

EUROPA 2000-2020  
ATLANTE DEL  
CINEMA QUEER  
CONTEMPORANEO

ANDREA  
INZERILLO  
(A CURA DI)



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As an interpreter of non-homologated existential thoughts and modalities, contemporary queer cinema restarts from desire and reworks LGBTQI+ issues with new linguistic and discursive modalities. It innovates aesthetics and sensibilities in order to promote a new framework within which feeling free from labels. Marking the occasion of the tenth anniversary of Sicilia Queer filmfest, the volume edited by Andrea Inzerillo maps European queer cinema from 2000 to 2020 for the first time in a wide-ranging research, presenting itself as an original and valuable account of an important segment of the new millennium cinematography.

**Andrea Inzerillo** is the artistic director of Sicilia Queer filmfest. He has translated and edited the Italian edition of works by Michel Foucault, Jacques Rancière, Gilles Lipovetsky, Pierre Bayard, Madame de Staël, Douglas Sirk. He is a teacher of history and philosophy in high schools, and is currently post-doctoral research fellow in Cinema at the University of Palermo.

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# Atlas of Contemporary Queer Cinema

Europe 2000-2020

Edited by Andrea Inzerillo



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Queer Relay in Post-Millennial British Cinema  
*Cüneyt Çakırlar, Gary Needham*

There is no British Queer Cinema. This is indeed a bold and controversial statement. While there are queer films and queer filmmakers in the United Kingdom, any sense of their being part of a recognizable movement or moment akin to post-war British social realism is wishful thinking. There is no collectively mobilised mutual support in personnel and production that would lead towards a shared political momentum and give a modicum of shape to a legacy that would be called a British Queer Cinema. Instead, queer practices in British filmmaking are fragmented and accountable on a production-by-production basis. Often, the careers of filmmakers whose early features are seemingly rooted in queer cinematic commitments, such as Andrew Haigh's *Greek Pete* (2008) and *Weekend* (2011), have not developed into authorial projects of queer dissidence of the sort seen in the work of Derek Jarman. It is not uncommon for this to be noted in the critical scholarship on British cinema. As Sarah Street writes, "as far as British cinema is concerned, gay and lesbian subject matter has not been central" (Street 2009, p. 191). In addition, it is axiomatic that minorities of all types are vastly underrepresented both in front of and behind the camera (Cobb, Newsinger and Nwonka 2020). To engage with this atypical "queer cinema" in the post-millennial British context, we propose a synoptic assessment of queer representations

that cross over different registers of production, style, genre and politics. This mobility of the queer subject in British cinema works to obscure the possibility of a “queer cinema” as an oppositional, dissident cultural force, and rather leads to a “relay system” that mobilises discursive and political value of queerness beyond the mainstream/alternative, hegemonic/non-normative, and central/marginal distinctions. We argue that this mobility of queerness in contemporary British filmmaking is comparable to what Lisa Henderson conceptualises as “queer relay”. Relay, Henderson asserts,

suspends or pauses cultural anxiety and the presumption of market degradation. It returns queer cultural power while depleting the speaker’s benefit in queer refusal, the moral and libidinal energy that comes from opposing dominance through separation and the condensation of that charge as political capital. What is lost in oppositional resolve may be gained in recognizing and redistributing critical cultural resources, including new subjectivities, as producers and audience members find room to move in a cultural middle range, where choices are not so constrained by the dominance of capital versus no-budget subversion (Henderson 2008, p. 571).

Henderson’s argument here treats “queer relay” as

a historicizing concept for a changing cultural economy, a world not formed by an anachronistic calculus in which the expressive ambitions of lesbian and other outsider cultural producers are suspect, whether for selling out to industry ambition or holding on to queer cultural autonomy (ivi, p. 594).

In this sense, what this article proposes is a revised methodological approach that neither constructs nor brands a “British Queer Cinema” through convenience sampling of specific queer films, but rather investigates the wider context of British cinema in which the queer subject operates across various registers of production, genre and style. What the coalescing term British Queer Cinema could perhaps indicate here is an acknowledgement of the existence of individual films and filmmakers that explore what it means to be queer, or to have



been queer, in the UK, or to be situated as queer within the current socio-political contexts such as the Gender Recognition Act (2004) and Brexit (2016). Most of these observations may help us identify a tendency that defines not only British but also a wider European context of LGBT filmmaking. Nonetheless, a significant number of contemporary films in the UK context have had strong leanings towards intersectionality, anti-essentialism, fragmentation of the nation-state, and the perceived preciousness of its borders, heritage, and traditions. British cinema is also prone to be obsessively backward-looking and nostalgic in a way that fails to address the contemporary legacies of imperialism or to engage in queer revisionism. However, we would note that British queer films are often engaged in recovering lost and marginalised histories (*Man in an Orange Shirt*, Michael Samuels, 2017; *The Happy Prince*, Rupert Everett, 2018), compiling archival footage of the ups and downs of British queer history and its icons (*Derek*, Isaac Julien, 2008; *Queerama*, Daisy Asquith, 2017; *After 82 The Untold Story of the AIDS Crisis in the UK*, Steve Keeble, Ben Lord, 2019), reclaiming queer historical figures through biopics (*Kenneth Williams: Fantabulosa*, Andy De Emmony, 2006; *The Imitation Game*, Morten Tyldum, 2014; *Vita and Virginia*, Chanya Button, 2018; *Against the Law*, Fergus O'Brien, 2017), and engaging with other contemporary issues that are informed by gender and sexuality – including those of migration (*God's Own Country*, Francis Lee, 2017), intersectionality (*Nina's Heavenly Delights*, Pratibha Parmar, 2006) and belonging (*Touch of Pink*, Ian Iqbal Rashid, 2004; *Disobedience*, Sebastián Lelio, 2017). In structuring this critical overview, we have identified two areas which dominate the past two decades of queer representation in British film. These areas of practice are shaped by (1) reclamations of heritage and history, and (2) representations of queer intersectionality, both of which operate through “queer relay” rather than leading to a politically and aesthetically distinct queer “trend” or “wave”. Yet, some further context is necessary before we discuss those two broad areas and the films associated with them.

