

The Monogamous/Promiscuous Optics in Contemporary Gay Film: Registering the Amorous Couple in *Weekend* (2011) and *Paris 05:59: Theo & Hugo* (2016)

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**Abstract:**

This article explores representations of same-sex intimacy in contemporary gay cinema by focusing on two films, namely *Weekend* (2011), and *Theo & Hugo* (2016). Both films spatialize intimacy, which is reflected in a formal appeal to monogamous and promiscuous optics. What interests us here is how the relational politics of monogamy/promiscuity can be considered as stylistic and ideological *registers* in gay filmmaking. Informed by Bersani's work, we investigate how gay cinema tests the social viability/intelligibility of same-sex intimacy against a centring of the self. Furthermore, we explore how gay films use form and style to situate both their politics and their spectators through spectacles of erotic relationality. Following Bersani, the article proposes a theory of a cinematic optics that privilege the impersonal over the personal, and the ontological over the psychological. The film *Weekend* 'ovalises' intimacy and locates the couple formally and ideologically. The couple in *Weekend*'s space of sociality operates within a monogamous optic that presents intimacy through stabilising identities and psychologising subject positions. *Theo and Hugo*, however, reorients spectatorship as impersonal and promiscuous in finding a way to express the experience of cruising and sociability in ways that are dispersed and extensible.

**Keywords:** Leo Bersani; film theory; intimacy; sex; gay cinema

## The Monogamous/Promiscuous Optics in Contemporary Gay Film: Registering the Amorous Couple in *Weekend* (2011) and *Paris 05:59: Theo & Hugo* (2016)

While Leo Bersani has frequently written about film, his contribution to film studies has yet to earn its due (Bersani and Dutoit 1980, 1993, 1999, 2004, 2009). Across a substantial body of work, Bersani's writing on film and arts (often in collaboration with Ulysse Dutoit) frequently argues *against* the concepts of identity, visibility, desire and intimacy. Familiar to film theory since the 1970s, identity, desire, and visibility are problematic terms for Bersani who locates a 'tyranny of the self' within these terms' self-centred, unilateral, appropriative, and annihilative address (Bersani 1990, 4). In *Forms of Being: Cinema, Aesthetics, Subjectivity*, Bersani and Dutoit theorise cinema *against* itself and argue that '*not being* has certain modes of visibility' that is evident in individual films by Godard, Almodovar, and Malick (2004, 3, authors' emphasis). If we can tease out a theory of Bersani's spectatorial '*not being*', then it would be a proposition for both undoing the centrality of the subject in/of spectatorship and the interpretation of film form against its known norms.

The films Bersani analyse (often with Dutoit) are those which challenge an easy understanding of character relations and their cinematic articulation on screen. These films register relations that are intimate but not defined by desire (*Confidences trop intimes* (2004) and *Beau travail* (1999)), incoherent in relation to narrative spaces (*Le mepris* (1963)), implicated within the difficulty of being in the world (*Safe* (1995) and *The Thin Red Line* (1998)), invested in cosmic reunification of the radically receptive embodiment (*Melancholia* (2010)), and constitutive of aesthetic rather than psychic attachments to the erotic and the sexual (*Salo* (1975)). A concern that unifies Bersani and Dutoit's writing on cinema is the overarching refusal to consider film as a 'reduction of the subject to an untroubled optical identity' (Bersani and Dutoit 1993, 159). This is an intervention against an optic grounded in distinct subject/object relations and clearly defined relations both within the film, and between the film and the spectator. With its 'promise of protected momentary intimacy,' Bersani and Dutoit suggest, 'film encourages us to believe in both the existence and the primordial importance of individuality' (2004, 8). Without naming such phenomena in a language specific to film theory, the scholars' confrontation with spectatorship and the [cinematic] apparatus locates a new ethics and optics of cinema that move away from

traditional arrangements of identities and desires anchored in subject-object and self-other relations: a film theory that would privilege the impersonal over the personal, the ontological over the psychological, sociability over society, and an aesthetic of sameness over an aesthetic of difference.

The appeal of Bersani's entire work, for others who have further developed his analytical paradigm, comes from the move away from 'the centrality of the subject' (Ricco 2002). The appeal to centrality has defined most Western thought about subjectivity - from philosophy to psychoanalysis including formative work in film studies around spectatorship and the apparatus. Both Tim Dean and John Paul Ricco prioritise Bersani's move away from the subject's centrality in their own theoretical frameworks. Ricco's work on queer space and architecture is defined by a 'homopseudonymic sociality', an 'erotics of the crowd' in which 'relationality is fabricated through a redundant and dissimulating sameness across the social' (Ricco 2002, 78). Dean, in his study of the subculture of barebacking, concludes his *Unlimited Intimacy* with an argument for cruising as an ethical imperative towards 'how one treats the other and, more specifically, how one treats his or her own otherness' (2009, 177). For Dean, 'opening oneself to the world', especially in the promiscuous sociality of cruising, 'entails a remarkably hospitable disposition towards strangers' (176).

Bersani's rethinking of the social and the relational is concerned with extending connections of the self through impersonal and dispersed experiences of contact with others/strangers, forming relations which move beyond the premise of identity-driven paradigms as the basis of a 'mode of sociality' (Ricco 2002, 78). This is important when it comes to love, sex, romance, and intimacy in the filmic representations of romantic screen couples. The formal and ideological configurations of intimacy are often based on notions of identity marked by sexuality, gender, class and so on, which has been a fertile ground for feminist and queer approaches in film studies by facilitating a critique of mainstream cinema's heteronormative logic. Our main aim is not to critique these identity-driven approaches (as they have at times been necessary) but to explore how cinema could potentially produce alternative optical registers in presenting different modes of intimacy, which we would like to conceptualise by treating monogamy and promiscuity as ideological forces that reify aesthetic practices in film and arts. For their use of 'register' as concept, Bersani and Dutoit suggest 'the individual

subject doesn't go from one register of being to another,' rather, registers are 'parallel modes or lines of being, alternative unfoldings of events that don't 'communicate' with one another but inaccurately replicate one another' (2004, 5). Constructions of romance and amorous relations in gay cinema provides us with parallel registers of monogamy/promiscuity and a rich context to understand Bersani's thought on relationality and gay specificity. This use of 'register' bridges his 'speculative essentialism' with his approach to film and arts as visual models of being (Tuhkanen 2018, 1-5).<sup>1</sup>

In 'Against Monogamy', Bersani argues that 'we are in a time of relational crisis' (Bersani 2009a, 87) through the privileging of marriage and the intimate couple championed by gay and lesbian politics. Bersani's discussion here is informed by the long-standing tension in gay politics between monogamy and promiscuity. In a re-reading of Freud, Bersani convincingly opposes monogamy primarily as a psychic retreat from the promiscuity which defines early oedipal life. This argument allows us to think about the ways in which monogamy as a societal and political model is based on a 'cult of difference' and a repression of promiscuity (Bersani 2009b, 34). Difference is an affective axis upon which the subject of desire, and by extension cinema, operates. In another key piece titled 'Is There a Gay Art?', Bersani elaborates on a promiscuous erotic of sameness that opposes 'the idea of sex as reinforcing an intimacy *à deux* ... to escape from the view of world' (2009b, 33). Our study will be capitalising upon this monogamy/promiscuity tension, which we will be considering as a tension ideologically embedded in cultural representations of gayness – cinema in particular.

The specificity in our reference to 'gay cinema' and 'gay film' is both a speculative and strategically essentialist move in contradistinction to the ways in which the post-1990s uses of the term queer attempt to revise and interrogate the identitarian regimes of gay and lesbian politics. This turn to 'gay' does not necessarily prioritise a contestation of the constructivist appropriations of what Ruby Rich defined as New Queer Cinema (NQC). However, as Rich also argued, the queerness of NQC implies a historically specific moment rather than an ongoing and enduring definition of gay and lesbian cinema (Rich 2013; Aaron 2004). Thus, we would like this study's framework to match with the specificity our chosen films address in their depiction of the contemporary experiences of gay sex and intimacy, which the use of queer, as the definitive marker of NQC's playful 'Homo Pomo' aesthetic,

would not effectively tackle with.

A key underpinning in our approach to sex, intimacy, love, and the couple in contemporary gay film is this dualistic tension between monogamy and promiscuity. This tension has informed the histories, communities, relationships, and politics of gay men since 'coming out' which is often conveniently, and also problematically, collapsed into the Stonewall riots of June 1969. One can observe that the post-Stonewall gay cinema has frequently explored this tension between the monogamous and the promiscuous in non-pornographic films.<sup>2</sup> Gay films and gay literature both dramatise *and* formalise what must now be considered an enduring tendency to see screen and literary relationships and the couple through this ideological framework.<sup>3</sup> After Stonewall, the AIDS crisis of the 1980s and 1990s is often used as a second historical and mythological marker of change for gay men in relation to monogamy, promiscuity, ideology, and politics. As Douglas Crimp summarises:

The narrative goes like this: gay liberation was our adolescence, a time when we were immature and irresponsible. Then AIDS came along and we grew up. We recognised the folly of our youthful ways and became responsible adults. AIDS civilised us. And being civilised, we now want to marry and raise children and be like everyone else (Crimp 2014, 35).

