

DESPERATELY SEEKING REDUNDANCY?
Queer Romantic Comedy and the Festival Audience

by

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ABSTRACT

Historically speaking, the queer film festival is rooted in grassroots politics and it exists as a counterculture space. Conversely, genre cinema is associated with classical Hollywood and it is largely associated with mainstream, heteronormative value systems. The queer romantic comedy represents a major flashpoint as a crossover phenomenon: in its ability to infiltrate these diametrically opposed cultural systems, it is viewed as both traitor and arbitrator simultaneously. The response to this queered genre is directly related to critical debates surrounding the question of whether the queer film festival space has become or seeks to become redundant. Ironically, while the question of redundancy circulates, critical analysis of the queer film festival space has only recently begun to emerge, while the queer romantic comedy itself is virtually non-existent within genre theory. As such, I argue that the queer film festival and the queer romantic comedy are inextricably linked as sites of transgression, and that, neither are becoming redundant.

To construct my analysis, I use the Vancouver Queer Film Festival as a blueprint for the selection of gay and lesbian romantic comedies. I cite a number of critical thinkers, however, key to my analysis are a series of forums on the queer film festival published in *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, as well as Rick Altman's genre theory and Bakhtin's concept of carnival. In chapter two, I provide an historical overview of the Vancouver Queer Film Festival and outline my primary data for analysis. In chapter three, I draw from the *GLQ* forums to contextualize key debates surrounding the changing role of the queer

film festival. In chapter four, I insert queer romantic comedy into the lexicon of genre theory to explore the use of self-reflexivity as a political tool. In chapters five and six, I compare the gay and lesbian romantic comedy collections, focusing on primary tropes, modes of address and media response to locate points of disruption within these 'generic' texts. In the concluding chapter, I consider the question of redundancy in relation to actual and authorized transgression within queer romantic comedy and the queer film festival space.

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This thesis is dedicated to

Michael Weir

1966 - 2005

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION: Coming Out and Crossing Over

At the *Persistent Vision Conference 2006* in San Francisco, on the current state of queer media, the crossover film was a hot topic of debate.¹ By crossover, I am referring to queer-themed films that have crossed over into the mainstream instead of, or in addition to, circulating through niche markets such as queer film festivals.² The conference program guide proclaimed “not only are we featured, but we are being woven into the media quilt in all of our complexity” and proudly listed examples of the queering of popular media: the fame of lesbian icon Ellen Degeneres; the creation of queer television channels in the U.S., Canada, and France; the broadcast of queer television programs like *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and *The L Word*; and the success of Oscar award-winning films such as *Monster* (Patty Jenkins 2003) and *Brokeback Mountain* (Ang Lee 2005) (4). However, while several panelists argued that a doorway into the industry had finally been opened for queer filmmakers, the idea that queer images are becoming ubiquitous was not unanimously embraced or expressly desired. Throughout the conference, films like *Brokeback Mountain* and *Transamerica* (Duncan Tucker 2005) were frequently cited as inadequate or offensive representations of gay and transsexual experience, a judgment that has been hurled at Hollywood films for decades. Paradoxically, it is interesting to note that *Brokeback Mountain's* award-winning status includes the 2006 GLAAD Media Award for Outstanding Film – Wide Release, GLAAD being the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation. Featured panels at the conference were clearly demarcated with either a mainstream or niche focus and while the crossover

phenomenon was open for debate, a close analysis of this newfound relationship between the mainstream and the niche was markedly absent.

Historically speaking, gay and lesbian film festivals emerged in the 1970s encouraged by the gay rights, civil rights and women's movements of that time and as such, they were quite distinct as niche venues that emphasized grassroots politics and sexual liberation. Lesbian and gay film production increased exponentially in the 1980s and this growth influenced what was to become known as New Queer Cinema in the early 1990s, hailed for its decidedly anti-Hollywood, anti-mainstream form.³ The films associated with this "movement" gained considerable visibility and garnered awards at such prestigious venues as the Sundance Film Festival in Utah. At the time, many critics were optimistic that the high profile of these films and filmmakers would encourage and enable the crossover of a steady stream of queer productions into the mainstream. The hype of NQC was short lived; however, this period of production and exhibition marked a significant turning point for deliberations on mainstream and niche marketing of queer cinema. In particular, several critics viewed this period as the moment corporate America identified an untapped market. Queer crossover discourse and the question of festival redundancy began to circulate with the rise of New Queer Cinema and it is not coincidental that two simultaneous developments followed this period of heightened visibility: the construction of a gay niche marketing campaign in the mainstream that targeted the gay, white, affluent consumer; and simultaneously, renewed attention on the surge of new queer film festivals emerging around the world.

Within this thesis, I will consider the relationship between these two oppositional events through a study of queer romantic comedies presented at the Vancouver Queer Film Festival from 1997-2008 as a means to analyse how the crossover film enhances and problematizes mainstream-niche debates. In doing so, the significance of this queered genre form within and outside the queer film festival space will become apparent. Fundamentally, I argue that the queer romantic comedy and the queer film festival space are inextricably linked as sites of transgression, and that the queer film festival is not becoming redundant, but rather, actively responds to the changing landscape of queer media culture.

The queer film festival exists as a counterculture space. I use this term to refer to the active separation from and/or rejection of dominant conventions associated with mainstream culture, in particular heteronormative value systems that promote heterosexuality and maintain particular assumptions surrounding marriage, family, sexuality and society. This term also connotes a critical, yet privileged, viewing position that takes into account the history of social and political activism that enabled the public critique of queer culture, queer cinema and the queer film festival space. In fact, some critics argue that counterculture *relies* on this history for its existence and is *enabled* by the very system it seeks to reject.⁴ Counterculture can therefore ignite debates surrounding authorized vs. actual transgression and it is a useful point of reference. Since genre cinema is typically associated with classical Hollywood which is motivated by mainstream, heteronormative values, the queer romantic comedy represents a major flashpoint as a crossover phenomenon: in its ability to infiltrate the

diametrically opposed cultural systems of the mainstream and the niche, it is viewed as both traitor and arbitrator simultaneously. The concept of crossover is, therefore, directly related to the critical question of whether queer film festivals are becoming or seek to become redundant due to the increasing number of queer mainstream products available outside this niche space, but also because of the growing number of genre features being programmed within queer film festivals.