*Post-millennial British Cinema in context (2000-2020)*

There are several challenging factors in UK film production and film as a source of national identity, including the UK's geopolitical make-up which informs national, economic, and political parameters of the cultural sector, especially those brought about through the devolution process, allocation of government funding, tax relief for international film investment (i.e. Hollywood and global media conglomerates), and more recently, Brexit (2016). Devolution and decentralisation (especially outside London) have benefited small-scale national productions in Scotland (e.g. the Glasgow-based production *Seat in Shadow*, Henry Coombes, 2016) and the North of England (e.g. *God's Own Country*), many of which utilised European funding sources in tandem with national and regional ones.

In 2000, the (New) Labour government disbanded both British Screen and the British Film Institute Production Board, and established the UK Film Council as the new body for funding development, which determined how public funds were allocated (including regional investments in film-making). They were further divided into a Premier Fund for films including *Notes on a Scandal* (Richard Eyre, 2006) with its star cast (co-financed by BBC Films), crossover genre films (*Dorian Gray*, Oliver Parker, 2009) and the New Cinema Fund for emerging talents' work that included *Weekend* (Andrew Haigh, 2011) and *My Summer of Love* (Pawel Pawlikowski, 2004). However, fewer queer productions benefited from the UK Film Council funding during this period – with *AKA* (Duncan Roy, 2002), *Nine Dead Gay Guys* (Lab Ky Mo, 2002), *Nina's Heavenly Delights*, *Scenes of a Sexual Nature* (Ed Blum, 2006), *I Can't Think Straight* (Shamim Sarif, 2008) and *Shank* (Simon Pearce, 2009) reliant on international co-production financing, start-ups, and pre-sales to LGBT-focused DVD distributors such as TLA releasing in the US. The UK Film Council invested in 900 films at a cost of 160 million pounds (Gant 2020), which might seem impressive. Yet, the figure also speaks of a dearth of investing in queer filmmaking

with the only queer films of note being *My Summer of Love*, *Notes on a Scandal*, and *Weekend*. The political shift in filmmaking governance from a public-sector investment in cultural value (under New Labour) to a private-sector investment measured by economic value (under the Conservatives) helps explain the irregular and sporadic nature of queer filmmaking in the UK. Additionally, this new business-oriented model enabled the British film industry to extend its benefits to large-scale blockbuster productions from the US that are given national production status and tax reliefs if they pass an official “cultural test”. Films in this profit-driven category include the Warner Bros. *Harry Potter* (2001-2011) and *Dark Knight* (2005-2012) global media franchises.



Fig. 1. *Weekend*, Andrew Haigh.

This might be in part related to the elision of sexuality in the UK’s Equality Act 2010 as Cobb, Newsinger, and Nwonka explain:

The concept of diversity is a way of articulating inequalities based on race and ethnicity, gender, disability and social class (sexual orientation hardly features in diversity policy despite being covered under the Equality Act 2010) while also being a way of managing the promotion of claims to equality from below within existing industry structures and practices (Cobb, Newsinger and Nwonka 2020, p. 1).

The Conservative government's dissolution of the UK Film Council to align the film industry with private-sector-led, profit-driven, inward investment and tax incentives established the UK film industry as a vital production context for Hollywood and overseas investors rather than a national cinema of national concerns, politics, and representations. The UK offers studios, a skilled workforce, and substantial tax breaks, which allow films to be classified as domestic features when, in reality, funding comes from global media conglomerates. In this context, films such as *The Fast and the Furious Presents Hobbs and Shaw* (David Leitch 2019), partly filmed around Glasgow, are afforded large tax breaks and are considered notionally UK/US co-productions despite their US studio branding. Therefore, the ideologically and politically shaped context of UK film industry since 2000, informed by the UK Film Council, its disbandment, and the Conservative government's lack of priority for arts and culture, has attracted inward investment for lucrative slick commercial products made in UK studios with UK personnel (i.e. the Warner Bros. Harry Potter and MGM's James Bond franchises) rather than supporting anything remotely connected to minority experiences, diversity and inclusion, or criticisms of class politics, immigration, or ongoing structural inequalities.

Undoubtedly, there will be an impact on regionalized and dis-unified film production with consequences on the queer stories that get told. Following Brexit, will UK film productions accommodate views "from the outside" that may speak alternative truths of those contained within a new set of borders? Will queer films in the UK foment identity-as-unity through a shared understanding of *being* queer

in times when the national context is significantly informed by uncertainty in political direction, economic insecurity, neoliberal politics, populist right-wing resurgence, and the crisis in management of national/global health in the broadest sense of its meaning? These are the questions that will no doubt engage the near future of British queer filmmaking. Yet, it is also worth remembering that during the heyday of New Queer Cinema some British films were included in an overtly US-centric canon (mainly dominated by works from the US-based queer filmmakers Gregg Araki, Todd Haynes, Tom Kalin, and Marlon Riggs) such as Derek Jarman's *Edward II* (1991) with its queer period anachronism, and Isaac Julien's *Young Soul Rebels* (1991) attentive to intersections of race, sexuality, and class in music subcultures, with both operating as British films and New Queer Cinema (Rich 1992).