Contemporary debates about gay marriage, sexual relations, HIV stigma, chemoprophylaxis, public sex, and social legitimacy often depend on AIDS as a lesson learned in the pursuit of normativity and assimilation *vis a vis* monogamy/promiscuity, which Bersani refers to as the 'rush to respectability' (Bersani 1998, 85). 'AIDS' and the pathologizing rhetoric of homophobia that circulated around the pandemic is no longer a historical marker for many younger gay men coming of age after the 2000s. As Kane Race observes, 'the AIDS crisis created an unprecedented opportunity for the proliferation of aggressive forms of normativity that proffered as their ideological antidote to this disturbance ameliorating visions of benign and proper intimacy' (Race 2016, 1). While our argument capitalises upon two contemporary gay films that are post-AIDS, although not post-HIV, we still observe an ongoing ethical and ontological question around monogamy and promiscuity operating within the films as the 'internal disagreement and debate regarding sexual practice [that] have continuously contributed in crucial ways to the productive diversity, as well as the bitter

fragmentation, of gay cultural self-perception' (Gove 2000, 84). The historicity of modern gay subjectivity has been shaped by this enduring tension that views promiscuity as either a progressive question of liberation and freedom in sexual practices and alternative community formations or negatively as the root of a myriad of problems that compromise gay rights and gay acceptance.<sup>4</sup> Gay promiscuity has its own specificities but more generally promiscuity is often construed in a negative light particularly in relation to women and minorities with associations couched in misogynist and racist language. The history of promiscuity as a term is 'notoriously vague' according to Ben Gove (2000, 6). He goes on to say:

the word derives partly from the Latin *miscere*, meaning 'to mix', which is subsumed within promiscuous, meaning 'mixed' or 'indiscriminate'. True to the multiple connotations of 'mixing' and 'indiscriminacy', the term has, throughout its history, contained both derogatory and more unassuming meanings (6).

Within the Bersanian framework outlined above, we will explore representations of same-sex intimacy and love in contemporary gay film by focusing on two specific case studies, *Weekend* (Andrew Haigh, 2011), and *Paris 05:59 Theo & Hugo* (Oliver Ducastel and Jacques Martineau, 2016). *Weekend* and *Theo and Hugo* belong to a tranche of recent gay films that explore romantic relationships.<sup>5</sup> Informed by Bersani's work, we aim to question how these films test the social viability/intelligibility of same-sex intimacy that goes outside the normative frameworks of 'personhood', 'settled being', individuality, coupledness, romance, and domesticity. How do these films register and represent amorous relations, sexual desire, and the event of falling in love and/or of making love? How do these films situate us as spectators when exposing us to various spectacles of intimacy and erotic connection? How do they attach value to love and sex? How do these films draw distinctions or impose confusions and hierarchies upon different meanings of intimacy and relationality?

### **The Monogamous Optic and the Oval Couple:**

#### **Settling Amorous Connections in *Weekend* (2011)**

In an interview published in 1998, for a special issue dedicated to his work, Bersani provides an account of how he explores the aesthetics of subjectivity and relationality. Commenting

on his rapport with critical theory, Bersani says: 'there's always something funny in ... *walking along* with someone – it's slightly affectionate and slightly mocking at the same time. That strikes me as a very healthy combination, in order to avoid what I think is a very bad form of passion, when passion – either in sexual relations or even intellectual relations – comes to be obsession' (1998, 186). Locating obsession as a 'bad' form of attachment, Bersani continues: 'it may seem as if you lose yourself in that kind of passion but it's extremely self-affirming in a bad sense, an appropriative and tyrannical form of passion' (ibid.). These references to appropriative consciousness and the self-affirmative, differential logic of sameness/difference, are the recurring motifs in Bersani's conceptual thinking on love, intimacy, relationality and sexuality. In Bersani's thinking, monogamy becomes a 'bad' form of 'self-affirming' intimacy, where the subject appropriates the alterity of the other to form an intimate rapport.

What particularly interests us here is how monogamous relationality can be considered a *register* in gay filmmaking. By register, we refer to Bersani and Dutoit's quest for the formal correspondences in art, which may provide us with 'visual models ... [for] the vast community of *dispersed yet related* being' (2005, n.p., our emphasis). Using this approach to trace forms of relationality in arts that disperse subjectivity, we first would like to explore a cinematic rendering of a monogamously 'settled being' in coupling. Rather than seeking to corroborate Bersani's framework of relationality through a selection of films, this discussion will attempt to extend the mutual exchange between film/arts and thought within his relational aesthetic of subjectivity. To understand Bersani's 'cognitively inconceivable and morally indefensible' monogamy (2009a, 3), we first should delve into the ways in which being is settled through 'the humanising attributes of intimacy within a couple where the personhood of each partner is presumed to be expanded and enriched by the knowledge of the other' (Bersani and Phillips 2008, 53). Thus, in our analysis of Haigh's *Weekend*, we seek to identify a specific relational register in cinema, that locates the couple through an appropriative consciousness where love as an intimate connection is brought to vision from within a monogamous optic. This optic eliminates the promiscuous dispersion of the subject. *Weekend* effectively demonstrates how cinema 'subjectivises' monogamous coupling as a formal and affective register, which also reproduces a universalising, assimilationist, 'post-gay' rhetoric by

'assert[ing] but also downplaying [the alternative and dissident specificities of] sexual identity' (Davidson 2015, 140).<sup>6</sup>

Bersani's formulation of homoness 'breaks down ego boundaries instead of reinforcing them', which he considers as 'the renunciation of the couple's oval-like intimacy' (Bersani 2009b, 33). Although Haigh's *Weekend* contradicts Bersani's framework of homo-aesthetics and impersonal intimacy, the film functions as an example that demonstrates how an analytical approach that pursues different registers of the couple in gay filmmaking can tackle the relationality of a monogamous 'post-gay' cinema. Considering both Haigh's formal choices and *Weekend's* homonormative treatment of romance as the ideological default, we argue that the film's monogamous optic settles rather than disperses the subject-in-love through an 'oval-like intimacy'. To critically explore the film's construction of the amorous exchange and to compare it with *Theo and Hugo* provides us with an analytical framework that identifies diverse relational optics and ethics of love in contemporary gay film through interpreting patterns in style and questioning the representations of the intimate screen couple. The comparison between these two films does not necessarily propose an oppositional evaluative judgment or a binary formulation but explore how these films valorise intimacy and sex differently in their representations of the amorous couple, and how their valorisation aligns with monogamy and promiscuity.

Haigh's focus in *Weekend* is on how subjects, and their differences, clash when in love. The film introduces romantic attraction through personal differences and oppositions. The subject-who-is-in-love has no relational curiosity in the film's monogamous world of intimacy. Fixing its point of view, the film domesticates the couple. Its erotic investment is located within the amorous exchange of the subjects of romance, who are reduced to two defensive, concrete egos continuously projecting their fears and anxieties to each other. This relationality of antagonising differences in the film confines the couple in what Bersani regards as 'a private, exclusionary oval'. Exploring 'a certain sexual positioning' in Jean Genet's *Funeral Rites*, Bersani situates an impersonal mode of gay sex against the oval couple:

I emphasize a certain sexual positioning in his work *Funeral Rites*, a scene of two men fucking

in which Genet opposes lovemaking face to face (which, he writes, would have confined them in a private, exclusionary oval) to one man standing behind the partner he is penetrating, both of them forming something like the prow of a boat, looking into the darkness as one “looks into the future.” “Not loving one in the other,” Genet continues, “they were escaping from themselves over the world, in full view of the world, in a gesture of victory.” Victory, I would suggest, over the idea of sex as reinforcing an intimacy *à deux*, of using that oval to escape from the view of the world and of the future and to become instead absorbed by the always futile efforts to penetrate the other’s secrets, that is, the other’s desires. [...] The renunciation of the couple’s oval-like intimacy may be the precondition for a community in which relationality is a function of sameness rather than of hierarchical or antagonistic differences, a community in which we might be indifferent to difference, in which difference, instead of being the valued term, would be the nonthreatening supplement of sameness (Bersani 2009b, 33).

