheless adapts and updates decisive elements from the former film wave as well as from queer indie and independent cinema of the 2000s, and, in doing so, creates something completely unique.

Moving on, when examining the way the NQCR was able to surge, it almost feels as if history was repeating itself. Firstly, this revival was possible due to the power of film festivals, seeing that just like in New Queer Cinema, many movies belonging to this new wave were festival darlings[170]: if we take *Weekend*, for instance, it's impact on the festival circuit cannot be denied as it won an audience award at Southwest Film Festival in 2011, then "toured the festival circuit outside of North America, achieved international distribution, and has garnered two-dozen other awards, including a jury prize at Outfest in Los Angeles, two British Independent Film Awards, a London Critics Circle Award and an Evening Standard award for Best Screenplay" (Moor 6). Eventually, it rapidly found not only art-house releases through Peccadillo Pictures, but also home-video distribution through "the prestigious Criterion Collection" (6).

Additionally, in the same fashion in which NQC was born out of technological innovation, i.e. camcorders, VCRs and VHSes, the NQCR also profited from new inventions. In particular, the rise and the growing accessibility of digital filming equipment made it possible for filmmakers on the fringes to make, share, and distribute movies through digital means. While technology has advanced immensely and the technological landscape appears to be quite

[170] To the same degree to which NQC pictures have seized award after award, so did those of the NQCR. A listing of the sheer number of awards won by NQCR filmmakers would go far beyond the scope of this discussion and can be looked up elsewhere (see, e.g., Richards "A New" 219-20). To illustrate the rising importance and ranks of these queer independent films, we should take in the curious fact that while Araki was still expressing his love for the legacy of Godard's cinema by placing a poster of *Made in U.S.A.* in *The Living End*, Xavier Dolan's *Mommy* (2014) was now winning "the jury Prize alongside Jean-Luc Godard's *Goodbye to Language* [2014]" at Cannes (Richards "A New" 219).

distinct from the past, the theory that technology helps in terms of opportunities for filmmaking and opens up new possibilities of filmic experimentation and exploration still holds true.

Not only did the technological means change, but the film market also went through deep transformations, now presenting completely different parameters than those existing during the heyday of NQC. Looking back, NQC was still established in an immensely homophobic industry, representing in itself a harbinger of change. The overall situation, however, changed soon after when Indiewood[171] would introduce worldwide audiences to queer perspectives through sophisticated semi-independent movies. These films naturally left a mark on spectators, other filmmakers, actors, and on film as a business as such, once more proving that an actual audience, forms of reaching these viewers, and an entire niche market of financial interest existed[172]. The film market also changed in other ways as we pass from the 2000s into the second decade of the 21st century: especially due to the downfall of Hollywood's art-house subsidiaries (largely brought on by the financial crisis and internet piracy), the dying of cinemas, and a resulting general lack of funding for film projects, filmmakers were confronted with a necessity of exploring new creative ways of finding financing and of creating art[173].

The end of Indiewood and the prevalence of mediocre and normative gay and lesbian films, then again, created a thirst for new depictions and types of representation that was further spurred by a fatigue regarding homonormative discourses in mainstream media, resulting in the fact that other urgent matters were placed on the backburner. It is in these sociopolitical issues that we, then again, find another facilitator for the continued success and rise of the wave. After all, the film industry does not exist in a bubble but is commonly affected and inspired by general societal interests. As detailed at length in chapter 8.1, the relation of the American government and society had drastically changed in relation to LGBTQIA+ communities since the times of NQC. Its renaissance thus faced an audience that was more reflective of, open to,

[171] Utmost interestingly, prior representatives of the original NQC wave had now become Indiewood darlings themselves, most notably Todd Haynes with hits like *Carol* (2015), Gus Van Sant with his Oscar-winning picture *Milk* (2008), or Lisa Cholodenko, whose *The Kids Are All Right* won several awards itself.

[172] To a degree this also opened the doors for NQCR film distribution. As will be seen further below, these indie pictures also had an aesthetic influence on many NQCR releases.

[173] The case of Travis Mathews' feature film *I Want Your Love* (2012) is incredibly interesting and pioneering in this regard: the project was first released as a short film (2010) by the pornographic production company Naked Sword on various porn sites. To test the waters for a potential full-length feature, a survey was included with the intent to "make a film for—and, to a certain degree, by—that very community" (Nordeen 13). Ultimately, this approach not only showed the width of new possibilities of distribution and financing options, but furthermore "rewrote these broadcast platforms—online porn aggregate and subscription-based websites—as interactive spaces, to gauge and to cultivate a communal dialogue about self-representation and non-prescriptive erotic pleasure, in part by reconfiguring the visual rhetoric of conventional pornography and promoting physical diversity and empathy, but also by destabilizing the consumer hierarchies latent in subscription sites, typically pay-to-play systems of commerce and release" (13). This, then again, underlines that online platforms can be used for way more than simply an impersonal exchange of products for money.

understanding, accustomed to, informed about, and interested in uncompromising queer stories. Consequently, the NQCR would reach even further with its unabashed representations, **"**mak[ing] this unambiguous queerness accessible to wider audiences" (Richards "A New" 224).

Newer generations, then again, grew up with a completely updated vision of concepts and parameters regarding LGBTQIA+ communities. Indeed, we are now living in a time in which simplified versions of queer theory are becoming mainstream, best seen in the way famous drag queen RuPaul uses ideas around gender performativity when preaching episode after episode of his international hit reality competition show *RuPaul's Drag Race* (2009-) that "we're all born naked and the rest is drag." An optimistic Jenna Wortham also ponders on these shifts in an article for the *New York Times*, explaining how utmost queer ideas have now entered everyday life and speech:

> The speed with which modern society has adapted to accommodate the world's vast spectrum of gender and sexual identities may be the most important cultural metamorphosis of our time. Facebook, which can be seen as a kind of social census, now offers nearly 60 different gender options, including "questioning" and "bigender" — or no gender at all. In a new commercial for Calvin Klein, Young Thug, a slender rapper prone to wearing dresses, states that he feels "there's no such thing as gender." The Oxford English Dictionary recently added Mx, a neutral replacement for titles like Mr. and Mrs. The video game "The Sims" has even begun allowing players to create same-sex relationships and lifted gender restrictions on characters' clothing and hairstyles. Plainly, we are in the midst of a profoundly exhilarating revolution. (Wortham n.p.)

With that said, in a time in which *queerness* (just like the acronym LGBTQIA+) has been absorbed into mainstream discourses in ways that commodify and assimilate it, strip it from its original intent and wrap it neatly into a marketable package, a strengthening counterculture has once more soared. Hence, we need to be aware that nowadays there is a distinction between a "queerness for the masses" (or a general use of queer as synonymous to LGBTQIA+) and a politically driven and ideological queerness expressed by self-identified queers, by queer theorists, artists, and creative and cultural actors. When it comes to film, the very same crucial need to "provok[e] controversy through voicing an oppositional radical sensibility and tapping into that of its like-minded niche audience" (Filippo *Provocateurs* 255) has reappeared on the horizon, re-introducing the radical edge queer cinema had been missing for over a decade. In the end, the NQCR doesn't shy away from embracing a culturally and socially illegitimate perspective that "runs counter to currently prescribed tastes or norms" (256) with the ultimate aim "of realizing a more transgressive futurity" (258).

Other voices, on the contrary, have argued that an air of subversively political queer defiance has never been achieved in the same way in independent cinema since the end of the former NQC wave[174]. Some, consequently, see this new iteration of queer cinema as less radical, particularly in terms of aesthetics, political messages, ideology, narrative structuring, and editing. Respectively, Nowlan thus expressed his disappointment with these developments by stating that "so-called 'queer films' made since the […] 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" (12-3). Moor adds that this new cluster of queer films "might well look conspicuously anti-rebellious if judged against" (26) its precursors, while Richards contends that "[t]hese films do not share the same radical aesthetic[175] of the films of the first wave of queer films in the early 1990s" ("A New" 225). However, a whole underbelly of lesser-known NQCR films exists that embrace the transgression in the same way as the NQC did, presenting utmost politically, ideologically, and cinematically transgressive and fluid ways of relating to queerness in a contemporary world.

The above, moreover, demonstrates that many discussions around the NQCR seem to ultimately lead to the question whether the renaissance is less or more radical than NQC. While there is no clear-cut answer, it is worth noting that this is not a comparative competition. After all, we need to remind ourselves that "the queerity or non-queerity of a film is [not] necessarily an either/or proposition. Most likely, and most often, the film itself will operate as a site of contradiction between straight and queer tendencies" (Nowlan 17). Besides, would demarcating what is "the queerest" and what is "not queer enough" not in itself begin to create certain normative ways of defining queerness[176]? The answer regarding the question whether the

[174] It needs to be recognized that the NQCR, in point of fact, is missing the blatant political drive and urgency warranted by the AIDS crisis, which ultimately aided in the emergence of NQC in the first place. When looking at the films comprising the renaissance, they look less politically involved at first glance. Yet, as will be returned to, they nonetheless hold important political meaning and potential.

[175] It is true that a film's stylistic choices can indeed compliment the subversive nature of its content or the general message of a movie. At the same time, it can also deliberately build a stark contrast to it, the general relation between style and content thus not being as straightforward. We have seen this, for instance, in a film like Todd Haynes' *Safe*, which follows a rather 'safe' narrative structure yet contemplates on important sociopolitical issues through metaphor and allegory. Different examples that illustrate this point will be explored in the further course of this chapter.

[176] We also need to recognize that what is shocking, provocative, or perceived as subversive shifts over time and really depends on the fluctuating sensibilities of a society, on what is being consumed and what we have grown accustomed to. Hence, what was considered groundbreaking in the 1990s is not so much twenty years later. Eventually, keeping up a counter-position for the sake of being radical loses its edge (which is not to say that NQC filmmakers were getting lost in this dilemma). Furthermore, as has been shown, certain sensibilities became absorbed by the mainstream. Hence, forcibly trying to trump the subversiveness that had been achieved prior was not what made queer cinema queer. I thus again reiterate that it would be unfair to compare a moment in film history to another one that happened 20 years earlier without recognizing the enormous time difference between both movements.

NQCR is more or less subversive than its predecessor is thus a mixed bag, both "yes" and "no": there is certainly a re-radicalization of queer cinema present as well as an incorporation of certain elements of clean and crisp mainstream and Indiewood filmmaking that are, in the end, sprinkled with a touch of world cinema.

In other words, instead of forcefully feeding into a non-normative position that imperatively goes against the grain in every cinematic aspect, the NQCR has morphed into something more open, allowing it to breathe more lightly by mixing transgressive elements with mainstream sensibilities. This, then again, also implies that questions of intersectionality, of experimentation, of social criticism, and self-reflexive filmmaking are all present, aiming for a more inclusive future. In the end, as will be shown, the New Queer Cinema Renaissance represents a balancing act between mainstream and more radical susceptibilities.

The same liminality is also found in the stylistic and aesthetic choices of the film wave: though some scholars try to pin-point this new wave to one specific style and aesthetic, I believe that it is more varied, crossing boundaries like the New Queer Cinema did in the 1990s. This variety is already apparent in the plurality of NQCR filmmakers, who come from all walks of life, consequently diversifying the movies of this wave from pictures with a very low budget look (such as *Brooklyn Bizarre* [Étienne Faure, 2015] or *Nova Dubai* [Gustavo Vinagre, 2014]) to more polished representatives (including *Blue is the Warmest Color*).

The one stylistic defining factor that not only distinguishes the NQCR from the former NQC, but also permeates a majority of films of the renaissance, though, is the incorporation of a more realistic style. The examples of movies that follow this trend are indeed manifold as the list goes on and on: *Weekend*; *L'Inconnu du Lac*; *Pariah; Tomboy*; *Keep the Lights On; Freier Fall* (Stephan Lacant, 2013); *Gerontophilia* (Bruce LaBruce, 2013); *Praia do Futuro* (Karim Aïnouz, 2014); *Blue Is the Warmest Color*; *Theo & Hugo*; *Something Must Break* (Ester Martin Bergsmark, 2014); *Jongens* (Mischa Kamp, 2014); *Lilting* (Hong Khaou, 2014); *God's Own Country* (Francis Lee, 2017) – all, to different degrees, subscribe to this convention. With this said, as will be returned to further below, this is not the only defining formal feature of the NQCR.

An assortment of established techniques is hence used to create the impression that someone else's lived experiences are realistically unfolding before our very eyes. The tension between recordings of moments of spontaneity and a scripted control that follows a narrative structure needs to be finely attuned so as to create an illusion of authenticity while keeping audiences engaged in the story being told. Most commonly, NQCR films thus fall back on static long takes, and a form of editing prone towards meandering. Naturally, these choices slow down

the pace of a film: long takes in particular break the norm of dynamic and invisible editing in narrative cinema, which has, generally speaking, accelerated its pace since the 1960s (Moor 11). The conservative editing and use of static long takes, often depicting extensive conversations, contribute to a feeling that is closer to the actual passing of time during an event in the real world. As we have seen in the case of Warhol's *My Hustler*, long takes also serve as a form of meditation on the subject matter of a movie, opening spaces for reflection instead of portraying a stream of fast-moving images. All in all, Moor thus describes this style as "non-judgemental" (6) hinting towards its quality of placing the viewer in the position of an observer or a voyeur.

To counteract the static feel of this practice, many New Queer Cinema Renaissance movies, like *I Want Your Love*; *Brooklyn Bizarre*; or *Beach Rats* (Eliza Hittman, 2017) also resort to handheld cameras to achieve moments that reflect the unsteadiness of moving through real life, thus adding to the naturalistic dimension of film. Fast camera movements are also a way to add feelings of threat or confused, excited, fearful and frenzied emotions to a filmic text. Furthermore, shaky handheld cameras often provide an improvised and spontaneous character as well as a documentary-style touch. In turn, the association with documentary filmmaking gives this filmic style an immediate authority that further creates the illusion of representing certain truths. A texture of reality is also achieved through specific tools that aid in fragmenting the narrative, such as the use of jump cuts, which, in turn, ultimately suggest the unreliability of time, of space, and of human perception, while taking away Hollywoodian fantasies of life as a smooth and slick passage of events. The same can be said for the NQCR's love for episodic storytelling (see, e.g., *Keep the Lights On* or *Blue is the Warmest Color*), which gives an impression of peeking into someone's life at a specific point in time without necessarily representing a narrative key point for a grander story.

The *mise-en-scène* can likewise provide accents of naturalism through on location shots, an avoidance of sets, and the use of natural lighting and diegetic sound[177]. Improvisation further aids in achieving an air of fidelity. In fact, the perfect blend, as Canet explains, is maintained by creating a "tension between scripted situations, which are acted out by the characters, and unscripted situations that arise from the spontaneity of the moment" (163). Casting non-actors also encourages authenticity, as seen in films like *Shortbus*; *I Want Your Love*; *Brooklyn Bizarre*; *M/M* (Drew Lint, 2018); or *Théo et Hugo*. The characters in NQCR films as well as

[177] *Weekend* takes the use of diegetic sound to the next level, almost as if following the Dogme 95 manifesto or as if being held back by the budget restrictions of a mumblecore film: "[t]he soundscape is entirely diegetic, consisting only of conversation and ambient noise. There is no title music, no opening credits, and even when music is used for emotional effect, it is clearly sourced diegetically" (Moor 10).

the many extras moreover usually look like everyday people, wearing common clothing, using everyday language, talking about common or even up-to-date topics.

Even though this frequent sprinkling of realism into queer cinema is, in some measure, a novelty, the above-described methods were not only established in other waves and movements and forms of cinema in the past but have even become a common stylistic feature of independent cinema overall. Going back in time, the very idea of "realism" arose prior to the invention of cinema, or, more precisely, "[t]he term realism comes from a literary and art movement of the nineteenth century which went against the grand tradition of classical idealism and sought to portray 'life as it really was'" (Hayward 311). When it comes to film (which is often heralded as *the* ideal medium to reproduce reality onto a screen[178]), the beginnings of realist filmmaking can be found in 1930s French and Italian cinema, Jean Renoir's *Toni* (1935) often being credited as the first film trying to capture a type of socio-realism on celluloid (312).

This was followed by post-war Italian Neo-Realism, a movement that fully dove into the idea of searching for the utmost form of realism in cinema. Best represented by the works of Vittorio de Sica (*Ladri di biciclette* [1948]), Roberto Rossellini (*Roma città aperta* [1945]), or Luchino Visconti (*La Terra Trema* [1948]), this movement went to ordinary European locations, placing actors into real settings amongst real people to find that "all that was needed was the ability to observe this mutilated reality to find the seeds of possible stories that told of the terrible consequences for a society torn apart by military conflict" (Canet 155). The previously discussed European (and international) new waves of the 1950s and 1960s also took over many of the ideas put on the map by realist cinema, while a cycle with somewhat similar ideas started in France during the 1960s, known as *cinema verité*. In accordance with this, in *Realist Cinema as World Cinema* Lúcia Nagib claims that realism has become one of the markers of world cinema (15-6) – greatly opposing Hollywoodian norms of filmmaking.

With that said, a social-realist dimension with an authorial touch has also slowly become more frequent in American independent filmmaking since the 1990s, introducing slow-paced,

[178] This idea refers to André Bazin, whose studies of realism and the representation of an elusive 'truth' in film are greatly based on neorealism. Indeed, "the film medium, for Bazin (1967), is intrinsically realist thanks to the 'ontology of the photographic image', that is, the medium's recording property, which establishes a material bond with its referent in the objective world" (Nagib 15-6). Or, as Bazin puts it, "[p]hotography and the cinema […] are discoveries that satisfy, once and for all and in its very essence, our obsession with realism" (*The Ontology* 7). In a way, film, then becomes a conservation of a reality passed: "[n]ow, for the first time, the image of things is likewise the image of their duration, change mummified as it were" (8). The filmic medium is hence believed to capture reality in an unmediated way, an approach that has been, however, questioned ever since the late 60s, particularly due to "the various stylistic, institutional, and ideological apparatuses that intervene between camera and 'reality,' and then between image and spectator, all of which demonstrate that these relationships are never as unmediated as Bazin imagined them to be" (Collins 252). Hence, capturing "reality" on film is impossible, but certain devices – like the long take (as opposed to the use of montage) or on location shots, all of which Bazin himself suggests – can bring us closer to a vision of reality, or rather, approximate an illusion of our natural perception of the world (Bazin *What Is Cinema* 25-6; Henderson 6; Nagib 15-6).

static, realist pictures that are not immediately rejected by audiences (Canet 154-5). Though American filmmakers with a similar aesthetic and objective existed prior (such as John Cassavetes), the sincere, realist social commentary movie has become more common, popular, and internationally accepted over the last decade (one only needs to look at Andrea Arnold's first US production *American Honey* [2016] or Sean Baker's overall *oeuvre* – including *Tangerine* [2015] or *The Florida Project* [2017]). Unlike the slow-paced works of European *auteurs* like João César Monteiro (*Recordações da Casa Amarela* [1989]) or Béla Tarr (*Werckmeister harmóniák* [2000][179]), this development is more suitable for the masses as it represents a fusion of art cinema and a more familiar and approachable narrative cinema.

This realist approach is also not necessarily a novelty in the realm of queer cinema. Movies like *A Very Natural Thing* or *Taxi zum Klo* already played with quotidian issues of queer individuals, representing their films as peeks into various regular existences. However, particularly during the 2000s the trend of mixing queer narrative cinema with more realist aesthetics found its footing in international markets: paramount examples include the French *Water Lillies* (Céline Sciamma, 2007) and *La Belle Personne* (Christophe Honoré, 2008); the Argentinian *Plan B* (Marco Berger, 2009); or the Portuguese *Morrer Como Um Homem* (João Pedro Rodrigues, 2009). Simply put, this type of gay-induced World Cinema existed before the US eventually caught up with the trend.

When talking about realism in the context of the NQCR, it would be negligent not to broach the idea of the New Sincerity, particularly when considering that scholar Andrew Moor labeled the movement as "New Gay Sincerity" in 2017. The original "New Sincerity" was actually first coined in Jim Collins' 1993 essay "Genericity in the Nineties: Eclectic Irony and the New Sincerity." Over two decades later, Moor adapted the idea of New Sincerity to the NQCR, justifying the aptness of the concept by reminding us that "Collins first coined his phrase to account for conservative genre-cinema in the late 1980s and early 1990s that had turned its back on forms of parody and self-reflexivity to present instead an 'aura' of authenticity. It signifies a tentative reaction against the polished irony and the proliferated textuality of postmodernism" (Moor 2). The great connector between the New Sincerity and

[179] These examples would rather qualify as representatives of slow cinema, i.e., movies that reflect a beauty in stillness and in intensely drawn-out temporalities and, furthermore, almost seem to lean into boredom or unproductivity, making it worth indulging in the mundane. The NQCR seldomly achieves a similar slow pacing, *India Blues*, perhaps, being one of the few exceptions.

the NQCR (or, as he puts it, the New Gay Sincerity[180]) is the fact that both waves appear to be reactions to the ubiquity of postmodern tropes in cinema (especially the common use of irony or parody). Instead, more authentic or substantial ways of exploring contemporary issues are employed that, though still self-reflexive, are also more realistic (Moor 21).

The idea of a New Sincerity does not end here. In an article for *The Atlantic*, Jonathan D. Fitzgerald sees the rise of sincerity as a deeper cultural rupture that has been simmering since the 2000s and is now deeply engrained in popular culture:

> Today, vulnerability shows up in pop music where bravado and posturing once ruled—see artists across every genre, from Conor Oberst to Lady Gaga to Frank Ocean. Television sitcoms and "bromance" movies depict authentic characters determined to live good lives. And respected literary authors like Jonathan Franzen, Zadie Smith, and Michael Chabon write sincere, popular books with a strong sense of morality. (n.p.)

However, more than limiting this trend to popular culture texts, Fitzgerald describes a growing tendency regarding a more sincere relation to everyday life issues as a wider shift in our general mentality: "[a]ll across the pop culture spectrum, the emphasis on sincerity and authenticity that has arisen has made it un-ironically cool to care about spirituality, family, neighbors, the environment, and the country" (n.p.). I fully agree with this assumption, particularly when remembering how debates around self-care or mindfulness have become commonplace in (social) media and everyday conversations. Thus, whether we fully agree with the described definitions and theories around the concept of a New Sincerity in film, these discussions have illustrated a key point, namely that there is a changing perception in society that, in turn, is notably adopted by the filmic medium.

A few questions, however, remain: why would queer filmmakers feel the need to resort to realist cinema? Moreover, does the aesthetic reveal anything about certain ideas they want to convey to their audiences? The answers are as varied as the filmmakers' ultimate intentions. Yet, overall speaking, for the most part, films that portray images closer to reality or in a more 'sincere' manner are usually known to address social issues without presenting these in a heavy-handed or obvious manner or taking the audience by the hand. Instead, "technique functions in

[180] Moor chooses the concept of "New *Gay* Sincerity" instead of "New *Queer* Sincerity" for two primary reasons. On the one hand, all the movies he considers in his analysis actually focus on an exploration of "same-sex desire" (Moor 22). On the other hand, he feels that the renaissance has left behind the postmodern elements of the NQC. He hence opts for "gay" to counteract this very postmodern tinge, feeling that the essentialist concept of "gay" creates distance to it (23-4). His wording, though, is less than representative of the vastness and intersectionality of queerness found in the movement. While the idea of linking the NQCR to the New Sincerity is spot-on, it also needs to be remembered that the film wave has broken the constraints of gay filmmaking, greatly drawing upon queer theory, queer history, and moments of earlier queer filmmaking.

this instance so as not to provide an encoded preferred reading. Rather, it seeks to offer as objectively as possible a form of realism" (Hayward 312).

Besides, seeing that times have drastically changed and that particularly during the Obama years open homophobic political and societal turmoil and harassment fell – at least on a surface level –, moralistic LGBT-themed narratives traded places with either films that celebrated pride (*G.B.F.* [Darren Stein, 2013]; *Geography Club* [Gary Entin, 2013]; *Pride* [Matthew Warchus, 2014]) or, as is the case of the NQCR, options that explored subtler and frequently overlooked issues. Thus, in direct comparison to NQC, the turn towards more sincere images mirrors a reality that seems less harsh (as in a less volatile political situation when paralleled to the AIDS crisis) and simultaneously serves less as a means to make the viewer ponder on issues through metaphor and allusions. A reality is instead presented and underlined as being simply a reality.

Then again, in a time in which queerness and queer history are widely approached through a prism of pride and celebration, it is plausible that an approach that is more nuanced and closer to actual life not merely feels like a breath of fresh air but also becomes more and more urgent: many a NQCR film therefore engages with everyday interpersonal relationships, with microaggressions, or negative, intersectional experiences and feelings the general population is not necessarily aware of (indulging, e.g., in questions around shame, guilt, isolation, marginalization, anxiety, or depression) and that are, however, all but too present in LGBTQIA+ communities. The stylistic stillness of these movies, then again, gives the viewer space to ponder on these subtler issues. In the end, the films representing the NQCR thus clearly distance themselves from, on the one hand, the great experimentation we witnessed in NQC movies by Sadie Benning or Isaac Julien[181], and, on the other hand, from images of queerness in mainstream and independent features of the 2000s, which were often rather loud, shrill, and colorful.

Lastly, the realist approach also speaks about creating counter-images[182] of queer individuals that oppose those found in mainstream media. More specifically, the NQCR tries to present bodies, experiences, and desires that do not fit into the popular homonormative package.

[181] In direct comparison with many NQC films, the realist approach is also easier accepted by audiences than the more radical *avant-garde* or experimental sensibility of its forebearer. Interestingly, this means that the socio-political critique and the transgressive content found in these films can reach wider audiences. After all, "[w]hile these films are not experimental or formally radical, they are still using film form to politicize the queer content" (Richards "A New" 220-1).

[182] Interestingly, these efforts were not limited to cinema, but many other "alternative" media outlets had started to provide a wider type of queer representation, creating more and more of a niche in the 2000s and thus tackling the exploding trend of homonormativity – be it the famous *BUTT* magazine created by the Dutch publishers Gert Jonkers and Jop van Bennekom, the queer electroclash icon Peaches, or even bands like XiuXiu or The Hidden Cameras.

Negative images are therefore time and time again embraced by the film wave, further magnifying and extending some of the tropes that characterized New Queer Cinema (which is, in turn, made possible due to the fact that the revivalist wave is not directly working against an entirely queerphobic past and present[183]). Unlike assimilationist strategies found in today's mainstream texts that embrace a positive, motivational message (*G.B.F.*; *Alex Strangelove* [Craig Johnson, 2018]; *Booksmart* [Olivia Wilde, 2019]), the renaissance is able to indulge in queer villainy: one only needs to look at the murderous hunk in *L'Inconnu du Lac*; the callous gender-queer killer in *Titane* (Julia Ducournau, 2021), the oppressed oppressor in *The Power of the Dog* (Jane Campion, 2021); the seemingly innocent homeless teen who cold-bloodedly burns his best friends in *Brooklyn Bizarre*; or the historical murderer Carlos Robledo Puch in *El Angel* (Luis Ortega, 2018) to understand the vastness of these examples.

First fostered by NQC, these multifaceted, queer individuals with a certain edge have now become so popular that they have even reached television, capturing audiences worldwide: "[t]hink of all of the lesbian, bisexual and trans inmates on 'Orange Is the New Black,' [Jenji Kohan, 2013-2019] the multifaceted Annalise Keating on 'How to Get Away with Murder,' [Peter Nowalk, 2014-2020] those fabulous Fosters on 'The Fosters' [Bradley Bredeweg & Peter Paige, 2013-2018] and those fabulously dysfunctional Pfeffermans on 'Transparent' [Joey Soloway, 2014-2019]" (Snarker n.p.). Consequently, Dorothy Snarker assertively states that "the concept of presenting our model selves is one that may finally be outmoded and unnecessary" (n.p.).

While I would not go as far as that, I must acknowledge that things have nonetheless changed. Indeed, the pushback that movies like *Cruising* or *Silence of the Lambs* had to deal with back in the day does not exist in the same capacity anymore. The tide has rather shifted: Roland Emmerich's *Stonewall* (2015) was basically canceled and completely flopped when audiences became aware of the fact that the movie unashamedly whitewashed the story of the Stonewall Riots by centering it on a young, cisgender, white, gay man. The backlash and the power from right-wing conservatives (at least until 2016, the timeframe of this project) never

[183] Consciously distancing itself from its forebears, NQC tried to avoid melodrama by finding new ways to deal with death instead of focusing on gay men slowly withering away. It thus very clearly contradicted trends within gay filmmaking of its time and place because of its political and cinematic aspirations. Seeing that the NQCR, in comparison, is not caught in a recent past characterized by victimizing queer images, it has been unafraid to deal with a wider range of subtler everyday images and topics around queer negativity that might seem less important at first glance – including depictions of individuals who fall victim to homophobia (*Pariah*), to their desires (*L'Inconnu du Lac*), to drugs (*Keep the Lights On*), shame and self-loathing (*Beach Rats*), unexpected dark and violent impulses (*Kater* [Klaus Händl, 2016]), those who get lost in an obsession (*Été 85* [François Ozon, 2020]), or drown in highly patriarchal, heteronormative, and homophobic institutions (like the police force as explored in *Freier Fall* [Stephan Lacant, 2013] or *Poppy Field* [Eugen Jebeleanu, 2020]). Instead of exploring political rage and a more obvious engagement with queer theory, the renaissance thus shifts towards more understated ways of examining queer-related problems and hurt.

again became as heightened and influential as during the culture wars of the 1980s, 1990s, and the early 2000s. This being said, with the Trump administration, the arts suffered new losses, while Obama-era advances seemed to suddenly become more and more vulnerable.

For the same reason, realist tropes are also employed in terms of content, as NQCR films often feature authentic, candid situations, relationships, and interactions with all the beauty, flaws, and messy details of our everyday existences. By rejecting one-sided stereotypes and clichés, the NQCR wave finds more exciting approaches to LGBTQIA+ life without needing to rely on moralistic or didactic tales or falling back on a "'social problem' narrative which have become clichés of many gay storylines: the closet, coming out, AIDS, social intolerance or exclusion" (Moor 15-6). These films therefore depict how LGBTQIA+ individuals navigate through 21st century society, how they manage everyday routines like smoking pot (*Weekend*), facing issues at work (*Poppy Field*), having dinners and parties with friends (*Keep the Lights On*; *I Want Your Love*), going clubbing (*Pariah*), giving relationship advice (*I Want Your Love*), domestic fights (*Kater*), dealing with mental health issues (*Tinta Bruta* [Filipe Matzembacher & Marcio Reolon, 2018]), family birthday gatherings (*Weekend*), old age (*Love is Strange*), breakups (*Blue is the Warmest Color*), or loss and mourning (*Lilting*).

Examples like *Keep the Lights On* furthermore reflect on autobiographical accounts, providing an even stronger touch of reality. Herein, director Ira Sachs explores his own long-term relationship with Bill Clegg, a book editor who had a crack addiction. As viewers, we get to peek into moments of their life and see how the substance abuse slowly destroyed Sachs' partner, while taking their relationship to its outer limits through the years. Likewise, the focus on biopics like *120 Battements par Minute* (Robin Campillo, 2017) or *Reaching for the Moon* (Bruno Barreto, 2013) accomplishes the same goal.

I Want Your Love achieves a similar feeling of genuineness by featuring actors who use "their own first names, and they portray versions of themselves onscreen," making the film "border[ ] on documentary" (Moor 19). What is also rather striking is the fact that, just like in real life and in great opposition to many NQC films, the characters seem more integrated into straight culture[184], thus radiating less of an us vs. them mentality. Though exceptions also existed within NQC (like *Safe* that almost solely played within straight circles), a number of

[184] Indeed, queerness was never supposed to create a binary opposition between a heterosexual and homosexual or queer fraction. Questioning norms and oppressive structures is certainly not limited to living marginally, isolated, and apart from general society. Likewise, as discussed at length in previous chapters, marginalization, discrimination, and oppression can happen in all social, racial, and sexual demographics. Nowlan puts it best when he describes that "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" (15-6). Indeed, these tensions will be rendered visible in my analysis of *Shortbus*.

movies like *The Living End* or *Chocolate Babies* certainly defined a strong sense of a homo vs. hetero division. With less of a forced necessity to prove that LGBTQIA+s, *de facto*, do exist and have a voice, nowadays there is a growing ease with being queer in a non-queer world and less of a need exists to center solely on movies that depict *only* queer characters. Less entangled in urgent queer politics, the characters in *Blue is the Warmest Color*, *Weekend*, *Keep the Lights On*, or *Love is Strange* all have access to queer spaces, yet also spend time with heterosexual groups of people without automatically fearing exclusion or aggression[185].

Even though there is an overarching tendency towards the use of realist or sincere aesthetics and techniques in NQCR filmmaking, I dare to differ with scholars that have tackled the film wave previously by appointing its realism as the sole aesthetic current. Indeed, looking back at the development of the wave from the standpoint of the early 2020s, it becomes clear that particularly towards the second half of the 2010s there was a new batch of films being released alongside the realist strand. Often merging with realist filmmaking or creating a continuum with it, these films went into a more experimental or fantastic aesthetic realm, especially when tackling ideas around gender, sex, and desire. Indeed, Manuel Betancourt mentions this development very briefly when describing

> the slow-motion dance sequences in the French AIDS epic *120 battements par minute* (*BPM* (*Beats per Minute*), Robin Campillo, 2017); the vibrant neon colors of the Kenyan drama *Rafiki* (Wanuri Kahiu, 2018); the starkly oppressive landscapes that play backdrop to the Icelandic mystery thriller *Rökkur* (*Rift*, Erlingur Óttar Thoroddsen, 2017); the Busby Berkeley–inspired disco musical sequence in *Una mujer fantástica* (*A Fantastic Woman*, Sebastián Lelio, 2017). They pulsate with energy precisely because their aesthetic defies categorization, borrowing and reworking references as if they were thrift- shop finds. (16)

As if taken out of photographer James Bidgood's *Pink Narcissus* (1971) or Fassbinder's *Querelle* (1982), this choice of style is predominantly characterized by the use of moody neon lights and pastel colors[186] and either reflects a certain cool tone of melancholy, sorrow,

[185] Moor thus comes to the conclusion that despite their open LGBTQIA+-content, these films ultimately embody "a universal social experience we all encounter. LGBT specificity and universal application: achieving both of these seems to be an aspiration of New Gay Sincerity" (Moor 13). While this might be true to some of the movies representing the wave, I do not see it as a defining factor. If we look at the setup of *L'Inconnu du Lac*, for example, we encounter a form of gay sexual utopia, a lake area at which queer men very visibly cruise other men, have sex in nature, and are far removed from the rest of heteronormative society – i.e., until policemen begin roaming the area, investigating a murder case.

[186] Indeed, the trend has grown rapidly and is found in a plethora of queer movies, including *You and the Night* (Yann Gonzalez, 2013); the audience and critics' darling *Moonlight*; *Théo et Hugo*; *Fanfreluches et idées noires* (Alexis Langlois, 2016); *Spa Night*; *Pieles* (Eduardo Casanova, 2017); *Les Garçons* Sauvages (Bertrand Mandico, 2017); *Un Couteau Dans le Coeur* (Yann Gonzalez, 2018); *Diamantino* (Gabriel Abrantes & Daniel Schmidt, 2018); *Apocalypse After* (Bertrand Mandico, 2018); *Cola de Mono* (Alberto Fuguet, 2018); *Tinta Bruta* (Filipe Matzembacher & Marcio Reolon, 2018); *Vento Seco* (Daniel Nolasco, 2020); or *Titane* (Julia Ducournau, 2021).

alienation, or isolation (as in a movie like *Titane*) or, more pronouncedly, emphasizes the erotic tone of a scene (*Spa Night*), an underground or socially-rejected sex culture (*Théo et Hugo* or *Tinta Bruta*), or a sexual fantasy sequence (*Vento Seco* [Daniel Nolasco, 2020]). When used to visualize a sexual fantasy, the neon aesthetic creates a stark contrast to the realistically depicted world the movie takes place in. Almost reminiscent of neon-lit red-light districts or seedy nightclubs, this break from reality opens up occasions for the exploration of sexual desires and a freedom of erotic expression and thus clearly distances these films from the pure and head-on stylistic and narrative realism of the early NQCR.

At the same time, this neon-lit elsewhere may represent a harbor for characters in distress. Hunsberger thus associates the aesthetic with a manner of grappling with the sociopolitical turmoil after the 2016 presidential election – especially for queer individuals seeking refuge in a soothing safe space, even if it is only found in an idealized, romanticized, and nostalgic (and ultimately non-existent) 1980s-like stylized fantasy reminding us of communitarian queer spaces (such as bars or baths): "[t]he lights grew to symbolize a space for the defiance of authority and creation of a supportive community. These circumstances are not entirely unlike current social and political circumstances – so it's no surprise that neon lights have returned to popularity" (Hunsberger n.p.). This being said, these sanctuaries are only temporary and exist "for spare moments of illusory relief. When it's morning, and the thrill of playing pretend has come to an end, each character must face the reality of their lives and all that this entails – as we too must come to terms with our own demons of the world" (n.p.).

When looking for the reasons why this aesthetic arose in the first place, no clear answer can be given. The most evident motivation hereby might be the already-mentioned 1980s- and 1990s-induced nostalgia that has overcome popular culture texts throughout the 2010s[187]. This is not only seen in the endless storm of 1980s remakes, reboots, and sequels (e.g., *Fright Night* [Craig Gillespie, 2011]; *Ghostbusters* [Paul Feig, 2016]; *Blade Runner 2049* [Denis Villeneuve, 2017]), but furthermore in the adoption of a moody, futuristic style found in many sci-fi films of the time, including the likes of *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982), *Videodrome* (David

[187] The neon trend is not only prospering in queer cinema, but overall in non-queer cinema as well, with movies such as *Enter the Void* (Gaspar Noé, 2009); *Beyond the Black Rainbow* (Panos Cosmatos, 2010); *Drive* (Nicolas Winding Refn, 2011); *Spring Breakers* (Harmony Korine, 2012); *Only God Forgives* (Nicolas Winding Refn, 2013); *Under the Skin* (Jonathan Glazer, 2013); *Lost River* (Ryan Gosling, 2014); *The Neon Demon* (Nicolas Winding Refn, 2016); *Atomic Blonde* (David Leitch, 2017); or *Mandy* (Panos Cosmatos, 2018) adopting the same dream-like, cool, erotic tone. More than that, as it seems, the trend has infiltrated popular visual culture in its entirety, being particularly visible in the music video format of both non-queer musicians (such as Drake's "Hotline Bling" [2015]) and queer artists – most prominently in Frank Ocean's "Pyramids" (2012); Perfume Genius' "Queen" (2014); Arca's "Reverie" (2017); or Yaeji's "Raingurl" (2017). In a way, in the late 2010s, the neon/pastel aesthetic seemed almost omnipresent, leading Michelle Olguin to cheekily inquire whether "an entire generation decided to live their lives in a two toned neon atmosphere?" (n.p.).