Despite our rather speculative opening, asserting that there is no British Queer Cinema, we would stress that there is a plethora of queer British films that sit harmoniously with contemporary re-conceptualisation of queer cinema and its new global trends. We will be exploring several examples below. We are also using queer as a catch-all for LGBTQ+ films which may not be closely aligned with the radical aspects of queer politics, but instead conform to settled, homonormative, assimilationist, or even queer antagonist priorities. Our study will provide a detailed critical evaluation of the last two decades of queer filmmaking in the UK.

Rather than reproducing familiar frameworks that regard individual British queer films as global theoretical objects and locate them in a transnational context of LGBTQ filmmaking, our approach will contextualise these films' modes of engagement with queerness and queer subjectivity by questioning the extent to which national belonging and production contexts shape these films' aesthetic and political construction of sexuality.

Notably, many of the queer-themed films between 2000 and 2020 continue with personal and introspective stories of queer individuals and biopics (*The Imitation Game*, *The*

*Happy Prince*), moments of poetic and amorous resolutions in everyday life (*Weekend*), distinct locations (*Clapham Junction*, Adrian Shergold, 2007; *God's Own Country*), historical markers (WWII in *Man in an Orange Shirt*, the 1950s in *Against the Law*), and enduring homophobic tropes of criminality (the lesbian villainy of *Notes on a Scandal* and the homicidal queer character of *Tony* [Gerard Johnson, 2009] – based on real life serial killer Dennis Nilson).

While some films use their queer characters and situations to narrate more significant political contexts both past and present (*Pride*, Matthew Warchus, 2014; *Against the Law*, 2017), others only hint at queer desires and possibilities (*Notes on a Scandal*; *Philomena*, Stephen Frears, 2013) in relaying their LGBTQ content to a wider spectatorial address. It is also crucial to note that being queer in the post-millennial British context is at times inseparable from being engaged in national politics of gender, religion, class, and ethnicity, including the government policies on gender recognition, immigration, citizenship, and marriage.

As Robin Griffiths (2016) argues, contemporary “British Queer Cinema” can be historicized as “post-Jarman” in its shift towards a different aesthetic and political concern aligned with neoliberalism and assimilationist aspirations. For Griffiths, the “post-Jarman” British queer film signifies a shift towards a different set of aesthetic and political concerns aligned with neoliberalism and assimilationist aspirations that eschew the radical formalist energy of Jarman’s distinctive authorship. However, without diminishing Jarman’s legacy, the Anglo-centric address of his films has not always been meaningful to the UK’s other nation-states, sub-national experiences, and multi-racial, multi-ethnic demographics. Jarman’s high-culture references, Anglo-centrism, and avant-garde impenetrability need to be also acknowledged as an impasse for wider contexts of queer reception in the UK.

Furthermore, the role occupied by the public service broadcasting system in the UK, specifically BBC and Channel 4, is significant in British queer filmmaking. As these major tel-

vision institutions are committed to British film productions, they have also been central and highly hospitable in financially supporting queer films in the UK since the 1980s. While many of these television-funded films have a short theatrical window before airing on television, they are most often seen outside the UK in theatrical and festival contexts, and produced like any other film with the intention of theatrical exhibition.



Fig. 2. *My Beautiful Laundrette*, Stephen Frears.

When Channel 4 was established in 1982, its remit included the commissioning of feature-length films that would have international theatrical potential and be distributed in the UK for a brief window before a national broadcast. As a source of independent film funding in the UK, one of Channel 4's earliest productions was *My Beautiful Laundrette* (Stephen Frears, 1985), a significant entry in the global queer canon of 1980s cinema. Alongside landmark television moments such as the magazine show *Out on Tuesday* (1989), the serial drama *Brookside* airing the first on-screen lesbian kiss before the watershed (in 1994), *Queer as Folk* (1999), and recently *Years and Years* (2019), *I May Destroy You* (2020), *Trigonometry* (2020), and *It's a Sin* (2021), it is hard to im-

agine a British queer screen culture without television, the financing and the remits of its role as a public service.

Historically, the BBC and Channel 4 were the main funding bodies for the oppositional film cultures including the work of Derek Jarman. The BBC funded Jarman's *Edward II* (1991), and Channel Four co-financed *The Angelic Conversation* (1985), *Caravaggio* (1986), and *The Last of England* (1987). We mention these earlier instances of television financing not only to demonstrate a lineage with contemporary films but also the context of those films being funded by a public body during a period of dominant right-wing politics under the Conservatives, the AIDS crisis, and the Section 28 law which prohibited the "promotion" of homosexuality in educational contexts. In short, since the 1980s, television has been an integral source of funding for independent British film production. Independent British filmmaking continues to depend upon the patronage of television. More recently, the BBC co-financed *My Summer of Love* (2004), *Notes on a Scandal* (2006), *The Edge of Love* (John Maybury, 2008), *Monsoon* (Hong Khaou, 2019) and *Supernova* (Harry Macqueen, 2020). FilmFour, the film production subsidiary of Channel 4, financed or part-financed *Clapham Junction* (2007), *Disobedience* (Lelio 2017) and *The Favourite* (Yorgos Lanthimos, 2017).