The differential, self-affirmative logic of the oval intimacy also resonates with Bersani’s conceptualisation of a culture of monogamy that produces and anchors ‘settled beings’ through coupling. Exploring Bersani’s stance against monogamy and criticising the critical interpretations of ‘Bersani’s destruction of the subject’ as ‘anti-social’, Heather Love reminds us of the significance of ‘spatialisation’ in Bersani’s thinking on sociability and gay desire. According to Love, Bersani is ‘concerned particularly with how structured hierarchical relations unfold in space’, and his ‘aesthetic subject ... [is] bound up with the concept of social space: the aesthetic functions to displace the subject by dispersing it into a social landscape that is concretely rendered’ (Love 2014, 39-40). Love reminds that there is a spatial specificity within what Bersani conceptualises as the sociability of queer subject. This focus on the spatialisation of desire matters a great deal in conceptualising monogamous/promiscuous optics in film. In alignment with Love’s approach to Bersani, we will focus on the operations of frame and space as tropes in *Weekend*, and explore how the film ‘ovalises’ intimacy and *where* it locates the couple representationally, formally and ideologically. This discussion will demonstrate the ways in which the unfolding of the screen couple in *Weekend’s* spaces of sociality operates within a monogamous optic.

Locating the film within the post-Thatcher revival of ‘British queer cinema’, Robin Griffiths suggests that ‘*Weekend’s* interrogation of gay identity in the new millennium’ is significantly

underpinned by a '(re)negotiat[ion of] radical queer politics in the face of neoliberalism' (2016, 597). Prioritising the film's politics of representation within a national cinema context, Griffiths's analysis provides an incisive critique of the ways in which the film's discursive framework reveals 'the political stakes and effects of assimilation versus transgression [in contemporary neoliberal Britain]' by treating the 'opposing functional roles ... [of its] romantic protagonists' as central narrative motors (598). Using a similar analytical approach that prioritises representation and the contextual specificity of national cinema, Clinton Glenn suggests the ways in which *Weekend's* use of narrative and style operates as a contemporary example of British social realism and of its poetic appropriations introduced by the new generation of contemporary auteurs including Andrea Arnold and Lynne Ramsay (Glenn 2014). While we acknowledge the significance of these scholars' work in examining the national and ideological markers of *Weekend's* construction of the screen couple, which contribute to the film's spatial organisation of desire, our discussion prioritises an analytical framework that attempts to examine closely the cinematic function and location of the gay couple on screen and to investigate relational modes in contemporary gay film by tracing where and when the monogamous/promiscuous and personal/impersonal modes of intimate exchange appear.

The monogamous optic in *Weekend's* relational field is constructed through a cinematographic operation of immobility and flight, and that of proximity and distance. This duality is reinforced through an expressive use of *mise-en-scène* and framing, the organisation of shots, and the repeated moments of the oval-like intimacy shared by the couple. The 'opposing functional roles' of Russell and Glen, and the treatment of Russell's point of view as an affective default, match with the film's engagement with immobility/flight, interior/exterior, private/public, personal/impersonal and monogamous/promiscuous. The immobility of the camera, its focus on the domestic interiors, and the personalisation of Russell as the site of spectatorial empathy/identification register the film's world of intimacy. Yet, the use of doors and windows as sites of Glen's flight from Russell's domesticity, and the refusal to grant Glen a frame without Russell's presence makes the film's use of *mise-en-scène* and cinematography prioritise the monogamous over the promiscuous. This pull to domesticity produces another couple in the film's relational field: treating Russell's point of view as default, the film encourages the

spectator to couple with Russell. The film's style repeatedly reinforces this position of alignment with Russell and his desire for monogamy.

*Weekend* opens with an establishing shot of Nottingham and then it cuts to Russell's flat. The film's focus on the domestic interiors of Russell's flat operates as a metaphor for Russell's pseudo-closeted personality throughout the film. While the gay club scene that opens *Theo and Hugo* adopts a promiscuous optic which, by its filmic investment in the dispersal of the cruising self, blocks any conventional mode of spectatorial attachment to an individual character, the use of *mise-en-scène* and point of view in *Weekend* anchors a monogamous optic through Russell. The spectator is granted access to the film's affective world only through Russell's point of view which is not only literally expressed in the repetition of point-of-view shots but also ideologically registered in his conversations with Glen. Here, Russell's yearning for a monogamous romance matches the spectatorial coupling Haigh provides in its exclusive attachment to the monogamy-desiring Russell. Contrary to what *Theo and Hugo* does, formally, in its erotic register of impersonal intimacy, *Weekend* does not allow a potential dispersal of spectatorial identification across more than one point-of-view. Taking Russell's pathos as default, identification becomes 'personalised', subjective, monogamous. It contradicts the possibilities Bersani and Dutoit see in cinema to generate new regimes of intimacy and spectatorial connection – which can be achieved by means of 'an artful ascesis ... [i.e.] a renewable retreat from stable identities and settled being [in the relational field of cinema]', or 'a re-circuiting away from the psychological subject to modes of singularity (rather than varieties of personality)' (Bersani and Dutoit 2004, 8).

While *Theo and Hugo*'s promiscuous optic resonates with Bersani and Dutoit's 'nonexpressive aesthetic ... outside subjectivity' (French 2005, n.p.) as we will discuss in detail in the following section, *Weekend*'s monogamous optic can be considered as formative of an expressive aesthetic – operating through subjectivity - that presents the visual field of amorous connections by confining and stabilising identities, psychologising subject positions, and *settling beings* as personalities on screen. In an interview published in *Little Joe*, Haigh highlights his deliberate focus on the 'very different backgrounds' of these two characters: 'It's about placing their politics within a psychology of who these people are' (Haigh 2011, 19). Yet, Haigh's placing of his characters' politics, through psychologising their subject

positions, confines the couple in an undemocratic way. While Russell's romantic investment in monogamy operates as the film's default, Glen's queer militancy and his escape from any form of domestic confinement, including his resistance against an oval intimacy ("I don't do boyfriends", he says), is psychologised through references to the traumatic break-up of his previous relationship.

The opposing functions of Russell and Glen as characters inform the film's dialectic engagement with the immobility/flight, monogamy/promiscuity, and private/public binaries. Treating Russell's subject position as default, the film also privileges immobility, monogamy, and the domestic in its formulation of coupledness. The film repeatedly shows Russell, by his window, watching Glen leave his apartment. Glen is never given his own point-of-view shot in order to reciprocate. There is also an emphasis on the scenes where Russell, by the door, says goodbye to Glen and stalls there, by the door, for a while (Figure 1). Similarly, the moments when Russell needs to withdraw from conflict takes place in bathrooms and in front of mirrors. Haigh's expressionistic use of *mise-en-scène* turns the domestic interiors and frontiers of Russell's flat into a melodramatic trope that psychologises the interiority of Russell-as-character. While *mise-en-scène* orients the spectator in Russell's domesticity, the camera's immobility further reifies a mode of spectatorial intimacy that consistently aligns us with Russell and prioritises a coupling with him. Andrew Moor associates this immobility, particularly in the film's long takes, with a 'neutral gaze' that points to a new form of 'gay sincerity' in cinema (Moor 2018, 17). However, the ideological and formal operation of the long takes in the film does not provide 'a neutral gaze' but harness Russell's subject position while normalising the monogamous intimacy as the default rapport in love.

There is an emphasis on Glen's departures from Russell's flat which are repeated three times with an identical set-up of Russell at the window and Glen as a distant body in long-shot. In this recurring trope, Glen is located as the subject of escape, who avoids the domestic confinement of his growing attachment for Russell. He escapes the domestic in many ways: he escapes Russell's domesticity, he escapes any form of romantic attachment or commitment, he plans to leave Nottingham for an art course in America, and ultimately, he escapes Haigh's camera, the screen and its register of love. Thus, framing is key to Haigh's

characterisation of Russell and Glen, establishing the use of *mise-en-scène* as a stylistic dramatisation of romantic impasse.

Through this differential economy in the use of framing and point of view shots, Haigh constructs a tension between the characters' different values of sex, love, and intimacy as an expression of monogamous and promiscuous ethics. While the film's entire textuality provides Russell a psychological depth and asserts his position as that of the spectator, Glen becomes a flat object, a caricatured form of otherness, almost an offender of Russell's amorous interests. Glen's queer militancy is framed as an immature antagonism against romantic coupledness. While the framing allows us to see Russell in his own drama of love throughout the film, Glen is rarely framed on his own.

This differential economy reinforces the drama of the amorous couple's 'oval-like' intimacy. The appropriative consciousness is constitutive of the oval couple's monogamous rapport with the other. In contrast to the outward and side-by-side framing of *Theo and Hugo's* intimate couple, there is an emphasis on face-to-face exchange in *Weekend*. Both face-to-face sex and the confrontational face-to-face conversations about love act as the transformative motors of romantic pathos in the film. Through this face-ward personal intimacy, *Weekend* highlights subject positions, introduces and psychologises personal conflicts that leads to love, and 'ovalises' its couple through a monogamous optic (Figure 3 and 4).