Cronenberg, 1983), or *Robocop* (Paul Verhoeven, 1987). Likewise, this aesthetic represents a hint to the early days of music videos and MTV, reminding us of Bowie's "Ashes to Ashes" or Ultravox's "Vienna" (Eloise n.p.) – thus building another bridge to NQC's fascination with popular culture texts. Lastly, neon lighting (accompanied by smoke) is an easy and accessible way to create an edgy, moody, and effective atmosphere in film. As Eloise informs us, the use of these techniques is a surefire way to turn a mundane setting interesting for little money[188] (n.p.).

One might also wonder whether the rise of the neon aesthetic could have been a form of rebellion against realism taking over independent cinema, especially since it has become more and more established, mundane, normative, and lost its thrilling edge that made it stand out at the beginning of the 2010s. Instead of completely circumventing the former style, though, the neon aesthetic is usually inserted into realist movies, thus helping to stylize them, to expand their potential and the dimension and worlds their characters are able to inhabit. This development also shows that, as is commonly the case with cinematic trends, this neon-80s *vogue* will eventually also come to an end. As Marianne Eloise puts it, "[u]ltimately, all art is cyclical. What we find cool or aesthetically pleasing will be absolutely rinsed to the point of over-saturation and meaninglessness, and then we'll find something else to nick from" (n.p.).

Finally, this cool and detached 80s/90s throwback style also greatly hints towards the internet as the space where trends are set, and distinct subcultures and styles are developed in the 21st century[189]. As a matter of fact, as Olguin tells us, "YouTubers, and specifically, the left leaning de-facto group of highly aesthetic and mostly queer video essayists known as left-tube became notorious for using this kind of lighting" (n.p.). Breaking the constraints of Youtube, the trend is nowadays almost all-pervading on social media, widely popularized by platforms such as Tumblr, Instagram, as well as amongst gaming streamers (and many others). In the context of the virtual realm, these stylistic choices might have also been influenced by vaporwave[190], a nostalgia-filled internet aesthetic and musical genre that formed in the early 2010s and references the 1980s and 1990s. In a nutshell, "[i]n attempting to create a

[188] Several NQC films, especially lower budget ones, featured black and white aesthetics for similar financial reasons.

[189] Despite its many flaws, the tendency towards becoming a space run by censoring corporations, and its predisposition towards creating negative and manipulative clout and content, the internet has also become a ground for community-building and symbolizes one of the main spaces where young people hang out. While online activism and meme-fied wisdom does not represent actual political action in any way, it nonetheless has helped in reigniting a fighting spirit and more radical points of view in many users (as seen in the mobilization during the Black Lives Matter marches and protests that were widely organized online to then be protested on the streets). To an extent, it represents a space of community sharing, as have local channels in the late 80s and early 90s that would screen AIDS videos and other LGBTQIA+-related political content.

[190] As internet trends develop at a rapid rate, nowadays there are new descriptors for vaporwave-like phenomena as well as other sub-categories and offshoots such as weirdcore, dreamcore, or traumacore.

sensationalized depiction of late capitalist alienation, vaporwave art uses neon colours, Windows 95 glitch art, corporate logos, images of Greek and Roman busts, melancholy 8-bit images of cityscapes, beaches, and other quasi-utopian aesthetic 'elsewheres', and Japanese anime and text" (Koc 61). As becomes apparent, vaporwave does not entail a mere random collage of digital remnants and commodities of the past but is highly interested in addressing the woes within a late capitalist, consumer-oriented postmodern world[191].

The crux of the matter in this case is the sense of "alienation and emptiness of late capitalism" (Koc 71) and of living in a hyperreality where human interaction is reduced to digital communication and global connectivity. The isolation brought on by digitalization reflects a realm which has, in turn, acquired more and more features of a consumer space. Vaporwave visualizes these feelings through a "hypersaturation of [consumerism's] own defining characteristics" (72) – in the same way, in which neon lights are used over and over again in film to express similar feelings.

This sense of alienation, so Koc, is further heightened by the "dehistoricized" dimension of a postmodern world. More precisely, in the digital realm, the notion of a fragmented form of history[192] has become increasingly accelerated, particularly in online spaces where memes, clips, and Tiktok videos not only reduce our attention spans to a minimum, but also market "facts" or "truths" to be concisely summarized in one or two sentences that users can easily repost. Parody and pastiche are ever-present while the introduction of past aesthetics and elements into the context of the present "function as tombstones of sorts, recalling a dim memory of stability in the respective definitions of aesthetics, beauty, and fine art predating the cultural tornado of postmodernism" (Koc 68).

It might seem rather odd that the 80s and 90s are chosen as this very place of refuge seeing that similar issues were also on the forefront during these respective decades. Ultimately, seen through nostalgic lenses, these decades – or rather, the "early late capitalist period" (Koc 64) – might resonate like "a more innocent time of postmodernity for the millennial viewer, before technology and late capitalist culture fully reduced history into a uniform blur accessible only through pastiche" (68). Hence, the dehumanized and alienated subject within vaporwave

[191] To an extent, vaporwave seems like a continuation of themes of commodity culture Warhol already explored in the 1960s, though this 21st century version of dealing with consumerism seems oversaturated and amped up to a maximum, in the process becoming "alien and impenetrable to its presupposed demographic of white Western viewers" (Koc 65). These themes of anti-consumerism, of uniformity and alienation in a neoliberal world, furthermore all go hand in hand with the anti-homonormative movement that I have already outlined in the previous subchapter.

[192] This feels almost like a throwback to the 1990s when NQC was dealing with similar issues concerning the place and concept of history in a fragmenting world. This being said, generally the take was more positive or empowering as it presented forms of taking hold of history, of having agency in rewriting and queering it.

tries to overcome "the feelings of isolation and numbness generated by postmodernity's detachment from history, depthlessness, and muted expression" (69) by holding on to a romanticized yet inaccessible past "preceding the trauma that followed postmodernity's final fracture from history through digital technology, and subsequent departure into its pastiche-fueled, 'schizophrenic' eternal present" (69).

Queer cinematic examples like Yann Gonzalez' *You and the Night* (2013) or Bertrand Mandico's short film *Apocalypse After* (2018) perfectly encapsulate the feelings and aesthetics brought on by vapowave: we encounter empty planets, dehumanized individuals who fail to connect to one another and live in a dehistoricized neon-flooded, pastel-colored neverland. The cyber aesthetic is taken to another extreme and perfectly adopted by notorious Portuguese adult filmmaker Antonio da Silva, whose experimental shorts *Pix* (2014) and *Spunk* (2015) display digital sexual encounters through overstimulating internet visuals. The former exhibits a stop motion-like flickering collage of faceless nude selfies of endless men. As a collective they together create an illusion of an animated, unitary, mosaic-like undressing male, whose penis slowly erects and reaches climax through masturbation. Hinting at the temporality of online dating and cruising, this short film makes its audience ponder on the place of the disposable male body and intimacy in an oversaturated online culture with an oversupply of pornographic portals, the constant sharing of digital corporeal stamps of approval, and the ubiquity of screens as distancing substitutes for real-life interaction.

Spunk, on the other hand, creates a collage of sex cam shows, pornographic advertisements, animated gifs, and mobile videos. In its overabundance of virtual aesthetics and forms of sexual meeting places, it again asks questions about contemporary sexual encounters between men and the place of technology in doing so. Both shorts, however, do not function as mere critiques. Though raising important questions, viewers are also supposed to enjoy the titillating content. Interestingly, the same issues are again pondered upon in the Brazilian *Tinta Bruta* (Filipe Matzembacher & Marcio Reolon 2018), a feature film that follows an online sex worker whose cam shows begin to have consequences in his actual life.

The idea that dating apps and social media platforms serve as surrogate environments for queer individuals in a world that is further and further dehumanized and removed from direct interaction also finds an outlet in several other movies that do not necessarily adopt the aesthetic of the virtual world. *Weekend*, for instance, takes up the subject of contemporary notions of easy and disposable sex within gay male communities, without necessarily portraying it in a negative or pejorative light. As the narrative unfolds, we come to an understanding that the two protagonists, whose one-night stand turns into a weekend of shared

experiences, try to hold onto memories of past hookups by immortalizing their sexual interactions with men in different ways: Russell (Tom Cullen) assembles little written memories about his one-night stands on his Macbook, while Glen (Chris New) records interviews with his lovers after each sexual encounter (a collection which he aims to turn into an art exhibit) lest these connections are lost to oblivion and meaninglessness. The young men's actions almost feel like futile attempts to clutch to these fleeting intimate moments of togetherness in order to combat the feeling of being discarded, of the triviality of hookup culture, and the resulting feelings of isolation and loneliness[193].

Even the tower block Russel lives in mirrors the same emotions, characterized by a monotone array of unknown lives hiding behind a myriad of windows that grace an unkind landscape. Just like the oppressive setting, he is a character that lives a closeted existence and treads carefully through life. His hookups inside the safe space of his own four walls thus receive a heightened importance: it is through sex that he is able to open up, to find intimacy and closeness and to be vulnerable. Perhaps intended as a nod to the British 1945 classic *Brief Encounter* (David Lean), the ending of the movie then serves to counteract these images: having let Russel further into his life by presenting him to his closest friends, the characters say goodbye in a sentimental scene at a train station. Glen is about to leave for the States to go to art school, which creates an utmost dramatic plot twist as the two have grown rather fond of one another, have broken down their walls and have finally connected with someone on a deeper emotional level. Instead of presenting a happily-ever-after ending, the film provides a sad goodbye. Overcome with emotions, the closeted Russell eventually lets down his guard and kisses Glen in public. Though denying the two a shared future, the movie nonetheless grants our protagonists the memories and the growth they experienced during their time together.

Apart from ideas concerning fragmentation, postmodern elements are also present in other facets of the New Queer Cinema Renaissance, creating further bridges to NQC[194]: to begin

[193] The film, in the end, however, transcends these negative notions and ultimately celebrates how fleeting encounters can greatly impact someone's life seeing that the characters' short-lived love affair helps them grow.
[194] While queer postmodern cinema continues to exist, the general tendency of movies gracing this new wave have stepped away from overt postmodern sensibilities, especially when compared to the original NQC wave. The reasoning for this shift in perspective and aesthetics might be attributed to various reasons. To a degree, the general tendency towards a bleak, apocalyptic outlook, that was particularly found in LGBTQIA+-themed postmodern cinema, is less common today: new ways of controlling HIV/AIDS and general strides in LGBTQIA+ life and legislations coupled with a progressive and supportive government generated a more optimistic worldview amongst many queers. Nonetheless, while incredibly impactful issues seemed to be somewhat resolved, and even though on the surface everything appears rosy, queer fragmentations, vulnerability, ostracization, and oppression continue to exist worldwide, including the United States. After all, the traumatizing Pulse shooting, the queerphobic steps the Trump government took, including his anti-trans bathroom bills or the trans military ban (which coexist amongst too many other atrocities) showed us how quickly this picture-perfect façade of inclusion can be shattered and disrupted. Even though the life-and-death urgency of the AIDS pandemic has worn off, other deep-cutting issues continue to exist.

with, queer theory is deeply anchored in postmodern ideas with its blurring of boundaries, categories, and traditions, as well as its deconstruction of normative and oppressive power structures and hierarchies – all of which are detectable as thematic undercurrents in movies of the NQCR. Having transformed into a more inclusive and intersectional form of cinema – especially in comparison with NQC or Indiewood – the NQCR further helps in creating multi-perspective points of view while uplifting smaller and fringe narratives, subjectivities, identities, and desires.

Movies that use postmodern filmmaking tropes for the sake of experimentation are also present in this wave, though they are not as prevalent as before. *Interior. Leather Bar.* (James Franco & Travis Mathews, 2013) thus dives into questions around self-reflexivity regarding the filmic medium, blurring the line between documentary and scripted narrative film, besides alluding to and recontextualizing an earlier cinematic text it bases itself on, namely Friedkin's infamous *Cruising*. In the case of *Interior. Leather Bar.* we not only encounter an act of remembering, of acknowledging a queer past[195] and a provocative and notorious queer text that was utterly destroyed when first released, but also a form of reworking and re-assessing it from a contemporary point of view. The idea of going back to look for answers in the past thus is still very much present in certain NQCR texts.

The Catalan *Fin de Siglo* (Lucio Castro, 2019), plays with temporalities in a different manner by providing a traditional narrative that is then completely deconstructed in its last act, exposing memory to be unreliable in a dream-like 'what-would-have-happened-if' twist, disrupting time and causality. Brazilian director Daniel Nolasco's desire-driven picture *Vento Seco*, then again, is interrupted by lustful fantasy sequences that let us get deeper into the protagonist's psyche yet also bear a critically different mood from the rest of the realist and static feel of the movie. As these examples prove, while not as prevalent and immediately obvious, a queer point of view is still channeled through unique, postmodern narrative structures in the NQCR.

To be able to truthfully represent or ponder on all the above-described issues and to explore approaches towards transformative and more inclusive solutions, the NQCR relies on previously described intersectional viewpoints so as to recognize various multilayered and interlocking systems of oppression and privilege. The urgency of these approaches is, then

[195] The sense of looking back or returning to past historical figures and events and (re)imagining their histories also continues to be explored in this second queer wave. Movies such as *Little Ashes* (Paul Morrison, 2008); *Howl* (Rob Epstein & Jeffrey Friedman, 2010); *Joshua Tree, 1951: A Portrait of James Dean* (Matthew Mishory, 2012); or *Eisenstein in Guanajuato* (Peter Greenaway, 2015) still work towards uncovering a forgotten past. Without meaning to minimize their importance, the great difference to their NQC precursors, though, again lies in the fact that there is less of a political urgency in these endeavors (as opposed to movies such as *Zero Patience*, e.g.).

again, best seen when considering the wider cinematic landscape. Unfortunately, while having worked on getting better at embracing more diverse forms of filmmaking, the film business overall is still incredibly problematic and exclusionary as the "#OscarsSoWhite" debates have shown, which spurred after not a single person of color was Oscar-nominated in either 2015 or 2016. As Kim and Brunn-Bevel explain, "the U.S. film industry, namely, Hollywood, prioritizes financial considerations over racial justice or political correctness and takes into account cultural and political considerations only in relation to economic returns" (39).

While there has been an apparent surge in celebrated and awarded films about the experiences of people of color – including *Hidden Figures* (Theodore Melfi, 2016); *Moonlight* (Barry Jenkins, 2016); *Get Out* (Jordan Peele, 2017); *Black Panther* (Ryan Coogler, 2018); *BlackKklansman* (Spike Lee, 2018); or *Crazy Rich Asians* (Jon M. Chu, 2018), – at closer analysis, these changes, while quite important, are rather superficial (Kim & Brunn-Bevel 59-60). Hollywood will only invest in versions of representations that succeed in a global marketplace and do not necessarily represent the widest spectrum possible (61). In a similar way, the queer independent movies that generated hype during the 2010s were mostly those that focus on gay white men and, to a lesser extent, women[196] (*Weekend*; *Keep the Lights On*; *Love is Strange*; *Blue is the Warmest Color*; *Call me by Your Name*; *God's Own Country*). One of the great exceptions in this regard was the semi-independent *Moonlight*, a film that portrays the life of a black, underprivileged, queer individual, ultimately winning the Oscar for best picture during the 89th Academy Awards in 2017.

This being said, if we look at the wider spectrum of independent queer cinema, there is clearly an uprise in more intersectional approaches trying to challenge hegemonic whiteness and cis-heterocentricity in cinema, particularly when compared to the initial New Queer Cinema. In a way, this also reflects the previously addressed changes within parts of society that seem more aware and mindful of sociopolitical and -economic issues and more ready to listen and learn – as the Black Lives Matter or #MeToo movements clearly demonstrated.

[196] Similarly, the lack of queer women filmmakers is still abhorrently apparent and their successes continue to be less celebrated and recognized than those of their male compatriots, even within the realm of queer filmmaking. A few talents were nonetheless able to establish themselves as successful filmmakers, continuing a career over decades, including Lisa Cholodenko (*High Art* [1998]; *The Kids Are All Right* [2010]); Céline Sciamma (*Water Lillies* [2007]; *Tomboy* [2011]; *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* [2019]); or Lucrecia Martel (*La Ciénaga* [2001]; *The Headless Woman* [2008]; *Zama* [2017]) – all of which continue to present thrilling works. Notable newcomers include Desiree Akhavan (*Appropriate Behavior* [2014]); Aurora Guerrero (*Mosquita y Mari* [2012]); Maryam Keshavarz (*Circumstance* [2011]); Dee Rees (*Pariah* [2011]); or Ingrid Jungermann (*Women Who Kill* [2016]). Chances for transgender and non-binary filmmakers seem even less probable, some exemptions being Silas Howard (*By Hook or By Crook* [2001]; *A Kid Like Jake* [2018]); Yance Ford (*Strong Island* [2017]); Sydney Freeland (*Drunktown's Finest* [2014], *Deidra & Laney Rob a Train* [2017]), and Lana and Lilly Wachowski – the latter already being established Hollywood filmmakers of movies such as *Bound* (1996); the *Matrix* tetralogy (1999-2021); or *Cloud Atlas* (2012).

Besides social progress, technological advances also play a decisive role: as I examined earlier, the accessibility through digital means now allows even the more underprivileged to make an actual film with less industry-induced constraints and to release it online. As a result, nowadays a more wide-ranging approach towards queerness exists, dealing with subject matters that were seldomly addressed in the 1980s and 1990s, including topics like age and ageism (*Love is Strange*; *Gerontophilia*), corporeal/body-related issues such as body shaming (*Pieles* [Eduardo Casanova, 2017]), disabilities (*Hoje Eu Quero Voltar Sozinho*), an interest in all types of gender expression, the common treatment of the woes of trans and nonbinary individuals (*They*; *Tomboy*), or even uncomfortable and shunned issues like incest (*Cola de Mono* [Alberto Fuguet, 2018]).

Even more so, a number of movies about queer people of color directed and/or produced *by* queer people of color have been coming out. Stories about the black American experience have been notably on the rise in queer cinema, including films like *Pariah*; *Tangerine*; *Moonlight*; *Blackbird* (Patrik-Ian Polk, 2014); or *Naz & Maalik* (Jay Dockendorf, 2015). Unfortunately, queer Asian-American representation, then again, is still rather meek overall, *Spa Night* being one of the standouts as well as the Netflix-distributed *The Half of It* (Alice Wu, 2020). Outside of the US, Asian queer cinema has been constantly growing, including, among many other features, *Loev* (Sudhanshu Saria, 2015); *Die Beautiful* (Jun Lana, 2016); *The Handmaiden* (Park Chan-wook, 2016); *Present Perfect* (Anusorn Soisa-Ngim, 2017); *Twilight's Kiss* (Ray Yeung, 2019); or *Your Name Engraved Herein* (Kuang-Hui Liu, 2020), while the Thai queer surrealist Apichatpong Weerasethakul is still continuously releasing strong work, including *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (2010); *Cemetery of Splendor* (2015); or *Memoria* (2021).

The biggest leap might have happened in trans filmmaking, particularly since films about transgender individuals were almost non-existent during the 1980s and 1990s. While previously on the fringes[197], many of these films now garner immense attention, with the problematic *The Danish Girl* (Tom Hooper, 2015) leading the way. More wide-ranging

[197] Trans representation in cinema started to ascend in the early 21st century, led by films such as *Boys Don't Cry*; *Lola + Bilidikid* (Kutlug Ataman, 1999); *Before Night Falls* (Julian Schnabel, 2000); *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*; *By Hook or by Crook* (Harry Dodge & Silas Howard, 2001); *Normal* (Jane Anderson 2003); *Soldier's Girl* (Frank Pierson, 2003); *Beautiful Boxer* (Ekachai Uekrongtham, 2003); *La Mala Educación* (Pedro Almodóvar, 2004); *Transamerica*; or *En Soap* (Pernille Fischer Christensen, 2006). Many of these forebears had their own problematic representations, though, and were often not told and informed by trans individuals themselves – i.e. in front and behind the camera. This, then again, also changed throughout the last decade with films such as *Tangerine*; *Something Must Break*; *Una Mujer Fantástica* and series like *Transparent*; *Sense8* (Lana Wachowski, et al., 2015-2018); or *Euphoria* (Sam Levinson, 2019-) finally embracing the intersectional potential of trans identities that had been widely missing in New Queer Cinema.

portrayals and questions can be found in titles like *Laurence Anyways* (Xavier Dolan, 2012); *52 Tuesdays* (Sophie Hyde, 2013); *Something Must Break* (Ester Martin Bergsmark, 2014); *Tangerine*; *They* (Anahita Ghazvinizadeh, 2017); or the Oscar winner *Una Mujer Fantástica* (Sebastián Lelio, 2017). Television series like *Transparent*; *Pose*; or *Orange is the New Black* featuring a variety of different trans experiences, actors, and filmmakers were able to reach even wider masses, giving viewers more insight into the multifaceted stories and lives of transgender individuals.

Other queer identities are found in movies like *Orchids: My Intersex Adventure* (Phoebe Hart, 2010), a documentary about a filmmaker coming to terms with being intersex; *Spork* (J.B. Ghuman Jr., 2010), a musical comedy about an intersex child trying to survive the difficulties of junior high; while both *Arianna* (Carlo Lavagna, 2015) and *Being Impossible* (Patricia Ortega, 2018) tell the fates of intersex individuals who discover that they were forced through surgeries as babies to represent the binary sex their parents chose for them. *Tomboy*, on the other hand, deals with the story of a child who prefers to be perceived as male by their surroundings, "open[ing] the dialogue on adolescence, passing, and gender identity" (Rich *New* 279). All of this not only shows that society has (partially) evolved, but also that the understanding and implementation of queer theory has progressed. After all, "NQC's first iteration also came and went before academic queer and transgender theories had time to gain the prominence they hold today, thus many of the earlier films were a direct response to the more dichotomous field of gay and lesbian studies and its reliance on binary oppositions" (Pawlak 99).

Lastly, when trying to approach a definition of the New Queer Cinema Renaissance, it is paramount to dive deeper into the sexual politics and representations the wave has brought forth. To recapitulate, after the heyday of NQC, prescriptive homonormative standards for depicting gays and lesbians were established in commercial cinema, restricting cinematic eroticism to timid depictions of sexual (or asexual) expressions in form of monogamous, loving, marriage-like relationships. This restrained handling of queer sex in film was also greatly centered on anxieties carried over from the AIDS pandemic, linking queer sexualities to decay, contagion and death, never to be discussed in association with pleasure or the realm of fantasy and the imaginary. This trend of desexualizing queer characters continued into the 2000s, leaving Benshoff to comment that "knowledge about sexuality in America at the turn of the millennium remains appallingly low" ("Reception" 182).

Yet, with the aforementioned boom of independent cinema in the 2000s that catered to a casual queer market, this trend began to shift. Though many of these early lesbian and gay

independent films are still cautious when representing LGBTQIA+ individuals as sexual and sexualized beings, others went one step ahead and embraced (full frontal) nudity[198] and soft-core tropes to further their appeal and sales. Films like the *Eating Out* pentalogy (2004-2011); *A Four Letter Word* (Casper Andreas, 2007); or *Long-Term Relationship* (Rob Williams, 2006) clearly fall under this category, to an extent reminding us of the approaches shows like *Queer as Folk* (but also heterocentric comedies like *Porky's* [Bob Clark, 1981] or *American Pie* [Paul Weitz & Chris Weitz, 1999]) used to deal with sexuality on celluloid. This is precisely seen in the way, in which homoeroticism, sexual acts, desires, and bodies in these pictures mostly strive for normative and formulaic appeal by centering on white, cisgender, well-groomed, muscular, and traditionally attractive men in highly sexualized and promiscuous spaces. This, then again, leads Renée Penney to argue that the muscled gay man is a clear trope that not only stands for assimilationism but also serves as a means to stand against "the homophobic interpretations of gay as equal to the weakling, the effeminate, the sissy, all manner of feminized criticisms of gay men" (Penney 88) – an idea we already encountered in the context of the gay clone and which was re-popularized in 2000s mass media, specifically with the move towards conservatism after the election of President George W. Bush.

In the realm of independent cinema, however, another dimension of films arose that actually concentrated on explicit (and even unsimulated) sex, including the likes of *Romance* (Catherine Breillat, 1999); *Baise-Moi* (Virginie Despentes & Coralie, 2000); *Intimacy* (Patrice Chéreau, 2001); *Lucía y el Sexo* (Julio Medem, 2001); *Anatomy of Hell* (Catherine Breillat, 2004); *9 Songs* (Michael Winterbottom, 2004); *Lie With Me* (Clement Virgo, 2005); or *Shortbus*. Most of these features, however, are still set outside the field of LGBTQIA+ sexuality and are mostly produced outside the US[199], with the exception of *Shortbus*, a film whose success might have been key to changing this situation. Indeed, in the late 2000s and into the 2010s, independent cinema – with the help of the already-mentioned digital developments – not only began relying on more and more sexual explicitness and provocation to market and sell

[198] While genitals are flashed in these films, the disclosure of the male anatomy is still quite timid, often being reduced to a split-second shot and from a distance (Needham 130). These brief penis shots, in turn, were often used to lure audiences, serving as a "thoroughly token gesture to get the mainstream gay audience hooked through clandestine images that circulate in the blogosphere" (130).

[199] European art cinema has generally faced less restrictions when it comes to handling the realm of desire, of the sensuous, and the sexual in cinema, whereas American filmmaking (with the exception of hardcore pornography) has always dealt with rules and regulations regarding these matters, instead proposing a supposedly more refined way of treating the subject matter (Williams "Cinema's" 23). As Linda Williams further explains, "displays of the body in the throes of passion, the cordoning off of this display into carefully elided highlights—arched backs, scratching fingernails, and other sanitized poses of decorous passion that last no longer than the length of a song—effectively quarantine sex from the rest of the movie" (23). As a consequence, "[s]ex, in such films, can never be a real part of what the films are about" (23), creating a distance between the lesser cinematic exploration of sexuality and the 'real' life and 'true' experiences of the characters in a movie.

cinematic products[200] and to tell unexplored narratives (think of Gaspar Noé's *Love* [2015] or von Trier's *Nymphomaniac Vol. I* and *Vol. II* [2013]), but also more sexually explicit, quality *queer* media was seeing the light of day: *L'Inconnu du Lac*; *Blue is the Warmest Color*; *Interior. Leather Bar.*; *Adonis* (Scud, 2017); *Nova Dubai*; *Théo & Hugo* (which begins with an 18-minute hardcore sex scene in a club) represent but a few examples that deconstruct normative bodies, gender expressions, relations, sexual practices, ultimately queering standards of cinematic sexuality to a maximum.

Explicit and naturalistic representations of sex also pervade many NQCR films[201]. Instead of functioning as a mere means to shock, of titillation, or rebellion against cinematic norms, realistic sexual scenes[202] in the context of the NQCR are commonly naturally embedded into a wider story that is being told (B. Walters n.p.). Hereby, the relation between sex, dialogue, and narrative or character development become of utmost significance: while Nordeen specifically talks about the *I Want Your Love* 2010 short film when he writes that "the dialogue grants ulterior meaning to the sex that follows, as the situation is not one of conquest or a traditional pornographic setup, but a kind of familiarization or convivial time-killing, even" (12), his analysis can be expanded to a plethora of other movies belonging to the film wave. In fact, overall, the dialogue found in sexually charged scenes of a plethora of NQCR films is rather spontaneous, it feels candid, and might be clumsy at times. If we take the first one-night

[200] Sex simultaneously serves as a form to set a product apart in an oversaturated digital market, as Maria San Filippo (*Provocateurs* 33) makes us aware of, seeing that "movies are increasingly imperiled by competing content (from peak TV to video games to YouTube to TikTok)" (34). Yet, rather than relying on a bland and empty exploitation of sex for the sake of titillation, this new type of explicit cinema "cuts through the clutter of content by provoking curiosity and controversy, a work that pushes the edge of what can be said or shown, about which it seems important to have an opinion" (34) and thus "reaffirm[s] the subversive potential of movie making *and* moviegoing" (38). In a cinematic landscape that lays focus especially on family-friendly franchises, a film can actually generate buzz and sales by standing out with an R-rating, thus transgressing and inverting long-lasting fears around exploring sexuality in cinema (37-8; 35). Even the mainstream has not been able to stay immune to these trends. As has been discussed at length in previous chapters, the studios and media conglomerates have often been inspired by trends and techniques taken from marginal cinemas. It is no different in this case: prime examples include the male stripper dramedy *Magic Mike* (Steven Soderbergh, 2012) and its sequel *Magic Mike XXL* (Gregory Jacobs, 2015), the soft-BDSM movie series *Fifty Shades* (2015-2018) (all of which generated enormous box office sales), or even the continuous use of sexual explicitness in HBO's popular fantasy hit series *Game of Thrones* (David Benioff & D.B. Weiss, 2011-2019) (Filippo *Provocateurs* 32-5, 54, 56 58). Even smaller publicity stunts like a quick glimpse at seasoned Hollywood actor Ben Affleck's penis in *Gone Girl* (David Fincher, 2014) have been turned into a media event to boost ticket sales (35).

[201] Again, I would like to emphasize that not all sex depicted in the NQCR is necessarily realistic. While there is a general tendency towards it, movies such as *Vento Seco* or *A Seita* (André Antônio, 2015) portray it more through the lens of a fantasy as earlier broached.

[202] The same cinematographic means explored earlier are used to make sex scenes seem more authentic, including static cameras (*India Blues: Eight Feelings* [George Markakis, 2013]), handheld cameras (*Shortbus*), and an emphasis on diegetic sound. Nordeen further draws attention to the lighting that is commonly "far more subdued than traditional pornography" (12) – hence not illuminating every body part at every single second.

stand[203] portrayed in *I Want Your Love* (the 2012 full feature film), we encounter a rather refreshing interaction between the protagonist, Jesse (Jesse Metzger), and a stranger: his hookup cums first, lies next to Jesse for a few seconds, and seeing that the protagonist is struggling to reach orgasm through masturbation, he timidly asks whether he can help somehow. This moment of shy and reluctant inquiry amplifies the notion that we are dealing with two people who are just getting acquainted to one another, even though they find themselves in a highly intimate context. While the hookup services the protagonist orally, a close-up focuses on Jesse's face, who, in this very moment of intimacy, seems completely distant, almost stressed. He eventually gives up and both of them go to sleep.

The suspension of the ejaculation (the height of a pornographic scene, as already examined in chapter 3) is then continued throughout the film, detailing and giving insight into Jesse's mental state. To be more precise, Jesse, an unsuccessful and financially unstable artist living in San Francisco, is about to move back to his parents' place in Ohio so as to save money and to find a new direction in life. The film thus follows him and his group of friends during his last two days in the city. We soon discover that Jesse is quite anxious about living in a small town, in close proximity to his parents, and away from his supportive community of queers and artists. It is through the integration of sex as a vital storytelling device that the character's personal development is ultimately delineated.

In great contrast to his one-night stand, in a later scene Jesse lies alone in bed, remembering his ex-boyfriend, Ben (Ben Jasper): in this flashback both lie in bed naked. We see images of the couple caressing their skin, kissing, and above all talking – showing that not every moment in bed necessarily leads to sex. In a moment of utter vulnerability and of cementing the connection he is feeling at that moment, Ben eventually reveals: "I want to tell you all my secrets. Like all those things probably make me sound ugly. I never felt like that before" (00:25:18-00:25:32). This short flashback discloses much about Jesse's overall motivation in the film: reminiscing about the great connection and happiness he once felt, it is in the closeness to another human being that Jesse continues to search for comfort. Ultimately, his attempts to remedy his fears of his unknown future by returning to what is familiar to him (i.e. sex) utterly fail. As Jesse himself confides in his neighbor, Keith (Keith McDonald),

[203] Overall, sexual promiscuity is found in many of the films belonging to this movement and is generally observed neutrally without any judgement (e.g., *Shortbus*; *I Want Your Love*; *L'Inconnu du Lac*; *Weekend*; *Vento Seco*; *Nova Dubai*). It consequently represents disposable sex as an integral part of queer culture (as already seen in films such as *Taxi zum Klo* or even Anger's 1947 *Fireworks*). Certain movies, including *Jours de France* (Jérôme Reybaud, 2016) or *Beach Rats* (Eliza Hittman, 2017) take these ideas into the era of online dating, showing that access to sexual pleasure is even more accessible and instantaneous in the age of virtual cruising.

towards the end of the movie, "I feel like I've spent the last ten years of my life distracting myself from myself. And I don't know why I'm so fucking scared of myself" (00:58:24-00:58:41).

Consoling him, Keith eventually initiates a kiss, which then leads to foreplay. When Keith caringly consults whether Jesse is doing okay, he is surprised by Jesse exclaiming that "this isn't what I want" (01:03:53-01:03:55). The scene then ends abruptly. Indeed, the audience is at first made to believe that Keith will somehow be his romantic savior, that he might make Jesse stay in San Francisco, and help him find back to himself. The film breaks all these preconceived notions – and, like this, not only disrupts the pornographic maxim by finishing another sex scene without ejaculation, but, furthermore, that of the common romantic narrative. Jesse's recoiling in intimate settings gives further insight into his psyche: having once again resorted to sex as a form of refuge, it seems to dawn on Jesse that he is not completely aware of his own needs and desires for the simple fact that he does not know who he is or wants to be to begin with. Before finding happiness in someone else, he must go on a personal journey towards finding himself – a journey that will be ultimately embodied by his move to Ohio.

Though Jesse never reaches a sexual climax throughout the movie, it is in the very last scene that he achieves something similar: on his way to the airport, Jesse suddenly bursts into something that seems like a crying fit at first but is then revealed to be him laughing. Eventually he confesses that "I'm excited. I don't know why, but I'm excited" (01:07:20-01:07:26). For the first time since we met him, he actually seems enthusiastic and upbeat about something that sex was not able to provide[204]. Now that the time he has been dreading for days has finally arrived, he is able to see it for all of the opportunities it can bring.

I Want Your Love also depicts sex as a non-clean experience that does not perfectly flow every time, something we see over and over again in movies that represent the NQCR. In *Fin de Siglo*, for instance, two men are about to have a one-night stand when they realize that neither of them has condoms. One of the partners thus needs to leave the house so as to get them at the closest supermarket. After their sexual adventure, the movie then shows how the used condom is wrapped into toilet paper. Speaking about this very scene, the director comments in an interview that "[i]f I said 'Oh I had great sex last night', I'm sure it was great but I'm also sure there were many things that weren't great about it. Perhaps a timing thing or the window blew open, or a neighbour said something. There are all these details that to me are rich" (Castro

[204] This is not to say that the movie does depict sex as an empty retreat for lost souls. In contrast to Jesse's behavior, his roommate, for example, is able to reconnect and to cure his relationship with his boyfriend through sexual experimentation. Indeed, overall sex within the NQCR is often used to explore the emotional landscapes characters inhabit, revealing much about characters' feelings and relations towards one another.

n.p.). Conveying aspects of real life in film is also achieved through the use of diversified body types that turn away from the idealized forms we have grown accustomed to in mainstream LGBTQIA+ cinema and media, but also from gay pornography: from different races or ethnicities to different body sizes or ages that are usually deemed as too unattractive for mass media, the NQCR embraces and eroticizes the plurality of the human form. In *Gerontophilia*, therefore, an elder is the point of desire for a young man, while Fábio Leal's short *Reforma* (2018) highly sexualizes its chubby, hairy protagonist (played by the director himself).

In a similar way, the actual sexual acts are also commonly depicted in a non-normative manner. Various characters in *I Want Your Love* thus engage in rimming, in "ass play", and one even "eats out" an armpit. We see couples being playful and silly during sex and observe how one moment of lightheartedness can quickly change into a very charged erotic scene. The examples go on and on with *Théo et Hugo*, e.g., portraying an orgy in a sex club, whereas *Nova Dubai* indulges in an explicit scene of intergenerational intercourse.

While it is more common for women's bodies to be put on display in cinema (see my discussion of Mulvey in chapter 3), portraying the male nude and, more so, the penis on screen is still widely shunned upon and considered a taboo – especially in the North American context. Though there are certainly moralistic and puritanical reasons behind this, as Lehman argues, disclosing male genitalia on screen also means demystifying the phallus, i.e. the symbolic representative of patriarchal rule (5-6, 9). Consequently, the male body needs to be kept from view at all costs[205], seeing that "[t]he privileged signifier of the phallus most easily retains its awe and mystique when the penis is hidden. The sight of the actual organ threatens to deflate and make ludicrous the symbolic phallus" (236). Deconstructing this patriarchal power relation ultimately signifies the revelation of this social charade and might grant new forms of empowerment and engagement with the male body. This means that the penis-phallus not only provides a position of power and privilege in a patriarchal society, but also that the very same constructed connotations lead to men being "profoundly alienated from their own bodies, which are lost beneath its monstrosity" (39).

Thus, movies presenting full frontal shots of men with different body types in almost casual ways and in all forms of arousal (as seen, e.g., in *Shortbus; I Want Your Love*; *L'Inconnu du Lac*; *Kater*; or *Nova Dubai*), on the one hand turn the male body and eroticism into a spectacle to be gazed at. On the other hand, they break this very canonical hide-and-seek power

[205] Indeed, one of the few carefully calculated moments the penis is commonly shown is in hardcore pornography in form of a "large, ever-present, long-lasting erection" (Lehman 236), which serves "to make it impressively dramatic" (10), thus becoming a placeholder and perpetuator of the myth of masculine strength, virility, and dominance.

game, thus completely demystifying the penis as the ulterior power symbol. In a similar vein, movies belonging to the NQCR also commonly avert the central focus of sex scenes from the act of penetration, which, in effect, contributes to the idea of authenticity: by showing a variety of body parts (hands, lips, genitalia, chests etc.) and types of caresses, the depiction of sex becomes more of a whole-body, sensuous experience, as opposed to being solely penile. These body parts, then again, are not fragmented in a fetishized hierarchy of importance for sexual titillation but are rather "often revealed in slow tilts and pans that frame the parts in the context of connection to a whole" (Williams "Cinema's" 14) – a motif that will become crucial when discussing *Shortbus*.

The same, however, can also be achieved through a complete lack of editing: *India Blues* is a very interesting example in this regard as, in Warholian fashion, the sex scenes between a male couple are all shot through a static camera that rarely changes its position. Although the viewer, as a result, has an unobstructed view of the goings-on, due to the distance between the camera and the characters, the spectator becomes less involved – the sex scene turning neutral, almost cold. All of this, in the end, serves as a queering of the patriarchal idea within traditional porn that real sex necessarily implies men repeatedly penetrating their sexual partner[206]. As will be explored in more detail when analyzing *Spa Night* in chapter 9.2, these means of queering sexual traditions simultaneously queer the male gaze – not only because the objects of desire please the LGBTQIA+ viewer's gaze through identification, but also because the abandonment of traditional sex between a cis-hetero man and woman with the sole focus on a woman as an object to be penetrated transgresses the entire tradition.