The most common criticism of crossover films is that they are simply “not queer” or “not queer enough.” This means the film is perceived as lacking primary elements that constitute queerness: they do not have a queer auteur; they are not produced for a queer niche audience; and/or they do not have a queer aesthetic or sensibility. This type of criticism relies on particular assumptions. The queer auteur or author is assumed to have exclusive experiential knowledge of his/her community that enables them to become a representative of the community. Implicit within the notion of a queer audience is the idea that queer equals niche, and that multiplex theatre audiences are always only heterosexual. The queer aesthetic or sensibility, a much more elusive point, refers to the inclusion of non-normative elements within the characters, story or stylistic devices. These points are key in my analysis since they are frequently used to distinguish “good” niche films from “bad” mainstream films. New Queer Cinema embodied these three ‘rules’ of queer production and the associated films are still viewed as critically acclaimed ‘good’ queer films. However, in a 2005 *Advocate* article, Adam B. Vary identifies what he calls the “New New Queer Cinema,” to

describe the next wave of queer films that include several queer romantic comedies such as Q. Allan Brocka's *Eating Out* and Angela Robinson's *D.E.B.S.* Fundamentally, both NQC and queer romantic comedies share key characteristics: they utilize mainstream systems to challenge those same systems; they take advantage of a queer platform to question the power dynamics within queer culture itself; and they rely on an inversion of genre conventions for their impact. Despite this shared rubric, the critical response differs greatly: NQC is assumed to have a social function, while queer romantic comedies do not; NQC is associated with audience *literacy* and activism, while queer romantic comedy is associated with audience *illiteracy* and apathy; NQC is viewed as radical, while queer romantic comedies are viewed as assimilationist. This paradox is central within my analysis of the crossover film and I argue that the queer romantic comedy pays homage to and extends the discourse of New Queer Cinema.

We can consider the critical duality the crossover film offers through the concept of 'queer relay' that Lisa Henderson describes as an "ongoing, uneven process of cultural passing off, catching, and passing on, if not always among members of the same team" (571). In Henderson's relay theory, "subcultures become the fantasy target of recognition and success" and dominant culture is "*in play*, not at the mercy of subcultural forms but lifeless without them" (571, emphasis in original). Henderson's articulation ties nicely into social movement politics that utilize a "dual organizing strategy" as described by Craig R. Rimmerman who argues that the assimilationist position recognizes the American

political system as “characterized by slow, gradual, incremental change,” while the more radical liberationist approach is characterized by a process of “leaping toward more radical goals” (133). He concludes that these approaches are interdependent and necessary for full change to occur, that is, “any social movement needs a variety of political organizing strategies that can be applied at different points and times and at all levels...” (147). The crossover film utilizes the slow, incremental evolution of recognizable genre systems while simultaneously incorporating representational strategies that speak to a radical queer politics of disruption.

If we consider the possibilities of crossover further, we can position the debates within a larger cultural framework. In his text *Black Directors in Hollywood*, Melvin Donalson elaborates on the evolution of the crossover film as it relates to the emergence of black actors and directors and black cinema. His analysis includes a consideration of the reception of Hollywood films by black audiences, the emergence of films featuring black actors and later black performers with a dedicated following (Richard Pryor and Eddie Murphy are two examples), and the emergence of black directors, including those who tell stories with white actors in white environments and those who tell stories with black actors in black environments. Donalson suggests that the crossover film “enables creative people to transcend socio-political boundaries, even as they validate or deconstruct those boundaries,” and we can view the emergence of queer subjects and queer filmmakers in the same light, with the same caveat that Donalson offers:

This type of film should not be seen as a cause célèbre for the erasure of racial barriers for black filmmakers nor should it be seen as an anomaly for a black director to tell a nonblack story. After all, black people, in general, have a familiarity with the environments and experiences of whites more often than the reverse. (278-279)

His argument is easily transposed onto queer politics and in recent years, references to queer crossover films have come to include films produced by queer filmmakers for mainstream markets, films with queer subjects produced by filmmakers within mainstream markets, and also, the crossover of mainstream audiences into niche venues.

Ultimately, “crossover” is not a site of stasis, but rather the site of perpetual movement; it is an in-between space that is not easily defined. For this reason, crossover can be conceived of as part of a queer process of change, a disruption of the normative, a “moving target” that must constantly be redefined and reconsidered. Critically speaking, it exists within a space of “both/and” rather than an “either/or” polemic. In this configuration, “the spectator is both constituted by and constitutes the text” and the film screen itself represents a “shifting and indeterminate “both/and” location “in between” social and economic practices of production and reception” (Pramaggiore 279). While the question of festival redundancy has been circulating since the early 1990s, it is ironic that sustained critical analysis of the queer film festival space has only recently begun to emerge, while the queer romantic comedy itself is virtually non-existent within genre theory. Therefore, I would argue that the queer film festival and the queer romantic comedy are not becoming redundant as they have yet to be included in sustained critical discourse.

In order to construct my analysis, I will rely heavily on queer theory and genre theory as well as social movement analysis. The Vancouver Queer Film Festival will serve as both a case study for the evolution of a queer film festival and the source of queer romantic comedies for analysis. I cite a number of critical thinkers throughout this thesis; however, key to my analysis are a series of forums on the queer film festival published in *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* as well as the seminal genre work of Rick Altman and the canonical deliberations on carnival transgression proposed by Mikhail Bakhtin. Other notable contributions to this emerging research that offset the *GLQ* forums include: the critical writing of renowned feminist, B. Ruby Rich, whose ongoing analysis of queer media and queer film and video festivals provides an invaluable reference point; the *Persistent Vision* conferences in 2001 and 2006, hosted by Frameline: San Francisco International LGBT Film Festival; a web-based resource on film festivals created by Skadi Loist and Marijke de Valck of the University of Hamburg in 2008 that was recently revised in 2010 to meet this growing area of research; Joshua Gamson's oft-quoted study, "The Organizational Shaping of Collective Identity: The Case of Lesbian and Gay Film Festivals in New York" (1996); and Gerald Zielinski's 2008 PhD dissertation, "Furtive, Steady Glances: On the Emergence and Cultural Politics of Lesbian and Gay Film Festivals" (McGill University). Collectively, their research draws attention to the double bind that identity-based festivals find themselves in as they move from grassroots activism to a global community of queer/cultural voices and their findings have greatly informed my thesis.