Commenting on the sex scenes in a Criterion supplement to *Weekend's* digital release, Haigh states that 'showing sex shouldn't be about titillation, ... it should be an exploration of what stage [the lovers] are in their relationship'. 'Sex is not explicit but it feels intimate; you are there with them', Haigh adds to underline the significance of the 'face-to-face sex' scenes in the film's framework of intimacy. Haigh continues:

In the sex scene where they're like facing each other as they have sex. So many people are like 'How is that even possible? I didn't know that's what could happen'. [...] I think there's a lot of things to blame for that and a lot of gay movies are to blame for that as well actually. There's this notion that when gay men have anal sex that its one man is lying on his front and the other

one is from behind. [...] That's what people have in their head and of course that's not always the reality and more than that I think there's a notion that when gay men have sex it's not tender and romantic and all of those things. But of course it is. It's just as tender and romantic as it is when a woman and man have sex. And that's really really important to me. [...] I suppose when I approached the sex scene I did want it to feel that it was a universal sex scene (Haigh 2012).

*Weekend's* framing of gay sex is a personalised exchange; or in other words, sex becomes a catalyst for the amorous couple formation. Escaping 'titillation', which Haigh perhaps negates as a stigmatised form of representing promiscuous gay sex, *Weekend* ovalises intimacy through an emphasis on face-to-face sex. Sex in the film facilitates Haigh's monogamous optic by 'reinforcing an intimacy *à deux*' where the ovalised couple 'escape[s] from the view of the world and of the future and ... become[s] instead absorbed by the always futile efforts to penetrate the other's secrets, that is, the other's desires' (Bersani 2009b, 33). 'I knew I didn't want to show the initial sex', says Haigh, referring to the first night Russell and Glen has sex after their encounter at the gay club *Propaganda*. Excluding, from the film's world of intimacy, the first 'titillation' that took place while the characters were cruising for sex, Haigh prefers the film's optic to frame gay sex not as a promiscuous practice of gay sociability but as a personalised, ovalising amorous exchange, the primarily transformative exchange of the couple formation. The couple's exchange about Glen's art project and Russell's background of upbringing is followed by the face-to-face sex on Russell's sofa. The intensely confrontational conversations on love, marriage and commitment is followed by the face-to-face sex in Russell's bed – where Russell, looking into his lover's eyes, finally allows Glen to penetrate him. Sex, in these scenes, is ovalised as a personal, intimate, and loving surrender for the couple (Figure 3 and 4).

Only Glen escapes the film's field of monogamous relationality. Within the characters' intense conversations about [gay] marriage and relationships in their final night together, Glen associates any domesticated forms of relationship with 'concrete and cement'. Marriage, for him, is like 'pouring concrete over a garden'. 'When you had the same friends for too long', he says, 'everything becomes cemented'. 'They won't let you be any version of yourself except an old version, or the version they want you to be. I don't want to be in

fucking concrete, thank you very much', he says. Marginalising Glen's militancy as a puerile escape from commitment helps the film 'cement' its relationship with Russell. It starts in Russell's flat in a concrete council block, and it ends in that very same concrete council block, which also embodies the 'cement' (Figure 5). The expressive use of *mise-en-scène* and settings, and the stalled camera correspond to the hard, heavy, static materiality, and the monumental domesticity, of what Glen refers to as 'concrete and cement', which becomes a metaphor of the 'immobile, centred and self-contained subject' of monogamy (Bersani 1997, 3). Bersani's quest for an 'homo-aesthetics', where 'difference is a non-threatening supplement to sameness', is informed by his critique of such 'striving[s] for containment in ethical and epistemological positions' (ibid.). Reflecting what Stephanie Deborah Clare's reading of the film regards as 'homonormativity's affective and emotional pull' (2013, 785), Russell's romantic investment in monogamous coupledness and his ideals of a good life are what the film values as default. Yet, Glen's anger with and escape from 'cemented' relations is psychologised through his past amorous experiences. These personalised differentiations (in/of subject positions) facilitates *Weekend's* monogamous optic and its construction of the couple.

However, the film's ending, the farewell scene at the train station where Glen leaves Nottingham for America, offers the spectator a moment where both concrete subject positions – or the characters' closets – crack. Interestingly, the camera captures the couple from a detached, impersonal point of view – which comes from behind the fences of the train station. The domesticating intimacy of the film is displaced for the first time by this shift to an almost voyeuristic and objectivising register. The supposedly hostile outer world, in which Russell says he feels ashamed, embarrassed and closeted, is gazing at him and his lover now. In other words, the world sees them as a gay couple in public through their presentation as a face-to-face intimate oval. The fence functions as the visible impasse that expresses the unexpressed. The fence is at first a visible obstacle between the spectator and the couple but as the camera slowly zooms in towards the couple the fence dissolves as the lens focus changes. This gradual dissolution of the fence during the long take is a metaphor of the barrier between Russell and Glen (Figure 6). While the couple does not go beyond the weekend of the film's title, there is a suggestion in the use of the fence-as-metaphor that they have become more open to each other's positions.

Bursting into tears, Glen surrenders in Russell's arms before his ultimate departure evoking many other films that have previously staged similar train station departure scenes from *Brief Encounter* (1945) to *Far from Heaven* (2002). The couple kiss. The homophobic taunts from the off-screen others on the street arrive to the scene, which Russell defies with his angry look. The camera stalls and gives us a long take on that angry outward look of confrontation. So, the film's formal engagement with the dramatic separation of the couple turns the intimacy into an affect that transforms the subjects and dissolves their hard differential boundaries of self and other (inside and outside, public and private) within their ovalised intimacy. Yet, even this unsettling transformation of the lovers registers love and intimacy as a projective, narcissistic exchange of two egos, in which love – or intimate attachment – takes place only in the form of appropriation and incorporation. A bit of Glen penetrates Russell, a bit of Russell penetrates Glen: there is a bit of Glen in Russell, a bit of Russell in Glen. Glen opens up Russell while Russell anchors Glen emotionally. Both closets, i.e. Glen's emotional closet and Russell's sexual closet, crack. In the film's final scene, Russell is looking out of his flat (i.e. 'cement and concrete'): his windows are wide open now.

Andrew Moor suggests that *Weekend* epitomises a new 'post-postmodern' trend in gay cinema, the ideological and aesthetic operation of which departs from, in contesting, the 'hip cynicism' of New Queer Cinema. In his definition of this new trend, namely as 'New Gay Sincerity', Moor locates 'a mode of frank, observational realism', 'a more earnestly non-judgemental and natural style' and an 'effort to conjure a sense of 'unmediated' authenticity' as its constitutive markers (Moor 2018, 5). This 'emphatic naturalism', according to Moor, operates within and beyond LGBT experience. The contemporary dramas of the couple, or the 'oval-like' attachment, is addressed by achieving both LGBT specificity and universal application. The 'authenticity' and 'frankness' in Moor's New Gay Sincerity points to an enduring monogamous sensibility in contemporary gay cinema, where the relational intimacy on screen operates through a homonormative monogamous optic and thus aspires to ameliorate the subject of desire by settling it with coupledness. The desire for monogamy is valorised as 'sincere', 'realistic', 'honest' and 'frank' by default. It works to 'redeem ... the value of sexuality' (Bersani 1987, 212) by marginalising promiscuity and eliminating its reimagining of the amorous subject.

## Sociability and promiscuity in *Theo and Hugo*: impersonal editing and the dispersed spectator

*Théo & Hugo dans le même bateau/Paris 05:59: Théo & Hugo* (2016) is the seventh theatrical feature by Olivier Ducastel and Jacques Martineau. Shot on a low budgeted two-week shoot, the film recounts the meeting of its characters Theo and Hugo at 04:27am in the Paris cruising club *L'impact*. The characters' real-time wander through Paris is an homage to Varda's *Cleo de 5 a 7* (1962) with the film's early treatment called *Theo de 4 a 6*. The film develops around Theo and Hugo's intimate and promiscuous encounter leading to an amorous connection, which includes a moment of disclosure following their *de facto* unsafe sex: the seropositive status of Hugo. Hugo's disclosure entails the couple's detour to a hospital's A&E department for Theo to obtain the antiretroviral PEP (Post Exposure Prophylaxis) before ending in Theo's apartment at 05:59am. The possibility of the couple's future is left open.