### *Reclamations: Queer Lovers, British Heritage, and the Nostalgic Turn*

British films of the late twentieth century, as Geoff Eley notes in his evaluation of the 1980s and 1990s, are predominantly "about who belongs to the nation, and about how that belonging is now to be imagined in Thatcherised Britain's transformed social landscape and differently structured public sphere" (Eley 2019, p. 134). Eley's study locates heritage film as a powerful example that consolidates Britain's swerve to conservative neoliberal cultural politics in the 1980s. Moreo-



ver, Higson (1993) identifies common stylistic and thematic features of the genre as it developed: the display of history as spectacle via a pictorialist camera style, the primacy of *mise-en-scène* over narrative, a fascination with upper-class life, the use of classic literature as source texts, especially E.M. Forster, and a consistent use of particular actors including Helena Bonham-Carter, James Wilby and Anthony Hopkins. Higson also places these films in a political context of British conservatism, particularly Thatcherism, interpreting the heritage genre as symptomatic of a middle-class denial of present-day social conflicts (Street 2009, pp. 117-118; Higson 1993). Yet, the heritage film, according to Eley,

successfully reinscribes “tradition” as the central good of the national past [...] [while] the very same stories might also be retold (or read against the grain) to challenge the conformities of the present – through critiques of the family, resistance to sexual repression, subversion of heteronormativity, the queering of sexualities, the claiming of feminist subjectivity, and so forth (Eley 2019, p. 136).

Resonating with Eley’s argument, we contend that Chanya Button’s *Vita and Virginia*, Yorgos Lanthimos’s *The Favourite*, and Francis Lee’s *Ammonite* (2020) are three key “queer” films of the post-millennial British cinema, which re-brand the heritage film by queering its normative re-inscriptions of tradition. We would like to focus on *Vita and Virginia* and *Ammonite* as these films provide a fertile ground to investigate not only queer appropriations of the heritage film but also the ways in which the biopic is used as a tool for queer reclamation of the past, the earlier (and more radical) examples of which are Derek Jarman’s *Caravaggio* (1986), *Wittgenstein* (1993) and *Edward II* (1991), and Isaac Julien’s *Looking for Langston* (1989) and *Derek* (2008). While queer biopics bear the political potential of destabilizing, decentring, re-inventing and recovering the past, some of these biopics are produced with wholly mainstream address, adverse to any queer provocations: the egregious de-queering of gay/bi men

in the two recent UK-financed Hollywood-distributed films, namely *Bohemian Rhapsody* (Bryan Singer, 2018) from 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox and *Rocketman* (Dexter Fletcher, 2019) from Paramount Pictures, demonstrates effectively the ways in which the biopic's representation of the radical queer subject could embody not only a default position of dissent but also a de-queered, assimilationist vision.

Chanya Button's *Vita and Virginia* is a meditation on the passionate relationship between Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West. In contrast to Jarman's stylistic experimentation with period drama and heritage film in *Edward II*, *Vita and Virginia* attempts to subvert the genre from within its aesthetic conventions by investing in the amorous relationship between two famous women of twentieth century English literature. The film re-incorporates the legacy of an unassimilable, queer, amorous Woolf (Sproles 2006) into the generic setting of British heritage. Such representations, according to Eley, act as

suppressed source[s] of a more radical conception of personhood, [...] [and] a modernism implacably hostile to the congealed normativities of the past [which] [...] could [...] deliver a counter-narrative, allowing a different history to be told (Eley 2019, p. 134).

Shaped significantly by love letters which are articulated on-screen through a haptic imagery of extreme close-ups, acousmatic sound and dream-like sequences of bodily sensations, the narrative of *Vita and Virginia* centres on the dynamics of queer desire between the two women, which inspires Woolf to write her novel *Orlando: A Biography* (1928). The film formulates a queer subject that is expressive, amorous, and thus, continually transforming, becoming. Rather than aspiring to de-closet its characters' sexualities and reducing them to certain identity categories, the film prioritises how desire unfolds, and intimacy develops, and how the characters' intimate connection makes them expressive, expansive, aesthetic subjects. As Eley also suggests,

the valorising of expressivity – the importance of individual feelings and the courage to recognise them – in a modernist philosophy of personhood had an avowedly political potential in the early twentieth century which the heritage film [...] evades (Eley 2009, p. 249).

Criticising her cross-dressing gender-bending daughter as a “promiscuous exhibitionist who only brings shame to the family”, and taking Woolf’s Bloomsbury scene as a “debauched, bohemian bubble”, Vita’s aristocratic mother, Lady Sackville (Isabella Rossellini), is presented as the generic gate-keeping character of heritage film which juxtaposes the couple’s queer “expressivity” and radical individuality, unsettling the default affective register of the genre throughout the film. Such tensions in representation are also present in Chanya Button’s aesthetic choices. While the *mise-en-scène* of *Vita and Virginia* (particularly locations, settings, costumes, and acting) reproduces the generic formulas of British period drama, the film’s stylistic register frequently shifts to a contemporary haptic mode that articulates, through various expressive uses of framing and non-diegetic sound, Woolf’s bodily sensations and the lovers’ wistful looks. The film’s contemporary expression of Sapphic desire disentangles the queer subject from the period setting while constructing a Virginia Woolf that is unassimilable to a gender-normative British heritage or to an identitarian optic of a queer present. “I like things wild, vast, complicated”, says Vita in one of the film’s key moments. Virginia’s experience of her “wild, vast, complicated” connection with Vita results in *Orlando*, a biography of a 16<sup>th</sup> century teenage nobleman undergoing a mysterious sex change, which reclaims and re-affirms the legacy of Virginia Woolf as one of a queer texture, shaped by queer desire.