My methodology for analysis will incorporate the following: an historical overview of the Vancouver Queer Film Festival that includes a study of its festival program guides, audience survey results and interviews with key staff; analysis of critical debates surrounding the function of international queer film festivals and the significance of the crossover film within these debates; a review of the romantic comedy genre as a whole to identify key conventions and social significance, followed by an articulation of this genre in its queered form; a close analysis of key films within this study with an eye on contrasting representational strategies and modes of address within the gay and lesbian collections; and a tertiary consideration of the media reviews that accompany select films. I must define my use of the word 'queer' in this thesis. While queer has been appropriated and some might argue has lost some of its original political meaning, I reclaim this word for its adjectival and political strength, as a disruptive term and as a word that connotes non-normative practices. Queer also defines my critical viewing position.

In chapter two, I outline my primary data for analysis and introduce the Vancouver Queer Film Festival as the blueprint for my film selection. Having celebrated its 20th anniversary in 2008, the VQFF is second only to Montreal's Image+Nation as the longest running international gay and lesbian film festival in Canada. A look through the VQFF Guides over the years reveals the evolution of the festival from grassroots activism to its present day status as a "professionalized" festival complete with corporate sponsors like Crest White Strips and Air New Zealand. The social activism of its younger days is not

completely gone. There are multiple programs of documentaries, biopics, short works and art video in each festival. However, there has been a tangible shift in the tone of the programming. I have isolated twenty romantic comedies presented at the festival from 1997 – 2008, which includes six lesbian-centred romantic comedies and fourteen gay-centred romantic comedies.

In chapter three, I contextualize the VQFF within current debates surrounding the function of the queer film festival space. Thomas Waugh of Concordia University in Montreal and Chris Straayer of New York University have undertaken one of the most significant studies to date, orchestrating three separate symposia on queer film festivals, to give voice to renowned festival curators, film critics and filmmakers from around the world. A series of critical essays and roundtable discussions from these gatherings were published as three separate collections in *GLQ: Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* in 2005, 2006 and 2008. These symposia were a follow-up to Patricia White's 1999 forum on queer film festivals also published in *GLQ*. Crossover films and the queer romantic comedy feature prominently in these discussions and a close analysis of the *GLQ* forums is invaluable to gaining an in-depth understanding of how the crossover film motivates the current debates surrounding the function of the queer film festival.

In chapter four, I analyse the romantic comedy genre as a classical form to identify its historical trajectory and its social significance. In this chapter, I will identify key conventions that are disrupted in the queering process and analyze the complex self-reflexivity within this subgenre that offers a pithy critique of both

heteronormative and homonormative value systems. Within this chapter, it is my goal to insert queer romantic comedy into the lexicon of genre theory where it is notably absent. Fundamentally, within this chapter I argue that an analysis of romantic comedy that does not consider queer romantic comedy is an incomplete analysis. Building on these ideas, in chapters five and six, I undertake a close analysis of primary tropes and modes of address within the gay and lesbian collections. The gendered division of the films speaks to the social, political and economic differences within these communities.

In chapter five, I focus on the gay white muscle boy trope as a ubiquitous marketing tool for the gay community, and by association, the construction of the 'gay lifestyle' within these films. Within the gay romantic comedies studied, characters struggle with promiscuity vs. monogamy, freedom vs. commitment, sex vs. love – all manner of romantic comedy conventions that in a queer context reveal an uncomfortable negotiation with the gay lifestyle. By comparison, in chapter six, I consider the representation of the lesbian community as an underground culture, infused with an explicit political agenda. My use of this alternate language to describe the space the lesbian characters occupy is significant as a means to distinguish the difference between lesbian and gay community; it alludes to a social hierarchy within and between these gendered communities.⁵ Unlike their gay counterparts, several of the lesbian-centred films studied focus primarily on youth culture and the coming out process features prominently as a comedic obstacle. While gay and lesbian romantic comedies are often dismissed as apolitical, there is a distinct political agenda at play in

each collection that positions heteronormativity as a force to be reckoned with; however, the themes and representation of these politics differ greatly within each collection.

In the concluding chapter, I revisit the major themes within my thesis and consider the question of redundancy more closely through an analysis of actual vs. authorized transgression within queer romantic comedy and the queer film festival space. While queer romantic comedy and the queer film festival represent an 'arrival' of sorts, their presence must be qualified within the larger spectrum of mainstream film production and queer representational strategies. Fundamentally, I argue that actual and authorized transgression encourage and enable one another and this relationship is the foundation of all the dual processes of exchange I discuss throughout this thesis.

¹ I attended this conference at the preliminary stage of my thesis research as an observer.

² We must conceive of crossover markets not only in relation to multiplex theatres and broadcast networks but also in relation to international film festival markets, independent television networks, home DVD markets and webcast which all offer expanded opportunities as crossover vehicles. In addition, “crossover” is not an exclusively queer phenomenon; it must be considered as the movement of marginal and/or oppressed communities into public, visible mainstream space. As such, it is a highly contested part of identity formation, whether cultural, gender-based, sexual, etc.

³ New Queer Cinema was a name coined by queer feminist critic, B. Ruby Rich, in a 1992 essay. The first wave of NQC filmmakers included Christopher Munch (*The Hours and Times* 1991), Tom Kalin (*Swoon* 1992), Gregg Araki (*The Living End* 1992), and Laurie Lynd (*R.S.V.P.* 1991) whose work premiered that year in the New Directions/New Films Festival at The Museum of Modern Art in New York and were later a huge success at The Festival of Festivals in Toronto and at the acclaimed Sundance Film Festival in Utah (Rich 2004:15). Munch, Kalin and Araki subsequently received numerous awards and nominations from Sundance and the festival featured a panel dedicated to queer cinema that was hosted by B. Ruby Rich.

⁴ I take my cue for this counterculture definition from an analysis of the counterculture movement of the 1960s and 70s as described in Jeremi Suri’s essay “The Rise and Fall of an International Counterculture, 1960-1975.”

⁵ Fundamentally, I conceive of counterculture and underground culture as representative of a rejection of dominant mainstream values, aesthetics, and/or lifestyles, however, I use them to distinguish a social hierarchy within the gay and lesbian romantic comedies, that is, the underground within the counterculture. I do not conceive of them in relation to the “subaltern,” which I conceive of as the disenfranchised and voiceless; on the contrary, in the case of queer romantic comedies, they are very present and very outspoken within queer culture.