Due to the fact that a lot of nudity is shown yet not as much of a focus is laid on the isolated display of penetration, Williams describes this form of hardcore erotica as "relatively explicit" ("Cinema's" 9), and thus as existing in the liminal space between pornography and R-rated norms (14-5). In times in which pornography (and its conventions) has grown to be commonly available and known, "a film like [*Blue is the Warmest Color*] must work to differentiate itself from that familiarity as well as from American R-ratings" (15). Hardcore eroticism, so Williams, hence, does not straightaway equal pornography anymore. Instead, "'relative explicitness' ranges from concealing erotic silhouettes, inferred fellatio, inferred

[206] While I speak about "traditional pornography", the genre has also evolved, particularly in recent years and especially due to the internet. Indeed, pornographic content online has helped in changing the familiarity and expectations of mature content. As William's explains, "it is more common these days for so-called amateur categories of pornography found on YouPorn to include films shot with a single handheld camera and very little editing" (Williams "Cinema's" 16). To some extent, sex seen in the NQCR might have thus evolved with DIY-porn, revealing specific parallels.

unprotected anal penetration, and peaceful postcoital moments that mark the film as hard-core eroticism and not pornography" (18).

This debate meanwhile also reminds us of questions regarding the separating line between pornographic and artful or erotic depictions of sex. While I myself have tried to distance the NQCR from certain exploitative pornographic traditions, there is no clear-cut distinction between porn and art (as seen above), but their dividing line is becoming more and more blurred[207] (Williams "Cinema's" 16). As an example, when speaking about his film *I Want Your Love*, NQCR director Travis Mathews revealed that from the beginning he was aware that his movie "was going to provoke arguments over whether it was art or porn, and [he] hoped it would encourage other projects within the porn world that pushed those boundaries" (qtd. in B. Walters n.p.).

Although movies like this certainly further contributed to the merging of the two categories, the muddling of porn and erotica has been a two-way street[208]: cinematographic traditions of pornography are subverted in art film (including the NQCR), however, pornography has, in recent years, also adopted some stylistic choices of what was traditionally considered art cinema (Williams "Cinema's" 16), as seen e.g. in the works of queer adult film director Noel Alejandro "whose work explores pornography as a tool to question society's old standards. His films go beyond the explicit, being set to live in a blend between cinema and erotica" ("Noel Alejandro" n.p.), as described on the filmmaker's official website[209].

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[207] In a nutshell, artful depictions of sex and pornography are traditionally separated through a "cerebral element" found only in erotica/ arthouse cinema, whose sexual content "requires a cultivated, intelligent mind" (Huntley 69). This sophisticated eroticism is supposedly achieved through more subtle camerawork and "proper" (as in elitist) choices of what is depicted on screen – in corporeal and sexual terms (Huntley 73). Ultimately, erotic art finds wider acceptance as it mirrors societal positions on sex and sexuality, already filtered through certain codes of decency and sophistication (73-4). Pornography, on the other hand, fails to do this as it exists solely to titillate baser needs. Shortly put, it is "there to be consumed like a hamburger, its only rationale being instant gratification for the consumer and commercial profit for the producer" (69). Yet, as I will expose, these strict separations ultimately do not exist.

[208] Art and porn cinema even contain ideological parallels as, historically seen, both are known for breaking taboos concerned with, e.g., sex and violence (Brinkema 98). Simultaneously, both are commonly considered adult genres that play with "the twin concepts of fantasy (personal, creative, sexual) and realism" (99). More than that, on a more tangible note, arthouse cinemas and porn cinemas also shared physical spaces, especially as "after the demise of art house theaters in 1950s America, many were turned into porn theaters" (99).

[209] This very postmodern method of muddling the gap between what is considered high and low sexual culture, however, becomes the most pronounced when looking at the work of Bruce LaBruce, a filmmaker that has been persistently working on the verge of porn and art cinema since the years of the original NQC, continuing to release cutting edge work. As LaBruce notes in an interview concerning this divide, "I could take a picture for Honcho magazine, but can take the same image and put it in a frame in an art gallery, and it becomes art. For me that speaks to the arbitrary nature of those labels" (Helfand n.p.). His in-betweenness has, however, generated a high amount of confusion, placing him on the margins of the cinematic world as his works remain unclassifiable and puzzle audiences and critics alike (Brinkema 104; LaBruce 66). Likewise, he has encountered resistance within the porn industry: to find financing for *The Raspberry Reich* (2004) – a film that joins both the art film and the pornographic –, LaBruce was made to produce a hardcore version of the film called *The Revolution Is My Boyfriend* (2004). This thus left one version for the art world and one for the pornographic market with less of a narrative development and more numerous and longer sex scenes (Siegel 115). More than simply merging porn

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When considering sex within the framework of post-1980s queer film history, one is also always looking at the history of AIDS cinema and of the historical and sociopolitical connotations HIV/AIDS continues to have, even 40 years into its *official* existence. After news about the end of AIDS as a death sentence spread with the introduction of successful protease inhibitors, a steady decline of cinema about HIV/AIDS was also perceptible. This is not to say that AIDS cinema stopped at once as it lived on in movies like *It's My Party* (Randal Kleiser, 1996); *Alive and Kicking* (Nancy Meckler, 1996); *Love! Valour! Compassion!* (Joe Mantello, 1997); *Zurück auf Los!* (Pierre Sanoussi-Bliss, 2000); *Le Fate Ignoranti* (Ferzan Özpetek, 2001); *The Event* (Thom Fitzgerald, 2003); the mini-series adaptation of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* (Mike Nichols, 2003); *The 24th Day* (Tony Piccirillo, 2004); *A Home at the End of the World* (Michael Mayer, 2004); *Noah's Arc* (Patrik-Ian Polk, 2004); the filmic adaptation of *Rent* (Chris Columbus, 2005); or *Loggerheads* (Tim Kirkman, 2005). Quite interestingly, in some of the mentioned movies, AIDS ceases to play a central role or is not necessarily used to progress a melodramatic narrative. This minor detail is, in fact, noteworthy for it exemplifies that the film business and its audiences were slowly learning to accept the immunodeficiency as a part of everyday life. Yet, it should not be forgotten that stigma around HIV/AIDS was also still profoundly pervasive.

While AIDS cinema generally became scarcer throughout the 2000s, in the 2010s there was a new rise in cinematic stories about HIV/AIDS. This can be related to the general trend of reworking the 1980s and 1990s throughout the decade, be it in fashion, in cinema, or in popular culture as a whole. In addition, the 2010s were also defined by a rising societal awareness regarding sensible topics: whether in terms of body positivity/ body shaming, sex shaming, the #MeToo movement, or Black Lives Matter, there has been a general trend towards more inclusivity, a greater respect for and awareness of intersectionality, women's and queer (and, most noteworthy, trans and intersex) rights and issues. Naturally, these dialogues have helped to rethink and revisit past events from a more nuanced point of view. Lastly, HIV/AIDS history and the trauma linked to it had been swept under the rug for over a decade because

and art, his very films tend to directly address the constructed boundary between the two cinematic fields. Being commonly fetishized as the intellectual height of cinema, LaBruce takes art cinema and equals its elitist pleasures with that of a viewer of pornography, as, in the end, it similarly stimulates certain pleasurable impulses within us. Lastly, very much in line with both NQC and the NQCR, LaBruce's work overall serves as a critique of homonormativity – porn being one of the last remaining tools to achieve subversion within gay culture. As the filmmaker explains, "making porn is a statement about a certain kind of gay radicalism. In some ways it seems like porn is one of the last fields to make radical statements in the gay world, or about homosexuality to the straight world" (LaBruce 66-7).

people were simply fed up with talking and hearing about the virus decades into the pandemic. With enough time having passed and with new generations coming of age, a need was felt to re-evaluate this not-too-distant past. Indeed, a lot can be learned from the 1980s and 1990s since they embody times of great queer upheaval, unrest, and rebellion, along with the guiding force of queer theory, which has also received wider approval in recent years.

Various contemporary television series like *When We Rise* (Dustin Lance Black, 2017); *Pose* (Ryan Murphy, et al., 2018-2021); or *It's a Sin* (Russell T. Davies, 2021) are all set during the AIDS crisis and inform their audiences about these turbulent and discriminatory times. The same goes for movies such as *Test* (Chris Mason Johnson, 2013); *Dallas Buyers Club* (Jean-Marc Vallée, 2013); *Pride* (Matthew Warchus, 2014); *The Normal Heart* (Ryan Murphy, 2014); *Holding the Man* (Neil Armfield, 2015); *Juste la Fin du Monde* (Xavier Dolan, 2016); or *120 battements par minute* (Robin Campillo, 2017). When browsing through this list of media texts, however, it becomes immediately noticeable that, strangely enough, most of them are set in the past. This choice certainly serves to provide valuable history lessons, and to show how far society has come since then. With this said, movies like *Dallas Buyers Club* or *Pride* or a series like *Pose*, though undoubtedly addressing discrimination and marginalization, also paint the past in a prettier or more glamorous light than it was, even romanticizing it for tragic narrative potential.

Most surprisingly, present day stories about individuals dealing and living with HIV/AIDS are rather scarce – almost as if the issue itself was a remnant of the past and not worth exploring anymore. Some of the few examples I was able to find include the queer series *Looking* (Michael Lannan, 2014-2015), which explores the struggles of an HIV positive character in modern day dating life and features open conversations about PrEP; *Théo et Hugo*, a film whose plot includes a character getting a morning-after treatment after having had unprotected sex with an HIV-positive man; *E Agora? Lembra-Me* (2013) that serves as a form of autobiographical notebook depicting a year of medical treatments in director Joaquim Pinto's life who has been HIV-positive since the 1990s; the explicit short film *Serodiscordantes* (Noel Alejandro, 2019) that portrays a candid conversation between two serodiscordant lovers before engaging in unprotected sex; or the documentary *Chemsex* (William Fairman & Max Gogarty, 2015) addressing the rising issue in the UK of drug consumption to heighten sexual pleasure, which often entails unprotected sex. What distinguishes these filmic texts is the fact that they do not simply present HIV/AIDS as a backdrop to a wider narrative, but critically engage with the issue and the forms of dealing with it in the 21st century, with an awareness of pharma-medical developments and new information.

Seeing that HIV/AIDS is almost treated as non-existent or as a non-issue (due to a lack of interest or because people are actually aware that the issue has deeply changed), it is not surprising that barebacking has also become more prevalent in queer cinema as a whole[210]: films like *Shortbus*; *I Want your Love*; *L'Inconnu du Lac*; *Nova Dubai*; *Théo et Hugo*; or *India Blues*, amongst many others, all feature condomless sex without needing to justify it. The requirement to always defend and to promote condom use at all costs, has thus become less and less imperative. To an extent, the increasing practice of depicting barebacking in porn since the 2000s might have vastly contributed to the normalization of these images in the filmic medium. Indeed, Dean even claims that bareback sex has become "the new normal" ("Afterword" 291) in pornography, while the same practices were still frowned upon by the industry in the late 1990s (298). Simultaneously, these trends also largely contradict the depictions of safe sex in mainstream gay films as well as the propensity towards LGBTQIA+ celibacy and asexuality found therein.

It can be said that, overall, the New Queer Cinema Renaissance rarely deals with AIDS directly since it is rather situated in a "post-AIDS" world, i.e., a world that has not been able to eradicate the retrovirus, but to control its spreading and progression within a human body. Still, we would be remiss not to acknowledge that HIV/AIDS indeed influenced the entire development of LGBTQIA+ history and film history after the 1980s, the crisis thus continuing to affect today's queer cinematic landscape indirectly. As a clear successor to NQC – and thus to AIDS cinema –, and, ultimately, as a child of everything that happened inside and outside LGBTQIA+ cinema and culture during the 80s, 90s, as well as the conservative Bush-induced post-9/11 2000s, the NQCR does not exist in isolation.

The impact of HIV/AIDS on the NQCR goes even into aspects concerning queer theory that are clearly explored in this new movement. After all, queer theory was also born out of the pandemic, taking and learning from the crisis and is now able to be applied to many other fields and issues. Most obviously, however, the NQCR greatly goes against trends of homonormativity that were, in themselves, linked to negative reactions, stigma, and a collective trauma after decades of living within a pandemic. This rebellion, as already established at large, is mostly seen in aspects related to the way sexuality is depicted, how boundaries of sexual

[210] Even though the condom mandate that had become prevalent in the 1990s (as earlier discussed) has lessened its grasp, there are still many moments of condom use in queer cinema, including a sexual encounter in *I Want Your Love* where a condom is visibly rolled over a penis or *Fin De Siglo* that features a conversation between two lovers: while one is on PrEP and thus prepared to have condomless sex, the other feels uncomfortable and suggests to go buy condoms before intercourse. Even in *L'Inconnu du Lac*, a movie that features many scenes of barebacking, one sexual partner insists on wearing a condom – a choice that brings the film closer to a more balanced and realistically nuanced depiction of sexual encounters.

explicitness, exploration, and diversity are re-established and how certain censoring and conservative norms are torn down again. While HIV/AIDS is not necessarily tackled openly in these films, it remains always in the background, contextualizing certain choices and approaches within queer filmmaking of the 21st century. After all, HIV/AIDS keeps lurking like a specter, representing a past that has deeply changed the present day.

When speaking about the representation of AIDS within the NQCR, *L'Inconnu du Lac* holds a special position as it not only goes back to a suggested 1980s-like era, but further returns to 1980s pseudo-AIDS cinema, in which unprotected queer sex and death are equated. Yet, as will be seen, the film refuses to fall into the trap of degrading connotations that prevailed in AIDS-themed cinema of the 80s. *L'Inconnu du Lac* instead lulls the viewer into an isolated, paradisical setting of a lake in the French countryside where gay men spend their summer mostly naked, sunbathing, swimming, interacting, and cruising. The film's protagonist Franck (Pierre Deladonchamps) regularly visits these cruising grounds where he befriends, gets enchanted by (not to say obsessed by), and becomes an almost-steady "fuckbuddy" of the gay clone Michel (Christophe Paou). One night, however, Franck runs into a most frightening discovery: while on his way home, hiding in the bushes, he witnesses how his attractive lover drowns one of his boy toys. A police investigation begins as soon as the body is found, during which Franck keeps quiet about his insights into the crime.

In an utmost interesting take, Linda Williams links Michel's killing and Franck's silence about the murder to the "Silence=Death" slogan, yet "[s]ilence, in this case, concerns not an epidemic but rather the drowning that barely seems to ripple the calm surface of life as usual at the lake" ("Cinema's" 17). Not only does this immediately transport us back to the way slasher films used to deal with HIV/AIDS through metaphors, but simultaneously Michel's obsession with the killer evokes NQC films like *The Living End* that depicted characters with a similarly strong death drive. Just as was the case during NQC, we are faced with a director who knows queer film history, its many associations, and is able to recycle them from a contemporary point of view. This is mostly perceptible in the way Guiraudie chooses to end the film: instead of punishing the protagonist for his sexual promiscuity and his play with fire (as would have been the case in both slashers as well as 1980s AIDS cinema), he leaves it open: indeed, after witnessing two further murders in the last moments of the movie, instead of hiding, Franck chooses to call out to his lover, giving himself into an unknown future. In this way, "Franck chooses his destiny and the narrative is about the repercussions of such a choice, but there is no lingering sense of Franck being punished as a gay man by a narrative that sets out to do so" (Williams "Cinema's" 22-3).

Overall, as has been shown not only by this last example, but throughout the entirety of this chapter, the NQCR represents as much of a continuation or extension as a reworking of many aspects of NQC, albeit with a greater tendency towards realism or realistic fantasy-filled settings, distancing it somewhat from the loud postmodern tropes the NQC was known for. These departures are most obviously visible when it comes to the sexual content of both film waves: while matters of queer sex were already present in NQC, they were often portrayed in relation to the AIDS pandemic while staying mostly modest in terms of representation. The NQCR, instead, is able to dive deeper into the sexual lives and struggles of 21st century queer individuals by not shying away from exploring sexuality in more open and explicit ways. The film wave, moreover, enjoys more freedom in exploring LGBTQIA+ representations in terms of questions around gender. The approaches in this respect could not be more varied: *Beach Rats* thus, for instance, deconstructs toxic masculinity by focusing on a gay teenager who is painstakingly trying to uphold the hypermasculine and heteronormative expectations of his "bros" and society at large, whereas a film like *They* describes the woes of a pre-teen who is faced with the dilemma of whether to transition or not while keeping the integrity of their non-binary identity.

Without being as politically loud and as openly activist, the renaissance nonetheless still tackles highly interventionalist theories that mirror 21st century living around the world through the exploration of subtle and nuanced everyday struggles, macro- and microaggressions, simultaneously reinvigorating queer cinema with a new aesthetic component. This becomes the more crucial when considering that the mainstream still tries to place LGBTQIA+ culture and individuals into a nicely wrapped box, as seen e.g., in films like the superhero blockbuster *Eternals* (Chloé Zhao, 2021).

Opening a dialogue that engages with a deeper questioning of the endless multitude of truths and experiences of queer individuals is thus an important and crucial step towards a more balanced, truthful, inclusive, and embracing queer cinematic landscape. Creating awareness about silenced identities, experiences, situations, in the end, furthermore helps individuals to feel less isolated and as part of a wider culture, normalizing queer forms of sexual and gender expression, while fighting stigma, hatred, internalized homophobia, and self-loathing. In this respect, it should not be forgotten that despite all of the media buzz around LGBTQIA+ inclusivity, being queer continues to be precarious worldwide. As has been shown after the 2016 elections, the glamorous celebration of queerness, though important in its own right, can become a façade that hides the many issues that seem permanently fixed in parts of America – and of the world.

It is in the plurality and intersectionality of queer voices that this new movement, then, finds its subversive power: while certainly also depicting issues surrounding homophobia stemming from straight culture (as seen in *Pariah*; *Lilting*; *Spa Night*; *Quand on a 17 ans* [André Téchiné, 2016]), the NQCR overall goes even deeper into the previously addressed problems arising from homonormative representations. Though not necessarily explicitly incorporated into the superficial narrative of these movies, the critiques are still seen in the actual filmmaking (stylistically and in terms of subject matter), the choice of using ambiguous characters with heterodox character traits, bodies, gender expressions, sexual preferences and desires outside of the white, hetero- or homonormative, cisgender, neoliberal, monogamous, married, consumer-oriented, child-bearing couple. It is in this way that movies belonging to the NQCR can distance themselves from other independent LGBTQIA+-themed films like *Boy Erased* (Joel Edgerton, 2018), an example that has adopted the realist style found in many movies of the wave, yet narratively, formally, and ideologically is quite traditionalist. In the end, there is not one way to truly define a NQCR film, the same way it is impossible to single out a formula for NQC. It is in their queer fluidity, their opening of boundaries, and, consequently, in their sense of defiance that these film waves find their true (uniting) potential.

Lastly, to conclude, when comparing my discussion of NQC and the NQCR, it becomes apparent that I have included many non-American films in the latter wave, while NQC rather stays in the realm of anglophone – and especially US-centric – filmmaking (even though exceptions existed). This difference can be attributed to the fact that NQC existed prior to an age of accelerated globalization and digitalization which has eventually granted more visibility to LGBTQIA+-themed artistic productions on a global platform. In consequence, these trends open up a wider accessibility in terms of awareness and information, providing glimpses into places with utmost different political and cultural parameters. As Villarejo perfectly encapsulates this development, global queer cinema today

> traces indigeneity as well as movements, migrations, diasporas; it charts connections with African-American and Afro-Brazilian politics, with the struggles of First Nations, with South Asian communities in the UK, US, and elsewhere, with Latino/a culture and history and so on. Less a conglomeration of national cinemas than a flux of new linkages and politics, this is the new queer cinema of the twenty-first century. (136-7)

Though certainly a utopian thought, we could almost deem it a step towards queer global community building[211]. In times of such interconnectedness, it thus becomes harder and harder to focus on the output of a single nation without also considering what happens outside of it. As previously noted, the NQCR has adopted a variety of aspects of non-American cinema making – from techniques of slow cinema to the sexual explicitness of European art cinema. In comparison, NQC was stylistically more purely American, being very fast paced, very close to American mass media and popular culture productions such as MTV. Simultaneously, it should not be overlooked that American independent filmmaking also had its fair share in influencing trends outside of the US, leading to "the domestication of many different styles, modes of production, film histories, and political programs into the dominant cultural forms of the global north" (Villarejo 136). Ultimately, the New Queer Cinema Renaissance as part of a "[g]lobal queer cinema is indebted to national cinematic traditions that intersect with a transnational queer culture" (Mennel 108-9), while marrying "[p]rocesses of mainstream appropriations and radical politics of representation" (112). This *mélange* of styles, techniques, backgrounds, sociopolitical, and ideological singularities in the end turn it into a wave that is all too wide-ranging to be ever fully grasped or defined.

[211] Indeed, some filmmakers belonging to this movement are very keen on giving back to queer cinema as a whole and to a wider community, as Andrew Ahn, director of *Spa Night*, revealed in Sundance's "Barbed Wire Kisses Redux" panel in 2021. Reflecting upon the New Queer Cinema and the way it influences his own work, the director explains that "there was this understanding of 'oh, there is history, connection, you know, that it's constantly growing and building'" (00:49:38-00:49:52). Not satisfied with representing but another entry in cinematic history, the filmmaker then discloses that there was always the idea of contributing to the community in terms of inspiring political commitment: "I think a lot about the future and mainstreamification of queer culture and how that can and has abandoned parts of our community that aren't necessarily cis, white, privileged. And so, I think about infrastructure and having to proactively build it. I think if we get lazy with it, like, 'queer culture is going to be fine,' then it's just gonna turn into the most palatable, least challenging, unhealthy thing for us" (00:49:58-0050:43).

9) *Happy Together*: On How to Create Connection Through Sexual Intimacy in NQCR Filmmaking

9.1) "Desire that Travels All Over the World. That Touches You. That Touches Me:" Communitarian Healing through Sexual Permeability in *Shortbus*

With his project *Shortbus* multitalented director John Cameron Mitchell sought out to make an accessible, sexual hardcore comedy that distanced itself, on the one hand, from sexually conservative Hollywood conventions and, on the other hand, from the melancholic negativity and permeating sadness of European arthouse films that feature unsimulated sex. In doing so, Mitchell created a uniquely fresh and honest American answer to explicit sex in cinema (Williams *Screening* 284; "Shortbus" 263). So as not to fall into the trap of exploitative pornographic filmmaking, he approached it from a communitarian angle: the director thus put out a casting call online, allowing actors to send in audition tapes in which they spoke about their interest in participating as well as their (sexual) biographies (Manders n.p.). Over the duration of a few years, the entire team got acquainted with one another and created and worked on the script and the characters together through improvisation (Williams "Shortbus" 269-70; Fitch 236). Mitchell's chosen work ethic, in turn, would turn out to be incredibly important for the actual movie as the same community-driven spirit is as well taken up and reflected by the narrative.

Shortbus finds itself in an even more unique position when considering that it exists in a liminal space situated somewhere between the end of the New Queer Cinema (that waned in the late 1990s/ early 2000s) and the true blossoming of the New Queer Cinema Renaissance in the early 2010s. Representing both movements at once, the elements taken from these kindred film waves, however, go far beyond this temporal dimension. *Shortbus* namely embraces NQC by evoking an equally bleak mood warranted by a post-9/11 setting. Just like the 90s film movement, it furthermore adopts similar postmodern strategies by playing with different filmic media (as, e.g., seen in the use of low-quality digital cameras by characters within the film as well as home video images), the film's splitting structure into various different, intermingling plots, and, most of all, the movie's playful and careless attitude reminds us of the early *oeuvres* of the likes of Gregg Araki or Gus Van Sant. In the end, Mitchell himself has stated that he was directly influenced by the 90s film wave in a conversation with B. Ruby Rich, during which he reveals that he even attended the "Barbed Wire Kisses" panel in 1992 as an audience member (Rich NQC xxviii).

The perpetual use of intertextuality further links it to NQC, be it through a reference to an actual NQC text like *My Own Private Idaho* or the naming of a sex toy after the notorious erotic drama *In the Realm of the Senses* (Nagisa Ôshima, 1976). Returning to the past, however, not only happens within film history, but Mitchell also takes notes from NQC filmmaking in terms of re-writing (queer) history at large. As many critics have noted, the sexual cultures he explores in this movie bear a tinge of the pre-AIDS, "free love" sexual revolution (Shahani 105). By presenting an almost utopian space in which bodies of all types, races, genders, sexual orientations, shapes and forms merge in uninhibited ways, it suggests "what could have happened were it not for AIDS-based homophobia and the attacks on gay memory" (104) while simultaneously hinting "towards hypothetical states in the past and future that have yet to be actualized" (104).

Similarly, there are also numerous elements that place the film closer to the NQCR. Most importantly, the film is set in a post-AIDS environment, in which the virus is not seen as a definitive life-threatening condition anymore. While the AIDS crisis is thus not at the center of the film, its traces can nonetheless be felt in the difficulty the characters face in building human connections, in their relation to sexuality, and in the general bleakness permeating the movie. Simultaneously, Mitchell introduces an unrepentant sexual explicitness, another paramount key element that would define the NQCR a few years later. *Shortbus* namely presents "real" sex in all its glory, chaos, and strangeness, distancing itself from the sterile cleanness of porn. Sexual relations, then again, become of importance to the development of the narrative and characters, even being given the central focus in the healing process of the protagonists, as will be explored further on. The emotional and sincere dimension regarding the sexual stories told by the NQCR thus also finds representation in this early 21st century digital film.

Utmost interestingly, sex scenes, while looking very real, simultaneously take place in a utopian setting reminiscent of a sexual fantasy, which, in turn, forebodes the way the NQCR would develop towards the latter half of the 2010s, thus embracing both the realism and the fantasy-induced realistic elements of the film movement. Furthermore, the movie integrates sexualized and sexual queers and non-queer individuals in the same physical spaces with an ease that allows them to co-exist without exhibiting any forms of dominance over one another. Instead, every identity and sexual expression are accepted as part of a greater whole. In this way, "[t]he film 'queers' even its straight-coded couples by situating them nonhierarchically amid this broad continuum of erotic agents and modes" (N. Davis "The View" 626-7). This, in the end, makes the film more pluralistic and intersectional than many a NQC text, an

advancement that would also become more prevalent with the second wave. Diversity is also found in terms of sexual desires, pleasures, expressions, proclivities, kinks, as well as of bodies – though the cast and extras are still in great measure represented by white, able-bodied individuals. Non-normative sexual acts also amass, including, amongst others, auto-fellatio, utmost acrobatic sex positions, BDSM, orgies, queer and non-queer penetrative sex, oral sex, or rimming. As already alluded to, this melting diversity will be of immense significance to the movie's overall development.

Briefly put, in episodic form *Shortbus* explores the interconnected stories of a handful of New Yorkers as they try to navigate deep-seated traumas by learning to find connections to themselves, their bodies and sexualities, to the people around them, as well as to life in post-9/11 America. The various plots ultimately intertwine at Shortbus, "a salon for the gifted and challenged" (00:18:52-00:18:54) that operates as a sexual and artistic haven with therapeutic potential. All of these motifs are, indeed, already explored in the film's opening sequence, which serves to establish the main characters as broken, alienated, lonely, and isolated – or, as a character later on suggests, as *impermeable*. We therefore encounter several protagonists in need of opening up, of becoming more *permeable* so as to let in other human beings (both emotionally and physically).

To visualize their diverse personal struggles, worries, and motivations, the main characters are thus introduced in an explicit yet playful intercut opening sequence. The film hence begins with a computer animation that displays several close ups of a fragmented Statue of Liberty, including an eye, a finger, and a toe. The camera then zooms out to establish the iconic landmark in its full glory. As these first seconds of the movie already hint towards, fragmented parts are joined to create a wider whole. The camera then takes up speed and flies over New York City, in doing so further establishing the space in which the story is set, and finally decides to enter various random buildings through windows, in the process replacing its animated style with actual filmic footage. The viewer is thus granted a peek into a variety of strangers' intimate lives, which, as a whole, remind us of the diversity the city is made of.

As viewers, we hence first get to meet the absent-minded James (Paul Dawson), laying in a bathtub, fully unclothed, blankly staring at the ceiling. We then observe the character filming his own flaccid penis (an image not too often explored in cinema, as exposed in the last chapter) with a digital camera as he pees into the tub – a clip that will later on be revealed as part of a bigger art project. More precisely, James has been working on his final work of art in form of a suicide tape, with the intention to leave it behind for his boyfriend to understand that "it wasn't his fault" (01:19:03). James thus will go on recording himself throughout the movie

in utmost personal situations. Ultimately, his filming does not only serve as means to provide footage for his suicide tape, but it also reflects on a character that is very much looking *at* and *for* himself at all times with an utmost critical eye, trying to make sense of his profound emotional numbness.

James next moves to the living room where he films himself uncomfortably attempting auto-fellatio on the floor. This moment, then again, becomes a visual metaphor for engaging alone in an act that is usually shared with someone else. More specifically, seeing that James goes to considerable length to reach his own penis with his mouth, it also alludes to his incapability to be sexual with other individuals that stems from hurtful past experiences, as we will find out throughout the further course of the narrative. In this regard, "[i]n being both penetrator and penetratee, James can practise making love in an environment where he has total control and cannot be injured by another man." (Keesey 165). At the same time, this scene also offers an utmost interesting convergence of gazes: namely that of James looking at himself through a camera, while his own scopophilic look is mirrored by an outsider, a voyeuristic neighbor living in a building facing his own who frequently spies on him through a telephoto lens.

Indeed, this stalker will appear wherever James goes and, in this way, further mirrors the gaze of the movie's audience – who becomes an accomplice by taking enjoyment in the act of peeking into other people's utmost intimate dilemmas. This idea is explored even further towards the end of the film when James finally meets his obsessed fan and he confesses that he began surveilling him and his boyfriend "[a] couple years ago. I work right out of here. I proofread for a living. And I don't have cable" (01:16:51-01:17:01). Intruding into some else's life is thus equated with entertainment, a real-life replacement for a show he could otherwise get on cable. He then goes on to explain that he has taken a special liking in following James, particularly because "[he is] sad" (01:17:14). His words, in turn, say a lot about our viewing habits, revealing that audiences indulge in depressing or dramatic, and utmost intimate storylines (one only needs to consider the boom of reality television since the 2000s). Simultaneously, it also puts into perspective audience's and filmmakers' obsession with tragic erotic tales – a trend that Mitchell tries to shatter with this movie, as earlier mentioned. Lastly, the stalking neighbor furthermore enters the pantheon of lonely individuals looking for connection, even though his preferred way of dealing with it is rather dubious.

The camera subsequently flies into a hotel room that has a direct view over Ground Zero. Interestingly, during the animation sequence the sight of destruction evokes the image of a wound that has just started to heal with its black, reddish-brown, and blue tones. This animated

image then fades into actual footage of Ground Zero, which was still a construction site at the time of filming, consequently further underlining the idea of healing and reconstruction the film will revert to over and over again. Likewise, these images determine that the narrative is set in post-9/11 NYC[212] and concurrently highlight the importance of the terrorist attacks to the story being told. Intruding the privacy of a hotel room, we witness a john *in flagrante* being whipped by the young dominatrix Severin (Lindsay Beamish), a struggling artist who has turned to sex work to survive in the overly expensive metropolis.

Her client is incredibly talkative, asking personal questions, which she simply blocks and reciprocates by whipping him over and over again. While, on the one hand, Severin is obviously doing her job, on the other hand, her reactions also foreshadow her inability to open up and her discomfort with human connection. Indeed, the movie will go on exploring her inability in creating deep emotional bonds with other people. As the character herself admits in a later scene, "sometimes when I get uncomfortable, I get mean" (00:48:28-00:48:31). Having deep-rooted issues in engaging with others on an emotional level, the character has shut herself off from the world, she stays to herself and tries to be as self-sufficient as possible. This is best revealed when her client inquires "[w]hat are your thoughts on procreation?" and Severin answers "I want to do it by myself in the dark, like a worm" (00:04:47-00:04:54). Though humorous as her answer might be, it is also very revelatory of the character's deep-seated wounds. Indeed, Severin has taken over the persona of the tough, cold-blooded dominatrix so as to shed off her own personality. When asked whether she is "a top or a bottom […] in real life," she counters with "[t]his is real life" (00:02:43-00:02:51). Role playing has become a substitute for her fragile 'real-life' identity.

Lastly, we enter the home of Chinese Canadian couple's counselor Sofia (Sook-Yin Lee) who is having a sexual feast with her husband, receiving cunnilingus on a piano, then moving over to the bed to be penetrated in a variety of acrobatic positions. Even though this represents the most traditionally pornographic scene so far with all its innumerable sexual positions, Linda Williams points out that it remains one of the very few moments of heterosexual penetrative sex in the entire film ("Shortbus" 289-90). Heterosexual penetration is thus used early on to establish the norm that must be broken down, questioned, and then reassessed throughout the film.

While the three described scenes are happening in spatial isolation from one another, by intercutting them, the movie already alludes to the fact that they are nonetheless connected, that

[212] As will be revealed later on in the narrative, the film is indeed set in 2003, a fact that is underlined by the inclusion of a major blackout that happened on August 14, 2003 and left "eight northeastern U.S. states and parts of Canada […] without power for at least 24 hours, and many of them were in the dark for weeks" (Taylor n.p.).

the different characters share a similar mental state, and that their paths will subsequently intermingle. Eventually, in each storyline a form of orgasm happens: James comes in his own mouth, Severin's client ejaculates onto a painting, and Sofia and her husband *seemingly* orgasm in tandem from penetrative sex, screaming loudly. The choice of exploring the "money shot" right at the beginning of the film immediately prepares the viewer for what is to come in sexual terms and simultaneously opens the doors for the analysis of the very same: this is to say that while this scene appears to be a common comedic scene closer in the traditional pornographic or erotic sense, *Shortbus* does not leave it at that. Instead, it subverts the aftermath of all these orgasmic moments by representing utter sobering comedowns. This, then, uncovers that even though the sexual acts each character has engaged in are thought of and culturally expected to be stimulating and fulfilling, in the end, it might be these very expectations that cripple the characters in the first place.

James therefore starts to sob on the floor, his orgasm rather than ending in bliss, becoming anticlimactic. In other words, instead of taking the cue of his ejaculation as a perfect conclusion for this scene to fade into the next one, the camera stays there with the person who is left behind alone and who does not find cinematic satisfaction and closure. Simultaneously, this choice also deconstructs specific gender roles: while usually "the cum shot poses as an excess of visuality within the narrative, obsessively turning and returning to masculinity" (Aydemir 122), we witness a fragile masculinity, a man whose sexual prowess is not able to make him feel more potent or powerful. James, however, is not able to dwell in his emotional response for long as he is interrupted by his bubbly, uber-positive partner, Jamie (PJ DeBoy). Entering the apartment, Jamie is completely oblivious of the pain his boyfriend is in, believing that James is doing naked yoga on the floor. The nonchalance with which he describes that he is late because "somebody threw themselves in front of the L train" (00:07:26-00:07:28), then further mirrors the emotional spasm between him and his suicidal partner.

Having whipped her client to the point of no return, Severin explains that after her last orgasm a sadness overcame her for the reason that she felt "like time had stopped and [she] was completely alone" (00:05:50-00:05:53), only to then come to the realization that "time hadn't stopped and [she] wasn't alone" (00:07:01-00:07:06). Again, the movie equates sex with unhappiness and *tristesse*. At the same time, her description of sexual fulfillment virtually seems like a search for complete numbness somewhat akin to death. It should also be pointed out that she is the only one in this opening sequence that does not have an orgasm nor feels

obliged to fake one[213]. Sofia, in comparison, at first seems to be in perfect harmony with her husband, Rob (Raphael Barker). Cuddling in bed post orgasm, she begins gushing over the fact that the sex was "incredible" and that she "feel[s] sorry for people who don't have what [they] have" (00:08:27-00:08:39).

We immediately discover, however, that the character is overcompensating as she next starts making up a story about a client of hers that keeps faking her orgasms. Strangely enough, she then confides in her boyfriend that she suggested to this client to not tell her partner and to "keep faking it. It's a completely legitimate strategy to buy time […] If she tells Brad he's gonna think it's all his fault […] And the thing is, an orgasm isn't something Brad can give her. She has to claim it for herself" (00:09:11-00:09:33). Yet, as becomes obviously apparent between the lines, Sofia is talking about herself, a fact that even her husband cannot miss. In speaking of "claiming it for herself," the character also establishes her motivation for her upcoming journey, namely that of procuring her first orgasm.

As the narrative progresses, we get to know Sofia as an incredibly eager character in her quest, whose stern determination in exploring the mysteries of the orgasm ultimately block her. Indeed, she explains that she has tried every possible avenue to reach it and even admits that she has stopped believing that it is real, trying to rationalize its existence with scientific evidence: "[i]t is so elusive. You know? I'm starting to wonder if it's even natural. It's not necessary for procreation, is it? It only seems to appear in a handful of species like the rabbit and the ferret, the bottle-nosed dolphin, the macaque" (00:23:23-00:23:35). Simultaneously, the prevalent notion that every human being must experience orgasms in our hypersexualized society puts further pressure on her, makes her feel ostracized and like a failure, on a personal level and in her relationship: "[y]ou know, I feel like we're inundated by images of these super-deluxe babes in the throes of the ultimate orgasm. I think it's just some myth to sell more magazines" (00:23:55-00:24:04), a defensive Sofia concedes. This ultimately uncovers that the decisive issue all of our protagonists need to grapple with "is that they each fail to have their sexual desire coincide with the discourses that might reveal and provoke a kind of truth about themselves" (Tinkcom 696). Each one of them thus needs to open up to unexplored avenues, to new forms of personal and sexual expression, as well as to new ways of connecting to their fellow human beings, so as to ultimately become *permeable*.

The issue of impermeability, in turn, not only plagues the characters, but they become stand-ins for post-9/11 America. After all, as previously broached, in the opening sequence the

[213] Indeed, Severin stays in physical isolation throughout most of the story, even noting at one point in the film that she can only come through her own hand.

city mirrors the characters' hurt as highlighted through the camera's lingering on the physical destruction of New York's iconic sight. The city as well as its population are thus not only paralleled but also presented as in utmost disarray and in need of overcoming the horrors that lingered after the terrorist attacks. Most interestingly, in her studies about the traumatic experience of 9/11, scholar E. Ann Kaplan describes that "it is hard to separate individual and collective trauma" (1) as the way an individual processes a catastrophic event is generally connected to a wider collective sensibility and memory: "how one reacts to a traumatic event depends on one's individual psychic history, on memories inevitably mixed with fantasies of prior catastrophes, and on the particular cultural and political context within which a catastrophe takes place, especially how it is 'managed' by institutional forces" (1).