Similar to *Vita and Virginia*’s reclamation of queerness within British heritage film, Francis Lee’s *Ammonite* reimagines the relationship of the 19<sup>th</sup> century palaeontology pioneer Mary Anning and her fellow geologist Charlotte Murchison. Suffering from melancholia and an unhappy marriage, Mur-

chison was left by her husband to Anning's companionship – with the hope that the seaside in Lyme Regis would cure her depression. Combining the pictorialist cinematography of period dramas with the expressionistic tools of poetic realism including the specific uses of colour, framing, make-up, location, and lighting, Lee creates a filmic universe that reflects Anning's passion for fossil-hunting. Depicting two 19<sup>th</sup> century women as subjects of desire and picturing them among the rocks and fossils of the British seaside under a gloomy weather, the film reclaims a queer subject lost within the stifling “closets” of British heritage. What the critic Peter Bradshaw's review of the film sees in Lee's metaphorical use of fossil-hunting, i.e. “the cracking open of stones, the discovery of secrets, the thrillingly real evidence of life” (Bradshaw 2021), also demonstrates how Lee makes heritage relay queerness and how queer love subverts the official scripts of heritage. In the final scene of the film, two women reunite at the British Museum. Gazing at each other from the opposite sides of a glass cabinet that contains the ichthyosaur fossil Anning discovered, the couple inhabits the museum and claims it – as the willful queer subjects of history and heritage.

Comparable to *Vita and Virginia's* anti-identitarian take on sexuality, *Ammonite* does not necessarily dramatise a crisis of sexual identity in the lives of these two Victorian women, either. Maintaining the trope of ammonite (as life fossilised and preserved in rock), the film suspends historical specificity, de-contextualises the period film by focusing on the intimacy between these women, and thus enacts a form of what Elizabeth Freeman conceptualises as “erotohistoriography”: a “deviant chronopolitics” that facilitates “a friction of dead bodies upon live ones, obsolete constructions upon emergent ones” (Freeman 2005, p. 66). From the picturesque seaside landscape to the British Museum, Lee grants these women visibility and mobility in the unlikely spaces of genre and history.

Queer re-imaginings of genre in post-millennial British cinema do not merely take place in the context of heritage

film and period drama. Andrew Haigh's *Weekend*, Matthew Wachus's *Pride*, and Francis Lee's *God's Own Country* are important examples that could be considered as interventions that carve out a space for non-heteronormative characters and relations within the British cinema's legacy of social realism (including its art-house and "mid-brow" modalities). Griffiths suggests that "[the] obsession with the past and the 'nostalgic turn' that seems to dominate the gay-themed British films that have emerged more recently are particularly evident in the release of Matthew Warchus' [...] comedy-drama *Pride* in 2014" (Griffiths 2016, p. 604). Warchus's film, Griffiths asserts, "is essentially a continuation of the *fin de millennium*, 'masculinity-in-crisis' narratives that were very much a cornerstone of British cinema in the late 1990s" (*ibidem*). The Welsh miners of the Dulais Valley Lodge in *Pride*, Griffiths suggests,

are almost interchangeable with the disillusioned northern English mining communities of *Brassed Off* (Mark Herman, 1996) and *Billy Elliot* (Stephen Daldry, 2000) and the unemployed Sheffield steelworkers of *The Full Monty* (Peter Cattaneo, 1997): all share the same struggle to adapt to the inherent trauma of economic change and the subsequent shift in social structures and gender relations that were brought about by the harsh political climate of late-twentieth-century Thatcherism (*ivi*, pp. 604-605).

Revisiting the coalitional activism of Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners (LGSM), Wachus's *Pride* reintegrates queer politics into the generic realm of British social realist cinema which has evaded marginal(ised) sexualities as a valid subject of its cultural and political critique of British society.

What Griffiths considers as nostalgic "fascination with the past" in *Pride* is informed by not only the cultural memory the film aims to mobilise with regard to the legacy of the coalitional LGBTQ politics in Britain, but also the contemporary currency of coalitional dissent against the atomising forces of conservative neoliberalism in post-millennial Britain, including the assimilationist homonormative gay politics it promotes (*ivi*, p.

607). Telling its story of friendship, alliance, and dissidence from within a mainstream-friendly register of social realism, *Pride* can be considered as one of the crucial examples of “queer relay”, which, we argue, largely dominates post-millennial queer representations in British cinema. Rather than claiming the margins, embodying the radical, deviant, non-conforming queer politics, and refusing to engage the mainstream, these films aspire to cross over various registers of cinematic production, and relay queerness where it usually does not belong. While what they compromise in favour of such a “crossover mobility” is a valid question for critique, the cultural and political potentials such relay bears should not be ignored.

*Outing the Intersectional Queer Subject: Collisions and Collusions*

From *My Beautiful Laundrette* to *God's Own Country*, British cinema has accommodated complex depictions of queerness that operate in intersection with relations of race, class and gender. While the post-millennial proliferation of LGBTQ-themed films in British visual culture does not necessarily lead to a well-established “queer cinema” with a set of recurring aesthetic and political concerns, the increasing visibility of the intersectional queer subject in most of these films deserves critical attention. Ranging from representations of queer diaspora to stories of migration, border-crossing, and interracial queer desire, the intersectional queerness in these films has a particular ethic of relationality as it expands queer subjectivity beyond familiar modes of LGBTQ dissidence. These films’ depiction of queer characters asserts an identity that contests not only the intersectional operations of heteronormativity, patriarchy, racism, nationalism and classism in Britain but also the normative aesthetic relations of gaze, genre and representation in film.

Considering the representations of the queer diasporic subject in post-millennial British filmmaking, we contend that Sally Al Hosaini’s *My Brother the Devil* (2012) is one of the most significant examples. The film tells the story of two tee-

nage brothers of Egyptian descent, Mo and Rashid, who live with their parents in Hackney, London. Flirting with social realism but using sound in a more expressive manner, Al Hosaini explores masculinity in diasporic youth by concentrating on the brothers' coming of age. Rashid is a member of a local gang and deals drugs. He meets Sayyid, a French-Arab photographer. Following the murder of his friend by a rival gang, Rashid decides to leave his gang and take the job Sayyid offers him. Their friendship turns into romance, and queer intimacy complicates the film's diasporic optic. The intimacy between the two Arab men, Fernandez Carbajal states, "forges a new model of diasporic masculinity that constitutes a simultaneous assemblage of competing models of Muslim masculinities and queerness, which micropolitically disorients diasporic familial constructions of Islamic masculinity and the hypermasculine gang model" (Fernandez Carbajal 2019, p. 142).