CHAPTER 2. QUEERWOOD (EVERYONE'S WATCHING)

2.1. The Evolution of the Vancouver Queer Film Festival

The festival space is a multivalent site. While it can be viewed as a container that collects its audience, it can also be viewed as a network through which ideas and identities pass, are performed and then discarded. An analysis of the Out on Screen Vancouver Queer Film Festival⁶ offers a thumbnail sketch of the evolution of grassroots queer film festivals as cultural identity networks. Historically marked by a social, political and artistic agenda, these festivals are resilient and adaptable to the ever-changing landscape of queer image-making and reception. The purpose of this chapter is to present the primary data in my research of the Vancouver Queer Film Festival as a means to establish a foundation of knowledge with which to engage in the critical analysis I will present in subsequent chapters. To this end, I will focus on an outline of the history of the VQFF as well as a presentation of and elaboration on the list of romantic comedy films programmed in the festival within the period of study. My research of the VQFF is drawn from the following data: a review of festival program guides from 1989-2008; a detailed itemization of programming from 1997-2008; a review of various VQFF press materials; personal interviews with Drew Dennis, Executive Director, and Vanessa Kwan, Programming Director (2006-2008); an analysis of the Out on Screen 2006 audience survey results; and on-line research of current queer film festivals in Canada.

The Vancouver Out on Screen Film Society was established in 1988 and launched the First Annual Gay and Lesbian Film Festival in 1989, as a “dry run

before the Gay Games” that were held in Vancouver in 1990 (*Highlights and History*). VQFF is second only to Montreal’s Image+Nation (1987) as the longest running international gay and lesbian film festival in Canada. Toronto’s Inside Out Festival (1990) is in third place historically, but stands alone as the largest gay and lesbian film festival in the country. In their 2007 festival guide, they scheduled 84 programs.⁷ By comparison, in 2006, Montreal listed 63 programs, while Vancouver listed 44. As a point of reference, Canadian queer film and video festivals are relatively small compared to their American and European counterparts. In 2007, NewFest: New York Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Film Festival scheduled 119 programs, Frameline: San Francisco International LGBT Film Festival scheduled 123 programs, and the London Lesbian and Gay Film Festival scheduled 152 programs. The size of each festival reflects the size of the cities in which they reside and the size of the communities they serve. At the time of researching this thesis, there were five additional queer film festivals active in Canada: The London Lesbian Film Festival (1991); Reel Pride in Winnipeg (1993); Queer City Cinema in Regina (1996); Fairy Tales in Calgary (1998); and Reel Out in Kingston (1999). Two other festivals are worth mentioning for their historic contributions although they are now defunct: Making Scenes Festival in Ottawa (1991-2003) and Peggy’s Festival of Queer Film and Video in Halifax (1992-1994).⁸ Of all the festivals listed, The Vancouver Queer Film Festival and Queer City Cinema stand out for their extensive community-based activities, in particular the Out in Schools program (VQFF) and the Queer City Cinema touring program. By comparison, Queer City Cinema is currently

the only queer film festival in Canada that focuses primarily on documentary and experimental shorts programming in the spirit of MIX New York.

The evolution of gay and lesbian film festivals can be quickly contextualized through a review of the various names and acronyms they have incorporated over the years: gay and/or lesbian in their singular form; gay and lesbian aligned together; lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender or LGBT to acknowledge a more diverse and expansive community; and more recently, the once derogatory, now reclaimed signifier, queer.⁹ Out on Screen was one of the first gay and lesbian film festivals in the world to adopt the word “queer” in its title, changing its name to the Vancouver Queer Film and Video Festival in 1996. Within contemporary criticism, the all-inclusive acronym LGBTQQIA is used to signify the diversity within the lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender-queer-questioning-intersex-ally community; however, it is interesting to note that while the “queer community” implies a group in solidarity against mainstream, heteronormative values, queer film festivals also distinguish themselves from one another in relation to the needs of their various communities. In larger cities such as New York and San Francisco, multiple queer film festivals exist to accommodate diverse streams within the larger queer community. In the San Francisco Bay area, for example, there are three festivals: Frameline: San Francisco International Lesbian and Gay Film Festival; Trannyfest: Transgender and Transgenre Film, Video, Culture; and the Oakland International Black LGBT Film Festival. Similarly, New York has two queer festivals, The New Festival and MIX New York, as well as a monthly Queer Black Cinema series.

The shift from shorts programming to features is significant within queer festivals since the early days of festival programming were largely centred on short works. This trend was due in part to the lack of queer features available for programming. Moreover, however, it reflects the artist-driven roots of these festivals, many originating as an offshoot of the non-profit artist-run centres (“ARCs”) that emerged in the early 1970s across Canada. These venues “were developed as a response to a lack of appropriate exhibition spaces for artists whose priorities were non-commercial, and [who] were too young in their careers to be showing in institutional or public galleries” (*What is an Artist Run Centre?*). The philosophy of the ARCS relies on the underlying premise that:

[A]rtists are given creative control of their work rather than being constrained by the demands of the market. While the commercial galleries serve a vital role in the arts community and in society generally, they also favour the production of certain types of artworks, and this limits the diversity of artistic experiences available to the public.... [V]isitors often find the work they encounter in ARCs to be outside the conventional definitions of what art can and should be. (*What is an Artist Run Centre?*)

Each of the queer film festivals listed previously has roots in an ARC and/or collaborates closely with their local ARCs in the development of scholarship programs, venue support and community outreach. The community-based philosophy indicated above is prominent within queer film festivals around the world. As a result, the shorts vs. features debate runs parallel with socio-political concerns about the mainstreaming of queer film festivals and the queering of the mainstream market.

2.2. Programming for the Community

An analysis of the VQFF’s programming reflects the evolution of the changing strategies and challenges urban festivals face.¹⁰ In Table 1, we can see that in the early years from 1989 to 1996, the number of shorts programs increased steadily until they dominated the festival. Feature presentations, while a staple in the early years, dropped off considerably and were absent from programming altogether in 1994. The spike in the number of features presented in 1990 corresponds to the festival’s participation in the Gay Games III Cultural Festival held in Vancouver.