In comparison to *Weekend*, *Theo and Hugo* offers an alternative mode of relationality and form, which is significantly informed by French cultural politics. The cultural politics of authorship in France and the political ideology of the state's republicanism factor into a resistance in the interpretation of French cinema as expressions of identity politics. Thus, establishing a coherent queer film tradition in France is a challenge. Yet, unlike other gay-identified filmmakers working in France (e.g. Patrice Chéreau, François Ozon, André Téchiné, etc.), Ducastel and Martineau are different in asserting an affiliation between their identities as gay men and their filmmaking practices. Authorship in the context of French cinema precludes any move to think beyond individual creative expression, or the identity constituents of the auteur, and any embrace of collectivist moving image minority discourse. It is thus subsumed under French republicanism which, historically, resisted the formation of identity politics and the recognition of identity-based communities through citizen-centred models of governance. As Johnston (2008) explains:

French republicanism, in its traditional formulations, is based on the fundamental notion of *le citoyen* as an abstract individual who enters into a direct relationship with the State not mediated through any aspects of sub-State-level identity. In theory, the resulting ideology,

which lies at the heart of French identity, considers all citizens to be equal, precluding the possibility of discrimination on the basis of any “distinguishing feature,” such as, for instance, sexuality. (93)

In more recent times, France’s LGBT politics have challenged the grip of republicanism and *le citoyen* through the queer citizens’ demands for their differences to be recognised as such. Nonetheless, and despite resistance from both right-wing politics and left-wing intellectuals, the government’s move to recognise queers brought about the PaCS (*Pacte Civil de Solidarité*)<sup>7</sup> in November 1999, the French equivalent of the civil partnership. Like the majority of Ducastel and Martineau’s films, *Theo & Hugo*’s queer politics belong to a *post-PaCS* context of cinema (Swamay 2006).

Since their co-authored debut *Jeanne et la garçon formidable/The Perfect Guy* (1998), Ducastel and Martineau have consistently demonstrated a strong commitment to queer filmmaking in France. Often explored across a range of styles and genres, and often with uneven results, their work has a perspicuity in its approach to contemporary sexual politics frequently underpinned by questions of desire and identity that bristle against French republicanism. Their debut, the romance musical *Jeanne et la garçon formidable*, is centred around a heterosexual couple with the perfect guy of the film’s title, the son of Jacques Demy, seropositive. *Jeanne et la garçon formidable* is also notable for the inclusion of footage from an ACT-UP Paris demonstration. Ducastel and Martineau were queer activists and were involved with ACT-UP (Rees-Roberts 2008, 93). The narrative expectations of Ducastel and Martineau’s subversion of AIDS/HIV cinema tropes is central to their most critically acclaimed film *Drôle de Félix* (2000). An intersectional AIDS road movie, replete with encounters and momentary attachments, familial, amorous and sexual, Felix travels from Dieppe to Marseille in search of his father but finds more meaningful relations in others. Unconventional relationships and couplings, and the subversion of AIDS/HIV tropes are Ducastel and Martineau’s thematic underpinnings. Notwithstanding, working across different genres (the musical, the farce, the road movie) and aesthetics (the camcorder ‘video diary’ in *Ma vraie vie à Rouen/My Life on Ice* (2002)), Ducastel and Martineau frequently privilege a gay specificity in their work. In her reading of *Ma vraie vie à Rouen*, Claire Boyle (2012) proposes such a specificity operating in relation to the gaze in which ‘Ducastel and Martineau identify a specifically queer way of looking that operates even where a specifically gay identity is absent

(or remains unarticulated)' (58). Boyle goes further in suggesting:

Ducastel and Martineau bring to a close what began as an exploration of the gay gaze and the mechanics of queer looking, but becomes a critical interrogation of gazes gay and straight, intradiegetic and spectatorial. Gazes that more usually remain unseen, unacknowledged and unscrutinised are rendered visible in this film (sometimes even hypervisible), and light is shed on the ethics of a number of different visual transactions as a result—including those in which audience members are involved. (65)

Boyle's discussion on the interrogation of the gaze and formal experimentation of looking in queer ways does apply to *Theo and Hugo*. Reincorporating HIV/AIDS as their cinema's political marker, *Theo and Hugo* is a work of authorship that seeks to affirm not only the filmmakers' identity but also the forms through which they express that identity.

The passion with which Ducastel and Martineau open *Theo and Hugo* with a twenty-minute sex club sequence of real sex, including actors Geoffrey Couët (Theo) and François Nambot (Hugo), subsequently evolves into to a coupling of Theo and Hugo and a didactic account of what one does in a moment of potential HIV transmission. This is an assertive and contemporary film on the ontology of risk in contemporary gay sexual practices and the emergence of PEP (Post Exposure Prophylaxis) drugs and discourse. *Theo & Hugo* is the first dramatization of the PEP subject in a feature-length film and the real-time unfolding allows the precise detailing of securing treatment and its possible side-effects to be conveyed to the audience. Nonetheless, one of our interests here is the ways in which promiscuity and anonymity, rather than issues of HIV disclosure and risk, are not an obstacle in the formation of the couple but central to it. In fact, the dispersal of the self, an effect of an impersonal intimacy, far from undoing the couple is what seemingly secures it.

What we will focus on in this section is the first twenty-minutes of *Theo and Hugo* because it gestures through film style towards a possible model of sociability and impersonal intimacy in gay film that differs from *Weekend's* monogamous optic. To address how *Theo and Hugo* registers its sexual intimacy, we conceptualise a promiscuous optic that implies a dispersal of the character's subjectivity and the subject of spectatorship. This optic aligns with an ontology of the anonymous and the impersonal. This is thematically extended to the rest of the film and its representation of the couple, which differs from *Weekend's* ovalising

discourse. Theo and Hugo move from their impersonal encounter in the club's promiscuous setting to a couple wandering the streets of Paris. It is the formal organisation of shots in the film's first section that offers a model for a promiscuous optic. Ducastel refers to the filming in the sex club 'as an experiment' that explores ways to 'film sex outside 'moral' (and economic) restrictions'.<sup>8</sup> This sense of experimentation and being 'outside restrictions' underscores the ways in which *Theo and Hugo* structures a promiscuous optic through the circumvention of conventional screen couplings and normative editing patterns. When Theo and Hugo leave the club together, we rarely see them filmed and structured in a conventional over the shoulder shot reverse-shot 'singles' which we would identify as a pattern then reinforces a monogamous optic. Instead, Ducastel and Martineau favour two-shots in which both Theo and Hugo are included in the frame side-by-side, frequently looking outward both as they walk and cycle through Paris and later sit in A&E and on the metro (Figure 7).

The frontal images of gay men alongside, filmed both from the front and from behind, often looking outward, is a visual trope that can be seen in a number of gay films. This trope appears quite prominently in *L'inconnu du lac/Stranger by the Lake* (2013) and can be traced back earlier to Warhol's *My Hustler* (1965) as a prototype (Figure 8). *My Hustler*, the first gay film to be theorised in relation to 'gay spectatorship as cruising' (Brasell 1992), opens a space for visualising the couple without recourse to shot reverse-shot patterns. Brasell argues that this formal detail in Warhol's film produces a structure of glancing rather than gazing and is amenable to how cruising itself operates as distinct from the gaze. These films are about promiscuous openness, availability, and the multiplicity of ways of looking and not looking, which cruising, as a gay cultural practice, engenders. In *Theo and Hugo*, even after the couple is established, Theo is still looking, still cruising other men, while Hugo retrieves his jacket from the cloakroom. There is always a sense of 'looking-out', an extensibility of the self, rather than an inextensibility of looking inwards that we would associate with the monogamous optic.

Coupling as a relational register in cinema is not defined solely as a representational or narrative issue concerning the screen couple interaction, shot reverse-shot, and the oval. Relationality also implies how we are positioned to see and reconsider our place of

spectatorship *against* formal norms through which '*not being* has certain modes of visibility' (Bersani and Dutoit 2004, 3). *Theo and Hugo's* opening experiment with editing and camera movement operates as a set of formal relations both *between* and *within* shots. Contrary to conventional short reverse-shot patterns, especially those that construct screen couples, the editing pattern in the film's opening is structured around the repetition of specific shots of men looking which are not sequentially followed by what is being looked at. Rather than fixing one man's look to another man's body through shot reverse-shot (that is, establishing a monogamous optic through a closed circuit of desire between two), *Theo and Hugo* moves us beyond the delineating norms of subject/object and self/other relations towards the spatialisation, openness and extensibility of a promiscuous optic.