While the film's stylistic approach to diaspora (characterised by its thematic inclusion of intergenerational conflicts, and the use of hip-hop music) partly resonates with what Hamid Naficy conceptualises as "accented cinema" (Naficy 2001), its representation of home/land, nationality, Muslimness, and masculinity further complicates Naficy's use of "accent" as trope by diversifying and giving texture to what is conventionally understood as diasporic subjectivity. This divergence from more formulaic representations of displacement, ambivalent attachments, and nostalgia for lost origins in migrant/diasporic film is significantly informed by Al Hosaini's emphasis on belonging. As Fernandez Carbajal states,

[in this film] the diasporic youth visibly steer away from the values of first-generation migrants and seek their own space where they can forge new ways of belonging that are multiethnic and diasporic, with more emphasis on settlement and rerooting than on dislocation (Fernandez Carbajal 2019, pp. 139-140).

This assertion of Britishness enables Al Hosaini to experiment with a more nuanced articulation of masculinity, faith, and same-sex intimacy.

The nuance in the film's character relations, and its representational discourse of gender and sexuality, is shaped by Al Hosaini's critical approach to identitarian visibility: the film refuses to build a drama where Muslimness and homosexuality are constructed as monolithic identity categories antagonising each other by default. While Sayyid's liberal approach to home/land, Islam, and homosexuality is informed by his class privilege, and the cultural capital thereof, Rashid's defensive yet ambivalent attitude to Sayyid, leading to a love affair without any drama of coming-out, makes the film "discourage an ethnographic gaze [...] [and] turn away from offering titillation for the cosmopolitan spectator, 'slumming' for erotic thrills" (Schoonover and Galt 2016, pp. 55-56). Rather than pursuing a de-closeting narrative, the film neither spectacularises the intimacy between Rashid and Sayyid nor imposes an identity on the couple. The revelation of the couple's intimate relationship in the story is granted the narrative function to ameliorate, if not resolve, the identificatory crises which the diaspora's hegemonic heteronormative masculinity mobilises within the youth. Peter Cherry argues that the film's "dualistic positioning [of the couple] [...] unintentionally colludes with an emergent British homo-nationalism" (Cherry 2018, p. 282). However, Al Hosaini's diversification of British Muslimness and the film's detachment from an identitarian framework of visibility and coming-out offer a distinct alternative to the dominant monogamous-promiscuous and native-migrant binary oppositions that have shaped the romantic "oval couple" dominating British queer films (Çakırlar and Needham 2020), including that of Andrew Haigh's *Weekend* and Francis Lee's *God's Own Country*.

The diasporic subject in post-millennial British cinema is significantly transformed by the instrumentalization of intersectional queerness. Refusing to reduce migrant queer characters to various forms of cultural estrangement (from both Britishness and queerness), the assertion of hybridity in these films is affirmative rather than negative, which compli-



cates the identitarian ethos of the “diasporic optic” (Moorti 2003), or what Hamid Naficy would regard as the cinematic “accent” of diasporic filmmaking (Naficy 2001). What makes these representations of intersectional queerness significant is that they replace the “primacy of return” and homecoming (Naficy 2001; Çakırlar 2020), as well as the migrant subject’s constitutive nostalgia for lost origins (which diasporic films have typically invested in), with relational subjects who assertively locate themselves in post-colonial Britain. In this regard, the representations of queer love in Pratibha Parmar’s *Nina’s Heavenly Delights* and Shamim Sarif’s *I Can’t Think Straight* are crucial examples that appropriate the homonormative constellations of lesbian romance by locating it in the mainstream stylistic registers of rom-com genre.



Fig. 3. *I Can't Think Straight*, Shamim Sarif.

*Nina’s Heavenly Delights* opens with the main character Nina’s return to Glasgow for her father’s funeral. Parmar’s framing of Nina’s homecoming does not work to reproduce the familiar tropes of return and nostalgia in diasporic film and literature (Naficy 2001; Hall 1989). While Hall and Naficy frame the diasporic subject’s “double consciousness” as significantly shaped by the intergenerational conflicts over

tradition and modernity, operating as a markedly gendered burden informed by patriarchal relations, *Nina* reintegrates the queer diasporic subject into family and tradition through the coming-out story of a Scottish South Asian woman whose strong attachment to her deceased father and his cultural legacy as a cook does not obstruct, nor overtly antagonise, but facilitate queer desire by reattaching it to an empowering, cross-generational, and inclusive vision of Scottish Asian diasporic women. Nina's relationship to his father is effective as well as proprietorial: the film's narrative axis of coming-out is matched with that of the curry competition (for restaurants in Glasgow) which Nina prepares for in order to save the ownership of her father's restaurant from falling into the hands of her ex-fiancé.