Table 1. OOS programming overview 1989-1996

YR	FEATURES	<i>Narrative</i>	<i>Docs</i>	SHORTS	Other Programs
1989	7	3	2	3	-
1990	14	10	4	7	2 retrospectives
1991	5	4	1	6	-
1992	4	3	1	9	-
1993	6	5	1	6	2 symposiums
1994	0	0	0	16	2 retrospectives
1995	3	2	1	21	2 media forums, 2 artist profiles
1996	3	3	0	14	3 forums, 1 art installation, 1 artist talk, 1 artist profile, 1 cabaret

By and large, the feature presentations were dominated by dramas and the shorts programming offered a wider range of subjects and styles. Gay and lesbian sex programs were some of the most lucrative draws for the festival as they featured explicit sexual representations that were not available outside the festival space. As the “Other Programs” column shows, there was a corresponding increase in community events as the festival grew. Drew Dennis suggests that the festival was perceived as more artist-driven up to 1996 “so a big thing in 1997 was getting the transit shelter ads, focusing on getting more

media - more mainstream media not just *Xtra! West* - so it was more audience driven but still community” (Dennis). While the period of 1989-1996 informs the evolution of the festival, my primary interest is in the period of 1997-2008.

When we consider the programming from 1997-2008, we can see a different agenda at play. In Table 2, it is noteworthy that the festival experienced an explosive growth spurt in 1997: twenty-six programs were presented including eight doc features, and four narrative features (three dramas and one comedy). Shorts programming was still strong in 1997 as fourteen programs are listed. In 2000, we see a marked increase in features once again and the beginning of a sharp decline in shorts programming that continued relatively consistently. Documentary features became much more prominent in 1997 and outnumbered narrative features in 2004-05.

Table 2. OOS programming overview 1997-2008

YR	FEATURES	<i>Narrative</i>	<i>Docs</i>	SHORTS	Other Programs
1997	12	4	8	14	1 panel, 1 artist profile
1998	14	11	3	20	2 artist profiles, 1 brunch
1999	13	8	5	21	1 multimedia installation
2000	20	13	7	18	2 panels
2001	19	10	9	17	1 panel, 1 artist profile
2002	23	10	13	16	2 panels, 1 artist profile
2003	22	12	10	15	3 panels, 1 artist profile
2004	19	8	11	17	1 panel, 1 forum, 1 performance, 1 script reading
2005	22	8	14	10	1 artist profile, 1 performance, 1 comedy night, 1 script reading, 3 panels, 2 workshops
2006	27	20	7	7	2 artist profiles, 1 panel, 1 performance, 1 script reading, 1 music event, 1 workshop
2007	28	21	7	12	2 artist profiles, 1 master class, 1 performance, lots of parties
2008	33	23	10	9	2 artist profiles, 1 performance, 3 workshops on scriptwriting in master class format, 1 lecture, 1 panel, 13 parties

In 2006, a significant shift occurred as narrative features eclipsed documentary features and dominated the programming content. Concurrently, throughout the period listed above, there is a continued rise in community-based activities in the “Other Programs” column with events taking place in the community beyond the festival screens. As a major part of the festival since its inception, community-based events have become a pressing issue with the growing saturation of queer work in the mainstream. Focusing on “community” enables the festival to compete by continuing to offer alternatives to the mainstream experience. Volunteers feature prominently in this regard, and it is interesting to note that the festival relied exclusively on volunteers and short-term staff up until 2001. That year, a full-time Programming Director was hired, marking the beginning of the professionalization of OOS, a trend visible in numerous queer festivals starting in the mid-1990s.¹¹ This trend is marked by a shift from grassroots volunteerism to full-time staff resources, corporate sponsorship of screenings and events, and the move to commercial venues. The festival currently employs four permanent year round staff, offset by nine additional contract staff in the months leading up to the festival, all supported by a pool of over 200 volunteers.

In studying VQFF program guides from 1997-2008, the evolution of the festival comes into sharper focus. With the exception of 1998, double galas were programmed until 2002 to target lesbian and gay audiences separately. Interestingly, editorial columns offering critiques by queer artists on the current state of queer media culture are prominent from 1997 – 2001 but are not included in programs after this date.¹² These editorials were repeatedly dedicated to the

search for a definitive description of identity and community, and may reflect a level of anxiety brought on by mainstream encroachment. In 2002, gala screenings became non-gender specific, relying on broader-based docs and popular genre features as a festival draw.¹³ That same year, OOS added an all-ages screening, a strategy that was expanded into the “School’s Out Series,” targeting queer youth at the festival, and the “Out in Schools Program,” targeting high schools in the Vancouver lower mainland. In 2003, the festival began marketing other film clusters such as a “Community Programming” series geared towards diverse cross-gender programs, followed by the “Human Rights” series in 2006 focused on international issues, and a “Music Focus” series that same year that included live performances. In 2007, OOS announced its “Queer History Project” as a means to “commission films that record and tell queer experiences from the past to ensure our stories are captured and told for generations” (VQFF Program Guide 2007).

2.3. Professionalization and Corporate Infusion

As mentioned, the professionalization of the festival meant an increase in corporate sponsorship. In the early years, individuals and small local businesses sponsored the programs. However, starting in 1999, commercial interest in the festival emerged and blossomed in 2001. In 1999, Granville Island and Viacom were sponsors, while in 2000 Famous Players were the presenting sponsor joined by PrideVision TV in 2001. Famous Players was replaced by Cinemark Theatres in 2002 and joined by Showcase (2002-2006), while Out TV replaced

PrideVision in 2005. In 2002, Crest Whitestrips came on board (2002-2004), followed by Schick Extreme 3 in 2003 (one year only). In 2003, VanCity joined forces and has subsequently become the festival's Presenting Sponsor each year. While OOS still utilizes some of its smaller, community-based venues, the Cineplex sponsorship of 2000 marks their move to a large commercial venue, a decision Executive Director Drew Dennis views optimistically: "its credibility, we're taking up space in a mainstream venue" (Dennis). One can argue that the festival is proactive in its relationship with the mainstream. Despite the rate at which the mainstream co-opts counterculture, Kwan is not fazed by the current exchange, saying it is an illusion to think of them as two extremes: "I actually think that finding balance and taking ideas from different cultures is a contemporary practice. [...] Staking out territories doesn't work anymore so you have to have different strategies" (Kwan).