There are sixty-five shots in the twenty-minute sex club sequence and only six of those can be defined as point-of-view shots proper in that they conform to a standard spatial and temporal continuity through reverse-shots, camera angle and height, and eye-line match. In contrast, there are twenty shots depicting men looking, which are not followed by what they are looking at since the subsequent shots are discontinuous in terms of spatial continuity and screen direction. *Theo and Hugo* often follows those shots of looking with a montage of bodies and sexual activity in a range of camera proximities, tilts and pans, none of which are continuous with the look, perspective or screen direction of any one individual established by a preceding shot. This erotic of repetitive sameness, as an indistinct and anonymous register that operates across these shots, avoids subject/object and self/other distinctions. We are calling this stylistic practice an *impersonal editing*. Rather than a psychic identity-driven me-you attachment, *Theo and Hugo* offers what Bersani and Dutoit conceptualise as an ontological register, the 'parallel modes or lines of being, alternative unfoldings of events that don't 'communicate' with one another but inaccurately replicate one another' (2004, 5). The experimental style in *Theo and Hugo's* opening registers a promiscuous optic of sexual sociability through shots that are inaccurate replications of each other. This thwarting of a subjectivising editing undoes what Bersani and Dutoit identify as 'the existence and the primordial importance of individuality' in narrative cinema (2004, 8). Following this, we will explore how this promiscuous optic permits us to rethink the relations between textuality, aesthetics, and subjectivity in gay film. How can the text engage the spectator in a mode of promiscuous looking, and in a mode of sociability that contests the screen couple as an

ethical ideal? Here, we propose an interpretation of editing specific to a gay filmic practice as a correspondence with the impersonally intimate and open practices among gay men.

Amorous relations in *Weekend*, as we demonstrated, are formally and textually structured through monogamy. This is especially important in gay cinema which carries the historical burden of an unavoidable interplay between monogamy and promiscuity. More broadly, the ideology of any filmic optic is an effect of a sequence of shot relations which are simultaneously underpinned by ideological and ontological, subjective and objective, spatial and temporal, narration and praxis (Browne 1975). One influential axiom of film theory developed in the 1970s is that social and political subjectivities of imagined spectatorships are shaped by technology and unilaterally 'constructed' by film style as an ideological and interpolating formal system.<sup>9</sup> The potential model we perceive in *Theo and Hugo's* experiment is a formal system that registers the promiscuous optic through a reconfiguration of stylistic conventions and spectatorial relations. The impersonal editing in the film doesn't assume an individualised place and instead disperses looking as being among rather than through characters.

Bersani elaborates on how sociability, a concept derived from George Simmel, is a union with others contingent upon the sacrificing of individuality as the condition of its membership (Bersani 2000, 2002). In sacrificing the self, 'we discover a new type of being, as well as a new type of pleasure' (2002, 11). The pleasure of sociability, Bersani explains, is 'the pleasure of existing, of concretely existing, at the abstract level of pure being' (ibid.). Sociability in Bersani's thought that allows one to think of ways of being that are against ego-centric models of the self. Sociability can be an alternative in the pursuit of a 'renewable retreat from the seriousness of stable identities and settled being' (Bersani and Dutoit 2004, 9). The spaces of gay cruising, as depicted in *Theo and Hugo*, are sociability *par excellence* in formally communicating what Bersani terms the 'intransitive pleasure intrinsic to a certain mode of existence, to self-subtracted being' (Bersani 2002, 11). The relational openness to others in cruising clubs is one that doesn't depend on appropriative exchange of individuals and the assertion of the self but defines how persons relate anew through their dispersal among the group. For Bersani:

Cruising is sexual sociability. The danger associated with cruising is not that it reduces relations to promiscuous sex, but rather that the promiscuity may stop. Few things are difficult than to block our interest in others, to prevent our connection to them from degenerating into a “relationship” (2002, 18).

The couple’s move in *Theo and Hugo* from the sociability of the cruising club to the walk home through Paris gestures towards this ‘degeneration’ but one that can only take place from 06:00am onwards after the film has ended. Sociability stops when couples form relationships in what is often characterised as a narrative trajectory from promiscuity to monogamy. *Theo and Hugo* does not rule out the continuation of sociability after the couple have been ‘cemented’. We see this in the film’s resistance against visualising the couple as an oval. Theo and Hugo’s looking forward and looking out, is a sign of their relational openness and extensibility as a couple who can go beyond the limiting structures that define normative representations of gay relationships in film as inward, ovalised, hermetic, and monogamous.

The filmmakers’ experiment of representing sex ‘outside restrictions’ in adopting an impersonal style, is one that also recalibrates the accepted norms of spectatorship in relation to primary and secondary identification. Through their appeal to an impersonal register, one analogous to the ‘homopseudonymic sociality’ which the film’s opening represents, *Theo and Hugo* is atypical in its resistance against individualised points of view (Ricco 2002, 78). In privileging a subjective divestment from what we are watching, *Theo and Hugo*’s style is a rapprochement of sociability and a reification of a promiscuous optic. Despite the number of shots that indicate men looking, they are rarely followed by an objective shot that speaks ‘an individual is looking at this’ (Figure 9). The opening scene takes considerable time before Theo and Hugo move from being the title of the film to a couple having sex and, we assume, will eventually ‘degenerate’ into a relationship. Nonetheless, Theo and Hugo ‘fall in love’ while being among and inside other men’s bodies as a part of a continuous, rather than individualised, movement of sexual and impersonal contact. The staging and choreography that bring Theo and Hugo together on screen never loses sight of the other men who are equally part of their impersonal intimacy (Figure 10). The ‘experiment’ the film seems to carry out is one that offers a textual sociability in which participation in the film requires the

subject of its spectatorship to forego its 'protected momentary intimacy' in favour of a dispersal analogous to that which is represented onscreen.

In turning away from the individual subject, that is the personal and the 'protected intimacy' associated with characters and spectators, *Theo and Hugo* swerves in another direction. Noting the importance of promiscuity and swerving as a methodological feature of Bersani's queer thought, Mikko Tuhkanen argues that this act of swerving inhabits a 'nonannihilative desire [to] reformulate the subject's relation to otherness in terms of what Bersani frequently calls "sociability"' (Tuhkanen 2014, 16). Indeed, it is this 'reformulation' of the spectator's relation to a non-desiring position that marks certain patterns of film form in gay cinema as potentially impersonal and promiscuous. Nonetheless, Tuhkanen implicates Sedgwick's 'queer and now' by tracing the etymology of the word queer back to definitions of swerving and turning away (i.e. the Latin *torquere*) as a 'digressive, transversal dance of desire that is not impelled by the need to assimilate an established choreography' (Sedgwick 1993, xii).<sup>10</sup> Potential cinematic articulations of this 'swerve' seem to be what inspires Ellis Hanson's (2014) reading of Gus Van Sant's *Elephant* (2003) as an impersonal 'cinema *a tergo*'. Implicating Freud's reference to *coitus a tergo* (in 'The Wolfman'), Hanson argues that the from-behind-ness of Van Sant's shooting style bears an erotic potential, that is, an impersonal erotics of gay authorship *à la* Bersani. Hanson writes, Van Sant's shooting from behind is the 'most impersonal, most depersonalizing angle' (83), a 'cruisy, fatal, homoerotic tracking aesthetic' (101). Hanson considers the depersonalised camera, as if the camera were staring, as one of erotic and moral detachment from the conventions of a heteronormative film practice. A formal practice that would otherwise seek to explain, motivate, and pathologise *Elephant's* teen killers. Hanson's yoking together of the impersonal in Bersani and the formal expressions of Van Sant's gay authorial sensibility renders both filming and looking in ways that challenge the tautology of desire for epistemic and subjectivised positions within spectatorship.

In contradistinction to promiscuity, monogamy, Bersani argues, is 'a hegemonic model of sexual relations' (Bersani 2009a, 86). Considering its implications in spectatorship, one can argue that monogamy is implicit in Mulvey's conceptualisation of visual pleasure as a hetero and hegemonic inequity (Mulvey 1975). Mulvey's original polemic, and we simplify here,

outlined the relationship between subjectivity and objectivity *vis a vis* textuality and spectatorship as disproportionate and patriarchal relations between men who look and women who are looked at. Well-rehearsed as it is, the original analysis is still revealing in how theories of cinematic desire and cinematic inequality operate in multiple ways. We suggest that Mulvey's framework constitutes a theoretical model that exposes a monogamous optic that, to borrow a phrase from Sedgwick, 'signifies monolithically' (Sedgwick 1993, 8). While the original analysis has inspired both refinements and challenges since its first publication in *Screen*, gay and lesbian scholars have often sought to trouble its heteronormative assumptions (Mayne 1993; Stacey 1993; Straayer 1996; White 1999; Edelman 1999; Farmer 2000). Nonetheless, men looking at men in *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) or *Call Me by Your Name* (2017) and women looking at women in *Desert Hearts* (1985) or *Carol* (2015) might seem to offer a homoerotic gaze but the formal structure in which such looking is situated, usually if not always in shot reverse-shot, still secures those relations and desires within a monogamous optic. There are two types of shots and patterns in cinema that reify this and readers will find examples coming easy to mind. They enable the monogamous optic to operate *within* a single shot and *between* a sequence of shots. Firstly, the repetition of shots that represent the couple together, often facing each other, *within* the frame of a single shot. These shots often proliferate in number and frequency as the couple grow closer and more intimate. The image of the ovalised couple is the zenith of this type of shot. Secondly, the shot reverse-shot pattern that concretises relations *between* couples. The editing pattern literally weds their relationship through complementary shots as each other's subject and object. What often begins as a shot reverse-shot conversation or exchange of looks early in the film develops into the single shot of the oval couple on a sofa, on a bed, holding hands, or at the potter's wheel.