Claiming Scotland as home, the film presents Nina's diasporic family and friends through a celebratory lens of neoliberal Scottish nationalism (Mahn 2013, p. 318). In line with this framework of neoliberal inclusion and diversity, the film also engages with an expanded and gendered trope of the closet: Nina's closeted queerness is coupled with her younger sister's closeted passion for Scottish Highlands dance and her mother's extramarital love for Raj. Therefore, the film not only celebrates Nina's coming-out but also re-authenticates a hybrid diasporic femininity by de-closeting women's desires that transgress normative attachments to nation, gender, sexuality, and tradition. Yet, *Nina's* "utopic queer hybrid Scottish Indian image" (Schoonover and Galt 2016, p. 66) is not limited to women. The gender-fluid character Bobbi, Nina's best friend, is situated as the embodiment of queer wisdom and domesticity in the film. Bobbi's remarks on Nina's predicaments throughout the film cultivate a re-imagining of belonging

transformed [...] from an obstructive obligation (the necessity of choosing between seemingly conflicting desires) into a utopian route to cohesion (never scarce or exclusive, platonic as well as erotic, grounded in one place and another, respectful of the past and guaranteed for the future) (ivi, p. 65).

Comparable to Al Hosaini's and Parmar's instrumentalization of queer diaspora, Shamim Sarif's *I Can't Think Straight* also accommodates an assertively identitarian yet intersectional vision of queer hybridity. The film focuses on the romantic affair between two women, Leyla and Tala. Sarif registers this amorous couple through a strategically layered oppositional binary that goes beyond the familiar monogamous-promiscuous and native-migrant dichotomies. As Sarif grants visibility to the amorous exchange between a Palestinian-Jordanian woman of a Christian Arab heritage [i.e. Tala] and a British Muslim woman of a South Asian heritage [i.e. Leyla], the film's representation of same-sex interethnic intimacy between women of colour works to mobilise an "assemblage of identities previously deemed incompatible by normative nationalist and diasporic ideologies" (Fernandez Carbajal 2019, p. 126). As in Parmar's *Nina*, Sarif deploys romantic comedy as genre "partly as a way to push back against both racialized scripts for cinematic romance and restrictive discourses of queer belonging" (Schoonover and Galt 2016, p. 61). These films' attempts to *relay* queer-of-colour critique from alternative modes of queer filmmaking to the mainstream registers of genre film imply both ideological collisions and collusions. While the playful engagement of Parmar and Sarif with the rom-com genre may lead to potential collusions with British homo-nationalism and homonormativity, their re-situating of queerness as intersectional collides with neo-colonial and nationalist scripts of homophobia and ethno-religious exclusivism.

*I Can't Think Straight* starts with Tala's engagement party in Amman. While the film's expressive *mise-en-scène* highlights the wealth of the privileged Arab elite, Tala's estrangement from the extravagant meritocratic rituals of heterosexual marriage is made considerably visible in these opening sequences. Furthermore, Sarif's framing of Leyla as the dissident daughter of an aspirational, middle-class, Muslim South Asian diasporic family, that is effectively integrated into the British neoliberal economy, aligns the two female protagonists through the shared alienation from their families' normatively gendered ex-

pectations. While the film's development of queer desire and romance leads to a homonormative, "ovalized" intimacy of monogamous coupledness (Çakırlar and Needham 2020), the *mise-en-scène* accommodates the couple within the traditional locations of British heritage (e.g. Oxford colleges, bucolic thatched cottages, polo matches, Houses of Parliament, and so on) that are "reimagine[d] as queer of colour spaces" throughout the film (Schoonover and Galt 2016, p. 63). However, these performatively constructed images of cultural collisions do not necessarily undermine the film's collusions with, and conflation of, homo-nationalism and homonormativity. The British involvement in the Israel/Palestine conflict is obscured by including various characters' simplistic remarks, either pro-Israel or anti-Zionist or anti-Semitic, to consolidate the film's discourse of diversity while celebrating Britain as the land of liberal inclusion. This is further reified by the film's presentation of Leyla's room, which also operates as a trope of her closet: here, the *mise-en-scène* reveals a CD of k.d. lang, and a tower of books from Virginia Woolf, Martina Navratilova, Jeanette Winterson and Sarah Waters. This "embrace of a Western and decidedly Anglophone lesbian canon, and model of sexual liberation", Fernandez Carjabal writes, "also entails a narrow subscription to Western liberal values and a lack of commensurability of other cultures" (Fernández Carjabal 2019, pp. 123-124). In line with this, the coming-out of Leyla and Tala grants the film's narrative with a resolution that resonates with the rom-com's generic promise for the happy reunion of the monogamous couple. Happiness, here, is anchored by Tala's familial aspirations: one of the film's concluding scenes consolidates this reproductive homonormativity by framing the couple together with a mother and her toddler in a park.

The films we have so far discussed in this section demonstrate the ways in which the visibility of intersectional queerness bears the critical potential to revise and nuance, if not subvert, the identitarian frameworks of British multiculturalism. Yet, the filmic figures of intersectional queerness are also "able to evade the identitarian traps that characterise