I recall being in the audience the first year PrideVision sponsored the festival. There was an air of excitement over this new exclusively queer television station, and simultaneously strangeness in this corporate presence. A representative of PrideVision attended the gala opening and generously distributed souvenir trinkets and popcorn to the masses. Slick and scripted, he drew attention to the 'new queer market' of spectators within that festival audience. The shift from grassroots to 'corporate' professionalism was tangible. The following year, when Crest Whitestrips sponsored the festival, self-conscious laughter rippled through the theatre as the sponsor's advertisement opened each screening. This sparkling corporate acceptance stood in direct opposition to the

drama that emerged on the eve of the gala opening: *Little Sister's vs. Big Brother* (Aerlyn Weissman), a ground-breaking documentary about anti-censorship based on the controversial legal trials between Vancouver's *Little Sister's Bookstore* and the U.S. Customs Agency, was targeted by the Film Classification Office who insisted that the festival did not have the appropriate permits to screen the film. Festival staff mobilized quickly and discovered that other festivals in B.C. were not required to obtain the permits specified. Media and community support put pressure on the F.C.O. who rescinded their request enabling the screening to go ahead as scheduled (*Highlights and History*). In 2007, the Festival was attacked again, this time by REAL Women of Canada who launched a public campaign claiming the Festival was a waste of taxpayers' dollars. Supported by their strong membership, the Festival's funding was maintained. This is the dynamic tension that exists within the queer festival space despite allegations that mainstream queer culture will render the festivals obsolete. As Vanessa Kwan explains:

People seem to think that queer festivals only existed so we could get to a certain point and now that we're here, it's like, 'oh, we've made it, we're ok now.' ... There's definitely a queer mainstream and we've amalgamated with the mainstream but it's small; there always has to be an alternative. We live in a late capitalist society and it's not going to take care of everyone (Kwan).

While the festival provides an alternative to the mainstream, it simultaneously exists within the mainstream and, as we have discussed, strives to occupy and promote queer public space.

A look at recent festival program designs reveals a strategy of movement out of the niche, an infiltration of queer culture into the mainstream. However, rather than suggesting the 'end' of a movement, the program cover designs alone can be read as a call for 'ownership' of public space *on queer terms*. In 2004, the pink and playful program guide cover featured a stylized black cat parachuting down the page towards a mock film classification rating of "F" for "Fearless: Suitable for people with open minds." In 2005, the program guide design featured a tightly framed black necktie on a white shirt with a "Hello, my name is _____" nametag label. This bold 'introduction' image appeared on transit ads and posters around Vancouver and was quite powerful in its public presence. Below the nametag label was the directive to "Peel it off," thereby stating the terms of the introduction. In 2006, the festival's program tag line was "Queerwood - everyone's watching" an explicit acknowledgement of the changing landscape of queer media. The image featured a downtown Vancouver cityscape view with a Hollywood Hills style "Queerwood" text perched in the mountains. Drawing on this theme further in 2007, the program image featured a dramatic neon cinema marquee with the name of the festival emblazoned on it, further emphasizing the encroachment of queer media into public space. The tagline that year was "worth coming out for." 2008 marked the 20th anniversary of the festival and the program design was understated returning to its earlier pink and black theme. Upon closer examination inside the program, readers learn that "green is the new pink" (11) referring to the recycled paper and vegetable-based ink used in program production. What is most significant, however, is the new festival logo

design that incorporates the uppercase letter Q into a series of chain links. This powerful design suggests strength and unity. That year, 53 programs of films, musical performances, master classes and guest artist talks were presented along with 14 parties that continued to expand the festival beyond its film/video base into what appears to be the trajectory of an events-based, queer cultural festival.

2.4. Defining Queer Romantic Comedy: Selection Process

In my analysis of the Out on Screen Vancouver Queer Film Festival, I have identified twenty queer romantic comedies in the programming from 1997-2008. My selection was determined based on the classical (and commercial) romantic comedy formula of “meet-lose-get” in which an unwitting couple has an initial encounter, experiences a separation and finally a reunion (Mernit 13). As Billy Mernit describes in *Writing the Romantic Comedy: From ‘Cute Meet’ to ‘Joyous Defeat,’* this genre is inherently predictable and recognizable to an audience, and relies exclusively on its obstacles to create a sense of doubt in the viewer that the characters can successfully get together. As a character-driven genre, the primary obstacle is an internal character conflict that must be overcome in order for reunion to take place. Rather than encountering an antagonist, more often than not, “the antagonism resides within the protagonist” and more specifically, “romantic comedy protagonists tend to be *emotionally incomplete*” (16; emphasis in original).

Table 3. OOS romantic comedy programming 1997-2008

	FILM TITLE	DIRECTOR	PROD YR	COUN	G/L	GALA
1	Leather Jacket Love Story	David DeCoteau	1997	USA	G	O
2	Bedrooms & Hallways	Rose Troche	1998	UK	G	
3	Billy's Hollywood Screen Kiss	Tommy O'Haver	1998	USA	G	O
4	Gypsy Boys	Brian Shepp	1999	USA	G	
5	Trick	Jim Fall	1999	USA	G	O
6	Better Than Chocolate	Anne Wheeler	1999	CAN	L	O
7	But I'm a Cheerleader	Jamie Babbitt	1999	USA	L	
8	All Over the Guy	Julie Davis	2000	USA	G	C
9	Punks	Patrik-Ian Polk	2000	USA	G	O
10	D.E.B.S	Angela Robinson	2003	USA	L	O
11	Guys and Balls	Sherry Hormann	2004	GER	G	
12	Eating Out	Q. Allan Brocka	2004	USA	G	
13	Slutty Summer	Casper Andreas	2004	USA	G	
14	Boy Culture	Q. Allan Brocka	2006	USA	G	
15	Eating Out 2: Sloppy Seconds	Phillip J. Bartell	2006	USA	G	
16	Puccini for Beginners	Maria Maggenti	2006	USA	L	
17	A Four Letter Word	Casper Andreas	2007	USA	G	
18	Itty Bitty Titty Committee	Jamie Babbitt	2007	USA	L	
19	Out at a Wedding	Lee Friedlander	2007	USA	L	
20	Kiss the Bride	C. Jay Fox	2007	USA	G	

G = gay centred narrative, L = lesbian centred narrative

O = opening gala, C = closing gala

Mernit defines the generic subtext of romantic comedy as “the power of love” that is not only “the catalyst for action” but also “the shaper of the story arc” and therefore, “love itself is the antagonist” and its effect on the central character drives the story (17). In elaborating on his meet-lose-get triad, Mernit describes the love antagonist: love challenges the characters (conflict); the characters must accept or deny love (crisis); and love transforms the characters (resolution). This three-act arc is typically used to “investigate a specific thematic issue” (18). The films I have selected for analysis incorporate three subgenres of romantic comedy that Mernit identifies: the ensemble, in which “ a central couple’s conflicts

are echoed, contrasted, or parodied through one or more supporting couples;” the triangle, which features the “instant conflict that a third party brings to any plot;” and, the marriage, in which “*staying* together or not is the issue” that drives the plot (20-21). Overall, these films are driven by the meeting of opposites and the unlikely possibility that they can stay together.