In the opening of *Theo and Hugo*, the lure towards coupling *within* shots and *between* shots evokes a relational absence. In its place is an impersonal editing pattern that avoids those conventional shots that visualise the couple and structure their relation to each other. The editing in *Theo and Hugo* impersonalises looking in moments of heightened intimacy and explicit sexual activity. For example, the character credited but not named as 'homme au smartphone' (Mario Fanfani), is the first person on screen. He descends to the lower level of the club and is initially framed by a shot of him looking. This is not followed by an objective

shot but a montage of differently angled and distanced shots as if his look is dispersed and extensible among a multitude of bodies whose sameness is reinforced by the red and blue gel-lighting of the *mise-en-scène* (Figure 11). The *mise-en-scène* in the club reinforces the move away from individuation by utilising two vibrant gel lighting schemes which render all the bodies in either blue and red light. Bodies are undulating and making contact but remain indistinct as individuals who forgo identity for a *milieu* of impersonal sexual contact.

Finding a way to express the experience of cruising, sex, promiscuity and sociability in ways that are dispersed and impersonal, points towards a momentary reformulation of the politics, forms, and possibilities of a different kind of textuality in gay films. Different because it moves beyond the persistence of a monogamous optic and discourses that are always pitted against the promiscuous.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, what would it mean for a gay film to privilege a promiscuous optic? What impact might that have on making sense of the cinematic gay couple? What is the spectator's relationship to a film that values promiscuity as an optic and an ontology? What we mean by promiscuity here is not merely a sexual practice or a filmic representation but an ethics of being that 'entails a remarkably hospitable disposition towards strangers' (Dean 2009, 176). While promiscuity is often understood negatively as the opposition of monogamy, the politics of *Theo and Hugo* are beyond the strictures of that dualism. That is not to say that the film is *the model* for the promiscuous optic but we interpret its formal experimentation and bold take on sexual sociability as an innovative intervention to gay cinema's representations of intimacy, love, and the screen couple.

## Conclusion

Bersani's thinking about erotic relationality is informed by Foucault's ethical project of new relational regimes. Foucault asks: 'What relations, through homosexuality, can be established, invented, multiplied, and modulated? The problem is not to discover in oneself the truth of one's sex, but, rather, how to use one's sexuality henceforth to arrive at a multiplicity of relationships.' (Foucault 1997, 136). For Foucault, a relational system does more than liberating desires within the institutionalised spaces of family, nation, kinship, and monogamy. Here, Foucault locates the political dissidence of homosexuality not within an identitarian politics of liberation but within the ways in which gay cultures construct new

ways of life, a relational aesthetic of existence – that goes beyond ‘the two ready-made formulas of the pure sexual encounter and the lovers’ fusion of identities’ (137).

Our intervention in introducing monogamous/promiscuous optics as a framework for contemporary gay film attempted to incorporate both Bersani’s reclamation for a gay specificity informed by relations of an ‘anti-identitarian homoness’ (Bersani 1995, 101), and his quest for ‘the potential[s] for aesthetic experience to dissolve the boundaries of selfhood and initiate new relational modes’ (Dean 2010, 390). While the monogamous optic in *Weekend* works to domesticate its couple (and the spectatorial experience of it) through an expressive use of *mise-en-scène*, point-of-view shots and framing as the spatialising tropes of the drama of romance, *Theo and Hugo*’s promiscuous optic disperses subject positions in terms of both the film’s textual operation and spectatorial positioning. Refuting shot reverse-shot and point-of-view logic, *Theo and Hugo*’s impersonal editing and the replication of shots open a way to convey sexuality through a filmic register of impersonal intimacy. Both films spatialise intimacy and same-sex desire but in very different ways, which, as we have argued, is acutely reflected in their formal appeal to monogamous and promiscuous optics.

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<sup>1</sup> For Tuhkanen’s detailed account of how “speculation” and “essentialism” operate in Bersani’s thought, please see the introduction to his *The Essentialist Villain: On Leo Bersani* (2018, 1-22). Tuhkanen explores Bersani’s ‘onto-ethics/aesthetics of being and becoming’ by locating his oeuvre within various figures of literature and philosophy, including Baudelaire, Benjamin, Beckett, Blanchot, Deleuze, Foucault, Freud, Nietzsche, Plato, Proust and Simmel.

<sup>2</sup> As early as *Boys in the Band* (1970), the drama of characters Hank and Larry is one that outlines monogamous and promiscuous perspectives on gay relationships. The first independent “positive images” post-Stonewall feature *A Very Natural Thing* (1974), explores commitment and relationships between monogamous-desiring David and the promiscuous-desiring Mark. *A Very Natural Thing* ends with David having found monogamy with another man as they splash about on an empty beach. *Buddies* (1985), the first feature to represent the AIDS crisis is the story of David, a defender of monogamy who ‘buddies’ up with Robert, a champion of promiscuity who is hospitalised with AIDS. Many of their bed-side conversations

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are about the politics of monogamy and promiscuity. There are exceptions for example, underground cinema, gay pornography, and New Queer Cinema.

<sup>3</sup> Examples of gay literature that engage with the monogamy/promiscuity tension and are the political opposites of each other are Larry Kramer's *Faggots* (1978) and Andrew Holleran's *Dancer from the Dance* (1978).

<sup>4</sup> One recent example from the *New York Times* is the protests by 'gay professional classes', many of them parents, over the number of sex shops in their neighbourhood. Michael Winerip, 'Chelsea's Risqué Businesses', May 15<sup>th</sup>, 2015, [https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/17/nyregion/chelseas-risque-businesses.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/17/nyregion/chelseas-risque-businesses.html?_r=0)

<sup>5</sup> These films include *Keep the Lights On* (2012), *I Want Your Love* (2012), *Pit Stop* (2013), *Test* (2013), *L'Inconnu du lac / Stranger by the Lake* (2013), *Holding the Man* (2015), *Call Me by Your Name* (2017), and *God's Own Country* (2017).

<sup>6</sup> Davidson defines 'post-Gay' as an 'assimilationist discourse that declares that gays are no different from straights, apart from 'who they love' and a few missing 'rights'. In this usage, post-gay indexes a historical moment in which, it is frequently claimed, gays and lesbians are accorded historically unprecedented levels of acceptance and representation and in which the need for distinctively LGBTQ ways of socializing, organizing sexuality, and viewing the world has fallen away' (140). This builds on an earlier definition of post-gay in Alan Sinfield's *Gay and After* (1998). Sinfield is concerned about the waning subcultural aspects of gayness as difference that are effaced in the assimilation and corporatization of a 'mainstream' gay culture.

<sup>7</sup> Cristina Johnston (2002) explains the PaCS as follows: 'While not exclusively applicable to gay partners, the PaCS enables adult couples, irrespective of gender, to sign an officially recognized contract which, in turn, allows them to organize their life together. The rights offered by the PaCS apply to housing, taxation, health insurance and inheritance but the certificate does not give couples either the right to adopt or to gain access to artificial insemination, although more recent debate has begun to focus very clearly on the question of gay parenting, both as an argument in favour of and against the PaCS. (23)

<sup>8</sup> 'Theo & Hugo: Interview mit Olivier Ducastel and Jacques Martineau', Interview: Christian Weber, February 2016, <https://vimeo.com/187169996> [last accessed September 5th 2018]

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<sup>9</sup> We are referring to Christian Metz, Stephen Heath, Jean-Louis Baudry, Laura Mulvey, Nick Browne, and Daniel Dayan among others and acknowledge that this was subsequently challenged and does not need rehearsing here.

<sup>10</sup> Sedgwick's definition of queerness also considers the etymology of the word 'from the Indo-European root – *twerku*, which also yields the German *quer* (transverse), Latin *torquere* (to twist) (1993, xii).

<sup>11</sup> Gay cinema still frequently defaults to characters uncomfortable in their own homosexual subjectivity, like Russell in *Weekend* and Johnny in *God's Own Country*. Homosexuality is something one suffers even if only slightly. Promiscuity is often bound to this suffering and a sense of alienation, destructiveness, and self-loathing. In *Weekend* and *God's Own Country*, we see a persistent yet modern variants of Dyer's 'sad young men' of the '50s and '60s (Dyer 2002).