It is thus pertinent to briefly recapitulate how these institutional forces dealt with the issue at hand. Generally speaking, while America was already becoming more conservative with the election of President Bush, this tendency rose even more steeply after 9/11 when American politicians and society began embracing a more guarded, nationalistic, patriotic stance. Meanwhile the nation's militaristic might was flexed in Bush's global war against terror. Hollywood, an incredibly impactful institution in itself, immediately adapted to the horrors unearthed by this new era, choosing approaches that respected the feeling of shock and mourning society was going through.

Consequently, images of the Twin Towers were removed from movies that had already been produced (including *Spider-Man* [Sam Raimi, 2002] or *Zoolander* [Ben Stiller, 2001]) while anything that could allude to the actual events of 9/11 was completely silenced in the cinematic medium. Interestingly, this was a complete U-turn for the big screen, had it not relied on the excessive spectacle of violence, death, and explosive destruction to lure audiences for decades[214] (Gabilondo 239; McSweeney 2, 4). This time of silence and reflection, however, was short lived, as already "four years later in 2005 […] the first theatrically released features about the conflict emerged" (McSweeney 5). Hollywood was back to using what it knew best, processing the nation's hurt through spectacular and violent images.

Bearing in mind Hollywood's decision to either censor the catastrophe or to react with violent retributions, *Shortbus*' answer to the post-9/11 American landscape becomes the more surprising and urgent. Instead of focusing on the spectacle of violence and destruction, the film chooses to relish in another form of societal fear, one that, however, is able to send out a far more positive and unifying message: namely that of connection, (queer) sex, love, and intimacy.

[214] In an utmost shocking twist, the actual destruction of the Twin Towers seemed almost cinematic to audiences worldwide that had gotten far too familiar with the spectacle of action-packed movies (McSweeney 6).

In this way, the movie substitutes an extrovert, bombastic vision with one that looks deeper into the psyche of the nation, attempting to find forms of healing by questioning and queering societal norms.

By virtue of this film project, director John Cameron Mitchell was also given an opportunity to deconstruct binary and patriotically incited discourses that became prevalent in media and on a political stage. Most considerably, after 9/11 the trope of the virile hero was reignited not only in everyday occurrences (especially policemen and firefighters were celebrated after the attacks) but also on American screens where the macho hero found newborn momentum in films such as *Ladder 49* (Jay Russell, 2004) (Gates 285). A form of toxic masculinity as white, stoic, physically "strong, turban-less, aggressively heterosexual, and refueled with a newer, more bellicose version of the colonial mission civilisatrice" (Arondekar 243) was celebrated in mainstream media all over the nation (Cohler 219). Once again rising as the prime image of the protector of the country, the violence exerted by the American male in media within a military context thus now seemed justified (Sayeau 104).

The enemy was furthermore established to be an outsider of color, a foreign terrorist that needed to be defeated. Visible in his stereotyped appearance, yet invisible in his forms of attacks, this new type of menace consequently asked for updated forms of public surveillance, leading to the creation of the Department of Homeland Security as well as "the USA Patriot Act (2001), which gave the federal government far-reaching power to carry out surveillance activities to weed out potential terrorism threats" (Batchelor 13). As a result, "the language of freedom and choice so central to neoliberal ideology [was] overwhelmed by a new emphasis on safety, security, and policing" (Weiss Routledge History 114).

Bearing in mind that the "enemy" was widely described "as a primitive, monstrous and sexually deviant 'monster-terrorist-fag'" (Misri 3), it is not surprising that who ultimately suffered most under the stigma in the United States were "Arab-Americans, Sikhs and various 'others' who come under the purview of difference ('mistaken identity')" (Arondekar 242), as well as queer individuals. Indeed, terrorism was often conflated with homoeroticism, so as to make the enemy appear weaker: as Arondekar recounts, in early 21st century media there were numerous "representations of the enemy as the demonized faggot figure" (243), including, amongst many others, depictions of Bin Laden being sodomized by the Empire State Building. Not only due to these accounts, but also seeing that "[s]uch nationalism was almost always predicated on implicit heterosexuality" (Cohler 220), the long-established cliché of unmanly, weak, dangerous queerness was also newly popularized and "confirmed that GLBT people

would continue as scapegoats whose rights could serve as political footballs when all else failed" (Eaklor 234).

Shortbus reacts to the above-mentioned in many ways. Most obviously it does so by embracing widely condemned queerness in all its facets, shapes, and proclivities, putting it on the map without hesitancy or censorship. More so, queer and non-queer characters in the film relate to one another, respect each other's existences and sexual expressions. Furthermore, in the place of the American hero, everyday people are chosen as representatives of the nation, who try to dive deeper into the self, who care and reflect and look for honest and trustworthy companions rather than distrusting their fellows. By trying to create an inclusive utopia, *Shortbus* proceeds on the assumption that the real issues plaguing the individual and society are found within the self and in interpersonal relations and are therefore expressed in our tendency to segregate and to isolate. Instead of promoting surveillance, the movie asks for trust and bonding. It ultimately suggests that only in a more inclusive and embracing way the nation is eventually able to recuperate from its deep-seated trauma.

Although *Shortbus*, to a degree, tries to find a way to build a bridge to the American nation, Mitchell's vision of queer nationalism, however, is not equated with the *malaise* of homonationalism that began spreading in the US throughout the 2000s. More precisely, homonationalism, a facet of the move towards homonormativity, proposes an "alignment of respectable LGBT citizen-subjects with the state and against other queered subjects, such as the terrorist, the criminal, the poor, and the undocumented" (Weiss Routledge History 114). Given the utmost precarious political climate, the director refuses to accept (homo)nationalism at face value and looks for different forms of connecting to his home country. Indeed, *Shortbus* is very American at heart. Accordingly, it starts with a scene that indulges in New York's iconic sights like the Statue of Liberty, Central Park, or Ground Zero, all of which have become placeholders for the city as well as the country.

Yet, another scene takes Mitchell's transgressive nationalist lens even further: having opened up their relationship, James and Jamie invite a youngster named Ceth (Jay Brannan) to join them in a threesome. While Ceth and James please each other orally, a kneeling Jamie gives Ceth a rim job. Unsatisfied with the performance of his sexual partner, Ceth tells Jamie to make more sounds, presumably to feel more vibrations. Jamie then ends up singing the national anthem into his anus. Though this scene clearly serves as a spoof targeted at the earnestness and intensity around nationalism and patriotism at the time, it also becomes a form of queering these ideas. After all, the film suggests a non-normative form of national pride by celebrating non-normative yet integral parts that are essential in forming the diverse American

demographic landscape. It is this type of radically queer utopian imagery that ultimately suggests how everyone[215] can be embraced as a part of the nation.

As already becomes apparent, the movie thus takes the catastrophe of 9/11 and posits it in a different light, changing the focus towards learning, growth, change, and possible future opportunities. Again, real life developments inspired this vision: the truth of the matter is that 9/11 shook up the nation fundamentally, re-awakening it after decades of accommodation. In effect, people suddenly became more conscious, more in touch and aware of what was going on around them. A scene in the film in which Sofia meets Justin (Mx Justin Vivian Bond), the owner of Shortbus, underlines this idea. "This place has really taken off in the last few years, since all these young people started flocking to the city," (00:18:59-00:19:02) Justin remarks. When Sofia inquires why this is the case when the city is so expensive, they simply answers "9/11. It's the only thing real that's ever happened to them" (00:19:07-00:19:10). In the same way in which America was forced to suddenly wake up to a new era that, although scarred at heart, represented new possibilities, so will the characters go through a journey of growth towards finding themselves.

As much as the film is about America, it is even more centered around New York. While both in *Mala Noche* and *The Living End* cities held incredible dangers for the queer protagonists, here, the city becomes a place of healing and of community building. This is warranted by the fact that New York is idealized as a unique and exceptionally diverse and inclusive American city (though the movie relativizes some romanticized notions by hinting towards the high cost of living in NYC).

Metropolises like New York, after all, function as havens for outcasts: "[b]ecause cities enable contact between strangers, historians cast them as fostering the creation of identities and communities related to nonnormative sexual desires" (Hollis Griffin 25-6). It is not for nothing that in one scene NYC is described as a city of hope and possibilities by an elderly, fictional former mayor of New York in a conversation with the young Ceth: "[i]t's where everyone comes to get fucked. Really! It's one of the last places where people are still willing to bend over, to let in the new. And the old. New Yorkers are permeable" (00:29:50-00:30:18). He goes

[215] While still not as diverse and intersectional as some NQCR films would be, *Shortbus* is already a step ahead of NQC by mixing people of different races (a Chinese Canadian woman, after all, is one of the leading figures), gender identities, sexual-orientations, ages, and social backgrounds. Unfortunately, given the extreme persecution of people of Arab descent (or that read as such) at the time, it falls short on focusing on individuals that were in dire need of representation and of being included in the mix. Additionally, some pertinent questions that plagued many, including those of citizenship, terrorism, immigration, or human rights, could have been introduced in a similar way in which a movie like *Mala Noche* did. This being said, rarely ever did a queer film from the 2000s address any of the listed issues, one of the few exceptions being a short introductory scene in LaBruce's *The Raspberry Reich*, in which an Arab man is seen singing – without reappearing in the film again, though.

on explaining that it does not only represent a sanctuary for the emotionally and physically wounded, but that NYC also embodies a place "where everyone comes to be forgiven" (00:30:41-00:30:45).

Even an emblematic figure like the mayor (whose presence alludes to New York's former mayor Koch [1978-89]), looks for that same forgiveness in the film. More precisely, as Shahani explains,

> Larry Kramer, for example, claims that, while mayor of New York, Koch could have done much more to prevent the AIDS crisis, but his own closetedness led to the abdication of political responsibility […] Mitchell deliberately frames their encounter as cross-generational – a meeting of past and present, foregrounded by the youth and good looks of Ceth juxtaposed against the weary wisdom of the fictional Koch. (108-9)

The character further underlines the parallels to Koch[216] by elucidating that "[p]eople said I didn't do enough to help prevent the AIDS crisis because I was in the closet. That's not true. I did the best I could. I was, I was scared. And impermeable" (00:31:36-00:32:10). By hinting towards the grave consequences like the spreading of AIDS that might stem from an individual person's impermeability, it is revealed that this condition also bears a strong sociopolitical danger – in this way, again linking the personal to the wider sociopolitical arena.

However, the movie in no way gets lost in highly philosophical or spiritual ramblings and instead commemorates happiness and the *joie de vivre*, even – or especially – in times of darkness and fear. As the movie namely progresses, all of the earlier-introduced characters soon cross paths: "the Jamies" seek out a session with Sofia as they are planning to open up their monogamous relationship sexually and would like "an impartial opinion from a sex therapist" (00:11:24-00:11:27). Unbeknownst to Jamie, James has suggested this step in their relationship as part of his suicide plan to guarantee that his partner will not be alone after his death. During this session, it becomes clear that Jamie suffocates James with his intensive personality, continuously answering for him. Only when left alone with Sofia, the suicidal James is able to begin opening up and to confide a deeply disturbing episode he witnessed at work: during his shift as a lifeguard at a gym jacuzzi, James found a man floating in the pool that he was unable to revive. Panicking and asking other guests to help him, he was left alone to his own futility. This backstory wound serves to mirror his personal feelings of drowning and of feeling

[216] The inclusion of the mayor and his regret over his past decisions, to an extent, is very much in line with NQC's tendency towards rewriting history from a queer perspective. In the case of *Shortbus*, however, we find less rage and anger directed at the handling of AIDS and queerness in history and are faced with a more forgiving attitude. The mayor is ultimately absolved in form of a kiss by Ceth, his failure is thus pardoned as a human mistake by a younger generation who must live with the consequences of his political failure.

completely isolated from his peers. His utter helplessness in this situation further confronted him with the fragility of life.

Jamie, on the other hand, gives very superficial answers when with Sofia, trying to force a "breakthrough" just like his boyfriend. Due to Jamie's self-centered and senseless behavior, he eventually gets into a fight with Sofia during which she unintentionally reveals that she is "pre-orgasmic" (00:15:40). Surprised by her confession, the gay couple invites the therapist to Shortbus[217], a salon where she might find answers to her quest towards an orgasm. Essentially, it is in this utopian, inclusive, intersectional, underground, members-only safe space[218] that the joy of living and of carelessness at the heart of the film will be explored to a maximum, especially in sexual terms.

The space thus consists of several rooms, directed at different needs, forms of sexual and artistic expression, and functionalities: there is a performance room where concerts can be held and movies can be exhibited; a more traditional bar space for mingling; the so-called "pussy palace," a women-only space to dialogue, to exchange ideas, and discuss personal issues; and lastly the "sex-not-bombs" room that represents the heart of the salon. At its core, it is an orgy area where all body types merge in a variety of semi-public, communitarian, pansexual sexual experiences and everyone is invited to join in, i.e., actively or as spectators. Not only are the participants united physically, but the movie also suggests a rhythm through musical cues that connects the bodies in motion with one another on a transcendental level.

The orgy room hence becomes central to the club as well as an embodiment of the film's larger story since it is here that sexual pleasure in all its varied forms is achieved as a collective, leading to happiness and the personal fulfillment that the main characters are working towards: by being open to all members, the space makes visible that which is usually hidden and silenced or perceived as abject, displaying vulnerability in all its plainness and beauty. The sex-not-bombs room furthermore brings the Other to the foreground, merging marginalization with centrality while creating a democratic vision of humanity in its amalgam of coalescing naked bodies. Ultimately, instead of using the pornographic staple of an orgy for exploitative means, *Shortbus* transforms group sex into a caring empowering stance of solidarity within "a utopian

[217] On arrival Sofia is greeted by Justin Bond, the owner of the club, who quickly explains the meaning of the name: "[y]ou've heard of the big yellow school bus? Well, this is the short one. It's a salon for the gifted and challenged" (00:18:47-00:18:54).

[218] As Shahani points out, salon Shortbus also re-establishes spaces that have become less and less common in the metropolis in consequence of the AIDS crisis and gentrification. Hereby, especially "the administration of Mayor Rudy Giuliani in the late 1990s resulted in the closing down of gay bathhouses, queer bookstores and clubs in New York City as well as an increased surveillance and crackdown on cruising and public sex" (Shahani 107).

community [that] assumes collective responsibility for the satisfaction and fulfillment of everyone's individual sexual desires and needs" (Nowlan 16).

Just like these bodies amalgamate, so do all of the presented storylines intertwine in the salon. Narratively, the movie therefore already hints towards the healing that will take place in this very space. When Sofia, the most sexually unfulfilled character, stumbles upon the orgy room, she is far too timid to participate, yet absorbs whatever she can lay her eyes on. The couple's counselor hence encounters sexual ecstasy as a voyeur, a first step towards understanding her own desires and tastes – a rather curious idea when considering that she discusses sex on a daily basis as part of her job. One couple in particular that appears in complete harmony with one another catches her attention: observing the woman climax, Sofia gets teary eyed.

In response, the woman's gaze falls on her observer, looking at her with an inviting kindness. Next, Sofia's adventure at Shortbus leads her into the pussy palace where she meets a number of women, amongst which we also find Severin. When opening up about her sexual problems and interestedly inquiring what an orgasm feels like to her fellows, Sofia receives answers that, again, equate climaxing with connection. A character played by musician J.D. Samson explains that "[she] felt like [she] was shooting out creative energy into the world. And it was merging with other people's energy and then there was no war and there was peace" (00:27:47-00:27:58), whereas a character that goes by the name of Bitch reveals that she "felt like [she] was finally not alone" (00:28:10-00:28:13).

The idealized vision of a merging of people's energies, on the one hand, hints towards the end of the movie when a collective orgasm regenerates New York's power, while, on the other hand, it is also describes as a liminal, abstract, irrational space that is unreachable by Sofia's structured, rational approach. Truly, the quest to uncover the mysteries of the orgasm has become a crippling challenge for the character, as she entrusts to the other women: while beginning with placatory phrases to protect her and her relationships ("Sex is really awesome. […] I love it a lot. It's a great workout. Feels good. And I love, you know, loving my husband" [00:28:34-00:28:49]), Sofia quickly realizes that she has to take advantage of the fact that she is in a safe space in which people are openly listening to *her* needs for once. She hence eventually opens up about the pains of making love: "[i]t's just, there comes a point sometimes where it just gets really a lot of pressure, and kind of 'ugh.' […] Kind of like somebody's gonna kill me and I just have to, you know, smile and pretend to enjoy it. You know, and that way I can survive" (00:28:49-00:29:08). From not being able to orgasm to *surviving* sex already gets

into a whole new register. There are deeper frictions in her sex life that thus need to be addressed.

The always-eager Sofia thus takes every hint she can get. Back at home, she works hard on her kegel exercises, she tries to turn herself on by posing in a *negligée* in front of her bathroom mirror, awkwardly masturbating on the floor (and immediately getting a cramp in her leg). She even starts meeting up with Severin on a daily basis in a sensory deprivation tank. These meetups are essentially a form of mutual support: Severin is supposed to introduce Sofia into the secrecies of climaxing, whereas Sofia is supposed to "help [Severin] have a real human interaction with someone" (00:48:37-00:48:40). Never having been in a stable romantic or amicable relationship, the dominatrix confides in Sofia that her submissive client "is like the longest relationship [she has] ever had" (01:00:17-01:00:21). Severin, however, turns out to be a hard nut to crack: when confronted with personal questions, she blocks them and, in turn, counters with uncomfortable, mean remarks. Only when the necessitous Severin begins to understand that she might lose the connection to Sofia due to her callous and hurtful comments, she eventually gives in, step by step.

Severin thus starts by revealing her real name, Jennifer Aniston, to Sofia in writing. Too ashamed to even say it out loud, the sex worker seems to despise the paramount normativity (in terms of beauty, sexuality, likability, social integration) attached to the star of *Friends* fame. After all, it encapsulates everything she as a sex worker and artist living on the fringes of society cannot or does not want to represent. Even though this is the message that comes across from her externalized behavior, deep down her total dismay of conventionality might represent a form of self-manipulation or self-preservation, as, shortly afterwards, the character discloses her secret dreams about having stability in life. More specifically, she mentions how she is sick of being a sex worker and how she yearns for domesticity instead: "I can't do it anymore. I just, like, wanna have like a house and, like, a cat that I can pet" (01:00:34-01:00:47). As she goes on explaining, stability would, in the end grant her the possibility to make art without distractions – a dream that NYC both enables and impedes. In other words, living in a city as embracing as New York where outcasts like her can find a voice and a community and authentically express themselves without fearing as much retribution as in other parts of the US, is a double-edged sword: due to the high living expenses, she is never able to fully develop her potential, to become known as more than Severin the dominatrix and instead be recognized as an artist, as a woman, as a human being.

To return the favor to Sofia, Severin guides her newfound friend through a sexual fantasy in the tank. Sofia, once again too goal-oriented and too impatient to come, aggressively

rubs her genitals and eventually needs to be stopped. Her issue now becomes more than clear: "[a]s we leave frustrated Sofia in the sensory deprivation tank it seems that her problem just now is that she sees the journey purely as a linear one, and is trying too hard to follow the map. […] Another notion of sexual arrival, and of narrative form, must be explored" (Williams "Shortbus" 298).

Although in particular Severin seems to benefit from these encounters, unfortunately, one night at Shortbus, the two women fall apart after an egg-shaped sex toy that Sofia inserted into her own vagina stimulates Severin to the point of orgasm while the two women make out. Sofia is hurt by her friend, being exposed to that which she is lacking and which comes so easily to Severin. She cancels any further depravation tank meetings and leaves Severin feeling abandoned once again. The "easy way out" of reaching orgasm with a different-gender partner also fails for her. Both women, in the end, were not able to magically cure one another. Yet, their bond has helped them to open up at least to a certain degree.

Sofia's relation to Rob is another essential building block to consider on her journey. Returning to the scene in which the couple's therapist has locked herself in the bathroom to masturbate in lingerie, she is suddenly interrupted by Rob's loud music, which completely takes her out of her mood – already introducing the dissonance between the couple. Annoyed, Sofia storms out of her hiding place to confront him, only to catch her partner in the act of masturbating to internet porn. The situation escalates into a fight in which she complains about the mess he leaves all over the house, while she is taking care of everything. The scene then abruptly cuts to another one in which the couple is sitting cross-legged, facing each other, screaming into the other's face as a form of ritualistic exercise to vent their frustration. They then calm down and "agree to come from a place of love" (00:42:50-00:42:54). Each of them next talks about their insecurities: she believes she is ugly because Rob gets turned on by porn, while he feels inadequate because of the standards set by pornography.

When Rob tries to go deeper into his fears, Sofia, mechanically slipping into a soothing, textbook therapist voice, fails to understand and downplays Rob's issues. "No! I'm saying that I feel small. I feel like I can't take up enough space. I feel like my cock isn't big enough for you," he explodes. Rob feels like a failed man as he is unable to meet societal expectations to "bring home any money. I feel like I'm not contributing" (00:44:48-00:44:51). The ultimate cherry on top is that he found out he can't make his wife orgasm. Just like his partner, he is therefore crippled by gendered and sexual societal expectations of what it means to be a virile and overly sexual man. Additionally, it is also revealed that Sofia's open conversation policy is a superficial farce, as, deep down, she keeps on lying to herself and her husband. Her

preoccupation with staying in control has even infiltrated her relationship, making conversations sterile and forced. It becomes instantly clear that things do not flow naturally between them and that some form of blockage separates the couple.

To clear the air, Sofia takes her partner to Shortbus and hands him the remote control to the earlier mentioned vibrating egg which she inserts into her vagina. Symbolically, by giving him the responsibility to buzz her at any time, she exposes her need to be taken charge of – a desire that stands in total opposition to Rob's daily life behavior. He, however, as we shall find out at the end of the story, secretly wants to be dominated. Uninterested in this game, Rob therefore "misplaces" the tool and the egg goes completely berserk when a stranger starts playing with the remote. Sofia left completely vulnerable, gets furious when she finds out about Rob's carelessness. She feels completely exposed by her partner as, fundamentally, this was an extremely intimate situation. Utterly desperate and angry with her relationship and her failure to climax, Sofia eventually leaves her calm and considerate façade and simply lets herself explode, telling her partner what is really on her mind: "[s]hut up with your honoring your feelings. And do not tell me what I own! Because I know what I own, you balding, impotent liar!" (01:09:55-01:10:01).

She runs out of the club and goes ballistic. Completely letting go of any consideration for others, Sofia destroys the vibrating egg on the street to let off steam, smashing it aggressively with a mannequin's leg. This, indeed, is *the* breaking point for her on a personal level and in regard to her relationship, opening her eyes to the fact that there might be a deeper incompatibility between her and her partner. Rob who has gotten to the same conclusion, next seeks out Severin's services to be dominated and to further explore his sexual kinks. "You never asked your wife to do this?," the sex worker inquires, whereupon Rob answers, "[s]he wouldn't understand" (01:15:53-01:15:57). His submissive and masochistic tendencies ultimately stand in opposition to the affirmative, yet toxic conversational positivity his marriage represents.

Sofia has also completely broken down. Wearing the same clothes as the night before, she sits in her office, completely defeated, half-listening to her clients rambling on about their personal issues. Bored out of her mind, she begins to focus on a park outside her window, her thoughts soon leaving the room, muting her clients' voices. The colors intensify and suddenly the counselor finds herself lost in a dense forest. Trying to make her way out of it, she gets stuck in the thicket. Panicking she fights to get off the branches that cling to her until she reaches a calm, fertile beach filled with greenery, in the middle of which, in surrealist fashion, she finds a solitary park bench next to a streetlamp. Sofia lays down on the bench and begins masturbating. The tide soon starts to rise around her, signaling her female sexual prowess and

stimulation, marking this as another key moment in her adventure. Yet, before moving on in her exploration towards her orgasm, we must also have to consider James' journey throughout the film until this very moment.

After deciding to open their relationship, James and Jamie meet young ex-model Ceth at Shortbus. While uncomfortable at first, the throuple eventually ends up in the earlier-described sexual daisy chain[219]. During this *ménage à trois*, "James lets Jamie fuck Ceth": handing him a condom as a nonverbal sign of his approval, he chooses this moment to pass on the torch as part of his ultimate plan. Continuing his pre-suicide to-do list, James next finishes his suicide tape and stops taking his medication. The character then reaches his breaking point when in a saucy truth or dare game at Shortbus, he is asked to get into a closet with Severin for five minutes to do whatever they feel like doing. In this cramped space we now encounter the two characters that find it the hardest to build emotional connections to others, suddenly unable to escape their mirror selves and their inner demons. Both characters, after all, are failed artists and have a background as sex workers.

Going deeper into his past as a hooker, James declares that he "loved it actually. I know exactly what I was worth. […] Exactly what I had to contribute" (01:06:13-01:06:25). Believing his worth to be found in being used and consumed, the character has completely withdrawn from the world, both on an emotional and physical level: the ex-sex worker namely goes on to reveal that "I've never let [Jamie] fuck me. I've never let anybody fuck me" (01:07:02-01:07:09). Literally and figuratively shutting himself off, he has become completely impenetrable. Tragically, the same goes for his relationship with his boyfriend, as he opens up about at a later point in the movie: speaking about the endless amount of love Jamie gives him, James explains that "I see it all around me. But it stops at my skin. I can't let it inside. It's always been like that. And it's always going to be like that. I can feel it in little moments with Jamie because he loves me so hard. He loves me as hard as the people who treated me like shit" (01:19:18-01:19:52). In a self-defeating and twisted way, love has become connected to humiliation and to losing agency in his mind. In effect, his value as a human being is reduced to being admired or loved in the act of serving someone else, a trauma that has stuck with him since his days working the streets. Even in his loving and superficially healthy relationship, he still feels like existing for someone else's pleasure.

[219] Indeed, this sex scene already foreshadows what the NQCR will bring to the map on a wider scale in terms of very naturalistically shots, unsimulated sex that also bears certain flaws: for instance, Ceth at one point tells James to grab his erection with his other hand as he is more used to that touch. The scene also becomes quite silly and playful when the three men join in singing the national anthem, which further distances it from tragic European erotica and serious pornographic conventions.

Severin takes a polaroid picture of her new acquaintance during his monologue and scribbles "$389" on it, a value referring to the highest price he ever received for a hooking job, thus visualizing James' deepest insecurity. Similar to the way in which *Mala Noche* constantly linked Johnny's body to dollar bills, James also becomes an absolute object to be consumed. An artist with an incredibly deep need to express himself has thus become another commodity in the consumer-oriented, overly expensive city. Confronted with this visual reminder, James begins to cry, and, in this moment of utmost vulnerability, the otherwise reserved man opens up even more: "I look back at things I wrote when I was twelve years old. And I'm still looking for the same things now" (01:08:05-01:08:14). While still clinging to childhood dreams, he is unable to fulfill them due to his mental health struggles, another element connecting him to Severin whose hopes and dreams are likewise shattered by outside factors. Interrupted again by an outsider, the conversation ends. James wipes off his tears and has to pretend once more to be fine.

In the next scene he finds himself at an empty pool, preparing his digital camera to film his actual suicide. Jamie takes a handful of pills, pulls a plastic bag over his head and lets himself float in the water. Utmost strikingly, he chooses the same way of dying as the man he was unable to safe during his watch as a lifeguard, a harking back to the trigger that eventually made plain the vulnerability of life, its fleetingness, the ease and rapidity of dying, of letting go. Yet, this time around, death will not arrive: James' stalking neighbor, who has been following him everywhere, jumps in the pool, rescues him, calls an ambulance, scribbles his number and email address on James' face, and finally disappears. Subsequently waking up in a hospital bed, James then calls his savior and accepts to meet up with him at his admirer's apartment. Upon meeting his stalker and getting to know about his obsession with him and his partner, James comes clear about his suicide plan, the video, and the reasons why he let Ceth into his relationship.

Driven again by his savior complex, the stalker takes charge and kisses him, whereupon James responds "I can't feel it" (01:19:57-01:19:59). Utmost keen on breaking James open, he now showers him with kisses. Though James gets agitated, fighting him off, telling him that he does not want any of that, utmost surprisingly, he suddenly gives in and decides to have penetrative sex with his stalker. This abrupt change of heart, in turn, can be read in different ways: on the one hand, James finds himself at his lowest after his suicide attempt. If he is to continue living, something must drastically change. Having shared his suicide plan and deepest anxieties with someone, he has simultaneously accepted to confront his biggest fear of exposing his inner life. On the other hand, his stalker also represents someone who admired him and

never asked for anything in return, thus setting himself apart from his paying customers and his reciprocal loving relationship with his boyfriend. Terrified and crying, the artist lets the stranger enter him. This choice, then again, is an utmost transgressive and transformative moment for the character as "Caleb's penis thus becomes the transition between James's own and his lover Jamie's, moving James towards an acceptance of sex as conveying love" (Keesey 165).

This scene is intercut with images from his suicide tape that display home videos of himself and Jamie as children, as well as disturbing recordings of a hurting adult James, alongside images of tender moments of intimacy with his partner, all of which highlight the confusion in his mind at this very particular moment. The footage of childhood harks back to the idea of the naïve childish dreams he still holds on to as he confessed to Severin earlier. Simultaneously, the child is also seen hitting a piñata over and over again, which, in a way, might be hinting towards destructive forces that have always resided in him. In the end, we hear a scarcely perceptible whispering stating "stay awake, stay up with me" (01:24:49-01:24:52). As all these memories and feelings worth fighting for, worth opening up for, swirl through James' head, they in the end figuratively wake him up.

This montage scene is further intercut with the earlier mentioned image of Sofia masturbating on the park bench, who is now starting to get in tune with her body, as well as with another scene in which Rob is being whipped by Severin. To strengthen the idea of an emotional and physical awakening, Severin shouts "[b]ooked a date so you could feel something? It's hard not to feel anything in your life. Feel it now, you little faggot?" (01:24:18-01:24:26), further building a bridge to the disassociated James and the non-orgasmic Sofia. Severin becoming aware of her self-reflexive words suddenly completely loses control and breaks down on the bed, upon which Rob takes her into his arms and tries to calm her down as she screams and cries. All of the characters, in tandem, have reached a point of epiphany. Their moment of opening up, of being vulnerable, of carelessness, of letting go eventually, and becoming permeable, then, coincides with New York's blackout. Not only do the characters become one through their individual breakdowns but this image also draws on the idea of them being connected to a wider metropolitan or even national emotional state.

Most interestingly, the blackout was foreshadowed throughout the movie, in particular in a scene in which Sofia had a deep conversation with the owner of the Shortbus salon, Justin. When describing her difficulties in reaching orgasm as a "clog in my neural pathway somewhere between my brain and my clitoris" (00:54:29-00:54:33), Justin gets upset, suggesting,

> [d]on't think of it as a clog. Think of it as some sort of magical circuit board. A motherboard filled with desire that travels all over the world. That touches you. That touches me. That connects everybody. You just have to find the right connection. The right circuitry. Look at all these people out there. They're trying to find the right connection. And I personally expect a few blown fuses before the night is over and maybe one of them will be yours. (00:54:35-00:55:00)

Indeed, once the characters have reached a point of utmost vulnerability by confronting their fears, more than a few fuses explode.

The blackout, in itself, represents a form of reset. Being completely cut off from modern technology, the characters are forced to engage with one another[220]. After all, "[i]nteraction with these electronic devices replaces human connection with the outside world" (Küçük 105). Indeed, throughout the movie electronics and the digital world take center stage in form of smartphones, dating apps, GPS tracking, internet pornography, digital cameras, laptops, bluetooth earpieces, amongst many others. While all these devices are nowadays seen as extensions of the self (and have become pervasive in NQCR film), they were not as ubiquitous in the mid-2000s, which is to say that the characters' heavy reliance on them sticks out even more. The concept of needing a timeout or recovery by letting go of distractions like the mediated world, in the end is very up to date.

To further the idea of the existence of a wider collective, we dive back into an animated sequence during which the camera sweeps over a now unlit New York, soon finding a single light amongst the darkness in the candlelit Shortbus club, symbolizing a place of refuge and hope. It is in this space where all the characters will join for a final scene that is accompanied by Justin's performance of Scott Matthew's "In the End," which, in turn, underlines the idea that everyone has become permeable: "as your last breath begins, you find your dreams, your best friend. And we all get it in the end," the singer repeats, like this emphasizing the idea of "getting it" as in coming to an understanding or an awakening, but also in a more sexual sense of reaching that final, healing orgasm.

When the blackout hits, James finds himself alone in his stalker's apartment. Looking out of the window he sees his partner Jamie in his own apartment window, facing that of his stalker. An incredibly worried Jamie sees his boyfriend and smiles at James, who reciprocates it. The abyss that lies between them in this moment, then again, emphasizes the idea that James had to go to the other side (meaning his attempted suicide and the penetration by a stranger), to

[220] Indeed, reminiscing on the blackout that happened in 2003, John Cameron Mitchell recounts that "[i]t was the most beautiful moment in New York. The cops let you drink and build bonfires, and people were so kind to each other. There was no fighting, no looting. We thought it was terrorists. When it wasn't, we were happy to be alive" (Dry n.p.). This feeling of coming together, again, perfectly encapsulates the overall message of the movie.

be able to return to his lover, to see the beauty that his life offers from an outsider's point of view, and to, finally, be fully seen by his partner. Indeed, James is now able to look at Jamie from the same perspective as his obsessive stalker has for the last two years. Having stepped outside, he finally recognizes what he indeed holds. Like everyone else, the couple returns to Shortbus where James and Jamie are reunited and joined by Ceth and the stalker, the latter two having bonded over their obsession about "the Jamies."

Severin also appears in this scene: while still sitting alone in a chair, she actually seems more present. For the first time we see her smiling, observing her surroundings in a more positive light, thus showing that she is, really, taking initiative to accept the presence of others. The artist even lets out a joyous scream when a marching band takes over the club and the music intensifies while people begin to sing together in communal fashion, further heightening the sense of a beautiful feeling of solidarity. The film thus leaves us with a sensation that she has become absorbed by the communitarian spirit taking over the place without giving her a sudden miracle cure in form of a deep relationship. She has started her journey of getting in touch with her emotions, which is the first step towards creating bonds with others. To a certain degree, Severin thus has also "gotten it" in the end.

Though the last breath mentioned in Justin's song could definitely reference James' meddling with life and death, at the same time, it can also denote an orgasm as a "little death" – the ending that Sofia will finally reach. With a newfound understanding that traditional, heteronormative marriage has been hurtful to them, Rob and Sofia now recognize that they must detach themselves from expectations, and, in the process, become queered to find happiness. It is thus suggested that allowing one's self to be permeable also means getting out of one's comfort zone, exploring, being open to new situations, experiences, people, and "pairings in which they are able to achieve insight into their sexualities, allowing for personal reinvention and social realignment" (Tinkcom 699). Accordingly, Sofia eventually joins the couple she has been eyeing on every visit at the salon. This is intercut with a montage presenting couples kissing, having sex, being intimate and eventually "[t]he orgy commences and everyone becomes permeable, if not literally penetrated, then at least open and available" (Williams *Screening* 292). Sofia finally reaches orgasm, represented by her ecstatic face, a common cinematic device to represent utmost pleasure (as we have already explored when considering Warhol's *Blow Job*).

Ultimately, there was never a quick solution or remedy for the character. She had to loosen up, to slowly absorb all of the diverse ideas she was told, and to take in the spirit of carelessness pervading the salon. Having completely broken down, she was eventually able to

start anew. While she had to get there in her own terms, she is now finally able to orgasm due to the help of the people surrounding her. Therefore, "it is the result of better community and trust for which sex now becomes a metaphor" (Williams *Screening* 292). Though the characters have not all found total bliss, each and everyone went through an eye-opening process. As a result, the city and the rest of America (and possibly the world) lights up again, now symbolically illuminated, proving that there is hope and opportunity in coming together to overcome dark times.

To conclude, this rather naïve sentimentality coupled with the exploration of queer eroticism is thus a clear allusion to the idea that by breaking open to marginal forms of being and of intimacy, one can become stronger as an individual and a collective, particularly after rupturing events like the AIDS crisis, 9/11, or Bush's ultraconservative regime. *Shortbus*, after all, achieves a happy and optimistic ending and with it presents a tremendously feel-good alternative after the bleakness of NQC without falling into stereotyped, bland formulas, as many other movies did in the early 21st century.

9.2) "Dude, Can You Stop Looking at My Dick?:" Identity-Building Through Voyeuristic Pleasure in *Spa Night*

While the previous subchapter has taken up an intrinsically intersectional approach that focused on the sexuality of a vast group of identities and bodies, this discussion will instead engage with a more intimate and introvert exploration of young adult queer desires and interlocking forms of oppression inherent in a very specific minoritarian American identity. Andrew Ahn's debut feature film *Spa Night* is namely a coming-of-age tale that relates the predicaments of second-generation Korean American teenager David (Joe Seo), who finds himself struggling between keeping up with familial and cultural expectations and exploring his arising homoerotic feelings. To support his family financially after they are forced to sell their business, the sexually inexperienced youngster finds employment at a Korean spa, a place where he is also able to dive into the titillating yet dangerous world of voyeurism, cruising, and sexual experimentation. Torn back and forth between his desires, his arising sense of self and Korean tradition, our protagonist must explore and come to terms with a unique and personal form of existing liminally.

Spa Night sets up the protagonist's close relation to his parents right from the start, as the very first scenes are set during a family outing at a Korean spa. While his mother (played by Haerry Kim) is segregated from her husband and son in the women's section of the facility, David and his father (Youn Ho Cho) go through the familial procedure together, sitting in a

sauna and later scrubbing their skin and each other's backs. These intimate rituals are not out of the ordinary as spas function as a form of shared family or communitarian space in Korean culture: "[f]or many Koreans, the spa is associated with the full days dedicated to taking the entire family to the spa to rid themselves of dead skin and dirt. For Korean-Americans, the spa is one of few uniquely 'Korean spaces' that imports a piece of the homeland abroad, preserved in time and space" (Dong n.p.). As becomes apparent, the spa thus also suggests the preservation of a certain Korean traditionalism – a detail I will revert to further into this discussion.

Even though the family appears to have a wonderful time together, an eerie feeling nonetheless lingers in the enclosed space: in the very first shot of the movie a close-up focuses on David's profile, sitting in a sauna with a towel over his head. Accordingly, the protagonist is already introduced as obscured, hidden, or imprisoned. Suddenly he takes the towel from his face and, as if lifting a heavy burden, he bursts out in Korean "Dad, I can't breathe," whereupon his father answers "Just a little longer" (00:01:11-00:01:17). Through this short interaction, director Andrew Ahn immediately establishes one of the key motifs of his film, i.e., the tug of war between family expectations that are set against the young man's own will, desires, and needs. Fundamentally, we are introduced to a character who is struggling with a sense of oppression that literally and figuratively suffocates him. The idea of a queer uncanniness then continues when the two of them join David's mother in a communal room (accessible to all genders) to mingle after the spa experience. Heteronormativity reigns supreme in this space: families are sitting together in groups, while a young couple talking closely is further highlighted.