liberal multiculturalism, enabling a shift from LGBT – identified characters to less corporeal figurations of queer worldliness” (Schoonover and Galt 2016, p. 74). In this sense, the British-Cambodian-Chinese director Hong Khaou’s *Lilting* (2014) and *Monsoon* can be considered as intriguing examples of queer filmmaking that characterise this shift from identity politics to a more critical practice that reinvents new aesthetic modes of queer relationality (rather than identity) in engaging with love, loss, grief, memory, and belonging re-imagined through a non-heteronormative optic. *Lilting* focuses on the relationship between Junn and Richard, following the death of Kai, the son of the traditionally conservative Chinese-Cambodian mother Junn, and the partner Richard. While the impossibility of cross-cultural translation in collectively mourning and grieving Kai – who operates as the film’s closeted “apparitional queer subject” – is central to the film, Khaou’s framing of grief is granted the narrative function to “represent the longed-for possibility of an embodied and loved Chinese-Cambodian-British queer kinship” (*ibidem*). As compared with Parmar’s *Nina* and Sarif’s *I Can’t Think Straight*, the closet in *Lilting* functions as a trope of linguistic, affective and cross-cultural obstacles that interferes with the communication of Junn and Richard. Although Richard finally outs Kai and their relationship to Junn, “*Lilting* ends by derauling the arc of the coming-out narrative, replacing the logic of gay identity with a cinematic space of affect and affection across cultures” (*ibidem*). Conversely, considering Khaou’s representation of gay identity as a “typical [projection] of the [post-Jarman, post-Thatcher] contemporary British gay narratives, [...] [and their] tropes of internalised guilt and shame”, Robin Griffiths associates *Lilting* with what he identifies as the “nostalgic turn [...] [in] the gay-themed British films” and their “neoliberal obsession” with identity politics (Griffiths 2016, pp. 603-604), i.e. more specifically, their “problematic division between repression and openness” (Bruzzi 2009, p. 125). Yet, we contend that Khaou’s evasion of coming-out as the key narrative axis makes *Lilting* a more critically innova-

tive contribution to the particular legacy of queer diasporic film in British (and transnational) cinema.



Fig. 4. *Lilting*, Hong Khaou.

Khaou's recent film *Monsoon* can also be considered as an original intervention into the familiar tropes of queer migrancy and diaspora in British and European cinemas. The film tells the story of Kit's return to Vietnam following the death of his mother. Kit visits the country for the first time since he was six years old when his parents fled Vietnam and immigrated to the UK in the aftermath of the American-Vietnam war. While loss and grief lead Kit to return to his country of birth, he struggles to recollect any memory of his childhood. Rather than representing the migrant subject's homecoming as a redemptive and ameliorative journey that folds into a set of affirmative identifications (Çakırlar 2020), the *mise-en-scène* in *Monsoon* presents, through Kit's point of view, an epistemologically dense, overwhelmingly effective yet impersonal, and transnational image of post-war Saigon stripped of any empathic myth of home, belonging, or domesticity. This impersonal "touristic" gaze is

occasionally interrupted by Kit's encounters with Lewis, the son of a deceased American veteran, who visits Vietnam and experiences similar feelings of estrangement. While the film "ovalizes" Lewis and Kit as a screen couple (through various scenes of them having sex), the intimacy between them does not necessarily constitute the film's narrative centre. Through a number of conversations he has with his childhood friend Lee (and the local girl Linh he befriended), Kit realises that his privileged life in London had been contingent on the failure of his father's first attempt to escape on his own (and abandon his family), and on the subsequent success of the escape of the entire family including Kit and his mother. The film's engagement with Kit's realisation does not produce a pathos of disappointment, guilt, or shame. On the contrary, the contingency of his six-year-old self's fate liberates Kit. In contrast to Parmar's and Sarif's de-closeting endings discussed above, *Monsoon* refuses to offer a narrative resolution that would assimilate the intersectional queer subject into the fold of monogamous romance and/or a redemptive belonging to home/land.

Refusing to reproduce the diasporic cinema's familiar tropes of "double consciousness", hybridity, and "nostalgia for lost origins", Khaou's film pursues an affective, slow cinematic aesthetic to register a de-domesticated queer migrant subject with no home/land. Kit's intimate connection with Lewis (i.e. the only personal relationship we see developing in the film) is also informed by Khaou's non-identitarian framing of queer migrancy or mobility. Offering no resolution, no redemption, no homonormative promises for monogamous coupledness, *Monsoon* encourages the spectator to join the cinematic drift of the queer migrant subject, partly analogous to the relational logic of the impersonal erotic in gay cruising.

### *In Place of a Conclusion: the Politics of Queer Relay*

The main intellectual motivation behind this study was to map out a landscape of queer filmmaking and representa-

tion in post-millennial British cinema. While we struggle to identify a distinct cinematic movement in Britain, a British Queer Cinema that invests in radical queer critique through a set of particular aesthetic and political concerns, the sporadic visibility of queerness (operating within a deregulated and reconfigured cultural sector) and its mobility across different registers of production and distribution can be considered to epitomise what Lisa Henderson defines as “queer relay”, that is,

a historicising concept for a changing cultural economy, a world not formed by an anachronistic calculus in which the expressive ambitions of [...] [queer] and other outsider cultural producers are suspect, whether for selling out to industry ambition or holding on to queer cultural autonomy (Henderson 2008, p. 594).

While the absence of a collectively mobilised culture of queer filmmaking in contemporary Britain should not escape a critical lens that attends to political as well as sectoral limitations in contemporary Britain, it would still be simplistic to reduce queer visibility in contemporary British film and television to a set of mainstream cultural appropriations that potentially obscures, if not erases, the legacy of LGBTQ dissidence. A queer critique of such formations that aspires to cross over mainstream and alternative modes of production, Henderson argues, should “*not* rush in with self-preserving refusal at the first or last sign of queer encounter with nonqueer market culture” (ivi, p. 570). A revised queer critical framework, then, should move

toward relay, a different trajectory in imagining relations between subcultures and their dominant alternatives [...] imagin[ing] a historical braid of changing production conditions and the virtual hunger of commercial systems for subcultural energy and artistry (ivi, p. 571).

Rather than looking for a false authenticity of a “queer cinema” in a particular national context (which may



appeal to neoliberal market demands of diversity in academia), queer film studies should be more attentive to contexts of mobility and relay. Rather than pursuing the default methodology of curating close film readings and imagining a queer national cinema on that basis, scholars of LGBTQ filmmaking should extend their frameworks to a more integrated analysis that contextualises queer filmmaking across different registers of production, style, genre, politics, and spectatorial address.

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