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Figure 1. *mise en scène* and POV in *Weekend*

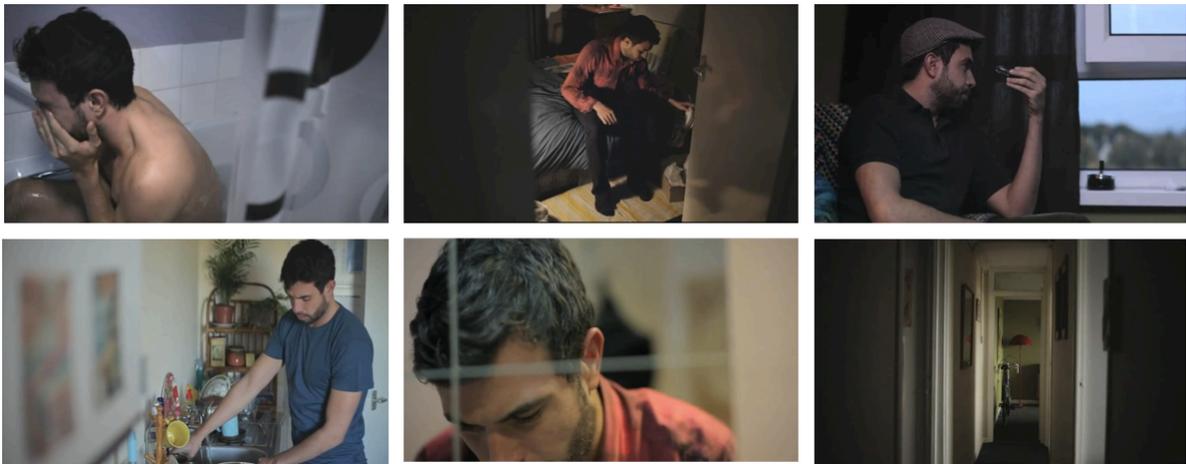


Figure 2. *mise en scène* in *Weekend*



Figure 3. The Oval in *Weekend*



Figure 4. Face-to-Face: Face-ward intimacy in *Weekend*



Figure 5. The “Concrete and Cement” in *Weekend*



Figure 6. The Farewell Scene: The Dissolution of the Fence/Cage

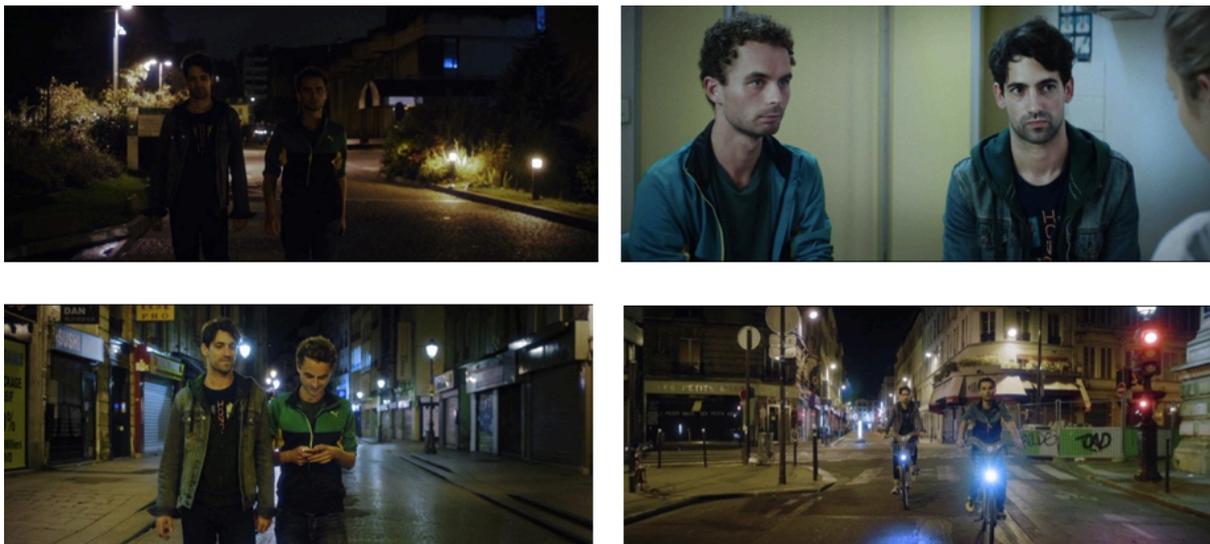
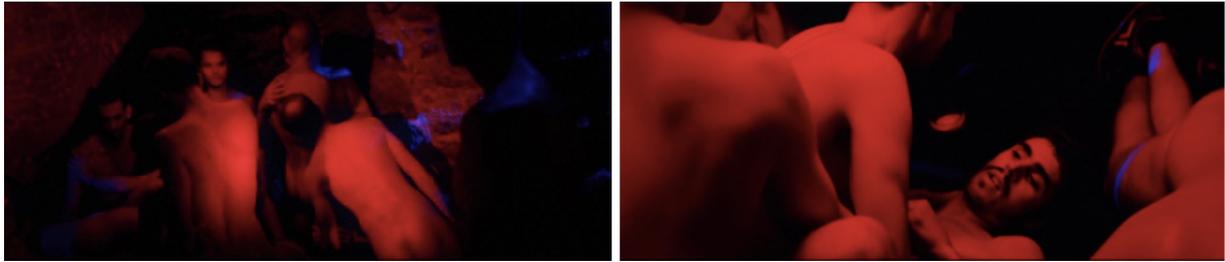


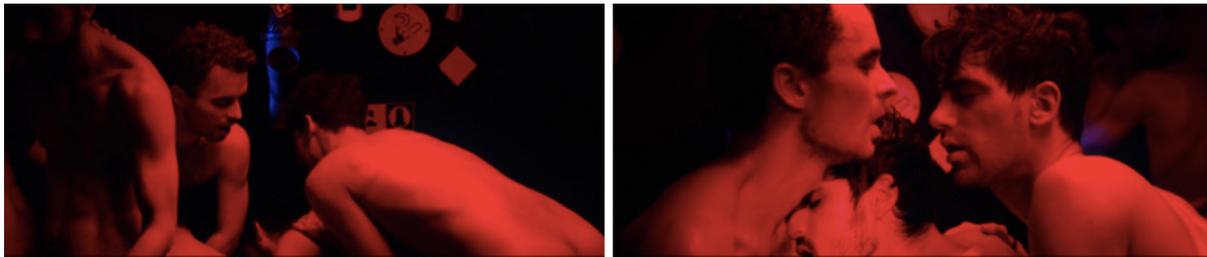
Figure 7. When outside the cruising club, the couple in *Théo & Hugo are (2016)* are filmed side-by-side.



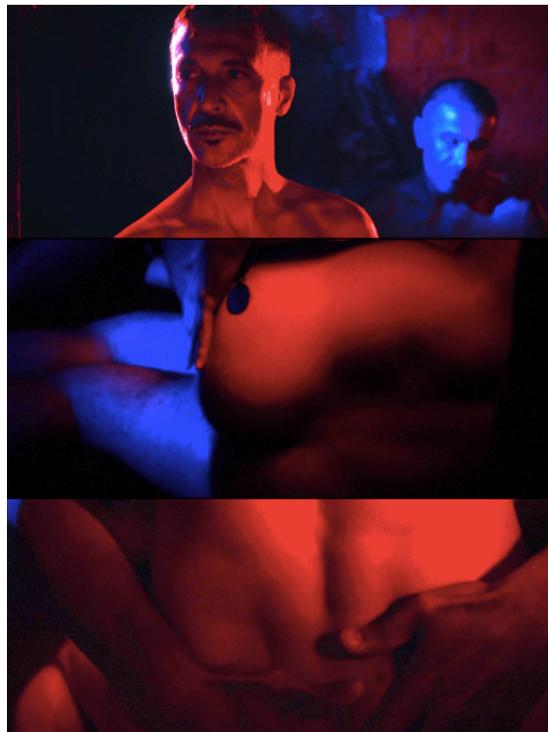
**Figure 8.** The frontal image of gay men in *L'inconnu du lac/Stranger by the Lake* (2013)



**Figure 9.** Shots of men looking, including Theo in the background, are not followed by objective shots of what they are looking at.



**Figure 10.** Theo and Hugo 'fall in love' among and inside other bodies in a staging of the impersonal intimacy of the cruising club.



**Figure 11.** A shot of the 'homme au smartphone' appears to be set up as a point-of-view is not followed by an objective reverse-shot. Subsequent shots do not align with the direction of the look or an eye-line match, the camera height is much lower, and this is followed by montage of close-ups and replicated anonymous bodies.