Although so far this still seems like a perfectly normal family trip, a little detail surfaces during a supposedly harmless conversation that attracts our attention: David's mother begins imagining a future in which her son's Korean wife will join her at the spa and then moves on to inquire about his dating life. David tries to evade her questions and eventually counters: "What if I marry a white girl?" (00:04:09-00:04:12). After a moment of hesitancy, his mother agrees that it could be a possibility but then concedes that communication with a non-Korean might be difficult for her and David's father: "[h]ow would we talk to her? To our grandchildren? You should marry a Korean woman and have Korean kids" (00:04:24-00:04:32).

While his parents are Korean traditionalists at heart, David instead is introduced as a split personality, not fully Korean nor fully American – a motif that will direct his journey throughout the rest of the narrative. David's defiant answers, though, reveal much more than

his national and ethnic hybridity – a mystery that is soon answered: having returned to the locker room, a man now undresses behind David. Even though the youngster tries to look away, his gaze finally wanders over and briefly rests on the stranger's body. Though representing but a split-second moment, the audience finds the answer to his queer behavior through his gaze – the gaze, in turn, becoming the leading device that guides us through David's inner life, motivations, and the narrative at large.

As has been revealed, traditional Korean family norms are thus juxtaposed with illegitimate homoerotic desire – the very tension that first inspired director Andrew Ahn to write the script for his movie, as he explains: "[a] friend of mine told me he had a hot hookup with a guy in the steam room of a Korean spa, and hearing that story really shocked me because the spa has always been a place I went with my family. The spa is a very traditional Korean family activity, and to hear that it was being used by the gay community [in that way] was kind of sacrilegious—but also really sexy" (Ahn "Sacrilegious" n.p.). In another interview, the filmmaker goes even deeper into his initial disapproval of his friend's actions, revealing his understanding of both realms as mutually exclusive: "Korean spas felt sort of sacred, in a way. […] It felt like church. It was a bonding thing I did with my family. And then I heard about the hookup culture. It had always been so easy for me to separate the two. And here they were totally in the same space. It was uncomfortable to hear that" (Ahn "Spa Hookups" n.p.).

To gain more insight into the reasons for the distress Ahn felt at first, it is imperative to grasp the negative associations queerness bears in some Korean American circles, which are, in turn, deeply rooted in specific historical discriminatory actions targeted at Asian identities through time. First and foremost, it is of importance to understand that queer Asian Americans are commonly culturally silenced, both within wider queer America and their own immigrant communities, thus facing double erasure (Kojima et al. 70). Whereas LGBTQIA+ communities either underrepresent and/ or marginalize Asian Americans as undesirable, heteronormative Asian American communities commonly view queerness "as a white Western phenomenon, accusing queer people in their midst as selling out, assimilating, or lacking authenticity" (Lee 193). As a result, the existence of LGBTQIA+ individuals in Asian communities becomes unimaginable, unspeakable, and incompatible with traditions[221] (Roberson 11; Manalansan "Queer Intersections" 251). The sheer unthinkability of Asian American queerness is also taken up in *Spa Night*, particularly reflected through the way in which David's parents not once seem

[221] Though this erasure is common in Asian American culture, this is not to say that these communities are "*more* homophobic, they are *differently* homophobic," i.e. a homophobia that has been "conditioned not only by beliefs, values, and circumstances but also by histories of Western imperialism and U.S. racism" (Lee 196).

to suspect their son's homosexuality, even when he evades questions of dating, marriage, and procreation.

Then again, the disavowal of LGBTQIA+ identities is also deeply rooted in culturally engrained gendered expectations and roles related to the family, including, most obviously, heterosexual marriage and reproduction, which already exclude queerness. As director Andrew Ahn puts it, "[s]o what happens if I don't have a Korean wife and don't have a Korean child? Suddenly, my Korean identity is at stake because my homosexuality keeps me from duplicating that family structure. In this way, my two identities feel at odds with each other" ("Q&A" n.p.). Along with this comes the centrality of the family and of family bonds in Korean American communities. As Manalansan explains, in the place of American individualism (under which open LGBTQIA+ expression falls), "in Asian American contexts, the valorization of discourses of individual rights over family harmony and community acceptance can fail to demonstrate the importance of family and community, especially in the context of racial discrimination and economic precarity" ("Queer Intersections" 252). The self, in consequence, can become secondary to the family or community.

These cultural expectations, however, do not end at general familial responsibilities, but they are also often specifically delegated to children of immigrant families. Citing Ahn again, the director explains that immigrant parents seem to put added pressure on their children not necessarily because they are excessively strict (as the pictures painted by clichéd depictions want to make us believe), but rather because they wish for a better life for their offspring and future generations[222]: "what made it hard about meeting the expectations wasn't the fear of being punished. It was the fact that our families loved us. That they were so excited for us. […] I really wanted to live up to those expectations, to give that to my parents, but I don't know if I could" (Ahn "Spa Hookups" n.p.).

This insight, then, helps to better empathize with David's choices throughout the narrative, whose journey cannot be separated from his relation to his parents. Indeed, the deep family bond becomes most obvious when considering that they are the people the youngster spends most time with: while he is never seen meeting up with friends by his own accord, he and his parents visit the spa together, they go to church, David helps out at his parents' restaurant, and they share a small and intimate living space which renders impossible a withdrawal to discover and engage with his own identity and to engage with his corporeality.

[222] This is underlined during an emotional breakdown towards the end of the movie when his father pressures him with the words, "[w]e didn't move here so that you could move furniture. Go to college! Get a girlfriend! Move out!" (1:10:10-1:10:23). He goes on revealing how much hope he puts into his son's future to provide for the family's well-being: "[s]uch a good kid. That's why you'll make it. I know you will. You're going to find success for all of us" (01:11:09-01:11:20).

One of the first scenes of the film stresses this conundrum when he tries to take a nude selfie in the bathroom and his mother knocks on the door to wish him a good night. Even in utmost intimate moments he is thus never fully alone but always engulfed in his family's presence. In the small space they live in, David also becomes aware of everything that is going on in his parents' marriage, he hears discussions even when his parents try to whisper. Ultimately, as the director of the film puts it, the parents are thus "very much the heart of the movie" (qtd. in Takeuchi n.p.).

David is ultimately exposed to a variety of pressures: naturally there is his already-mentioned queerness, which is further complicated by the family's link to the Christian faith and Christian Korean American community. In this context, not only is homosexuality not welcomed, but David is also supposed to be a presentable member to the community. Hereby, a parallel can be drawn to the experience of Korean American writer Michael Kim who notes that "[a]s a religious institution, [the church] is naturally a locus of community-building and socialization, but as a human institution and moreover a center for expression of ethnic solidarity and community, it often becomes highly politicized in community terms and frequently devolves into hierarchical posturing and gossiping. My parents are respected for their success because of my achievements" (146-7).

These social façades and the clinging to success are also clearly present in the film at hand: seeing that his mother is not even able to admit the "failure" of losing her restaurant to a family friend at church, David's coming out to the community would represent the ultimate social death for him and his family. Even on a more obvious level David fails to be the successful son his parents wish him to be: after all he is not an exemplary student (as opposed to some of his peers who already moved on to university). His subpar performance at school, however, was linked to him having to help his parents with their restaurant during high school. Seeing that his SAT scores, as a result, were too low to make him eligible for university, further makes him feel as if he is unable to fulfill his parents' wishes.

David thus begins to take an intensive SAT prep course to see if he can repeat the exam to get into college. Nonetheless, it soon becomes all too obvious that he has difficulty in learning. Without motivation and clearly not improving his grades, the pressure becomes even more unbearable for the teen as he is simultaneously aware of the fact that these classes are taking a huge financial toll on the family who just lost their restaurant and finds itself in a precarious economic situation. More than only having to fulfill certain expectations, David also begins feeling a sense of responsibility for the well-being of his parents. As he wants to keep the illusion of his success alive (despite the fact that he is certainly not doing well), he pretends

to keep going to class while secretly seeking employment at a Korean spa (though, as I will revert to later on, sexual interests also play a major role in this decision). Having a part time job, our protagonist is now able to contribute to the family's finances by putting his earned money in his mother's purse at night without anyone knowing.

His responsibilities mount when his father, who slowly disintegrates emotionally after losing the family's restaurant and being unable to find employment, begins day drinking. Now unable to meet his duties as the family patriarch, it is up to David to take care of him, "[i]n some ways, [becoming] a parent to his own parents" (Takeuchi n.p.). Even in this stressful time, David does not leave the role of the caring son: when his father apologizes for having failed him ("I thought I could do better for you. I thought I could do more"), the ever-loyal David soothes him by making his father understand that "you've already done so much" (01:10:41-01:10:56). Indeed, "so much" relates to all the sacrifices his family went through so as to afford a better future for their son. His grandmother, after all, was buried in the United States far from her husband in Korea because she wanted to be close to David.

His now-exhausted mother, in turn, had a great deal of hopes and dreams when coming to America, yet ended up as a waitress while dealing with her drunkard of a husband. As she explains during a walk past the flat she first lived in when coming to the US, "[m]oving to America, we were so excited to be here" (01:16:16-01:16:21). She then gets emotional, perhaps understanding that her dreams seem shattered at that point in the narrative. Her hopes are now transferred to David's well-being and success. Throughout the movie she thus insistently enquires about his SAT classes, telling him how proud she is whenever he lies to her about his results while falling further down a spiral of feeling inadequate.

Due to the close-knit family ties, David's coming out would hence be disastrous, not only in a communitarian sense (as already suggested), but even more so on a more personal, familial level. Michael Kim verbalizes some of these feelings when writing about his own personal experiences as a gay Korean American Christian man: "I cannot make choices based on what I understand to be true and right; I must factor in the happiness and standards of family and the entire Korean community" (146). The author then goes on,

> [f]or me to come out to my parents and to the Korean community would be, quite literally, the ultimate failure—moral, social, and personal all at once. It would nullify everything good that I have done and would stand as the single mark upon me. It would be the ultimate shame upon my parents, and shame is the worst offense in my family. They have spent so long being proud of me that I don't think they would know how to cope with the shame of it all. Consequently, every time I go back home to visit with my immediate and extended family, I go back into the closet, a process that feels like anathema to all that I have come out of in the past few years. (M. Kim 147)

In David's case, his strong sense of solidarity and responsibility towards his parents go directly against any possibility of being ex-communicated from their life and community as it would, in turn, make his family's life difficult and dampen their well-being in the US – even if it means "trading the happiness of [his] parents for [his] own personal happiness" (M. Kim 146). At the same time, there is always the fear of being rejected and abandoned by those closest to him, who, in the end, represent his emotional support system, especially when considering that, as Richard Fung reasons, within minorities "our families and our ethnic communities are a rare source of affirmation in a racist society" ("Looking" 149). With all these outside pressures at work, we shall not forget that our protagonist also has personal and intimate needs and desires. As becomes apparent, David thus needs to keep up a highly emotional balancing act between guaranteeing the family's success and happiness and being true to his personal sense of authenticity and happiness.

Given the earlier-related homophobia present in certain parts of Asian American communities, Andrew Ahn also faced a series of issues throughout the development process of *Spa Night*, including being turned down by possible actors as well as several Korean spas when looking for shooting locations: "[a]ctually, most of them said no. And then that's when I realized, again, that I'd have to withhold that information in order to get this done" (Ahn "Spa Hookups" n.p.), the filmmaker retells. Just like his character, he had to return to a form of don't-ask-don't-tell closet when engaging with community members. The filmmaker encountered further obstacles due to the centrality of Asian American characters in his script. So as to make the narrative more appealing to a wider audience, "a potential producer suggested that Ahn write in a white surrogate" (Jung n.p.), an idea that completely went against Ahn's vision regarding his project: "[t]here's an authentic Asian-American queer culture. I could have made a film that talks about what it means to be a gay Asian-American man in a very predominantly white gay culture, but that's not what I wanted to talk about" (Jung n.p.).

This latter issue Ahn faced, however, is a problem Asian American filmmakers (or minority filmmakers in general) experience regularly. A brief look into the history of Asian American cinema might therefore shed some light on these struggles and further guide us in our understanding of the decisions Ahn took when writing *Spa Night*: Asian American

independent cinema[223] started to particularly surge during the 1970s (Okada 1-2; Park 114-5). Since its inception, it has existed in a state of dependency as "[w]ithout public media and its stance on diversity, the institution of Asian American film and video—films, film festivals, discourse—would not exist" (Okada 2). As a result, filmmakers in need to please an industry with a highly racist past have oftentimes been put in situations that forced them to vastly compromise their artistic vision. This is further aggravated by the fact that since its inception Hollywood has created harmful stereotypes about individuals of Asian descent based on mid-19th century ideas around Yellow Peril scares, which, in turn, have survived until today (Park 113-4). In a nutshell, notwithstanding the existence of a great diversity of nations and the endless diversity of individuals that compose Asian demographics, male Asian or Asian American characters were mostly confined to clichéd supporting roles of "martial arts experts, wise elderly sages, gawky sideshow nerds, dangerous foreigners, and whitewashed actors in yellowface" (Park 114) as well as "the egghead/ wimp, or […] the kung fu master/ninja/samurai (Fung "Looking" 148).

For a long time, Asian characters were thus either portrayed as the dangerous, cunning, untrustworthy inscrutable oriental, whose face was unreadable, inhuman, emotionless, and cold – *or* as asexual zen masters (Park 113-4; Fung "Looking" 148; Benshoff & Griffin *America* 380-1). The idea of the sexless Asian individual, in turn, is linked to prejudices painting Asian American men as being more feminine and less sexually virile as opposed to Euro-American masculinity (Park 112, 127; Fung "Looking" 146) and further endowed with "racial/sexual clichés about passivity, premature ejaculation, small dicks, and so on" (Fung "Shortcomings" 356). As Fung further reasons, "the Asian man is defined by a striking absence down there. And if Asian men have no sexuality, how can we have homosexuality?" (148).

This decisive point becomes even more conspicuous when considering that in American media Asian homoeroticism is still incredibly rare (149-50). The few instances in which Asian American men are eroticized are still mostly relegated to pornography where the racialized phantasy of imperialist domination over the feminized, primitive Other is continued: Asian American men are, after all, "uniformly depicted as submissive bottoms eager to please their white male partners. […] That is, within gay relationships, Asian men are expected to fulfil

[223] When speaking about Asian American cinema, one is always engaging with a generalization. After all it encompasses "the multitude of stories of people of Asian descent who have shared the familiar experience of immigration, racial discrimination, and alienation at various periods in the United States. […] What brings these ethnicities together is their link to experiences forged in contact with US culture, policies, and history as it is represented in moving images" (Okada 5). Simultaneously, we need to be careful so as not to reduce Asian American filmmaking to projects that are made by, about, and for Asian Americans as this vision "is neither mutually exclusive nor collectively exhaustive" (5).

sexually submissive roles, and to do so eagerly" (Manalansan "Queer Intersections" 228-9). This submissiveness, then, has the effect of boosting the virility of the western man – a detail that we need to keep in mind as it will be of importance when returning to David's sexual encounters.

While still marginal, today some changes are nonetheless happening in the American mediascape as in the last decade more Asian American-led movies have been produced, most notably the big box office hit *Crazy Rich Asians* (Jon M. Chu, 2018). While definitely a step forward, a simple replacement of white actors with people of color does not solve the wider issue "in representing the nuances of masculinity for Asian Americans" (Park 112). Furthermore, as Benshoff and Griffin write, "films about Asian American experiences are still struggling for mainstream popularity" (*America* 420-1). *Spa Night*, as will be revealed over the further course of this discussion, thus represents an anomaly that deeply deconstructs the above-described clichés.

Returning to the film at hand and bearing in mind everything that I have discussed so far, David is trapped in a liminal space between different, seemingly opposed realms: as established, his hybridity is best viewed in the binary separating the heteronormative world he inhabits from his silenced homosexuality. These frictions, then, also stress an inherent duality underlying his Korean traditionalism and the American side of his upbringing (best represented by his trilingualism and adaptability to both cultures), which, then again, reveal much about his dilemma between pleasing his parents and adhering to cultural expectations and being true to his own feelings, needs, desires, and identity.

Although his whole being seems to be split when looking at the world through a traditional lens, his journey will become characterized by a queering of the oppressive binaries that deter him from fluidly feeling connected to his hybridity. *Spa Night*, as a result, becomes a coming-of-age story in which the protagonist is not an adult not yet a teenager (which again represents another form of liminality) and is forced to grow up and face all the new sets of emotions, feelings, responsibilities, and life decisions that come with this specific chapter in life. In the same way in which David is already able to code-switch between three languages and two distinct cultures, he must learn to adapt his fluidity to every other part of his being[224]. As the film's director words it, David's journey ultimately represents an intersection "to forge a queer Korean-American identity, to find these situations where the two cultures aren't separate, but they co-exist. It's this question of being whole" (Ahn "Spa Hookups" n.p.).

[224] This makes him akin to the character of Johnny Alonzo in *Mala Noche*, as David must always stay observant seeing that any misstep could out him as gay, as a failed student, as a spa worker, as a liar.

His fluid otherness is, in turn, also embodied by the very space of the spa, its liminality being underlined by the blue neon lights and foggy obscure spaces that create an almost otherworldly atmosphere and evoke a parallel underground world in which the protagonist is able to explore both his traditionalist Korean as well as his lustful queer American side out of view of controlling heteronormative gazes (despite the fact that he is unable to fully express the latter openly). The space, consequently, also manifests an in-betweenness in terms of the nuanced balance it keeps between homosociality and homoeroticism: in a nutshell, homosociality describes intimate platonic same-gender relations that are never allowed to become romantic or sexual since they would, in effect, reflect unwarranted homoeroticism. What is created to keep out any 'divergent' forms of male sexuality is thus a binary vision of the world, which is divided into a hegemonic heteromasculine ideal standing in opposition to any 'deviant' forms that need to be suppressed (Arosteguy 124). Hence, certain unspoken rules apply to intimate and close bonds between men defining "appropriate" behavior so as to avoid and punish any emerging feeling of homoeroticism altogether.

This, however, also implies that the frontiers between the social and erotic are imaginary and fluid, or rather "a continuum whose visibility, for men, in our society, is radically disrupted" by our society's profound fear of any sign of homosexuality arising in supposedly "stable" heterosexual males (Sedgwick *Between* 1-2). Locker rooms or spas are exemplary settings in which males must tread very carefully so as not to cross this imaginary line. After all, there is commonly a feeling of vulnerability present when co-existing completely nude in an all-male enclosed space. The fear that the situation might become or be interpreted as homoerotic is thus heightened – one wrong move or look can easily be interpreted as sexual. As a result, a certain reinforcement of virility takes place: according to LaCaruba, homosocial bonds in locker rooms are often established "through the exclusion of women and homosexual men, and an ideological emphasis on men's difference from, and superiority to, them" (14) – something we will return to when looking at David's relation *vis-à-vis* Eddie. In the film, this smooth line is further explored by making the spa an unofficial yet perfect spot for gay cruising, in which men are surrounded by and gaze at other naked bodies in all their glory.

This dichotomy is also further heightened by David's own nudity: his nakedness is obligatory in the space, his body hence becoming invisible amongst the crowds of heterosexual clientele. As Andrew Ahn describes this situation: "at the spa, you're not talking, and you're completely naked. I feel the most Korean that I ever feel, because it's my naked Korean body, in this Korean space. When you look at other people, you're seeing them naked, and the cues that you usually use to understand who a person is aren't there anymore" ("Spa Hookups" n.p.).

Yet, as soon as we realize that he himself is a queer man moving amongst other cruising men, he suddenly also represents a body of desire to the wandering queer eye. The Korean spa, then, becomes an exciting yet daring ground for exploration of corporeal ambiguity and of decision-making for David: will he adhere to everything his family believes in or instead explore his own self and desires? Or will he perhaps rather find a way to bridge both – like this belonging to neither and to both worlds at the same time and on his own terms.

David's sexual awakening begins with an obsessive relation towards his own body. Right in the first sequence of the movie we find the protagonist in front of a mirror at the spa, closely looking at himself, carefully touching his arm in a close-up shot, which is followed by images of his face and belly. Right away, the character is therefore introduced in fragmented form[225]. His incompleteness, then, indicates that he is trying to piece himself together; it speaks of a character who keeps looking at his own reflection in search for answers about his very identity and sense of self. During his examination, David is then interrupted by his father, another recurring theme that hints towards the earlier mentioned battle between exploring the self and being ready to follow familial or communitarian responsibilities.

The film furthermore frequently depicts the youngster working on his body, doing crunches and sit-ups at home in his cramped living room or running through the city on a seemingly everyday basis. Interestingly, just as was the case in the earlier mentioned mirror shots, even during the supposedly liberating action of exercise, he is often not fully in frame, again creating a certain feeling of oppression. This feeling, in turn, goes hand in hand with his careful and continuous control of his changing body in front of mirrors, which suggests him working towards a normative masculine bodily ideal. When considering my earlier discussion, this, then again, could be perceived as a form of counteracting the stereotype of feminized Asian men prevalent in American media representations as well as that of the homosexual weakling (which I have discussed at length in previous chapters). Interestingly, while his mother mocks his exercise and shows a clear lack of understanding for it, David receives positive reactions in regard to his changing appearance from outside his Korean community when a delivery man at his parents' restaurant approvingly notices that he is "getting more buff" and "growing up" (00:07:26-00:07:30).

[225] By fragmenting David's body and mixing him with a number of other nude Asian American men, the film refuses to objectify him in the traditional pornographic way: "[e]ven if such images do arouse, they break from Western cinema conventions by highlighting, even eroticizing Asian American men's bodies in stages of undress, without reducing them to one-dimensional, sexually servile types. Other bodies in the film, captured in long shot or via the closer, more aestheticizing vantages through which we often regard David, further refuse to exotify him as the sole exemplar of Asian or specifically Korean corporeality" (N. Davis "More" 52).

The manner in which he gazes at his own physicality by means of a mirror are also essential to look into[226]: in two separate scenes, David namely locks himself in his bathroom – again a symbol for his oppressed being and shame regarding his sexuality – and takes nude selfies of his upper torso and genital area in front of his bathroom mirror. Again, the scenes are constructed through fragmented shots that alternate between showing either his gazing eyes, his upper body, or, most importantly, the photo he takes with his smartphone. In both scenes David then zooms into his toned abs and penis on his phone. To an extent, the device grants him an outsider's perspective regarding his body – hinting towards a form of disassociation that even the mirror in front of him is unable to grant. After all, in a digital age in which individuals are generally seen through mediated images on screen, the self, to a degree, is constructed in comparison to other digitalized bodies. In the images he takes, the youngster furthermore crops out his face and with it detaches his body from his own identity. Trying to emulate an ideal type, he becomes a copy of a copy, a faceless nobody – neither Korean, nor American, simply a shell to desire with a normative physique.

David's obsession with (and as an extension thereof the viewers' interest in) the male physique is next expanded from the self to other men, whom he begins admiring. Our protagonist is subsequently initiated into the world of the homoerotic gaze and the dangers thereof when a family friend at church suggests that he could shadow her son Eddie (Tae Song) for a day at USC and arranges their meeting. Eddie represents the perfect, successful Korean son, who comes from a religious household, dates a Korean girl, and is studying at a leading private university as a result of his good grades – and thus represents everything that David is supposed to achieve yet lacks. The earlier-described slippage between homosociality and homosexuality is chief in this very sequence and is introduced right away when David is greeted by a cartoon drawing of an ejaculating penis at the door of Eddie's dorm stating, "Eddie I need a hug." Not only can it be read as common "bro" humor that is often based on accusations and a simultaneous disavowal of homosexuality, but it certainly also represents a form of

[226] As David's expression remains rather emotionless during these scenes, it might appear as if Ahn is reviving the racist stereotype of the inscrutable oriental. Yet, when considering the director's careful and well-thought-out handling of Asian American identities on screen, David's blank face can also be read as a matter of re-appropriating the trope while using it in a context in which it actually reflects on the protagonist's inner conflict. After all, David is so closeted that he had to close himself off from his own emotions so as not to reveal his secret inner life. This, then again, draws further attention to David's gaze – the only guiding principle in the film that gives us hints at what he wants and desires. We as viewers are ultimately led by his stares and gazes and, as a consequence, through identification are made to desire what he secretly longs for. In this way, Andrew Ahn achieves an intriguingly different form of intimacy with the main character that is not controlled by close-ups of faces showing emotions, as is the tradition in filmmaking. The way in which *Spa Night* presents the gaze is, however, far more potent than only serving as a sexually voyeuristic means. Seeing that David has difficulty in expressing himself openly and due to a resulting lack of dialogue in the film overall, his gazes also serve as means to read other people and gather subliminal information.

homophobic microaggression, seeing that Eddie has a gay roommate who is absent during David's visit.

Their encounter, however, begins well, albeit a little awkward: even though David and Eddie haven't seen each other in a long time, Eddie immediately takes him under his wing. Through Eddie, a whole new world opens up to David, who has been living between his parent's restaurant, SAT classes, and working out at their cramped apartment: after class the two of them lift weights at a gym, which is a first for the visitor. The intimacy between the two "bros" in particular strikes the eye during this scene: not only due to the element of trust when one needs to spot the other, but even more so because of the physical closeness as Eddie's crotch rests right above David's face. The subdued eroticism continues in this very scene, developing a strong tactile touch when David begins observing Eddie's hand as it tenderly runs over the surface of a treadmill. Though a regular everyday movement, it becomes erotic due to the framing in the film, or rather due to the character's momentary gaze that reveals much more. The same gaze will be echoed a few scenes later when David observes how Eddie's hand folds into his girlfriend's hand in a car. This second scene hence serves as an eye-opener for David that his chances with Eddie indeed might be feeble. His focusing on Eddie's hand also reveals a longing for intimacy, for wanting to be touched, a theme I will revert to later into this discussion.

The two next go to a party where Eddie presents himself as extremely outspoken and self-conscious, while David completely keeps to himself and looks very out of place and uncomfortable. Indeed, this is the first time we see David interact with peers his age. His awkwardness rises when girls begin coming onto him. Though in his everyday life he manages to stay relatively unobtrusive despite his queerness, these heteronormative bonding rituals leave him completely vulnerable and unable to act. The added pressure of being supposed to indulge in the attention of women he is given, completely shuts him down. The same feeling of discomfort then continues when the group decides to go to a karaoke bar where they engage in a homophobic game that very unabashedly tests the limits between homosociality and homosexuality: the group of Korean American teens namely plays a drinking game where two individuals of the same gender stand facing each other while slowly moving their faces closer and closer together into a kiss. The first to cop out loses and must drink.

Two girls play first and slightly touch the other, making grossed out noises right afterwards to show their dismay with queer intimacy. Next it is David and Eddie's turn: though David gets really close to his actual dream of kissing his object of desire, he chooses to withdraw, showing that he is very much aware of the societal rules he is supposed to abide by,

while simultaneously trying to deflect from his true feelings[227]. As David continues drinking throughout the night, he increasingly releases his inhibitions: having started with secret, shy gazes at Eddie's hands, he now fully looks at Eddie's penis when the two find themselves in the same restroom. His staring is so obvious that his friend even warns him by remarking, "[d]ude, can you stop looking at my dick?" (0:31:47-0:31:49). David's uninhibited lust then culminates when he visits a spa with Eddie and another male friend completely drunk in the middle of the night. While the three undress, David's eyes move over the boys' bodies, whereupon Eddie's drunk friend calls him out as a "penis looker" (00:33:29-00:33:30). Having been warned twice, the utterly drunk David, however, insists on trying his luck. Relaxing in a sauna, David sits behind Eddie and attempts to get a glimpse at his friend's crotch area. Yet Eddie's friend catches him again in the act, directly confronting David with the situation. The teen only recoils but is unable to miss Eddie's face when he turns around and looks David straight in the eye: gone is his nice disposition, his look is now utterly threatening.

The next day Eddie is extremely cold and distanced towards David, who understands the hint and leaves. This sequence indeed is a watershed moment for the protagonist. On the one hand, for the first time he has fully indulged in his voyeurism (i.e. a progression from quick glances to full on gazing at other's genitals) – a threshold he was able to cross because of his lowered, inebriated self-restraint. Then again, this experience alerts him of the dangers of being a desiring queer Korean American man and how precarious the line between homosociality and homosexuality is. Tenderness between friends must be very carefully curated lest it be policed.

Now having become more aware of his deep-lingering feelings and needs, David returns to the spa to inquire about a job opening and quickly begins working there, doing cleaning and maintenance jobs. Always surrounded by naked men of all ages, sizes, and racial and ethnic backgrounds during his working hours, he is now fully emerged in a realm that tickles his fancy. Desire now takes over many decisions of the character, who prefers working to going to his SAT classes. In fact, at one point guilt overcomes the teen but is soon again mitigated by a sense of sexual curiosity: noticing that his grades are not improving at all and feeling the financial burden of his intensive course, the protagonist decides to quit his job at the spa to focus on fulfilling his parents' wish to make it through the classes as fast as possible. After spending his supposed last workday at the spa, he reconsiders his decision, especially because he discovers the underground world of hidden gay cruising at his workplace.

[227] At the karaoke bar, for a second, David let's go and dances with a girl, one of few moments we actually see the character smiling. Yet when his eyes meet Eddie's observing, cold gaze, he immediately stops, his face goes cold, and he crawls back into his shell, being reminded of the hypermasculine behavior he is supposed to encapsulate. Consequently, there is an obvious form of policing going on between the men in the group.

During his shift David keeps glancing at a patron, who, in turn, is eyeing another man who meets the gaze of the first patron. Although the cruising is very carefully orchestrated through subtle glances, the message is very clear as both men go into an empty sauna. David follows these events very carefully and shadows the men to the sauna door to get a glimpse at the sexual action going on. When another guest tries to get inside the improvised dark room, David stops the man at the door, making up the excuse that he must clean the cabin, thus giving the cruising guys space to go ahead with their encounter. This moment is again a key point for David, not only because he finally found out about the cruising scene at the spa, but also because he has now turned a part of the underground movement by enabling sex. To emphasize his secret membership, one of the men he helped out comes into the locker room while David is changing and stands in the doorway looking him straight in the eye. He then goes up a flight of stairs, an inviting cue to follow him and another form of cruising through glances and body language.

Our protagonist nervously follows the invitation and finds a room where several men are laying on the floor, some of them engaging sexually. David now fully aware of the methods and spaces of cruising has officially been initiated into the homosexual underbelly. In other words, while still perceived as a regular worker at the spa, David seemed invisible as no one cared for him or seemed to even register him[228]. Once he reveals his true self, though, he becomes part of a new community: he is invited, he is finally *seen* as an individual self and with it an essential part of him is at last recognized and accepted without judgement.

In fact, even though the men are secretly engaging in homoerotic acts, there is no shame to their desire, which, again, is a completely new insight and experience for David. In the room, David lies down between the men and just silently watches. This moment stands out because the character finally breaks his impenetrable emotional shell, becoming visibly anxious and excited, breathing heavily. Overcome by fear and excitement, the youngster next flees into a bathroom cabin to masturbate, yet suddenly a stranger in the next toilet stall knocks at his cabin door. The cruising suddenly seems omnipresent, and our protagonist finds himself knee-deep in it, even if only as a voyeur and enabler.

In the next scene, set on another day at the spa, David already observes his surroundings with more confidence and now has turned protecting other gay patrons into a pastime of his at work, putting cleaning signs in front of sauna cabins that are being used for sexual encounters.

[228] The fact that David is Korean offers him a certain vantage point as he falls under the radar. As Ahn explains in an interview: "Whenever I've had to go to a Korean spa — and I've had to go to a ton of them for research, for location scouting for the film — no one ever thinks I'm there for any other reason than as a Korean person who showers. That's how I'm seen. I can tell. The spa manager can be kind of vigilant — if it's a white guy, he might kind of be suspicious. But if I'm there, it's like, 'Oh, he's just a Korean guy'" (Ahn "Spa Hookups" n.p.).

Soon, the youngster finds the courage to take his sexual experimentation a step further: while relaxing in the sauna himself, a middle-aged white man begins cruising him by throwing glances at him. David immediately reciprocates the advances by quickly touching the man's leg with his thigh, in this way initiating sexual contact for the very first time. However, when the man tries to reach over to touch the Korean American, David slams his hand away. "No touching" (01:01:54) he warns his admirer and the two go on masturbating together.

Interestingly enough, the sexual goings-on are completely left out of frame and left to the imagination. In consequence, it is not only David who is fragmented, but his sexual explorations are portrayed in similarly claustrophobic ways. To a certain degree, this might represent the danger he finds himself in while cruising and the anxiety the teenager feels. The many close-ups simultaneously create a form of physical intimacy that is withheld from the character throughout most of the narrative. Then again, the camera also deliberately withholds visual information that viewers have become used to in more recent queer independent films and want to engage with. Reducing the sexual encounter to fragmented pieces, then, not only deconstructs sexualized queer cinematic tropes, but also speaks about the agency of looking. To put it differently, instead of presenting an Asian body as an object to be visually devoured, the film returns full sexual agency and subjectivity to the Asian American protagonist, portraying him as someone who chooses to present his sexuality in more subtle form.

The reversal of hierarchical power structures at play in this scene goes even deeper. The fact that David rejects the touch of a white man that is older than him deconstructs certain racialized and colonial hierarchies of power and desirability – or, more precisely, "the racialized hierarchy of desire among gay men with white men at the top, followed by Latino men, with black and Asian men being viewed as less desirable" (Manalansan "Queer Intersections" 231). Additionally, the feminized Asian man is traditionally supposed to be submissive and willing to please the fantasies of his white master (Roberson 22). As Roberson thus concludes,

> [w]hile the shameless confidence of the older white man's advance points to this dynamic, David's rejection of his sexual attention allows him to reclaim power not usually afforded to him by virtue of his Asianness. By rebuffing the man's advances, David disregards the high value placed on white men as sexual partners; the older white man's sense of expectation shatters when David angrily pushes his hand away, a paradox of sorts: undesiring the desired white man who desires the undesirable Asian man. (22)

This interaction is thus also highly indicative of David's general emancipation and his growing sense of self and of his desires and limits.

Having had his first sexual experience, David is, however, soon awakened from the dream of the spa as a utopian homoerotic fantasy land. That is to say that an incident happens during which a guest calls the police because a Latino man was cruising him. The whole situation makes David aware of the danger, specifically because he had a sexual encounter that same day and it could have been him standing in front of the policeman. The pressure mounts when the youngster is then asked by his boss to report "anything strange" (01:03:20) he sees. As a defiant response, the now sexually liberated David hangs up a warning sign that reads "if you are caught engaging in inappropriate activity, we will call the authorities," while consciously ignoring a group of men jerking off together. His anxiety and guilt, however, rise after David spends some time with his family and is reminded of everything his parents have gone through to offer him a good life: the family namely visits family friends who just had a baby. Seeing his parents in utter bliss playing with the child, the teenager is again reminded of his own failings regarding heteronormative standards of success as his future might not hold the possibility to provide the same happiness to his family. A visit at the graveyard that same day then brings to mind that his Korean grandmother was buried in the US instead of Korea because "[s]he wanted to be here with us, with David" (01:07:55-01:08:00), further making him ponder on his responsibilities that stand in utmost contrast to the life he is leading at the spa. These scenes are eventually followed by his father's breakdown, which I delineated earlier and during which he makes sure to highlight what a good, successful kid David is.

Having once again been made aware that he must comply to certain societal expectations that are incompatible with his dreams, desires, and romantic interests, we encounter a pensive David, sitting at the empty spa, staring into the void while playing with the surface of the pool water. Feeling the desperate urge to bring his life back on track, he takes the first opportunity of misconduct to set things straight: when hearing a suspicious rumbling, David returns to the cruising room where he finds men fondling each other. As soon as they notice that the newcomer is the supposedly harmless David, the men relax and simply continue. Yet, this time, David clearly signals that their sexual activities are not welcomed by throwing off a towel from the lamp that dims the room, exposing all of the goings-on. The men quickly flee.

Just as turbulent as his reactions are, so will he go back and forth between fighting against and giving into his desire, feelings, and lust. His confusion between being a good son and a sexual being eventually collide towards the end of the movie when his parents, whose relationship was already crumbling for a while, get into a fight: all starts when his father comes home drunk in the middle of the night, screaming completely out of control. Subsequently, David's mother reaches a breaking point and bursts out: "[y]ou can't do anything! You get

drunk night after night. And I'm trying to make enough for us, breaking my back. You're just drinking our lives away! What are you? What happened to you?" (01:18:51-01:19:16). His father, immediately subdued, apologizes, explaining that his life has become "too much. It's just too much" (01:19:25-01:19:29). His wife, at the end of her tether, begins to sob and asks David to take care of his father.

David takes his father to the spa, the only refuge he knows, to get some sleep and sober up. Getting wind of the fact that the spa manager is out for the night because of an emergency, the perfect opportunity presents itself to David to finally sexually experiment. This decision, then, can be read as a direct reaction to the fight he witnessed at home. After all, his parents for the first time revealed how emotionally broken they can be and that human beings are fallible – a fact that might have taken some pressure off the youngster of being the perfect son himself. Returning to his place of sexual healing, he might also be looking for solace after this rough experience, looking to finally engage in what he truly wants to (i.e. sex with another man), and to get rid of everything that is weighing on him. His sexual manhunt thus begins with a shower scene during which he gazes intently at his own reflection as if asking himself for the last time if he is sure about what he is about to engage in or as if bolstering himself up for what is to come. At the same time, the mirror gives him a perfect perspective to cruise.

We next see David sitting in a sauna with another young man his age. "Are you Korean?," the protagonist asks and the other youngster affirms. "Me too" (01:24:21-01:24:34), David replies and moves closer to give his peer a hand job. The fact that he asserts his nationality and right afterwards exposes himself as gay through his actions is a crucial moment: for the first time David accepts that he can be both, queer and Korean, and goes about his desires without hesitation. He is further encouraged by finding his mirror image in another young adult, i.e. someone who resides in the same space of liminality in terms of nationality and sexual identity. Director Ahn reinforces the idea that this scene transcends David's lust and desire as it depicts him as searching for and "wanting to have a community" (Jung n.p.). To put it in another way, the protagonist needed to go through his first intimate sexual experience with a likeminded individual possessing similar cultural experiences to be able to see and recognize his own fluid duality (K. Kim n.p.). The choice of keeping his hookup's face either concealed under his hair or out of frame, further evokes the idea that David has found his double who mirrors David's own secrecy and oppression.