Within the films selected, there is a primary gay or lesbian protagonist couple that we follow throughout the film. For this reason, I have not included romantic comedies featuring multiple couples that are more akin to the sex comedy formula. Films of particular note that I have not selected for study include: *Another Gay Sequel: Gays Gone Wild!* (Todd Stephens USA 2008); *Queens [Reinas]* (Manuel Gómez Pereira Spain 2005); *Goldfish Memory* (Elizabeth Gill Ireland 2003); *Côte D’Azur* (Olivier Ducastel, Jacques Martineau France 2005). In each of these films, the sex and romance is divided amongst numerous characters and they lack a singular or primary romantic comedy conflict. *Another Gay Sequel: Gays Gone Wild!* follows the sexual escapades of four gay men at a gay resort. Filled with sexual and scatological excess, numerous narrative threads are woven together. *Queens* is a film about gay marriage and mothers. The comedy is derived primarily from the antics of the mothers of the gay characters who nervously prepare for their wedding day; a monolithic event as it is a public group wedding ceremony that marks the legalization of gay and lesbian marriage and includes hundreds of gay and lesbian couples. *Goldfish Memory* combines gay, lesbian, straight and bisexual characters and the narrative is composed of several relationships that overlap.

The central character of this film is in fact a hackneyed lothario and university professor who lures his female students into his sexual web, a web that is used to introduce us to the other characters in the film. *Côte D'Azur* follows the sexual awakening of a family: the father is a closeted gay man who must come out; the mother is having a torrid affair; like his father, the teenage son is gay but not out; and like her mother, the teenaged daughter is also in a passionate relationship. In each case, these films satisfy some of the key conventions of romantic comedy; however, they lack a central gay or lesbian 'couple' focus, instead, taking a pansexual or queer approach to relationships. This is not to say that I have excluded all films with ensemble elements. On the contrary, several films studied include a central gay or lesbian couple surrounded by an ensemble of sexually active characters; however, the gay or lesbian couple drives the primary romantic comedy narrative.

Two other films of particular note that I have not included in my analysis are *Chutney Popcorn* (Nisha Ganatra Canada 1999) and *Nina's Heavenly Delights* (Pratibha Parmar UK 2007), two lesbian romantic "dramadies" that foreground a dramatic plot offset by comedic elements. In *Chutney Popcorn*, Reena is an out lesbian from a traditional Indian family who do not fully accept her 'lifestyle' or her white girlfriend. When Reena's sister and her husband discover they cannot have children, Reena offers herself up as a surrogate. What results is a merging of cultures, family loyalties and lesbian lifestyles. While the promotional material for this film describes it as a "spicy comedy" it does not satisfy the criteria for analysis that I have established since it does not

foreground the romantic comedy conventions. Similarly, *Nina's Heavenly Delights* is the story of a young woman who must take over her father's Indian restaurant and compete in "The Best of the West Curry Competition" after her father's unexpected death. Similar to *Chutney Popcorn*, Nina comes from a traditional Indian family and the plot is motivated by her attraction to Lisa, the merging of cultures and family loyalties. *Nina's Heavenly Delights* is charming and comical but also foregrounds dramatic elements over comedic elements. These films are noteworthy, however, as romantic and comic films that feature a multi-racial cast and incorporate an exploration of cultural, ethnic, gender and queer boundaries within genre form.

A final film that is worth mentioning is *20 Centimetres* [*20 Centímetros*] (Ramón Salazar Spain 2005), the story of Marieta a well-endowed pre-operative transsexual woman and prostitute who dreams of becoming the perfect woman and finding the perfect man. Marieta meets the sexy, edgy Gustavo and falls madly in love. Much to her delight, he does not care that she has a penis; much to her dismay, he enjoys her penis too much and does not want her to transition completely. In an unexpected turn of events, Marieta is given an envelope of money, which enables her to have her final surgery, thereby ending the relationship with the man of her dreams but freeing her to become the woman of her dreams. While the film incorporates many comedic scenes and revolves around the themes of love, sex and romance, it is primarily a dramatic, coming of age story. This film is noteworthy for its representation of a transsexual protagonist as a romantic lead.

2.5. Audience Demographics and Representational Strategies

Mernit defines the gay romantic comedy as a “cross-genre,” thereby staking the genre’s claims to its heterosexual roots. However, his observation that gay romantic comedies “tend to be strong in social commentary” in the spirit of satire is key to my interest in this genre. In my interview with Dennis and Kwan, they playfully commented that romantic comedies make “great date films,” but Kwan elaborated further saying:

[They represent] a certain amount of validation in the mainstream, that [our] relationships count and that they aren’t just docs about how serious it is to be queer. ... That good feeling that you get, I think we take that for granted. I mean even 15 years ago it wasn’t a good feeling when you went and saw queer characters. (Kwan)

Dennis concurred and suggested that queer romantic comedies are in fact a “little subversive... Our audience likes to see monolithic genres skewered a little bit” (Dennis). As the only festival of its kind in Vancouver, the VQFF strives for balanced representation and diversity in order to serve the largest number of people possible. The queer romantic comedy represents a small part of their programming and while this genre is a popular audience draw, it problematizes the festival’s mission of sexual and cultural diversity for a number of reasons: it’s strong ‘heterosexual’ roots as a genre; the prominence of gay romantic comedies over lesbian romantic comedies; and the prevalence of white characters, or, characters that possess all the privileges associated with ‘whiteness.’