Next, the protagonist's hookup goes on his knees to blow David and then abruptly sits on his lap to be anally penetrated. During this sexual interaction, the camera frames the two young men in a close-up from the side, so that the viewer only gets to see David's face and his

partner's shoulders. The experience happens quite quickly: David holds his lover tight, embracing his torso with his arms. This very image is quite tender and represents the closest he has physically been to someone throughout the entire film. We thus come to the understanding that he has a deep need to "express[] a long-withheld desire for intimacy" (Dong n.p.) that goes further than his sexual urges. Simultaneously, this scene deconstructs a variety of sexual clichés often attributed to gay East Asian men that I specified earlier. This is best seen in David's "[i]nitiating the hookup, receiving fellatio, and being the 'top' during intercourse [actions that] establish him as a dominant and agentive sexual figure, rarely depicted in predominantly white gay communities in which East Asian men are most often designated the label of 'bottom' due to their feminized status" (Roberson 28). As Roberson further notes, seeing two gay men delight in each other's lustful presence also takes away the preconceived notion of Asian American men as competitors in the sexual market, further creating a sense of solidarity and community (28-9).

Once David orgasms, his lover quickly gets up to sit down next to him. Yet, as has been established, David yearns for more than "a quick fuck". To show his affection he leans forward, attempting to kiss his peer, who quickly withdraws. With a sudden knock on the door, the audience and the characters are then alerted that the two lovers have been spotted by the spa's manager, who stands in front of the cabin, observing the couple. David's sexual partner immediately flees in shame while David tries to hide his face in the shadows of the small space. Seeing that his boss does not budge, he is eventually forced to come forward, revealing his identity. This disclosure clearly symbolizes his coming out: he has already admitted his true feelings to himself and is for the first time seen as a queer Korean from a straight member of his community.

After his grand revelation, David gets into a shower and begins scraping his skin, an action that harks all the way back to the first sequence of the movie where he did it together with his father. Bearing in mind his father's comment about "all this dirt" (00:01:31-00:01:34), David seems to be cleansing his polluted self from his depraved queerness. The youngster then begins engaging in self-harm by violently rubbing a scrub into his flesh until he breaks open his skin and bleeds. Having went through an utmost turbulent sexual and identarian awakening, the young man tries to cut into his deepest being, to exteriorize the pain he feels inside, yet without avail. Through these intense actions, he also goes against his body, the shell he has meticulously treated throughout the narrative to fit a western, masculine ideal, which has, however, eventually betrayed him in his attempt at fending off an identity that lies deeper than his flesh.

David next has a total breakdown: the otherwise calm and controlled teenager breaks his composure and begins to sob loudly. Very similar to Sofia in *Shortbus*, he finally lets go after having oppressed any "wrong" feelings that might disclose his socially-unacceptable interior life. Showing emotions, in turn, becomes an opportunity of catharsis and healing to the young man. Viewed from this angle, this moment hence transgresses the idea of his pain as "the spa also contains an air of vulnerability, and a sense of rebirth, a shedding of old skin, arising anew in the fog" (K. Kim n.p.). The same notion of a rebirth is further reinforced in the last few scenes of the movie. David namely picks up his sleeping father, helps him dress, and goes to check out of the spa where he meets the manager again. Apologizing to his elder, David receives no answer except for a judgmental look, whereupon the youngster responds in rebellious fashion by throwing his key on the counter and leaving. Even though he began this interaction by giving in and asking for forgiveness (just like his father did a few scenes earlier when scolded by his wife), David rises above, does not accept this humiliation, and stands his ground. Though only a seemingly small act of self-empowerment, it is an enormous step for someone as closeted and as accommodating as David.

The next scene depicts the protagonist at church, standing amongst his community in prayer. All the other members then sit down to join in singing, yet he stays up, looking contemplative. When David next lifts his head, his face is radiated by a light, a probable symbol of clarity. Ultimately, as the imagery in this scene suggests, he has found some balance regarding his feeling of belonging to both of his communities, even if he stands out as a unique being. The notion of having found his piece of mind is intensified in the following scene. The character is now running fast through the city again. He stops for a moment, breathing deeply, and then continues. The scene ends abruptly and the end credits role. What is especially striking about this ending is the fact that it is set outside, thus breaking the chain of oppressive close-ups, allowing the protagonist to breathe more freely in an open world filled with possibilities. Life goes on for David, who has now come to accept his identity.

In the end, David understands that he can inhabit and carve out a personal sense of in-betweeness that is usually not granted in society. His queer Asian American identity consequently does not become relegated to an either/or choice, commonly segregated between geographies, races, cultures, and sexualities. Able to accept his intersectional fluid identity that lies beyond cultural and familial expectations, he furthermore does not force himself to succumb to the western ideal of having to come out to his unsuspecting family and peers so as to find ultimate fulfillment, at least not at this point in his life. As director Andrew Ahn explains, "[t]here are many communities and countries and religions where coming out is putting

yourself in danger, and so I think for me, the film wasn't so much about this vocal, I'm-[out-]and-proud sort of thing but it was more about someone understanding who they are and learning and growing and just trying to find some sort of inner peace" (qtd. in Takeuchi n.p.).

This, then again, also builds a stark contrast to the "mainstream North American LGBTQ discourse that demands he externalize his queerness to be recognized as a feeling, queer subject" (Wan n.p.) – an idea that is found in a large part of contemporary queer coming out and coming of age stories and romantic comedies that are nowadays expressing more diversity in all senses (including *Hoje Eu Quero Voltar Sozinho* [Daniel Ribeiro, 2014]; *Love, Simon* [Greg Berlanti, 2018]; or *Happiest Season* [Clea DuVall, 2020]). Indeed, the concept of coming out and the associated idea of demanding visibility has been an incredibly important political strategy to gain basic human rights and in the fight for equality, as delineated in earlier chapters. After all, the closet is widely perceived as "the defining structure for gay oppression in this century" (Sedgwick *Epistemology* 71). Though I greatly agree with these ideas, it would be problematic to dictate this attitude as the sole way of living, of experiencing, and of having pride in one's queerness.

The contemporary western ideal of an obligatory coming out moment (which is even celebrated in October on National Coming Out Day) thus needs to be put into perspective: not intending to downplay the importance of each personal coming out story, it is not as universally coherent and beneficial as the media makes it out to be, but very much depends on each individual person's context and the reactions it might elicit – that might range from an embracing stance to physical and mental harm (see my discussion in chapter 4 where I address the practice of forced public outings of closeted homosexuals). In the way in which David inhabits identitarian spaces of fluidity, so can he exist in a place between being "fully out" (a contestable idea in itself[229]) and being in the closet. After all, the character is allowed to be out to himself and his romantic and sexual others while not presenting as queer amongst his community. Yet, what his future will bring is left open. Instead of providing an externalized celebratory, pride-filled ending, the film in its place celebrates his individual, private decision

[229] The concept of the closet in itself presupposes a binary vision of the world: one is either in or out of the closet, which nullifies possibilities for any grey zones. However, as the pioneering queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes, "[e]ven at an individual level, there are remarkably few of even the most openly gay people who are not deliberately in the closet with someone personally or economically or institutionally important to them" (Sedgwick *Epistemology* 67-8). Being in or out of the closet is thus relative, it exists on a spectrum of endless coming outs. As Sedgwick goes on to explain, "every encounter with a new classful of students, to say nothing of a new boss, social worker, loan officer, landlord, doctor, erects new closets whose fraught and characteristic laws of optics and physics exact from at least gay people new surveys, new calculations, new draughts and requisitions of secrecy or disclosure. Even an out gay person deals daily with interlocutors about whom she doesn't know whether they know or not; it is equally difficult to guess for any given interlocutor whether, if they did know, the knowledge would seem very important" (68).

as a viable option and as a step he has to take towards getting to a better place mentally in his life and to, ultimately, feel whole.

An Inconclusive Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the changing representations of the sexualized male body and homoerotic desire in American independent film from 1986-2016. Engaging in a comparative study between two transgressive queer cinematic movements, i.e. New Queer Cinema and the New Queer Cinema Renaissance, I was able to emphasize how issues related to male corporeality and queer desire are intricately connected not only to shifts of film historic nature, but also to deep-cutting sociocultural and -political changes (in and outside the US) over a period of 30 years. Throughout I was thus able to disclose that New Queer Cinema and its renaissance are inherently merged, besides proving that their roots stem from a long lineage of cinematic forebears, queer and LGBTQIA+ activist movements, queer theory, and other non-film-related aspects that hark all the way back to the 19th century.

In order to illustrate this claim, the theory-induced first chapter of this project thus dove deeper into questions concerned with the emergence of discourses around sexuality at the *fin de siècle* and the different ways these evolved throughout the 20th century. In this way, I was able to create a basis for my dissection of NQC and the NQCR, seeing that stereotypes and misinformed ideas regarding LGBTQIA+ identities established during this time frame would infiltrate filmmaking early on – and would, eventually, be deconstructed by both film waves. Basing myself on the insights gained from this discussion, I then went on to tackle the highly complex task of defining the concepts of queer and queer theory, which not only arose from the above-mentioned discourses, but simultaneously would lay the groundwork and serve as the base tools for the further course of my research and analyses.

Chapter 2 followed a similar path of providing a basis for the continuation of this study, this time by focusing on the history and definition of independent cinema. As this chapter has attempted to illustrate, independent film is a rather organic and ever-changing concept that suffered deep shifts in meaning through time according to both, changes inside as well as outside the film industry. What remained as a constant, however, is independent cinemas deep relation to Hollywood: indeed, this connection has always remained, even in times in which the film form was adopted by the major studios, given that, in some shape or form, lower-scale independents always survive and continue to produce movies[230]. Most importantly, however,

[230] Interestingly – and potentially an avenue for future research – the fight of independents for a space in a highly competitive cinematic landscape has developed in almost cyclical form throughout film history: returning and ebbing away in continuous waves, the demand and possibilities for independent filmmakers have often been reduced by bigger players only to regain their strength, be it due to technological advances, audience interest, or a mere void of movies needing to be filled.

as this chapter aimed to demonstrate, independent films as artifacts that are often ignored by mainstream-oriented studies should be considered and valued more highly, not least due to the fact that the sociopolitical and artistic relevance of these supposedly inferior mass culture texts can broaden the epistemological framework of film studies.

Seeing that this thesis is centered on *queer* independent film, it hence also became essential to get a more detailed perception of the history of LGBTQIA+ cinema, an adventure chapter 3 embarked on. Here, I specifically engaged with the historical roots of many harmful cinematic tropes and stereotypes regarding LGBTQIA+ individuals, which were, as has been revealed, greatly founded on early cultural and medical discourses regarding homosexuality. Throughout film history glimmers of hope existed in the form of marginal cinemas (including, e.g., exploitation film, the American avant-garde, or American underground cinema) that dealt with queerness through more empowering and artful approaches and, ultimately, represent direct forebears of NQC and the NQCR. The same can be said for LGBTQIA+ activist cinema that particularly gained momentum in the post-Stonewall era, ushering in a more politically assertive chapter in LGBTQIA+ film history.

During these discussions, I was also able to first connect the realms of independent and queer cinema in utmost outright fashion: first and foremost, throughout most of the 20th century the sole space for queer cinema (in all its various evolutions) to blossom was usually found in the fringes of independent cinemas, which already underlines the deep-rooted link between both. What can furthermore be gathered from my first three chapters, then, is that the marginality of independent and queer film forms allowed for unique parallels between their histories and developments, best seen in the tense wars these margins waged with the centers. Simultaneously, as has been proven at large, queer independent cinema (including NQC and the NQCR) was also greatly impacted by a variety of different independent film waves and movements that built on one another, subverting that which came before them. Hence, my discussion of *My Hustler*, e.g., not only pointed towards many trends that were used by Warhol in 1965 but that would also gain prominence decades later during the times of NQC and the NQCR (such as postmodern tropes, the dissection of the gay male gaze, the depiction of obsessive desire, or the relation between power and sex).

Lastly, fringe cinemas, be they queer or non-queer, were moreover as much impacted by technological progress, societal shifts, political changes, and audience demands – all of which can be deduced as further elements that helped in producing films against all odds. Indeed, existing on the sidelines can be a blessing in disguise for many as it allows filmmakers to take risks, to experiment, and to further evolve the outer bounds of the filmic medium.

Ultimately, as has become evident throughout these discussions, independent cinema as well as queerness are both concepts that are incredibly hard to delineate as they are fluid at their core while being further defined by ever-evolving shifts in perception. In consequence, this already hints towards the fact that NQC and the NQCR inhabit a similar space of transience and fluidity.

Another essential building block that allows for a broader understanding of NQC (and, by association, the NQCR) is the decade of the 1980s, which I decided to devote two chapters to – one that spoke about the general sociopolitical struggles queer individuals went through and another that was concerned with the way the filmic medium adapted to these issues – be it on a studio or independent level. Chapter 4 hence introduced the context of the homophobic 1980s, while further considering the general concerns regarding the conservative political backlash under the Reagan presidency, the emerging AIDS crisis, as well as reactions to the disease – an amalgam of events that eventually resulted in a heightened discrimination of LGBTQIA+ individuals during the indicated decade.

As has been moreover demonstrated throughout this chapter, the development of the American political landscape during the late 70s and 80s urged queer activism to resurge with a fervor not seen before, in turn bringing to the forefront the intersections of AIDS-related issues and debates around sexual and corporeal autonomy and their intrinsic political dimensions. These elements – coupled with the help of AIDS video –, as proposed in this chapter, would all turn out to be paramount to the establishment of queer independent cinema. In the same vein, the discussed shift towards more radical tactics when it came to queer struggles, along with the questioning of the all-pervading hostility found in Hollywood movies that was, in turn, directly influenced by the sociopolitical climate, would soon be adopted in LGBTQIA+ cinema, especially with the emergence of New Queer Cinema.

Chapter 5 built on these discussions by inserting them in the context of LGBTQIA+ cinema. Beginning with a consideration of the queerphobic context of 1980s Hollywood (as well as a few queer-embracing oddities that flourished against all expectations), this chapter then particularly focused on AIDS film. After all, these early AIDS movies would deeply inform NQC, while the subversive 90s film wave would, simultaneously, go to considerable length to deconstruct many clichés, tropes, and one-sided portrayals established during the 1980s. I thus took a peek at various AIDS movies and ultimately came to an utmost insightful conclusion: bearing in mind the many overlapping features between films such as *Buddies* or *Parting Glances* and movies belonging to the New Queer Cinema movement, in chapter 5.3 I suggested that these early occurrences of NQC-like pictures should fall under the term of proto-New Queer Cinema films. This is not only due to the fact that these forebears paved the way

for the movement in the 1980s, but also because, at least due to some essential elements, they might be partially included in the New Queer Cinema film canon. Finally, the 1980s were also of utmost importance for the very reason that queer independent cinema slowly began gaining momentum, thus manifesting the first seeds that would eventually blossom into the full-blown NQC movement.

After a thorough five-chapter preparation, I was finally able to directly address New Queer Cinema in chapter 6, where I proved that the film movement, though short-lived, nonetheless had an enormous impact still felt today. Fed by the rage of the AIDS crisis, NQC went on to break and subvert a variety of cinematic expectations, and, by doing so, established a new cinematic language to represent the supposedly unrepresentable struggles and lived experiences of the time. As I further explored, through the reclamation of harmful and villainous tropes, NQC was eventually able to return agency and subjectivity to all kinds of queer individuals (though, as has been highlighted, the movement was not as intersectional and diverse as many make it out to be). Most important to the study at hand, however, was the insight that NQC also represented a step towards more empowering depictions of queer sexuality on screen, especially in the face of the pandemic – an issue that I then chose to dive deeper into in my two film analyses in chapter 7.

More precisely, concentrating on the intricate sexual power struggles and hierarchies presented in Gus Van Sant's *Mala Noche* allowed me to uncover how sexuality can be profoundly influential on and impacted by the interaction of issues related to class, economics, sexual orientations, citizenship, and ethnicity. Indeed, disclosing these hierarchical dimensions allows Van Sant to ponder not only on issues of intersectionality, but also on how the othering in society between minorities of different kinds comes to be. At the same time, by dissecting mundane situations within the film, I was able to unveil deeply twisted historical and sociopolitical relations between the United States and its bordering country Mexico, which, in turn, highlight how the countries' relations affect their citizens in everyday life. Although set in the 1970s, *Mala Noche* addresses questions that defined US culture throughout the 1980s. More specifically, issues concerning homophobia as well as illegal immigration were widely discussed in politics and the media at the time, thus turning the themes addressed in Curtis' novel into then still up-to-date topics.

While *Mala Noche* is not as commonly revisited when looking back at NQC, Araki's *The Living End*, the film I discussed next, on the contrary is one of the figureheads of the movement. In comparison with chapter 7.1, this second subchapter also dove further into issues around AIDS, a matter at the heart of NQC. As I was thus able to determine in this analysis, as

a connoisseur of film history, Araki is able to create an intricate play between experimentation and film traditions in his film by citing conventions of different subgenres in order to adapt these to the queer experience during the AIDS crisis. As has been shown, in the context of the film, the road becomes a space of refuge to the AIDS-infected queer to escape the discrimination suffered under the ultraconservative Bush administration.

Nevertheless, *The Living End* refuses to dwell in self-pity and, consequently, rather than constantly stressing the idea of queerness as victimizing, chooses to grant its gay seropositive protagonists agency and the power of retribution against a system and a society intent on destroying them. As has been discussed in detail, the choice of using anger-filled, violent, sexualized, and uninhibited representations of HIV-positive gay men ultimately serves to create a space of reflection on ideas around "irresponsibility" in times of heightened discrimination and the unjust and reckless scapegoating of LGBTQIA+ individuals – a discussion I then chose to link to debates around barebacking. Seeing that even today, in times of a greater diversity within the American sociopolitical and cinematic landscape, queer intimacy and sex continue to be taboo subjects in movie productions, Araki's film, ultimately, was able to underline the importance regarding the reconstitution of cinematic portrayals concerning homoerotic desire, intimacy as well as politics regarding the sexualized male body.

While *The Living End* ends with a flicker of optimism regarding a better future, actual hope was soon to come in form of the first highly active antiretroviral therapy in 1996 able to stop the spreading of the virus in an infected body, thus slowly allowing HIV-positive individuals to live longer and healthier lives. These developments were game-changing, shifting the public perception of LGBTQIA+ people greatly into the new millennium. Bearing this in mind, chapter 8.1 thus began by investigating the impact of homonormative mandates in American society, culture, and politics that emerged as a reaction to these developments from the mid-90s onwards. These, in turn, proved to be highly influential, particularly in depoliticizing queerness and in turning LGBTQIA+ culture into consumer goods (all of which created a stark contrast to the achievements of AIDS and queer activism of previous decades). As I then went on to expose, the same mindset simultaneously began infiltrating LGBTQIA+ cinema: not only did this surge of assimilationist gay and lesbian films partially contribute to the end of NQC, but it can simultaneously be credited as the pathbreaking wave that wakened the mainstream by raising awareness of a profitable LGBTQIA+ film market. Thus, as I was able to demonstrate, Hollywood itself began producing queer-themed pictures with an independent spirit, which would later also, to a certain degree, have a lasting influence on the NQCR.

After a decade of predominantly tame gay and lesbian filmmaking, more radical queer movies eventually appeared on the horizon in the late 2000s, forming a movement very similar to NQC. As I demonstrated, this New Queer Cinema Renaissance is both a continuation as well as an extension of the prior film wave, very much reflecting on wide-ranging queer-related issues while being firmly grounded in 21st century lives and struggles of LGBTQIA+ communities. This being said, it distances itself from the former wave by relying further on realistic tropes (or a fantasy-induced realism) while bearing less of a postmodern tinge to it. Most conspicuously, however, the NQCR boosted the sexual content and its explicitness to levels seldomly seen in NQC, thus enabling new forms of narrative exploration not yet covered in queer cinema in that amount and depth until that point in time.

While having lost some of the political urgency of NQC, the NQCR nonetheless engages in highly interventionalist topics by means of more subtle approaches that counteract homonormative trends permeating the mainstream. This, in turn, is achieved by adopting vastly intersectional points of view that give visibility to non-normative bodies, gender and sexual expressions or preferences, and desires from all over the globe that are commonly ostracized within white, hetero- or homonormative, cisgender, neoliberal discourses. As I then attempted to conclude, all in all, it is fair to say that trying to define both NQC and the NQCR is a fairly difficult task due to their queer fluid and pluralistic nature. Their transgressiveness, their spirit of defiance, and tendency towards opening boundaries, nevertheless can be deemed one of the most pervasive defining qualities that infuse both waves with their true meaning.

The two film analyses that followed, subsequently allowed for a deeper plunge into the many questions the renaissance film wave raises. Both discussions were, again, very unique in their tackling of queer- and sex-related content. As I disclosed, *Shortbus*' singularity particularly originates from its historic placement between NCQ and the NQCR, turning it into a sort of NQC latecomer and NQCR prototype at once. Indeed, this analysis was of particular importance to this study because it goes beyond the strict gender and sex binaries that underly the other films in my corpus and instead focuses on a vast variety of queer (and queered) identities. In this way, I was able to ponder on the vastly expanding intricacies of representing queer sex, sexualities, and desires in NQCR filmmaking.

Likewise, the movie represented not only a perfect way to demonstrate how sex can be used as an integral storytelling device, but also, at the same time, how it can be very reflective of national issues on a wider scale – thus once again demonstrating that the personal is indeed very political. It's almost naïve air of hope and of idealistic community-building through intimacy furthermore sets this filmic text apart from all the others discussed in this project,

disclosing that affirmative and hopeful queer texts can exist without needing to fall into a trap of assimilationist and homonormative conventions.

While *Shortbus* epitomized a merging of several stories, bodies, and desires, my last analysis went the opposite route by focusing on a very intimate coming of age story about an extremely private and withdrawn teenager. *Spa Night*, a film already representing the full-blown NQCR movement in all its glory, thus presented the opportunity to give space to individuals who deliberately stay in the closet, highlighting this choice as valid and simultaneously opposing the obligatory out-and-proud resolution popular in contemporary LGBTQIA+ films that focus on young adults. Our queer Korean American protagonist, plagued by an inherent duality, thus finds a sense of self in his own unique way throughout his journey. Guided by his feeling of belonging to various disparate places at once, I was also able to further dive into questions regarding stereotyped cinematic representations of Asian and Asian American identities filmmaker Andrew Ahn attempted to tackle in this movie. Simultaneously, this very discussion then enabled me to investigate questions concerned with the erotic undercurrents of the queer male gaze as well as the narrative function of the same.

Bearing in mind all of the above-discussed, it becomes more than apparent that ideas of fluidity, of flexibility, of opening up and adapting to new and constantly-changing avenues through the transgression of oppressive binaries form a common thread that runs through all of the movies I closely examined: be it the transient border-crosser Johnny in *Mala Noche*, the ostracized seropositive fugitives in *The Living End*, the whole cast of *Shortbus* in search of becoming more permeable, or David in *Spa Night* who establishes his own path towards becoming whole. Coming full circle, these notions, then again, all hark back to the fluidity inherent in the concepts of queerness and queer theory, which, in their own right, are highly integrated in both film waves.

Seeing that the impact of NQC and the continuing importance of the NQCR have been made very visible throughout this thesis, I suggest that further research into these areas can enrich the field of queer film studies with new vitality. After all, despite the fact that more awareness and interest has been directed at both film waves in recent years, critical studies are still scarce – especially when it comes to the NQCR. As for NQC, though it would be false to claim that it is a completely understudied field and even though I already established a thorough basis for its definition throughout this study, in my discussion I was simultaneously able to hint towards many aspects that are still in need of wider examination: hereby we should be specifically mindful of the relation between proto-NQC and NQC films. Indeed, seeing that the original NQC wave is so rich in references, its many links to other international waves,

movements, and filmmakers – past and present – also need to be further reassessed for us to fully understand the width and influence of this phenomenon.

The NQCR, on the other hand, being a more recent wave that is still underway, asks for even more consideration, especially when bearing in mind that there is a myriad of issues my study was unable to address. First and foremost, I would thus suggest a deeper dive into questions around HIV/AIDS and sexual health, which have been right at the heart of NQC and of this study and might still wield more influence on the renaissance than my thesis has proposed. After all, AIDS, as is well-known, still rages worldwide, particularly in the Global South and poverty-stricken countries and communities, having deep-cutting repercussions for those affected. This insight, then, already leads us to the next essential point in need of being tackled, namely that of breaking the constraints of American filmmaking and embracing all the international offshoots of the NQCR, warranted by our current age of accelerated globalization and digitalization. An expansion across borders and a comparative study of different national cinemas is of much importance as, in fact, it widens the scope of queer-related issues while broadening our awareness of lived experiences from different sociopolitical and -cultural backgrounds and, in doing so, aids us in deconstructing the general fixation on the anglophone film market.

As such, an entire pool of films produced in the US is also still at our disposal, as the abundant examples I have listed throughout chapter 8 have made extensively clear. Likewise documentary filmmaking and short films were only marginally approached in this thesis due to my narrow methodological focus on narrative full-length features, thus also asking for deeper investigation in terms of their own developments and their relation to or place within NQC and the NQCR. On top of this, the NQCR still being relevant over ten years into its existence asks for a deeper analysis of its evolution, including, but not limited to, the fantasy-filled realist strain I brought to the forefront.

Lastly, also a myriad of other aspects defining 21st century LGBTQIA+ lives that were only marginally approached in this project, are in need of a more thorough study – including, amongst many others, the wide-ranging issue of agism, non-white, non-gay and cis-gender representations, the problem of chemsex devastating queer communities, a deeper look into non-normative queer relationships**,** the importance of dating apps and the digital realm to queer existences and desire, the forming of identities through mediated images, or the influence of the Trump government on the stories being told in this film wave. As has been demonstrated, especially the place of technology can be incredibly pathbreaking and influential and it remains

to be seen how future inventions will further shift the realms of independent and queer cinema while opening up new avenues for scholarly work.

Lastly, LGBTQIA+-related topics are nowadays infused more and more into mainstream cinematic texts and other cultural productions with broader variety and diversity, but in many cases also with a lack of nuance and finesse. Possessing a wider awareness of LGBTQIA+ film and media history can thus aid us in recognizing and dissecting these trends and in continuing to observe them through a critical lens so as to unveil injustices and oppressive methods underlying media representations. Subversive queer filmmaking is thus as important as ever, especially in times of mounting crises, rising discrimination, political agitations, and the pervasive homosocial pressure to conform. Continuing to guarantee a haven for all those identities, stories, experiences, shunned forms of being and expressing oneself, of feeling, loving, or desiring finally also contributes to queer memory-building and guarantees a more diverse, inclusive, and wide-ranging media and social landscape.

All in all, due to the endless vastness of the subject matter at hand and the restrictions imposed on this project, like many of the films analyzed here I must thus recur to an open end: film history, technology, and sociopolitical issues are ever evolving and in constant motion and so are our perceptions regarding cinema and queerness. New Queer Cinema and the New Queer Cinema Renaissance will thus live on, continuing to inspire and influence filmmakers and audiences to come while provoking deeply transgressive questions and debates regarding 21st century LGBTQIA+ existences and experiences.

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As Is. Dir. Michael Lindsay-Hogg. Perf. Colleen Dewhurst, Robert Carradine, and Jonathan Hadary. Interchange Television Group, 1986.

Atomic Blonde. Dir. David Leitch. Perf. Charlize Theron, James McAvoy, and Eddie Marsan. Focus Features, 2017.

Avatar. Dir. James Cameron. Perf. Sam Worthington, Zoe Saldana, and Sigourney Weaver. Twentieth Century Fox, 2009.

Badlands. Dir. Terrence Malick. Perf. Martin Sheen, Sissy Spacek, and Warren Oates. Warner Bros., 1973.

Baise-Moi. Dir. Virginie Despentes & Coralie. Perf. Karen Lancaume, Raffaëla Anderson, and Céline Beugnot. Toute Premiere Fois, 2000.

Basic Instinct. Dir. Paul Verhoeven. Perf. Michael Douglas, Sharon Stone, and George Dzundza. Canal+, 1992.

Beyond the Black Rainbow. Dir. Panos Cosmatos. Perf. Michael J Rogers, Eva Bourne, and Scott Hylands. Chromewood Productions, 2010.

Beach Party. Dir. William Asher. Perf. Robert Cummings, Dorothy Malone, and Frankie Avalon. American International Pictures, 1963.

Beach Rats. Dir. Eliza Hittman. Perf. Harris Dickinson, Madeline Weinstein, and Kate Hodge. Cinereach, 2017.

Beautiful Boxer. Dir. Ekachai Uekrongtham. Perf. Asanee Suwan, Sorapong Chatree, and Orn-Anong Panyawong. GMM Pictures Co., 2003.

Before Night Falls. Dir. Julian Schnabel. Perf. Javier Bardem, Johnny Depp, and Olatz López Garmendia. El Mar Pictures, 2000.

Before Stonewall. Dir. Greta Schiller & Robert Rosenberg. Perf. Barbara Gittings, Rita Mae Brown, and Maua Adele Ajanaku. Before Stonewall Inc., 1984.

Behind the Screen. Dir. Charles Chaplin. Perf. Charles Chaplin, Edna Purviance, and Eric Campbell. Lone Star Corporation, 1916.

Being Impossible. Dir. Patricia Ortega. Perf. Lucía Bedoya, Belkis Avilladares, and María Elena Duque. Antorcha Films, 2018.

Being John Malkovich. Dir. Spike Jonze. Perf. John Cusack, Cameron Diaz, and Catherine Keener. Astralwerks, 1999.

La Belle Personne. Dir. Christophe Honoré. Perf. Louis Garrel, Léa Seydoux, and Grégoire Leprince-Ringuet. ARTE, 2008.

Below Her Mouth. Dir. April Mullen. Perf. Erika Linder, Natalie Krill, and Sebastian Pigott. Serendipity Point Films, 2016.

Better Than Chocolate. Dir. Anne Wheeler. Perf. Wendy Crewson, Karyn Dwyer, and Christina Cox. British Columbia Film, 1999.

Bhuvan Shome. Dir. Mrinal Sen. Perf. Utpal Dutt, Suhasini Mulay, and Shekhar Chatterjee. Mrinal Sen Productions, 1969.

Bike Boy. Dir. Andy Warhol. Perf. Joseph Spencer, Ed Wiener, and Vera Cruz. Andy Warhol Films, 1967.

Billy's Hollywood Screen Kiss. Dir. Tommy O'Haver. Perf. Sean Hayes, Brad Rowe, and Armando Valdes-Kennedy. Revolutionary Eye LLC, 1998.

The Birdcage. Dir. Mike Nichols. Perf. Robin Williams, Nathan Lane, and Gene Hackman. Da United Artists, 1996.

The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant. Dir. Rainer Werner Fassbinder. Perf. Margit Carstensen, Hanna Schygulla, and Katrin Schaake. Filmverlag der Autoren, 1972.

Blackbird. Dir. Patrik-Ian Polk. Perf. Mo'Nique, Julian J. Walker, and Kevin Allesee. KBiz Entertainment, 2014.

Black Is... Black Ain't. Dir. Marlon Riggs. Perf. Angela Davis, Essex Hemphill, and Bell Hooks. Signifyin' Works, 1989.

BlackKklansman. Dir. Spike Lee. Perf. Alec Baldwin, John David Washington, and Isiah Whitlock Jr. Focus Features, 2018.

Black Panther. Dir. Ryan Coogler. Perf. Chadwick Boseman, Michael B. Jordan, Lupita Nyong'o. Marvel Studios, 2018.

Blacula. Dir. William Crain. Perf. William Marshall, Vonetta McGee, and Denise Nicholas. American International Pictures, 1972.

Blade Runner. Dir. Ridley Scott. Perf. Harrison Ford, Rutger Hauer, and Sean Young. The Ladd Company, 1982.

Blade Runner 2049. Dir. Denis Villeneuve. Perf. Ryan Gosling, Dave Bautista, and Robin Wright. Alcon Entertainment, 2017.

The Blair Witch Project. Dir. Daniel Myrick & Eduardo Sánchez. Perf. Heather Donahue, Michael C. Williams, and Joshua Leonard. Haxan Films, 1999.

Blood Simple. Dir. Joel Coen & Ethan Coen. Perf. John Getz, Frances McDormand, and Dan Hedaya. River Road Productions, 1984.

Blow Job. Dir. Andy Warhol. Perf. DeVeren Bookwalter. Factory Films, 1963.

Blue is the Warmest Color. Dir. Abdellatif Kechiche. Perf. Léa Seydoux, Adèle Exarchopoulos, and Salim Kechiouche. Quat'sous Films, 2013.

Blue Movie. Dir. Andy Warhol. Perf. Viva and Louis Waldon. Andy Warhol Films, 1969.

Blue. Dir. Derek Jarman. Perf. Derek Jarman, Tilda Swinton, and John Quentin. Channel 4 Television Corporation, 1993.

Bohemian Rhapsody. Dir. Bryan Singer. Perf. Rami Malek, Lucy Boynton, and Gwilym Lee. Twentieth Century Fox, 2018.

The Bolsters. Dir. Rosa von Praunheim. Perf. Luzi Kryn, Dietmar Kracht, and Steven Adamczewski. Rosa von Praunheim Filmproduktion, 1971.

Bonnie and Clyde. Dir. Arthur Penn. Perf. Warren Beatty, Faye Dunaway, and Michael J. Pollard. Warner Bros.-Seven Arts, 1967.

Booksmart. Dir. Olivia Wilde. Perf. Kaitlyn Dever, Beanie Feldstein, and Jessica Williams. Annapurna Pictures, 2019.

Bound. Dir. Lana Wachowski & Lilly Wachowski. Perf. Jennifer Tilly, Gina Gershon, and Joe Pantoliano. Dino De Laurentiis Company, 1996.

Boy Erased. Dir. Joel Edgerton. Perf. Lucas Hedges, Nicole Kidman, and Russell Crowe. Focus Features, 2018.

Boys Don't Cry. Dir. Kimberly Peirce. Perf. Hilary Swank, Chloë Sevigny, and Peter Sarsgaard. Fox Searchlight Pictures, 1999.

The Boys in the Band. Dir. William Friedkin. Perf. Kenneth Nelson, Peter White, and Leonard Frey. Cinema Center Films, 1970.

Boys in the Sand. Dir. Wakefield Poole. Perf. Casey Donovan, Peter Schneckenburger, and Danny Di Cioccio. Poolemar, 1971.

Boys on the Side. Dir. Herbert Ross. Perf. Whoopi Goldberg, Mary-Louise Parker, and Drew Barrymore. Alcor Films, 1995.

Breathless. Dir. Jean-Luc Godard. Perf. Jean-Paul Belmondo, Jean Seberg, and Daniel Boulanger. Les Films Impéria, 1960.

Bride of Frankenstein. Dir. James Whale. Perf. Boris Karloff, Elsa Lanchester, and Colin Clive. Universal Pictures Corp., 1935.

Brief Encounter. Dir. David Lean. Perf. Celia Johnson, Trevor Howard, and Stanley Holloway. Cineguild, 1945.

Brokeback Mountain. Dir. Ang Lee. Perf. Jake Gyllenhaal, Heath Ledger, and Michelle Williams. Focus Features, 2005.

The Broken Hearts Club: A Romantic Comedy. Dir. Greg Berlanti. Perf. Timothy Olyphant, Dean Cain, and Zach Braff. Banner Entertainment, 2000.

Brooklyn Bizarre. Dir. Étienne Faure. Perf. Pierre Prieur, Adrian James, and Raquel Nave. Bushwick Factory, 2015.

Buddies. Dir. Arthur J. Bressan Jr. Perf. Geoff Edholm, David Schachter, and Billy Lux. Film and Video Workshop, 1985.

Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid. Dir. George Roy Hill. Perf. Paul Newman, Robert Redford, and Katharine Ross. Campanile Productions, 1969.

Butterfly Kiss. Dir. Michael Winterbottom. Perf. Amanda Plummer, Kathy Jamieson, and Saskia Reeves. British Screen Productions, 1995.

By Hook or by Crook. Dir. Harry Dodge & Silas Howard. Perf. Silas Howard, Harry Dodge, and Stanya Kahn. Steakhaus Productions, 2001.

Cabaret. Dir. Bob Fosse. Perf. Liza Minnelli, Michael York, and Helmut Griem. Allied Artists Pictures, 1972.

La Cage aux Folles. Dir. Édouard Molinaro. Perf. Ugo Tognazzi, Michel Serrault, and Claire Maurier. Da Ma Produzione, 1978.

La Cage aux Folles II. Dir. Édouard Molinaro. Perf. Ugo Tognazzi, Michel Serrault, and Marcel Bozzuffi. Da Ma Produzione, 1980.

La cage aux folles III: "Elles" se marient. Dir. Georges Lautner. Perf. Ugo Tognazzi, Michel Serrault, and Antonella Interlenghi. Da Ma Produzione, 1985.

Call Me by Your Name. Dir. Luca Guadagnino. Perf. Armie Hammer, Timothée Chalamet, and Michael Stuhlbarg. Frenesy Film Company, 2017.

Capote. Dir. Bennett Miller. Perf. Philip Seymour Hoffman, Clifton Collins Jr., and Catherine Keener. United Artists, 2005.

Caprice. Dir. Frank Tashlin. Perf. Doris Day, Richard Harris, and Ray Walston. Twentieth Century Fox, 1967.

Car Wash. Dir. Michael Schultz. Perf. Richard Pryor, Franklyn Ajaye, and Ivan Dixon. Universal Pictures, 1976.

Caravaggio. Dir. Derek Jarman. Perf. Noam Almaz, Dexter Fletcher, and Nigel Terry. British Film Institute, 1986.

Carol. Dir. Todd Haynes. Perf. Cate Blanchett, Rooney Mara, and Sarah Paulson. StudioCanal, 2015.

The Celluloid Closet. Dir. Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman. Perf. Jan Odenberg, Richard Dyer, and Gore Vidal. Arte, 1995.

Cemetery of Splendor. Dir. Apichatpong Weerasethakul. Perf. Jenjira Pongpas, Banlop Lomnoi, and Jarinpattra Rueangram. Kick the Machine, 2015.

La Cérémonie. Dir. Claude Chabrol. Perf. Isabelle Huppert, Sandrine Bonnaire, and Jacqueline Bisset. Canal+, 1995.

Chan is Missing. Dir. Wayne Wang. Perf. Wood Moy, Marc Hayashi, and Laureen Chew. New Yorker Films, 1982.

Un Chant d'Amour. Dir. Jean Genet. Perf. Jean Genet, André Reybaz, and Lucien Sénémaud. BFI Video, 1950.

Chelsea Girls. Dir. Andy Warhol. Perf. Brigid Berlin, Randy Borscheidt, and Christian Päffgen. Filmmakers Distribution Center, 1966.

La Ciénaga. Dir. Lucrecia Martel. Perf. Mercedes Morán, Graciela Borges, and Martín Adjemián. 4k Films, 2001.

Chemsex. Dir. William Fairman & Max Gogarty. Vice Media, 2015.

Children of Loneliness. Dir. Richard C. Kahn. Perf. S. Dana Hubbard, Morgan Wallace, and Luana Walters. 1934.

The Children's Hour. Dir. William Wyler. Perf. Audrey Hepburn, Shirley MacLaine, and James Garner. United Artists, 1961.

Chi-Raq. Dir. Spike Lee. Perf. Nick Cannon, Teyonah Parris, and Wesley Snipes. Amazon Studios, 2015.

Chocolate Babies. Dir. Stephen Winter. Perf. Sean Barr, Suzanne Gregg Ferguson, and Dudley Findlay Jr. Open City Films, 1996.

Un Couteau dans le Coeur. Dir. Yann Gonzalez. Perf. Vanessa Paradis, Nicolas Maury, and Kate Moran. CG Cinéma, 2018.

Circumstance. Dir. Maryam Keshavarz. Perf. Sarah Kazemy, Nikohl Boosheri, and Reza Sixo Safai. Marakesh Films, 2011.

Citizen Cohn. Dir. Frank Pierson. Perf. James Woods, Joe Don Baker, and Joseph Bologna. HBO Films, 1992.

Cleopatra. Dir. Joseph L. Mankiewicz. Perf. Elizabeth Taylor, Richard Burton, and Rex Harrison. Twentieth Century Fox, 1963.

Cloud Atlas. Dir. Tom Tykwer, Lana Wachowski, and Lilly Wachowski. Perf. Tom Hanks, Halle Berry, and Hugh Grant. Cloud Atlas Productions, 2012.

Cobra. Dir. George P. Cosmatos. Perf. Sylvester Stallone, Brigitte Nielsen, and Reni Santoni. Warner Bros., 1986.

Codependent Lesbian Space Alien Seeks Same. Dir. Madeleine Olnek. Perf. Lisa Haas, Susan Ziegler, and Jackie Monahan. Pro-Fun Media, 2011.

Cola de Mono. Dir. Alberto Fuguet. Perf. Santiago Rodríguez Costabal, Cristóbal Rodríguez Costabal, and Carmina Riego. Cinepata, 2018.

Come Back to the 5 and Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean. Dir. Robert Altman. Perf. Cher, Karen Black, and Sandy Dennis. Sandcastle 5 Productions, 1982.

Coming Out. Dir. Heiner Carow. Perf. Matthias Freihof, Dagmar Manzel, and Dirk Kummer. DEFA, 1989.

Compulsion. Dir. Richard Fleischer. Perf. Orson Welles, Dean Stockwell, and Diane Varsi. Darryl F. Zanuck Productions, 1959.

Concussion. Dir. Stacie Passon. Perf. Robin Weigert, Maggie Siff, and Johnathan Tchaikovsky. 93 Films, 2013.

The Consequence. Dir. Wolfgang Petersen. Perf. Jürgen Prochnow, Ernst Hannawald, and Werner Schwuchow. Solaris Film, 1977.

Contracorriente. Dir. Javier Fuentes-León. Perf. Cristian Mercado, Tatiana Astengo, and Manolo Cardona. Elcalvo Films, 2009.

The Conversation. Dir. Francis Ford Coppola. Perf. Gene Hackman, John Cazale, and Allen Garfield. The Coppola Company, 1974.

Couch. Dir. Andy Warhol. Perf. Bingingham Birdie, Rufus Collins, and Gregory Corso. 1964.

Crazy Rich Asians. Dir. Jon M. Chu. Perf. Constance Wu, Henry Golding, and Michelle Yeoh. Warner Bros., 2018.

Crime of M. Lange. Dir. Jean Renoir. Perf. René Lefèvre, Florelle, and Jules Berry. Films Obéron, 1936.

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon: Sword of Destiny. Dir. Woo-Ping Yuen. Perf. Donnie Yen, Michelle Yeoh, and Harry Shum Jr. Netflix, 2016.

Cruising. Dir. William Friedkin. Perf. Al Pacino, Paul Sorvino, and Karen Allen. United Artists, 1980.

D.E.B.S. Dir. Angela Robinson. Perf. Sara Foster, Jordana Brewster, and Devon Aoki. Screen Gems, 2004.

Dallas Buyers Club. Dir. Jean-Marc Vallée. Perf. Matthew McConaughey, Jennifer Garner, and Jared Leto. Truth Entertainment, 2013.

The Danish Girl. Dir. Tom Hooper. Perf. Eddie Redmayne, Alicia Vikander, and Amber Heard. Working Title Films, 2015.

Da Sweet Blood of Jesus. Dir. Spike Lee. Perf. Stephen Tyrone Williams, Zaraah Abrahams, and Rami Malek. 40 Acres & a Mule Productions, 2014.

Dancer in the Dark. Dir. Lars von Trier. Perf. Björk, Catherine Deneuve, and David Morse. Zentropa Entertainments, 2000.

The Dark Knight. Dir. Christopher Nolan. Perf. Christian Bale, Heath Ledger, and Aaron Eckhart. Warner Bros., 2008.

Deep Throat. Dir. Gerard Damiano. Perf. Linda Lovelace, Harry Reems, and Dolly Sharp. Gerard Damiano Film Productions, 1972.

Deidra & Laney Rob a Train. Dir. Sydney Freeland. Perf. Ashleigh Murray, Rachel Crow, and Lance Gray. General Population, 2017.

Deliverance. Dir. John Boorman. Perf. Jon Voight, Burt Reynolds, and Ned Beatty. Warner Bros., 1972.

Desert Hearts. Dir. Donna Deitch. Perf. Helen Shaver, Patricia Charbonneau, and Audra Lindley. Desert Hearts Productions, 1985.

Desperate Living. Dir. John Waters. Perf. Liz Renay, Mink Stole, and Susan Lowe. Charm City Productions, 1977.

The Detective. Dir. Gordon Douglas. Perf. Frank Sinatra. Arcola Pictures, 1968.

Diamantino. Dir. Gabriel Abrantes & Daniel Schmidt. Perf. Carloto Cotta, Cleo Tavares, and Anabela Moreira. Maria & Mayer, 2018.

Diary of a Shinjuku Thief. Dir. Nagisa Ôshima. Perf. Tadanori Yokoo, Rie Yokoyama, and Moichi Tanabe. Sozosha, 1968.

Die Beautiful. Dir. Jun Lana. Perf. Paolo Ballesteros, Christian Bables, and Joel Torre. The IdeaFirst Company, 2016.

Different from the Others. Dir. Richard Oswald. Perf. Conrad Veidt, Leo Connard, and Ilse von Tasso-Lind. Richard-Oswald-Produktion, 1919.

Do the Right Thing. Dir. Spike Lee. Perf. Danny Aiello, Ossie Davis, and Ruby Dee. 40 Acres & a Mule Productions, 1989.

Doctor Dolittle. Dir. Richard Fleischer. Perf. Rex Harrison, Samantha Eggar, and Anthony Newley. Twentieth Century Fox, 1967.

Dog Day Afternoon. Dir. Sidney Lumet. Perf. Al Pacino, John Cazale, and Penelope Allen. Warner Bros., 1975.

The Doom Generation. Dir. Gregg Araki. Perf. James Duval, Rose McGowan, and Johnathon Schaech. Desperate Pictures, 1995.

Dressed to Kill. Dir. Brian De Palma. Perf. Michael Caine, Angie Dickinson, Nancy Allen. Filmways Pictures, 1980.

Drive. Dir. Nicolas Winding Refn. Perf. Ryan Gosling, Carey Mulligan, and Bryan Cranston. FilmDistrict, 2011.

Drugstore Cowboy. Dir. Gus Van Sant. Perf. Matt Dillon, Kelly Lynch, and James Le Gros. Avenue Pictures, 1989.

Drunktown's Finest. Dir. Sydney Freeland. Perf. Jeremiah Bitsui, Carmen Moore, and Morningstar Angeline. Grey Hour Production Services, 2014.

Duel. Dir. Steven Spielberg. Perf. Dennis Weaver, Jacqueline Scott, and Eddie Firestone. Universal TV, 1971.

E Agora? Lembra-Me. Dir. Joaquim Pinto. Perf. Joaquim Pinto & Nuno Leonel. C.R.I.M. Produções, 2013.

An Early Frost. Dir. John Erman. Perf. Gena Rowlands, Ben Gazzara, and Sylvia Sidney. NBC Productions, 1985.

Easy Rider. Dir. Dennis Hopper. Perf. Peter Fonda, Dennis Hopper, and Jack Nicholson. Pando Company Inc., 1969.

Eat. Dir. Andy Warhol. Perf. Robert Indiana. 1963.

Eating Out. Dir. Q. Allan Brocka. Perf. Scott Lunsford, Jim Verraros, and Emily Brooke Hands. Ariztical Entertainment, 2004.

Eating Out 2: Sloppy Seconds. Dir. Phillip J. Bartell. Perf. Jim Verraros, Emily Brooke Hands, and Rebekah Kochan. Ariztical Entertainment, 2006.

Eating Out: All You Can Eat. Dir. Glenn Gaylord. Perf. Rebekah Kochan, Daniel Skelton, and Chris Salvatore. Ariztical Entertainment, 2009.

Eating Out: Drama Camp. Dir. Q. Allan Brocka. Perf. Chris Salvatore, Daniel Skelton, and Aaron Milo. Ariztical Entertainment, 2011.

Eating Out: The Open Weekend. Dir. Q. Allan Brocka. Perf. Chris Salvatore, Chris Puckett, and Aaron Milo. Ariztical Entertainment, 2011.

Eating Raoul. Dir. Paul Bartel. Perf. Mary Woronov, Paul Bartel, and Robert Beltran. Bartel, 1982.

Edge of Seventeen. Dir. David Moreton. Perf. Chris Stafford, Tina Holmes, and Andersen Gabrych. Blue Streak Films, 1998.

Edge of the City. Dir. Martin Ritt. Perf. John Cassavetes, Sidney Poitier, and Jack Warden. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), 1957.

Edward II. Dir. Derek Jarman. Perf. Steven Waddington, Kevin Collins, and Andrew Tiernan. BBC Films, 1991.

Eisenstein in Guanajuato. Dir. Peter Greenaway. Perf. Elmer Bäck, Luis Alberti, and José Montini. Submarine, 2015.

El Norte. Dir. Gregory Nava. Perf. Zaide Silvia Gutiérrez, David Villalpando, and Ernesto Gómez Cruz. American Playhouse, 1984.

Elizabethtown. Dir. Cameron Crowe. Perf. Orlando Bloom, Kirsten Dunst, and Susan Sarandon. Paramount Pictures, 2005.

Empire. Dir. Andy Warhol. ItaloDVD, 1964.

En Soap. Dir. Pernille Fischer Christensen. Perf. Trine Dyrholm, David Dencik, and Frank Thiel. Nimbus Film Productions, 2006.

Enter the Void. Dir. Gaspar Noé. Perf. Paz de la Huerta, Nathaniel Brown, Cyril Roy. Fidélité Films, 2009.

Eraserhead. Dir. David Lynch. Perf. Jack Nance, Charlotte Stewart, and Allen Joseph. American Film Institute, 1977.

Été 85. Dir. François Ozon. Perf. Félix Lefebvre, Benjamin Voisin, and Philippine Velge. Mandarin Films, 2020.

Eternals. Dir. Chloé Zhao. Perf. Gemma Chan, Richard Madden, and Angelina Jolie. Nimbus Marvel Studios, 2021.

Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind. Dir. Michel Gondry. Perf. Jim Carrey, Kate Winslet, and Tom Wilkinson. Anonymous Content, 2004.

The Event. Dir. Thom Fitzgerald. Perf. Joanna Adler, Chris Barry, and Walter Borden. Arkanjel Productions, 2003.

The Exorcist. Dir. William Friedkin. Perf. Ellen Burstyn, Max von Sydow, and Linda Blair. Warner Brothers, 1973.

Fabulous! The Story of Queer Cinema. Dir. Lisa Ades and Lesli Klainberg. Perf. B. Ruby Rich, Michelangelo Signorile, and Todd Haynes. Orchard Films, 2006.

Fanfreluches et idées noires. Dir. Alexis Langlois. Perf. Carlotta Coco, Justine Langlois, and Aurélien Deseez. Groupe de Recherches et d'Essais Cinematographiques, 2016.

The Fan. Dir. Ed Bianchi. Perf. Lauren Bacall, James Garner, and Michael Biehn. Paramount Pictures, 1981.

Far from Heaven. Dir. Todd Haynes. Perf. Julianne Moore, Dennis Quaid, and Dennis Haysbert. Focus Features, 2002.

Le Fate Ignoranti. Dir. Ferzan Özpetek. Perf. Margherita Buy, Stefano Accorsi, and Serra Yilmaz. R&C Produzioni, 2001.

Fellini Satyricon. Dir. Federico Fellini. Perf. Martin Potter, Hiram Keller, and Max Born. Produzioni Europee Associate, 1969.

Female Trouble. Dir. John Waters. Perf. Divine, David Lochary, and Mary Vivian Pearce. Dreamland, 1974.

Fifty Shades of Grey. Dir. Sam Taylor-Johnson. Perf. Dakota Johnson, Jamie Dornan, and Jennifer Ehle. Focus Features, 2015.

Fifty Shades Darker. Dir. James Foley. Perf. Dakota Johnson, Jamie Dornan, and Eric Johnson. Universal Pictures, 2017.

Fifty Shades Freed. Dir. James Foley. Perf. Dakota Johnson, Jamie Dornan, and Eric Johnson. Perfect World Pictures, 2018.

Fin de Siglo. Dir. Lucio Castro. Perf. Juan Barberini, Ramon Pujol, and Mía Maestro. Cinemien, 2019.

Fireworks. Dir. Kenneth Anger. Perf. Kenneth Anger, Gordon Gray, and Bill Seltzer. Kenneth Anger, 1949.

First Blood. Dir. Ted Kotcheff. Perf. Sylvester Stallone, Brian Dennehy, and Richard Crenna. Elcajo Productions, 1982.

Flaming Creatures. Dir. Jack Smith. Perf. Francis Francine, Sheila Bick, and Joel Markman. 1964.

Flaming Ears. Dir. Ursula Puerrer, A. Hans Scheirl, and Dietmar Schipek. Perf. Susana Helmayr, Ursula Puerrer, and A. Hans Scheirl. LOOP TV-Video-Film, 1992.

Flesh. Dir. Paul Morrissey. Perf. Joe Dallesandro, Geraldine Smith, and Patti D'Arbanville. Factory Films, 1968.

A Florida Enchantment. Dir. Sidney Drew. Perf. Sidney Drew, Edith Storey, and Charles Kent. Vitagraph Company of America, 1914.

The Florida Project. Dir. Sean Baker. Perf. Brooklynn Prince, Bria Vinaite, and Willem Dafoe. Cre Film, 2017.

The Fly. Dir. David Cronenberg. Perf. Jeff Goldblum, Geena Davis, and John Getz. SLM Production Group, 1986.

For Colored Girls. Dir. Tyler Perry. Perf. Janet Jackson, Anika Noni Rose, and Whoopi Goldberg. Lionsgate, 2010.

Fortune and Men's Eyes. Dir. Harvey Hart & Jules Schwerin. Perf. Wendell Burton, Michael Greer, and Zooey Hall. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1971.

Four Eyed Monsters. Dir. Susan Buice & Arin Crumley. Perf. Susan Buice, Arin Crumley, and Julia Ann Ames. Less Life Lived LLC, 2005.

A Four Letter Word. Dir. Casper Andreas. Perf. Jesse Archer, Paul Haje, and Charlie David. Embrem Entertainment, 2007.

Fox and His Friends. Dir. Rainer Werner Fassbinder. Perf. Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Peter Chatel, and Karlheinz Böhm. City Film, 1975.

The Foxy Merkins. Dir. Madeleine Olnek. Perf. Gian Maria Annovi, Nuotama Bodomo, and Diane Ciesla. Wisconsin, 2013.

Frankenstein. Dir. James Whale. Perf. Colin Clive, Mae Clarke, and Boris Karloff. Universal Pictures Corp., 1931.

Freebie and the Bean. Dir. Richard Rush. Perf. Alan Arkin, James Caan, and Loretta Swit. Warner Bros., 1974.

Freier Fall. Dir. Stephan Lacant. Perf. Hanno Koffler, Max Riemelt, and Attila Borlan. Kurhaus Production, 2013.

Frida. Dir. Julie Taymor. Perf. Salma Hayek, Alfred Molina, and Geoffrey Rush. Handprint Entertainment, 2002.

Friday the 13th. Dir. Sean S. Cunningham. Perf. Betsy Palmer, Adrienne King, and Jeannine Taylor. Warner Bros., 1980.

Fright Night. Dir. Craig Gillespie. Perf. Anton Yelchin, Colin Farrell, and Toni Collette. Dreamworks Pictures, 2011.

Frisk. Dir. Todd Verow. Perf. Michael Gunther, Craig Chester, and Michael Stock. Bangor Films, 1995.

Fun. Dir. Rafal Zielinski. Perf. Renée Humphrey, Alicia Witt, and William R. Moses. Neo Modern, 1994.

Fun Down There. Dir. Roger Stigliano. Perf. Yvonne Fisher, Martin Goldin, and Nickolas B. Nagourney. Angelina Productions, 1989.

Gaav. Dir. Dariush Mehrjui. Perf. Ezzatolah Entezami, Mahin Shahabi, and Ali Nassirian. Iranian Ministry of Culture, 1969.

Les Garçons Sauvages. Dir. Bertrand Mandico. Perf. Pauline Lorillard, Vimala Pons, and Diane Rouxel. Ecce Films, 2017.

Garden State. Dir. Zach Braff. Perf. Zach Braff, Peter Sarsgaard, and Natalie Portman. Camelot Pictures, 2004.

The Gay Brothers. Dir. William K.L. Dickson. Edison Manufacturing Company, 1895.

Gay U.S.A. Dir. Arthur J. Bressan Jr.. Perf. Stuart Loomis, Pat Parker. Blossom Studios, 1977.

G.B.F. Dir. Darren Stein. Perf. Michael J. Willett, Paul Iacono, and Sasha Pieterse. School Pictures, 2013.

Geography Club. Dir. Gary Entin. Perf. Cameron Deane Stewart, Justin Deeley, and Meaghan Martin. Enumerated Pictures, 2013.

Gerontophilia. Dir. Bruce LaBruce. Perf. Pier-Gabriel Lajoie, Walter Borden, and Katie Boland. 1976 Productions, 2013.

Get Out. Dir. Jordan Peele. Perf. Daniel Kaluuya, Allison Williams, and Catherine Keener. Universal Pictures, 2017.

Ghostbusters. Dir. Paul Feig. Perf. Zach Woods, Kristen Wiig, and Ed Begley Jr.. Columbia Pictures, 2016.

Gia. Dir. Michael Cristofer. Perf. Angelina Jolie, Faye Dunaway, and Elizabeth Mitchell. HBO Films, 1998.

Girl Power. Dir. Sadie Benning. 1993.

Glen or Glenda. Dir. Edward D. Wood Jr. Perf. Edward D. Wood Jr., Bela Lugosi, and Lyle Talbot. Screen Classics, 1953.

God's Own Country. Dir. Francis Lee. Perf. Josh O'Connor, Alec Secareanu, and Gemma Jones. British Film Institute, 2017.

Go Fish. Dir. Rose Troche. Perf. V.S. Brodie, Guinevere Turner, and T. Wendy McMillan. Can I Watch, 1994.

Gods and Monsters. Dir. Bill Condon. Perf. Ian McKellen and Brendan Fraser. Lions Gate Films, 1998.

The Godfather. Dir. Francis Ford Coppola. Perf. Marlon Brando, Al Pacino, and James Caan. Paramount Pictures, 1972.

Gone Girl. Dir. David Fincher. Perf. Ben Affleck, Rosamund Pike, and Neil Patrick Harris. Twentieth Century Fox, 2014.

Goodbye to Language. Dir. Jean-Luc Godard. Perf. Héloïse Godet, Kamel Abdelli, and Richard Chevallier. Wild Bunch, 2014.

Good Will Hunting. Dir. Gus Van Sant. Perf. Robin Williams, Matt Damon, and Ben Affleck. Miramax, 1997.

Gouttes d'eau sur pierres brûlantes. Dir. François Ozon. Perf. Bernard Giraudeau, Malik Zidi, and Ludivine Sagnier. Fidélité Productions, 2000.

The Graduate. Dir. Mike Nichols. Perf. Dustin Hoffman, Anne Bancroft, and Katharine Ross. Lawrence Turman, 1967.

The Grand Budapest Hotel. Dir. Wes Anderson. Perf. Ralph Fiennes, F. Murray Abraham, and Mathieu Amalric. Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2014.

The Great Mouse Detective. Dir. Ron Clements, Burny Mattinson, David Michener, and John Musker. Perf. Vincent Price, Barrie Ingham, and Val Bettin. Walt Disney Pictures, 1986.

Grief. Dir. Richard Glatzer. Perf. Craig Chester, Illeana Douglas, and Jackie Beat. Grief Productions, 1993.

The Half of It. Dir. Alice Wu. Perf. Leah Lewis, Daniel Diemer, and Alexxis Lemire. Likely Story, 2020.

The Handmaiden. Dir. Park Chan-wook. Perf. Kim Tae-ri, Yong-nyeo Lee, and Min-chae Yoo. CJ Entertainment, 2016.

Hannah Takes the Stairs. Dir. Joe Swanberg. Perf. Greta Gerwig, Kent Osborne, and Andrew Bujalski. Film Science, 2007.

Happiest Season. Dir. Greg Berlanti. Perf. Kristen Stewart, Mackenzie Davis, and Mary Steenburgen. TriStar Pictures, 2020.

Happy Together. Dir. Wong Kar-Wai. Perf. Leslie Cheung, Tony Chiu-Wai Leung, and Chen Chang. Block 2 Pictures, 1997.

Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix. Dir. David Yates. Perf. Daniel Radcliffe, Emma Watson, and Rupert Grint. Warner Bros., 2007.

Hawaii. Dir. Marco Berger. Perf. Manuel Vignau, Mateo Chiarino, and Luz Palazón. La Noria Cine, 2013.

The Headless Woman. Dir. Lucrecia Martel. Perf. María Onetto, Claudia Cantero, and César Bordón. Aquafilms, 2008.

Heat. Dir. Paul Morrissey. Perf. Joe Dallesandro, Sylvia Miles, and Andrea Feldman. Andy Warhol Factory, 1972.

Heathers. Dir. Michael Lehmann. Perf. Winona Ryder, Christian Slater, and Shannen Doherty. New World Pictures, 1988.

Heaven's Gate. Dir. Michael Cimino. Perf. Kris Kristofferson, Christopher Walken, and John Hurt. Partisan Productions, 1980.

Heavenly Creatures. Dir. Peter Jackson. Perf. Melanie Lynskey, Kate Winslet, and Sarah Peirse. WingNut Films, 1994.

Hedwig and the Angry Inch. Dir. John Cameron Mitchell. Perf. John Cameron Mitchell, Miriam Shor, and Stephen Trask. Killer Films, 2001.

High Art. Dir. Lisa Cholodenko. Perf. Radha Mitchell, Ally Sheedy, and Patricia Clarkson. 391 Productions, 1998.

Hidden Figures. Dir. Theodore Melfi. Perf. Taraji P. Henson, Octavia Spencer, and Janelle Monáe. Fox 2000 Pictures, 2016.

High Noon. Dir. Fred Zinnemann. Perf. Gary Cooper, Grace Kelly, and Thomas Mitchell. Stanley Kramer Productions, 1952.

Hoje Eu Quero Voltar Sozinho. Dir. Daniel Ribeiro. Perf. Ghilherme Lobo, Fabio Audi, and Tess Amorim. Lacuna Filmes, 2014.

Holding the Man. Dir. Neil Armfield. Perf. Ryan Corr, Sarah Snook, and Francesco Ferdinandi. Screen Australia, 2015.

A Home at the End of the World. Dir. Michael Mayer. Perf. Jesse Archer Andrew Chalmers, Ryan Donowho, and Asia Vieira. Hart Sharp Entertainment, 2004.

The Hours. Dir. Stephen Daldry. Perf. Meryl Streep, Nicole Kidman, and Julianne Moore. Paramount Pictures, 2002.

The Hours and Times. Dir. Christopher Munch. Perf. David Angus, Ian Hart, and Stephanie Pack. Antarctic Pictures, 1991.

House Party. Dir. Reginald Hudlin. Perf. Christopher Reid, Robin Harris, and Christopher Martin. New Line Cinema, 1990.

Howl. Dir. Rob Epstein & Jeffrey Friedman. Perf. James Franco, Todd Rotondi, and Jon Prescott. Werc Werk Works, 2010.

How to Survive a Plague. Dir. David France. Perf. Peter Staley, Larry Kramer, and Iris Long. Public Square Films, 2012.

The Hunger. Dir. Tony Scott. Perf. Catherine Deneuve, David Bowie, and Susan Sarandon. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1983.

Hustler White. Dir. Bruce La Bruce & Rick Castro. Perf. Tony Ward, Bruce La Bruce, and Kevin P. Scott. Hustler White Productions, 1996.

I Am Not Your Negro. Dir. Raoul Peck. Perf. Samuel L. Jackson, James Baldwin, and Martin Luther King. Arte France, 2016.

I Don't Feel at Home in This World Anymore. Dir. Macon Blair. Perf. Melanie Lynskey, Elijah Wood, and Marilyn Faith Hickey. Film Science, 2017.

I Know What You Did Last Summer. Dir. Jim Gillespie. Perf. Jennifer Love Hewitt, Sarah Michelle Gellar, and Ryan Phillippe. Mandalay Entertainment, 1997.

The Imitation Game. Dir. Morten Tyldum. Perf. Benedict Cumberbatch, Keira Knightley, and Matthew Goode. Black Bear Pictures, 2014.

In & Out. Dir. Frank Oz. Perf. Kevin Kline, Joan Cusack, and Tom Selleck. Paramount Pictures, 1997.

India Blues: Eight Feelings. Dir. George Markakis. Perf. Christoph Forny and Yiannis Kolios. Cornelsen Films, 2013.

L'Inconnu du Lac. Dir. Alain Guiraudie. Perf. Pierre Deladonchamps, Christophe Paou, and Patrick d'Assumçao. Arte France Cinéma, 2013.

Interior. Leather Bar. Dir. James Franco & Travis Matthews. Perf. Val Lauren, Christian Patrick, and James Franco. RabbitBandini Productions, 2013.

In the Realm of the Senses. Dir. Nagisa Ôshima. Perf. Tatsuya Fuji, Eiko Matsuda, and Aoi Nakajima. Argos Films, 1976.

The Incredibly True Adventures of Two Girls in Love. Dir. Maria Maggenti. Perf. Laurel Holloman, Nicole Ari Parker, and Maggie Moore. Fine Line Features, 1995.

Intimacy. Dir. Patrice Chéreau. Perf. Mark Rylance, Kerry Fox, and Susannah Harker. Téléma, 2001.

Invasion of the Body Snatchers. Dir. Don Siegel. Perf. Kevin McCarthy, Dana Wynter, Larry Gates. Walter Wanger Productions, 1956.

It Is Not the Homosexual Who Is Perverse, But the Society in Which He Lives. Dir. Rosa von Praunheim. Perf. Bernd Feuerhelm, Berryt Bohlen, and Ernst Kuchling. Bavaria Atelier, 1971.

I Want Your Love. Dir. Travis Mathews. Perf. Jesse Metzger and Brenden Gregory. Naked Sword, 2010.

I Want Your Love. Dir. Travis Mathews. Perf. Jesse Metzger, Brontez Purnell, and Ben Jasper. Naked Sword, 2012.

I Was a Teenage Frankenstein. Dir. Herbert L. Strock. Perf. Whit Bissell, Phyllis Coates, Robert Burton. American International Pictures, 1957.

I Was a Teenage Werewolf. Dir. Gene Fowler Jr.. Perf. Michael Landon, Yvonne Lime, and Whit Bissell. American International Pictures, 1957.

It's My Party. Dir. Randal Kleiser. Perf. Margaret Cho, Bruce Davison, and Lee Grant. Opala Productions, 1996.

It Wasn't Love. Dir. Sadie Benning. 1992.

J'ai Tué Ma Mère. Dir. Xavier Dolan. Perf. Anne Dorval, Xavier Dolan, and François Arnaud. Mifilifilms, 2009.

Jaws. Dir. Steven Spielberg. Perf. Roy Scheider, Robert Shaw, and Richard Dreyfuss. Universal Pictures, 1975.

Jeffrey. Dir. Christopher Ashley. Perf. Steven Weber, Michael T. Weiss, Peter Jacobson. The Booking Office, 1995.

Johnny Guitar. Dir. Nicholas Ray. Perf. Joan Crawford, Sterling Hayden, and Mercedes McCambridge. Republic Pictures, 1954.

Jongens. Dir. Mischa Kamp. Perf. Gijs Blom, Ko Zandvliet, and Jonas Smulders. Pupkin Film, 2014.

Joshua Tree, 1951: A Portrait of James Dean. Dir. Matthew Mishory. Perf. James Preston, Dan Glenn, and Clare Grant. Iconoclastic Features, 2012.

Jours de France. Dir. Jérôme Reybaud. Perf. Pascal Cervo, Arthur Igual, and Fabienne Babe. Chaz Productions, 2016.

Die Jungfrauenmachine. Dir. Monika Treut. Perf. Ina Blum, Marcelo Uriona, and Gad Klein. Hyena Films, 1988.

Juste la Fin du Monde. Dir. Xavier Dolan. Perf. Nathalie Baye, Vincent Cassel, and Marion Cotillard. MK2, 2016.

Kajillionaire. Dir. Miranda July. Perf. Richard Jenkins, Debra Winger, and Evan Rachel Wood. Annapurna Pictures, 2020.

Kater. Dir. Klaus Händl. Perf. Toni, Lukas Turtur, and Philipp Hochmair. Coop99 Filmproduktion, 2016.

Keep the Lights On. Dir. Ira Sachs. Perf. Thure Lindhardt, Zachary Booth, and Julianne Nicholson. Parts and Labor, 2012.

Khush. Dir. Pratibha Parmar. Kali Films, 1991.

A Kid Like Jake. Dir. Silas Howard. Perf. Claire Danes, Jim Parsons, and Octavia Spencer. XS Media, 2018.

Kids. Dir. Larry Clark. Perf. Leo Fitzpatrick, Justin Pierce, and Chloë Sevigny. Guys Upstairs, 1995.

The Kids Are All Right. Dir. Lisa Cholodenko. Perf. Annette Bening, Julianne Moore, and Mark Ruffalo. Focus Features, 2010.

Kinsey. Dir. Bill Condon. Perf. Liam Neeson, Laura Linney, and Chris O'Donnell. Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2004.

Kiss. Dir. Andy Warhol. Perf. Rufus Collins, Johnny Dodd, and Gerard Malanga. ItaloDVD, 1963.

The Kiss. Dir. Pen Densham. Perf. Joanna Pacula, Meredith Salenger, and Mimi Kuzyk. TriStar Pictures, 1988.

Lucía y el Sexo. Dir. Julio Medem. Perf. Paz Vega, Tristán Ulloa, and Najwa Nimri. Alicia Produce, 2001.

Labyrinth. Dir. Jim Henson. Perf. David Bowie, Jennifer Connelly, and Toby Froud. TriStar Pictures, 1986.

Ladder 49. Dir. Jay Russell. Perf. Joaquin Phoenix, John Travolta, and Jacinda Barrett. Touchstone Pictures, 2004.

Ladri di Biciclette. Dir. Vittorio de Sica. Perf. Lamberto Maggiorani, Enzo Staiola, and Lianella Carell. Produzioni De Sica, 1948.

Last Tango in Paris. Dir. Bernardo Bertolucci. Perf. Marlon Brando, Maria Schneider, and Maria Michi. Produzioni Europee Associate, 1972.

The Last Temptation of Christ. Dir. Martin Scorsese. Perf. J Willem Dafoe, Harvey Keitel, and Barbara Hershey. Universal Pictures, 1988.

Laurence Anyways. Dir. Xavier Dolan. Perf. Melvil Poupaud, Emmanuel Schwartz, and Suzanne Clément. MK2 Productions, 2012.

Lianna. Dir. John Sayles. Perf. Linda Griffiths, Jane Hallaren, and Jon DeVries. Winwood Productions, 1983.

Liberace: Behind the Music. Dir. David Greene. Perf. Victor Garber, Saul Rubinek, and Michael Dolan. Kushner-Locke Company, 1988.

Lie With Me. Dir. Clement Virgo. Perf. Lauren Lee Smith, Eric Balfour, and Polly Shannon. Conquering Lion Pictures, 2005.

Lilting. Dir. Hong Khaou. Perf. Pei-Pei Cheng, Ben Whishaw, and Andrew Leung. London Film Productions, 2014.

Little Ashes. Dir. Paul Morrison. Perf. Javier Beltrán, Robert Pattinson, and Matthew McNulty. APT Films, 2008.

The Living End. Dir. Gregg Araki. Perf. Mike Dytri, Craig Gilmore, and Mark Finch. Desperate Pictures, 1992.

Loev. Dir. Sudhanshu Saria. Perf. Dhruv Ganesh, Siddharth Menon, and Shiv Panditt. Bombay Berlin Film Productions, 2015.

Loggerheads. Dir. Tim Kirkman. Perf. Kip Pardue, Michael Kelly, and Tess Harper. Bombay 120dB Films, 2005.

Lola + Bilidikid. Dir. Kutlug Ataman. Perf. Gandi Mukli, Baki Davrak, and Erdal Yildiz. Boje Buck Produktion, 1999.

Lonesome Cowboys. Dir. Andy Warhol & Paul Morrissey. Perf. Viva, Tom Hompertz, and Louis Waldon. Andy Warhol Films, 1968.

Long-Term Relationship. Dir. Rob Williams. Perf. Matthew Montgomery, Windham Beacham, and Artie O'Daly. Guest House Films, 2006.

Longtime Companion. Dir. Norman René. Perf. Stephen Caffrey, Patrick Cassidy, and Brian Cousins. American Playhouse, 1989.

Looking for Langston. Dir. Isaac Julien. Perf. Ben Ellison, Matthew Baidoo, and Akim Mogaji. British Film Institute, 1989.

Looking for Mr. Goodbar. Dir. Richard Brooks. Perf. Diane Keaton, Richard Gere, and Tuesday Weld. Paramount Pictures, 1977.

The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring. Dir. Peter Jackson. Perf. Elijah Wood, Ian McKellen, and Viggo Mortensen. New Line Cinema, 2001.

The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers. Dir. Peter Jackson. Perf. Elijah Wood, Ian McKellen, and Viggo Mortensen. New Line Cinema, 2002.

The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King. Dir. Peter Jackson. Perf. Elijah Wood, Ian McKellen, and Viggo Mortensen. New Line Cinema, 2003.

Lost River. Dir. Ryan Gosling. Perf. Christina Hendricks, Iain De Caestecker, and Saoirse Ronan. Bold Films, 2014.

Lot in Sodom. Dir. James Sibley Watson & Melville Webber. Perf. Friedrich Haak, Hildegarde Watson, and Dorthea House. 1933.

Love. Dir. Gaspar Noé. Perf. Aomi Muyock, Karl Glusman, and Klara Kristin. Les Cinémas de la Zone, 2015.

Love is Strange. Dir. Ira Sachs. Perf. John Lithgow, Alfred Molina, and Marisa Tomei. Parts and Labor, 2014.

Love Story. Dir. Arthur Hiller. Perf. Ali MacGraw, Ryan O'Neal, John Marley. Paramount Pictures, 1970.

Love, Simon. Dir. Greg Berlanti. Perf. Nick Robinson, Jennifer Garner, and Josh Duhamel. Fox 2000 Pictures, 2018.

Loving Annabelle. Dir. Katherine Brooks. Perf. Erin Kelly, Diane Gaidry, and Laura Breckenridge. Big Easy Pictures, 2006.

Love! Valour! Compassion! Dir. Joe Mantello. Perf. Jason Alexander, Stephen Spinella, and Stephen Bogardus. Krost/Chapin Productions, 1997.

Ludwig. Dir. Luchino Visconti. Perf. Helmut Berger, Romy Schneider, and Trevor Howard. Mega Film, 1973.

Made in U.S.A. Dir. Jean-Luc Godard. Perf. Anna Karina, László Szabó, and Jean-Pierre Léaud. Anouchka Films, 1966.

Magic Mike. Dir. Steven Soderbergh. Perf. Matthew McConaughey, Channing Tatum, and Olivia Munn. Iron Horse Entertainment, 2012.

Magic Mike XXL. Dir. Gregory Jacobs. Perf. Channing Tatum, Juan Piedrahita, and Sharon Blackwood. Warner Bros., 2015.

Making Love. Dir. Arthur Hiller. Perf. Michael Ontkean, Kate Jackson, Harry Hamlin. Twentieth Century Fox, 1982.

The Making of Monsters. Dir. John Greyson. Perf. Christopher Anderson, Stewart Arnott, and Lee MacDougall. Canadian Film Centre, 1991.

La Mala Educación. Dir. Pedro Almodóvar. Perf. Gael García Bernal, Fele Martínez, and Daniel Giménez Cacho. Canal+ España., 2004.

Mala Noche. Dir. Gus Van Sant. Perf. Tim Streeter, Doug Cooeyate, and Ray Monge. Criterion, 1986.

Manchester by the Sea. Dir. Kenneth Lonergan. Perf. Casey Affleck, Michelle Williams, and Kyle Chandler. Amazon Studios, 2016.

Mandy. Dir. Panos Cosmatos. Perf. Nicolas Cage, Andrea Riseborough, and Linus Roache. SpectreVision, 2018.

The Man with the Golden Arm. Dir. Otto Preminger. Perf. Frank Sinatra, Eleanor Parker, and Kim Novak. Carlyle Productions, 1955.

MASH. Dir. Robert Altman. Perf. Donald Sutherland, Elliott Gould, and Tom Skerritt. Twentieth Century Fox, 1970.

The Matrix. Dir. Lana Wachowski & Lilly Wachowski. Perf. Keanu Reeves, Laurence Fishburne, and Carrie-Anne Moss. Warner Bros., 1999.

The Matrix Reloaded. Dir. Lana Wachowski & Lilly Wachowski. Perf. Keanu Reeves, Laurence Fishburne, and Carrie-Anne Moss. Warner Bros., 2003.

The Matrix Revolutions. Dir. Lana Wachowski & Lilly Wachowski. Perf. Keanu Reeves, Laurence Fishburne, and Carrie-Anne Moss. Warner Bros., 2003.

The Matrix Resurrections. Dir. Lana Wachowski. Perf. Keanu Reeves, Carrie-Anne Moss, and Yahya Abdul-Mateen II. Warner Bros., 2021.

Memoria. Dir. Apichatpong Weerasethakul. Perf. Tilda Swinton, Agnes Brekke, and Daniel Giménez Cacho. Anna Sanders Films, 2021.

The Meeting of Two Queens. Dir. Cecilia Barriga. Perf. Marlene Dietrich and Greta Garbo. Amtea Audiovisuales, 1993.

Meshes of the Afternoon. Dir. Maya Deren. Perf. Maya Deren and Alexander Hammid. 1943.

Milk. Dir. Gus Van Sant. Perf. Sean Penn, Josh Brolin, and Emile Hirsch. Focus Features, 2008.

Midnight Cowboy. Dir. John Schlesinger. Perf. Dustin Hoffman, Jon Voight, and Sylvia Miles. Jerome Hellman Productions, 1969.

M/M. Dir. Drew Lint. Perf. Antoine Lahaie, Nicolas Maxim Endlicher, and Nina Kettiger. Film Forge, 2018.

Mommy. Dir. Xavier Dolan. Perf. Anne Dorval, Antoine Olivier Pilon, and Suzanne Clément. Les Films Seville, 2014.

Monster. Dir. Patty Jenkins. Perf. Charlize Theron, Christina Ricci, and Bruce Dern. Media 8 Entertainment, 2003.

The Moon Is Blue. Dir. Otto Preminger. Perf. William Holden, David Niven, and Maggie McNamara. Carlyle Productions, 1953.

Moonlight. Dir. Barry Jenkins. Perf. Mahershala Ali, Naomie Harris, and Trevante Rhodes. A24, 2016.

Morrer Como Um Homem. Dir. João Pedro Rodrigues. Perf. Chandra Malatitch, John Jesus Romão, and Ivo Barroso. Rosa Filmes, 2009.

Mosquita y Mari. Dir. Aurora Guerrero. Perf. Fenessa Pineda, Venecia Troncoso, and Joaquín Garrido. Indion Entertainment Group, 2012.

Una Mujer Fantástica. Dir. Sebastián Lelio. Perf. Daniela Vega, Francisco Reyes, and Luis Gnecco. Participant, 2017.

Mulholland Drive. Dir. David Lynch. Perf. Naomi Watts, Laura Harring, and Justin Theroux. Canal+, 2001.

Muscle Beach Party. Dir. William Asher. Perf. Frankie Avalon, Annette Funicello, and Luciana Paluzzi. American International Pictures, 1964.

My Beautiful Laundrette. Dir. Stephen Frears. Perf. Saeed Jaffrey, Roshan Seth, and Daniel Day-Lewis. Channel Four Films, 1985.

My Best Friend's Wedding. Dir. P.J. Hogan. Perf. Julia Roberts, Dermot Mulroney, and Cameron Diaz. TriStar Pictures, 1997.

My Dinner with Andre. Dir. Louis Malle. Perf. Andre Gregory, Wallace Shawn, and Jean Lenauer. Saga Productions Inc., 1981.

My Father is Coming. Dir. Monika Treut. Perf. Alfred Edel, Shelley Kästner, and Annie Sprinkle. Hyena Films, 1991.

My Hustler. Dir. Andy Warhol. Perf. Paul America, Joseph Campbell, Genevieve Charbon, and Ed Hood. Andy Warhol Films, 1965.

My Own Private Idaho. Dir. Gus Van Sant. Perf. River Phoenix, Keanu Reeves, and James Russo. New Line Cinema, 1991.

My Summer of Love. Dir. Pawel Pawlikowski. Perf. Natalie Press, Emily Blunt, and Paddy Considine. Apocalypso Pictures, 2004.

Nashville. Dir. Robert Altman. Perf. Keith Carradine, Karen Black, and Ronee Blakley. Paramount Pictures, 1975.

Naz & Maalik. Dir. Jay Dockendorf. Perf. Kerwin Johnson Jr., Curtiss Cook Jr., and Annie Grier. Pecking Wilds, 2015.

The Neon Demon. Dir. Nicolas Winding Refn. Perf. Elle Fanning, Karl Glusman, and Jena Malone. Space Rocket Nation, 2016.

The Next Best Thing. Dir. John Schlesinger. Perf. Madonna, Rupert Everett, and Benjamin Bratt. Lakeshore Entertainment, 2000.

Next Stop Greenwich Village. Dir. Paul Mazursky. Perf. Lenny Baker, Shelley Winters, and Ellen Greene. Twentieth Century Fox, 1976.

Nighthawks. Dir. Ron Peck. Perf. Ken Robertson, Tony Westrope, and Rachel Nicholas James. Nashburgh, 1978.

A Nightmare on Elm Street. Dir. Wes Craven. Perf. Heather Langenkamp, Johnny Depp, and Robert Englund. New Line Cinema, 1984.

Noah's Arc. Dir. Patrik-Ian Polk. Perf. Alistair Abell, Nate Adams, and Jennia Fredrique Aponte. Tall Skinny Black Boy Productions, 2004.

No Country for Old Men. Dir. Ethan Coen & Joel Coen. Perf. Tommy Lee Jones, Javier Bardem, and Josh Brolin. Miramax, 2007.

Normal. Dir. Jane Anderson. Perf. Richard Bull, Mary Seibel, and Danny Goldring. HBO Films, 2003.

The Normal Heart. Dir. Ryan Murphy. Perf. Mark Ruffalo, Jonathan Groff, and Frank De Julio. HBO Films, 2014.

No Skin Off My Ass. Dir. Bruce LaBruce. Perf. Bruce LaBruce, G.B. Jones, and Caroline Azar. Gaytown Pictures, 1991.

Nova Dubai. Dir. Gustavo Vinagre. Perf. Gustavo Vinagre, Bruno D'Ugo, and Hugo Guimarães. Avoa Filmes, 2014.

Nowhere. Dir. Gregg Araki. Perf. James Duval, Rachel True, and Nathan Bexton. Desperate Pictures, 1997.

The Nude Restaurant. Dir. Andy Warhol. Perf. Brigid Berlin, Julian Burrough, and Taylor Mead. Andy Warhol Films, 1967.

Les Nuits fauves. Dir. Cyril Collard. Perf. Cyril Collard, Romane Bohringer, and Carlos López. Banfilm, 1992.

Nymphomaniac Vol. I. Dir. Lars von Trier. Perf. Charlotte Gainsbourg, Stellan Skarsgård, and Stacy Martin. Zentropa Entertainments, 2013.

Nymphomaniac Vol. II. Dir. Lars von Trier. Perf. Charlotte Gainsbourg, Stellan Skarsgård, and Stacy Martin. Zentropa Entertainments, 2013.

The Object of My Affection. Dir. Nicholas Hytner. Perf. Jennifer Aniston, Paul Rudd, and Kali Rocha. Twentieth Century Fox, 1998.

Only God Forgives. Dir. Nicolas Winding Refn. Perf. Ryan Gosling, Kristin Scott Thomas, and Vithaya Pansringarm. Space Rocket Nation, 2013.

Orchids: My Intersex Adventure. Dir. Phoebe Hart. Perf. Phoebe Hart, Bonnie Hart, and James Davidson. Hartflicker Moving Pictures, 2010.

Our Sons. Dir. John Erman. Perf. Ann-Margret, Julie Andrews, and Hugh Grant. Robert Greenwald Productions, 1991.

Outrageous!. Dir. Richard Benner. Perf. Craig Russell, Hollis McLaren, and Richert Easley. Film Consortium of Canada, 1977.

Pariah. Dir. Dee Rees. Perf. Adepero Oduye, Kim Wayans, and Aasha Davis. Chicken And Egg Pictures, 2011.

Paris is Burning. Dir. Jennie Livingston. Perf. Brooke Xtravaganza, André Christian, and Dorian Corey. Art Matters Inc., 1990.

Parting Glances. Dir. Bill Sherwood. Perf. John Bolger, Richard Ganoung, and Steve Buscemi. Rondo Productions, 1986.

The Pass. Dir. Ben A. Williams. Perf. Russell Tovey, Arinzé Kene, and Lisa McGrillis. Toledo Productions, 2016.

Pepi, Luci, Bom y otras chicas del montón. Dir. Pedro Almodóvar. Perf. Carmen Maura, Félix Rotaeta, and Alaska. Fígaro Films, 1980.

Personal Best. Dir. Robert Towne. Perf. Mariel Hemingway, Scott Glenn, and Patrice Donnelly. The Geffen Company, 1982.

Philadelphia. Dir. Jonathan Demme. Perf. Tom Hanks, Denzel Washington, Antonio Banderas, and Joanne Woodward. TriStar Pictures, 1993.

Pieles. Dir. Eduardo Casanova. Perf. Ana Polvorosa, Carmen Machi, and Macarena Gómez. Nadie es Perfecto, 2017.

Pink Flamingos. Dir. John Waters. Perf. Divine, David Lochary, and Mary Vivian Pearce. Dreamland, 1972.

Pink Narcissus. Dir. James Bidgood. Perf. Don Brooks, Bobby Kendall, and Charles Ludlam. La Folie des Hommes, 1971.

Pix. Dir. Antonio da Silva. Antonio da Silva Films, 2014.

A Place Called Lovely. Dir. Sadie Benning. 1991.

Plan B. Dir. Marco Berger. Perf. Manuel Vignau, Lucas Ferraro, and Mercedes Quinteros. Rendez-vous Pictures, 2009.

Poison. Dir. Todd Haynes. Perf. Edith Meeks, Larry Maxwell, and Susan Norman. Killer Films, 1991.

Poppy Field. Dir. Eugen Jebeleanu. Perf. Conrad Mericoffer, Alexandru Potocean, and Radouan Leflahi. ICON production, 2020.

Porky's. Dir. Bob Clark. Perf. Dan Monahan, Mark Herrier, and Wyatt Knight. Astral Bellevue Pathé, 1981.

Portrait of a Lady on Fire. Dir. Céline Sciamma. Perf. Noémie Merlant, Adèle Haenel, and Luàna Bajrami. Lilies Films, 2019.

Postcards from America. Dir. Steve McLean. Perf. James Lyons, Michael Tighe, and Olmo Tighe. Channel Four Films, 1994.

The Power of the Dog. Dir. Jane Campion. Perf. Benedict Cumberbatch, Geneviève Lemon, and Jesse Plemons. Cross City Films, 2021.

Praia do Futuro. Dir. Karim Aïnouz. Perf. Wagner Moura, Clemens Schick, and Jesuíta Barbosa. Coração da Selva, 2014.

Present Perfect. Dir. Anusorn Soisa-Ngim. Perf. Kritsana Maroukasonti, Priyada Sittachai, and Anusorn Soisa-Ngim. Commetive Production, 2017.

Prick Up Your Ears. Dir. Stephen Frears. Perf. Gary Oldman, Alfred Molina, and Vanessa Redgrave. Zenith Entertainment, 1987.

Pride. Dir. Matthew Warchus. Perf. Ben Schnetzer, Abram Rooney, and Jim McManus. Pathe UK, 2014.

Psycho. Dir. Alfred Hitchcock. Perf. Anthony Perkins, Janet Leigh, and Vera Miles. Shamley Productions, 1960.

Pull My Daisy. Dir. Robert Frank & Alfred Leslie. Perf. Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and Gregory Corso. G-String Enterprises, 1959.

Pulp Fiction. Dir. Quentin Tarantino. Perf. John Travolta, Uma Thurman, and Samuel L. Jackson. Miramax, 1994.

Quand on a 17 ans. Dir. André Téchiné. Perf. Sandrine Kiberlain, Kacey Mottet Klein, and Corentin Fila. Fidélité Films, 2016.

Querelle. Dir. Rainer Werner Fassbinder. Perf. Brad Davis, Franco Nero, and Jeanne Moreau. Planet Film, 1982.

Rafiki. Dir. Wanuri Kahiu. Perf. Samantha Mugatsia, Neville Misati, and Nice Githinji. Les Big World Cinema, 2018.

The Raspberry Reich. Dir. Bruce LaBruce. Perf. Susanne Sachße, Daniel Bätscher, and Andreas Stich. Jürgen Brüning Filmproduktion, 2004.

Reaching for the Moon. Dir. Bruno Barreto. Perf. Glória Pires, Miranda Otto, and Tracy Middendorf. LC Barreto Productions, 2013.

Recordações da Casa Amarela. Dir. João César Monteiro. Perf. João César Monteiro, Manuela de Freitas, and Ruy Furtado. Invicta Filmes, 1989.

Red River. Dir. Howard Hawks and Arthur Rosson. Perf. John Wayne, Montgomery Clift, and Joanne Dru. Monterey Productions, 1948.

Reforma. Dir. Fábio Leal. Perf. Fábio Leal, Mariah Teixeira, and Paulo César Freire. Ponte Produções, 2018.

Rent. Dir. Chris Columbus. Perf. Anthony Rapp, Adam Pascal, and Rosario Dawson. Rent Productions LLC, 2005.

Return of the Secausus Seven. Dir. John Sayles. Perf. Bruce MacDonald, Maggie Renzi, and Adam LeFevre. Salsipuedes Productions, 1979.

The Revolution Is My Boyfriend. Dir. Bruce La Bruce. Perf. Susanne Sachße, Daniel Bätscher, and Andreas Stich. Jürgen Brüning Filmproduktion, 2004.

River's Edge. Dir. Tim Hunter. Perf. Crispin Glover, Keanu Reeves, and Ione Skye. Hemdale, 1986.

Rocketman. Dir. Dexter Fletcher. Perf. Taron Egerton, Jamie Bell, and Richard Madden. Paramount Pictures, 2019.

Roma. Dir. Alfonso Cuarón. Perf. Yalitza Aparicio, Marina de Tavira, and Diego Cortina Autrey. Netflix, 2018.

Rope. Dir. Alfred Hitchcock. Perf. James Stewart, John Dall, and Farley Granger. Warner Bros., 1948.

Les Roseaux sauvages. Dir. André Téchiné. Perf. Élodie Bouchez, Gaël Morel, and Stéphane Rideau. Ima Films, 1994.

Robocop. Dir. Paul Verhoeven. Perf. Peter Weller, Nancy Allen, and Dan O'Herlihy. The Orion Pictures, 1987.

Rökkur. Dir. Erlingur Óttar Thoroddsen. Perf. Björn Stefánsson, Sigurður Þór Óskarsson, and Guðmundur Ólafsson. Hero Productions, 2017.

Roma Città Aperta. Dir. Roberto Rossellini. Perf. Anna Magnani, Aldo Fabrizi, and Marcello Pagliero. Excelsa Film, 1945.

Romance. Dir. Catherine Breillat. Perf. Caroline Ducey, Sagamore Stévenin, and François Berléand. Flach Film, 1999.

Rose Hobart. Dir. Joseph Cornell. Perf. Charles Bickford, Rose Hobart, and Noble Johnson. 1936.

Rosemary's Baby. Dir. Roman Polanski. Perf. Mia Farrow, John Cassavetes, and Ruth Gordon. William Castle Productions, 1968.

R.S.V.P. Dir. Laurie Lynd. Perf. Ross Manson, Daniel MacIvor, and Ferne Downey. Miracle Pictures, 1992.

The Ryan White Story. Dir. John Herzfeld. Perf. Judith Light, Lukas Haas, and Michael Bowen. Landsburg Company, 1989.

Saboteur. Dir. Alfred Hitchcock. Perf. Priscilla Lane, Robert Cummings, and Otto Kruger. Universal Pictures, 1942.

Safe. Dir. Todd Haynes. Perf. Julianne Moore, Xander Berkeley, and Dean Norris. Killer Films, 1995.

St. Elmo's Fire. Dir. Joel Schumacher. Perf. Demi Moore, Rob Lowe, and Andrew McCarthy. Columbia Pictures, 1985.

Le Sang d'un Poète. Dir. Jean Cocteau. Perf. Enrique Rivero, Elizabeth Lee Miller, and Pauline Carton. Vicomte de Noailles, 1930.

Saturday Night and Sunday Morning. Dir. Karel Reisz. Perf. J Albert Finney, Shirley Anne Field, and Rachel Roberts. Woodfall Film Productions, 1960.

Saving Face. Dir. Alice Wu. Perf. Joan Chen, Michelle Krusiec, and Lynn Chen. Destination Films, 2004.

Scorpio Rising. Dir. Kenneth Anger. Perf. Ernie Allo, Bruce Byron, and Frank Carifi. Puck Film Productions, 1963.

Scream. Dir. Wes Craven. Perf. Neve Campbell, Courteney Cox, and David Arquette. Woods Entertainment, 1996.

Sebastiane. Dir. Derek Jarman. Perf. Leonardo Treviglio, Barney James, and Neil Kennedy. Cinegate, 1976.

A Seita. Dir. André Antônio. Perf. Sócrates Alexandre, Felipe Araújo, and Júlio Emílio. Surto e Deslumbramento, 2015.

The Sergeant. Dir. John Flynn. Perf. Rod Steiger, John Phillip Law, and Ludmila Mikaël. Robert Wise Productions, 1968.

Serodiscordantes. Dir. Noel Alejandro. Perf. Alejandría Cinque and Cachorro Lozano. Noel Alejandro, 2019.

Sex, Lies, and Videotape. Dir. Steven Soderbergh. Perf. James Spader, Andie MacDowell, and Peter Gallagher. Outlaw Productions, 1989.

Shadows. Dir. John Cassavetes. Perf. Ben Carruthers, Lelia Goldoni, and Hugh Hurd. Lion International, 1958.

She's Gotta Have It. Dir. Spike Lee. Perf. Tracy Camilla Johns, and Tommy Redmond Hicks. 40 Acres & A Mule Filmworks, 1986.

Shortbus. Dir. John Cameron Mitchell. Perf. Sook-Yin Lee, Peter Stickles, and PJ DeBoy. THINKFilm, 2006.

A Single Man. Dir. Tom Ford. Perf. Colin Firth, Julianne Moore, and Matthew Goode. Fade to Black Productions, 2009.

The Silence of the Lambs. Dir. Jonathan Demme. Perf. Jodie Foster, Anthony Hopkins, and Lawrence A. Bonney. Strong Heart/Demme Production, 1991.

Sister My Sister. Dir. Nancy Meckler. Perf. Julie Walters, Joely Richardson, and Jodhi May. Channel Four Films, 1994.

Sisters. Dir. Brian De Palma. Perf. Margot Kidder, Jennifer Salt, and Charles Durning. American International Pictures, 1973.

The Skeleton Twins. Dir. Craig Johnson. Perf. Kristen Wiig, Bill Hader, and Luke Wilson. Duplass Brothers Productions, 2014.

Sleep. Dir. Andy Warhol. Perf. John Giorno. 1964.

Smithereens. Dir. Susan Seidelman. Perf. Susan Berman, Brad Rijn, and Richard Hell. Domestic Productions, 1982.

Soldier's Girl. Dir. Frank Pierson. Perf. Troy Garity, Lee Pace, and Andre Braugher. Bachrach/Gottlieb Productions, 2019.

Some Came Running. Dir. Vincente Minnelli. Perf. Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, and Shirley MacLaine. Sol C. Siegel Productions, 1958.

Some of my Best Friends Are…. Dir. Mervyn Nelson. Perf. Tom Bade, James Murdock, and Paul Blake. Bachrach/Gottlieb Productions, 1971.

Something Must Break. Dir. Ester Martin Bergsmark. Perf. Saga Becker, Iggy Malmborg, and Shima Niavarani. Garagefilm International, 2014.

Song of the Loon. Dir. Andrew Herbert & Scott Hanson. Perf. John Iverson, Morgan Royce, and Lancer Ward. Sawyer Productions, 1970.

Spa Night. Dir. Andrew Ahn. Perf. Joe Seo, Youn Ho Cho, Haerry Kim. Nonetheless Productions, 2016.

Spider-Man. Dir. Sam Raimi. Perf. Tobey Maguire, Kirsten Dunst, and Willem Dafoe. Columbia Pictures, 2002.

Splendor. Dir. Gregg Araki. Perf. Kathleen Robertson, Johnathon Schaech, and Matt Keeslar. Desperate Pictures, 1999.

Spork. Dir. J.B. Ghuman Jr. Perf. Savannah Stehlin, Rodney Eastman, and Robert Bradvica. Last Bastion Entertainment, 2010.

Spring Breakers. Dir. Harmony Korine. Perf. James Franco, Selena Gomez, and Vanessa Hudgens. Muse Productions, 2012.

Spunk. Dir. Antonio da Silva. Perf. Rowland Byass, Alexi Carpentieri, and Brendan Healy. Antonio da Silva Films, 2015.

Staircase. Dir. Stanley Donen. Perf. Rex Harrison, Richard Burton, and Cathleen Nesbitt. Stanley Donen Films, 1969.

Star Wars: Episode I - The Phantom Menace. Dir. George Lucas. Perf. Ewan McGregor, Liam Neeson, and Natalie Portman. Lucasfilm, 1999.

Star Wars: Episode IV - A New Hope. Dir. George Lucas. Perf. Mark Hamill, Harrison Ford, and Carrie Fisher. Lucasfilm, 1977.

Star!. Dir. Robert Wise. Perf. Julie Andrews, Richard Crenna, and Michael Craig. Twentieth Century Fox, 1968.

Stonewall. Dir. Roland Emmerich. Perf. Jeremy Irvine, Jonny Beauchamp, and Joey King. Centropolis Entertainment, 2015.

Stranger than Paradise. Dir. Jim Jarmusch. Perf. John Lurie, Eszter Balint, and Richard Edson. Cinesthesia Productions, 1984.

Strong Island. Dir. Yance Ford. Perf. Yance Ford, Harvey Walker, and Kevin Myers. Yanceville Films, 2017.

Sudden Impact. Dir. Clint Eastwood. Perf. Clint Eastwood, Sondra Locke, and Pat Hingle. Warner Bros., 1983. DVD.

Sunday Bloody Sunday. Dir. John Schlesinger. Perf. Peter Finch, Glenda Jackson, and Murray Head. Vectia, 1971.

Sunset Boulevard. Dir. Billy Wilder. Perf. William Holden, Gloria Swanson, and Erich von Stroheim. Paramount Pictures, 1950.

Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story. Dir. Todd Haynes. Perf. Merrill Gruver, Michael Edwards, and Melissa Brown. Iced Tea Productions, 1987.

Sweet Home Alabama. Dir. Andy Tennant. Perf. Reese Witherspoon, Patrick Dempsey, and Josh Lucas. Touchstone Pictures, 2002.

Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song. Dir. Melvin Van Peebles. Perf. Melvin Van Peebles, Simon Chuckster, Hubert Scales. Yeah, 1971.

Swoon. Dir. Tom Kalin. Perf. Daniel Schlachet, Craig Chester, and Ron Vawter. American Playhouse, 1992.

The Talented Mr. Ripley. Dir. Anthony Minghella. Perf. Matt Damon, Gwyneth Paltrow, and Jude Law. Miramax, 1999.

Tan de Repente. Dir. Diego Lerman. Perf. Tatiana Saphir, Carla Crespo, and Veronica Hassan. Hubert Bals Fund, 2002.

Tangerine. Dir. Sean Baker. Perf. Kitana Kiki Rodriguez, Mya Taylor, and Karren Karagulian. Duplass Brothers Productions, 2015.

Tarnation. Dir. Jonathan Caouette. Perf. Jonathan Caouette, Renee Leblanc, and Adolph Davis. Tarnation Films, 2003.

Taxi Driver. Dir. Martin Scorsese. Perf. Robert De Niro, Jodie Foster, and Cybill Shepherd. Columbia Pictures, 1976.

Taxi zum Klo. Dir. Frank Ripploh. Perf. Frank Ripploh, Bernd Broaderup, and Orpha Termin. Exportfilm Bischoff & Co., 1980.

Tea and Sympathy. Dir. Vincente Minnelli. Perf. Deborah Kerr, John Kerr, and Leif Erickson. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1956.

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. Dir. Steve Barron. Perf. Judith Hoag, Elias Koteas, and Josh Pais. New Line Cinema, 1990.

Tell Me That You Love Me, Junie Moon. Dir. Otto Preminger. Perf. Liza Minnelli, Wayne Tippit, and Guy Sorel. Otto Preminger Films, 1970.

Teorema. Dir. Pier Paolo Pasolini. Perf. Silvana Mangano, Terence Stamp, and Massimo Girotti. Aetos Produzioni Cinematografiche, 1968.

The Terminator. Dir. James Cameron. Perf. Arnold Schwarzenegger, Linda Hamilton, and Michael Biehn. Hemdale, 1984.

Terminator 2: Judgment Day. Dir. James Cameron. Perf. Arnold Schwarzenegger, Linda Hamilton, and Edward Furlong. Carolco Pictures, 1991.

La Terra Trema. Dir. Luchino Visconti. Perf. Luchino Visconti, Antonio Pietrangeli, and Antonio Arcidiacono. Universalia Film, 1948.

Test. Dir. Chris Mason Johnson. Perf. Scott Marlowe, Matthew Risch, and Evan Boomer. Last Serious Productions, 2013.

That Touch of Mink. Dir. Delbert Mann. Perf. Cary Grant, Doris Day, and Gig Young. Granley Company, 1962.

Thelma & Louise. Dir. Ridley Scott. Perf. Susan Sarandon, Geena Davis, and Harvey Keitel. Pathé Entertainment, 1991.

Them! Dir. Gordon Douglas. Perf. James Whitmore, Edmund Gwenn, Joan Weldon.Warner Bros. Pictures, 1954.

Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau. Dir. Olivier Ducastel & Jacques Martineau. Perf. Mario Fanfani, Geoffrey Couët, and François Nambot. Ecce Films, 2016.

There Will be Blood. Dir. Paul Thomas Anderson. Perf. Daniel Day-Lewis, Paul Dano, and Ciarán Hinds. Miramax, 2007.

They. Dir. Anahita Ghazvinizadeh. Perf. Rhys Fehrenbacher, Kooyar Hosseini Golkou, and Nicole Coffineau. Mass Ornament Films, 2017.

The Thing. Dir. John Carpenter. Perf. Kurt Russell, Wilford Brimley, and Keith David. Universal Pictures, 1982.

A Thousand Clouds of Peace. Dir. Julián Hernández. Perf. Juan Carlos Ortuño, Juan Carlos Torres, and Salvador Alvarez. Nubes Cine, 2003.

Tinta Bruta. Dir. Filipe Matzembacher & Marcio Reolon. Perf. Shico Menegat, Bruno Fernandes, and Guega Peixoto. Avante Filmes, 2018.

Titane. Dir. Julia Ducournau. Perf. Vincent Lindon, Agathe Rousselle, and Garance Marillier. Kazak Productions, 2021.

To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar. Dir. Beeban Kidron. Perf. Wesley Snipes, Patrick Swayze, and John Leguizamo. Universal Pictures, 1995.

Tom à la Ferme. Dir. Xavier Dolan. Perf. Xavier Dolan, Pierre-Yves Cardinal, and Lise Roy. MK2 Productions, 2013.

Tomboy. Dir. Céline Sciamma. Perf. Zoé Héran, Malonn Lévana, and Jeanne Disson. Hold Up Films, 2011.

Tongue's Untied. Dir. Marlon Riggs. Perf. Marlon Riggs, Michael Bell, and Kerrigan Black. Signifyin' Works, 1989.

Toni. Dir. Jean Renoir. Perf. Charles Blavette, Celia Montalván, and Jenny Hélia. Les Films Marcel Pagnol, 1935.

Tootsie. Dir. Sydney Pollack. Perf. Dustin Hoffman, Jessica Lange, and Teri Garr. Columbia Pictures, 1982.

Totally Fucked Up. Dir. Gregg Araki. Perf. James Duval, Roko Belic, and Susan Behshid. Desperate Pictures, 1993.

Touch of Pink. Dir. Ian Iqbal Rashid. Perf. Jimi Mistry, Kris Holden-Ried, and Suleka Mathew. Martin Pope Productions, 2004.

Toy Story. Dir. John Lasseter. Perf. Tom Hanks, Tim Allen, and Don Rickles. Pixar Animation Studios, 1995.

Transamerica. Dir. Duncan Tucker. Perf. Felicity Huffman, Kevin Zegers, and Fionnula Flanagan. Belladonna Productions, 2005.

Transformers. Dir. Michael Bay. Perf. Shia LaBeouf, Megan Fox, and Josh Duhamel. DreamWorks, 2007.

Trash. Dir. Paul Morrissey. Perf. Joe Dallesandro, Holly Woodlawn, and Geri Miller. Filmfactory, 1970.

Tropical Malady. Dir. Apichatpong Weerasethakul. Perf. Banlop Lomnoi, Sakda Kaewbuadee, and Huai Dessom. Backup Media, 2004.

True Love. Dir. Nancy Savoca. Perf. Annabella Sciorra, Ron Eldard, and Aida Turturro. United Artists, 1989.

Twilight's Kiss. Dir. Ray Yeung. Perf. Tai-Bo, Ben Yuen, and Patra Au. New Voice Film Productions, 2019.

Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives. Dir. Apichatpong Weerasethakul. Perf. Thanapat Saisaymar, Jenjira Pongpas, and Sakda Kaewbuadee. Kick the Machine, 2010.

Under the Skin. Dir. Jonathan Glazer. Perf. Scarlett Johansson, Jeremy McWilliams, and Lynsey Taylor Mackay. Film4, 2013.

United in Anger: A History of ACT UP. Dir. Jim Hubbard. Perf. David Barr, Ken Bing, and Gregg Bordowitz. New York State Council on the Arts, 2012.

Up. Dir. Pete Docter & Bob Peterson. Perf. Edward Asner, Jordan Nagai, and John Ratzenberger. Pixar Animation Studios, 2009.

Urinal. Dir. John Greyson. Perf. Pauline Carey, Paul Bettis, and George Spelvin. Greyson Productions, 1988.

Vampire Lovers. Dir. Roy Ward Baker. Perf. Ingrid Pitt, Pippa Steel, and Madeline Smith. Hammer Films, 1970.

Vento Seco. Dir. Daniel Nolasco. Perf. Leandro Faria Lelo, Allan Jacinto Santana, and Renata Carvalho. Panaceia Filmes, 2020.

Vertigo. Dir. Alfred Hitchcock. Perf. James Stewart, Kim Novak, and Barbara Bel Geddes. Paramount Pictures, 1958.

A Very Natural Thing. Dir. Christopher Larkin. Perf. Robert McLane, Curt Gareth, and Bo White. Montage Creations, 1974.

Victim. Dir. Basil Dearden. Perf. Dirk Bogarde, Sylvia Syms, and Dennis Price. Allied Film Makers, 1961.

Victor/Victoria. Dir. Blake Edwards. Perf. Julie Andrews, James Garner, and Robert Preston. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1982.

Videodrome. Dir. David Cronenberg. Perf. James Woods, Sonja Smits, and Debbie Harry. The Filmplan International, 1983.

Vinyl. Dir. Andy Warhol. Perf. Tosh Carillo, Larry Latrae, and Gerard Malanga. 1965.

Voices from the Front. Dir. Sandra Elgear, Robyn Hutt, and David Meieran. Perf. Vito Russo, Larry Kramer, and Peter Staley. Testing the Limits, 1991.

A Walk on the Wild Side. Dir. Edward Dmytryk. Perf. Laurence Harvey, Capucine, and Jane Fonda. Famous Artists Productions, 1962.

Wanderer of the West. Dir. Robin Williamson. Perf. Kermit Maynard, Betty Caldwell, and Frank Clark. Trem Carr Pictures, 1927.

Warhol's Cinema 1963-1968: Mirror for the Sixties. Dir. Keith Griffiths. Perf. Brigid Berlin, Henry Geldzahler, J. Hoberman. Channel Four Films, 1989.

Water Lillies. Dir. Céline Sciamma. Perf. Pauline Acquart, Louise Blachère, and Adèle Haenel. Lilies Films, 2007.

The Watermelon Woman. Dir. Cheryl Dunye. Perf. Cheryl Dunye, Guinevere Turner, and Valarie Walker. Dancing Girl, 1996.

We Were Here. Dir. David Weissman & Bill Weber. Perf. Ed Wolf, Daniel Goldstein, and Guy Clark. Weissman Projects, 2011.

Weekend. Dir. Andrew Haigh. Perf. Tom Cullen, Chris New, and Jonathan Race. Glendale Picture Company, 2011.

Weekend. Dir. Jean-Luc Godard. Perf. Mireille Darc, Jean Yanne, and Jean-Pierre Kalfon. Comacico, 1967.

Werckmeister harmóniák. Dir. Béla Tarr. Perf. Lars Rudolph, Peter Fitz, and Hanna Schygulla. ARTE, 2000.

Westler. Dir. Wieland Speck. Perf. Sigurd Rachman, Rainer Strecker, and Andy Lucas. Searcher Film, 1985.

Westworld. Dir. Michael Crichton. Perf. Yul Brynner, Richard Benjamin, and James Brolin. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1973.

The Wild Angels. Dir. Roger Corman. Perf. Peter Fonda, Nancy Sinatra, and Bruce Dern. American International Pictures, 1984.

The Wild Bunch. Dir. Sam Peckinpah. Perf. William Holden, Ernest Borgnine, and Robert Ryan. Warner Brothers/Seven Arts, 1969.

Wildness. Dir. Wu Tsang. Perf. Zackary Drucker, Crazy Bitch in a Cave, and Mariana Marroquin. Class Productions, 2012.

The Wild One. Dir. Laslo Benedek. Perf. Marlon Brando, Mary Murphy, and Robert Keith. Stanley Kramer Productions, 1953.

Windows. Dir. Gordon Willis. Perf. Talia Shire, Joe Cortese, and Elizabeth Ashley. Mike Lobell Productions, 1980.

Women in Love. Dir. Ken Russell. Perf. Alan Bates, Oliver Reed, and Glenda Jackson. Brandywine Productions, 1969.

Women in Revolt. Dir. Paul Morrissey. Perf. Candy Darling, Jackie Curtis, and Holly Woodlawn. Score Movies Ltd., 1971.

Women Who Kill. Dir. Ingrid Jungermann. Perf. Annette O'Toole, Sheila Vand, and Grace Rex. FilmRise, 2016.

Word is Out. Dir. Nancy Adair, Andrew Brown, & Rob Epstein. Perf. Pat Bond, John Burnside, and Sally M. Gearhart. Mariposa Film Group, 1977.

The World According to Garp. Dir. George Roy Hill. Perf. Robin Williams, Mary Beth Hurt, and Glenn Close. Warner Bros., 1982.

Xenia. Dir. Panos H. Koutras. Perf. Kostas Nikouli, Nikos Gelia, and Giannis Stankoglou. 100% Synthetic Films, 2014.

You and the Night. Dir. Yann Gonzalez. Perf. Kate Moran, Niels Schneider, and Nicolas Maury. Sedna Films, 2013.

Young Soul Rebels. Dir. Isaac Julien. Perf. Valentine Nonyela, Mo Sesay, and Dorian Healy. British Film Institute, 1991.

Your Name Engraved Herein. Dir. Kuang-Hui Liu. Perf. Edward Chen, Jing-Hua Tseng, and Leon Dai. Netflix, 2020.

Zama. Dir. Lucrecia Martel. Perf. Daniel Giménez Cacho, Lola Dueñas, and Matheus Nachtergaele. Bananeira Filmes, 2017.

Zéro de Conduite. Dir. Jean Vigo. Perf. Jean Dasté, Robert le Flon, and Louis Lefebvre. Franfilmdis, 1933.

Zero Patience. Dir. John Greyson. Perf. John Robinson, Normand Fauteux, and Dianne Heatherington. Zero Patience Productions, 1993.

Zoolander. Dir. Ben Stiller. Perf. Ben Stiller, Owen Wilson, and Christine Taylor. Paramount Pictures, 2001.

Zorro: The Gay Blade. Dir. Peter Medak. Perf. George Hamilton, Lauren Hutton, and Brenda Vaccaro. Melvin Simon Productions, 1981.

Zurück auf Los!. Dir. Pierre Sanoussi-Bliss. Perf. Thilo Ackermann, Michael Ande, and Dieter Bach. Cinemien, 2000.

Television

Abbott, Michele, Ilene Chaiken, & Kathy Greenberg, creators. *The L Word*. Anonymous Content, 2004-2009.

Ball, Alan, creator. *Six Feet Under*. HBO, 2001-2005.

Barr, Roseanne & Matt Williams, writers. *Roseanne*. Wind Dancer Productions, 1988-2018.

Benioff, David & D.B. Weiss, creators. *Game of Thrones*. HBO, 2011-2019.

Black, Dustin Lance & Cleve Jones, writers. *When We Rise*. ABC Signature, 2017.

Canals, Steven, Brad Falchuk, and Ryan Murphy, creators. *Pose*. FX Network, 2018-2021.

Charles, RuPaul, creator. *RuPaul's Drag Race*. World of Wonder Productions, 2009-.

Collins, David, creator. *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. Bravo Original Production, 2003–2007.

Cowen, Ron & Daniel Lipman, creators. *Queer as Folk*. Cowlip Productions, 1999-2005.

Crane, David & Marta Kauffman, creators. *Friends*. Warner Bros. Television, 1994–2004.

Davies, Russell T., creator. *Queer as Folk*. Channel Four, 1999–2000.

---, creator. *It's a Sin*. Red Production Company, 2021.

Doganieri, Elise, Bertram van Munster, & Evan Weinstein, creators. *The Amazing Race*. ABC Signature, 2001-.

Harris, Susan, writer. *The Golden Girls*. Touchstone Television, 1985-1992.

Groening, Matt, creator. *The Simpsons*. 20th Gracie Films, 1989-.

Kohan, David & Max Mutchnick, creator. *Will & Grace*. KoMut Entertainment, 1998-2020.

Kohan, Jenji, creator. *Orange is the New Black*. Tilted Productions, 2013-2019.

Lannan, Michael, creator. *Looking*. Fair Harbor Productions, 2014-2015.

Levinson, Sam, creator. *Euphoria*. HBO, 2019-.

MacFarlane, Seth, creator. *Family Guy*. Fuzzy Door Productions, 1999-.

Murray, Jonathan and Mary-Ellis Bunim, creators. *The Real World*. MTV Studios, 1992-.

Nichols, Mike, director. *Angels in America*. HBO, 2003.

Parker, Trey & Matt Stone, creators. *South Park*. MTV Entertainment Studios, 1997-.

Parsons, Charlie, creator. *Survivor*. Mark Burnett Productions, 2000-.

Prestwich, Dawn & Nicole Yorkin, creators. *The Education of Max Bickford*. 20th Century Fox Television, 2001-2002.

Rosenthal, David S. Rosenthal, creator. *Ellen*. Black-Marlens Company, 1994-1998.

Soloway, Joey, creator. *Transparent*. Amazon Studios, 2014-2019.

Star, Darren, creator. *Beverly Hills, 90210*. 90210 Productions, 1990-2000.

Wachowski, Lana, Lilly Wachowski, and J. Michael Straczynski, creator. *Sense8*. Anarchos Productions, 2015-2018.

Whedon, Joss, creator. *Buffy*. Mutant Enemy, 1997–2003.

Williamson, Kevin, creator. *Dawson's Creek*. Outerbanks Entertainment, 1998–2003.

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