As a genre newly infused with gay and lesbian protagonists, the history of the genre’s heterosexual formula is present in numerous films, represented by a

heterosexual buddy couple and/or a ‘heteronormative force’ that surrounds the characters; while this history informs the comedy, the proximity of heteronormativity enflames the debates. A primary heterosexual buddy couple can be located in eight of the twenty films studied, while an additional seven films include a strong heterosexual presence as a secondary attribute. In Table 4, I highlight the sexual demographics within these films.

Table 4. Romantic comedy content: sexual representation and casting

FILM	sexual demographics											casting			
	G1	G2	L1	L2	B2	T2	D2	O1	O2	H1	H2	W1	W2	M1	M2
A Four Letter Word	x						x				x	x			x
All Over the Guy	x									x		x			
Bedrooms & Hallways	x				x				x		x	x			
Better Than Chocolate			x		x	x	x	x			x	x			
Billy's Hollywood Screen Kiss	x			x			x			x		x			x
Boy Culture	x			x					x			x		x	
But I'm a Cheerleader		x	x			x	x	x			x	x			x
D.E.B.S			x					x		x		x			x
Eating Out	x				x				x	x		x			
Eating Out 2:Sloppy Seconds	x			x	x				x	x		x			
Guys and Balls	x			x				x			x	x			
Gypsy Boys	x											x		x	
Itty Bitty Titty Committee			x		x	x	x				x	x			x
Kiss the Bride	x				x			x		x		x			
Leather Jacket Love Story	x						x					x			x
Out at a Wedding		x	x					x		x		x		x	
Puccini for Beginners			x		x				x	x		x			
Punks	x						x						x	x	
Slutty Summer	x											x			
Trick	x			x							x	x			

1 = primary element
2 = secondary element

G = gay
L = lesbian
B = bisexual
T = transgender
O = coming out
D = drag

H = heterosexual
W = white
M = multiracial

Reflecting on Mernit’s point regarding the exploration of thematic issues within this genre, one can argue that the ‘battle of the sexes’ that permeates

heterosexual romantic comedies is often replaced by a 'battle of the sexualities' in gay and lesbian romantic comedy. In addition to gay, lesbian and heterosexual characters, bisexual characters are present in seven films and these characters destabilize the sexual polemics of gay/lesbian and heterosexual narratives. In addition, it is interesting to note that transgender characters are present only in the lesbian romantic comedies while drag queen characters are present only in the gay romantic comedies, marking a distinction between these 'gendered' communities.

The ratio of male to female directors is 11:9; however, only six films are lesbian-themed romantic comedies while the remaining fourteen are gay-themed and primarily, gay, white and American. Not coincidentally, in the 2006 Out on Screen audience survey, the majority of festival viewers are listed as male, gay, white, and also middle-aged and affluent (Table 5).

Table 5. OOS 2006 survey results: descending audience demographics

GENDER	Male	Female	Trans	Other			
	49%	39%	5%	7%			
IDENTITY	Gay	Lesbian	Queer	Bisexual	Hetero	Other	
	45%	24%	10%	6%	4%	11%	
ETHNICITY	Caucasian	Asian	Latin	Persian	Native	African	Other
	54%	9%	3%	1%	1%	1%	30%
AGE	30-39	50 or older	40-49	24-39	19-23	Other	
	30%	22%	22%	13%	6%	7%	
INCOME	\$60 K +	\$20 K -	\$30-\$39 K	\$20-\$29 K	\$40-\$49 K	\$50-\$59 K	Other
	22%	18%	14%	13%	10%	8%	15%

Other = personal category not listed and/or no response

These characteristics largely describe the main protagonists in the gay-themed films I have listed, with the exception of the age demographic: gay protagonists are typically buff and cut 18-25 year olds. This is a particular bone of contention within critical analysis of queer film festivals as they shift to genre-based programming since it privileges the audience that it represents. Despite this trend, there are a few exceptions to the gay white muscle boy rule, and the VQFF seeks these exceptions out in order to balance their programming. Notable examples include Patrik-Ian Polk's *Punks*, Q. Allan Brocka's *Boy Culture* and Brian Shepp's *Gypsy Boys* all of which feature a multi-racial cast.¹⁴ The dominant 18-25 character demographic is equally strong in the lesbian films and while the gay white muscle boy is a primary trope in gay romantic comedies, the lipstick lesbian or femme is the dominant aesthetic in lesbian romantic comedies. Within the lesbian romantic comedies listed half of the titles studied include a multi-racial cast including *But I'm a Cheerleader* (Jamie Babbit), *D.E.B.S.* (Angela Robinson) and *Out at a Wedding* (Lee Friedlander).

Within this collection of films, the presence of a biological and/or surrogate family is prominent and the inclusion of older gay and lesbian characters signifies a relationship to / negotiation with a larger queer history project. The threat of homophobic violence and the fear of being socially ostracized and/or rejected by family and friends is either completely elided or is a temporary obstacle. These films construct a utopia, an unfettered playground for the pursuit of love/romance/sex. However, entrenched in this seemingly myopic focus, is a pithy critique of contemporary relationships, both queer and non-queer. Vanessa

Kwan acknowledges that romantic comedies are not the most challenging works in the VQFF programming; however, they are popular draws for the festival. She suggests that this genre is somewhat of a “Trojan horse” in that it can be wheeled into a mainstream audience that might otherwise be disapproving of queer lifestyles, and for that she feels there is something to be said for its crossover status. I would suggest that this Trojan horse metaphor flows bi-directionally in that queer romantic comedy has something to offer a queer audience that might otherwise be disapproving of Hollywood cinema. Despite comprehensive analysis of the romantic comedy in genre studies, the ‘queering’ of romantic comedy is often dismissed from critical assessment of queer film festival programming precisely because of its proximity to heteronormative and Hollywood conventions. For example, Toronto’s 2007 Inside Out Festival program rather self-consciously clusters romantic comedies in a “guilty pleasures” category separate from their “international” and “outsider” categories of films. However, as my data reveals, there is more to queer romantic comedy than simply “feel good” narratives.

In this chapter, I have focused on VQFF in relation to the Canadian queer film festival circuit and outlined key points of discussion - grassroots evolution, professionalization, sponsorship and genre-based programming - that will be elaborated upon throughout this thesis. In the following chapter, I will contextualize VQFF in relation to the discourse that surrounds the international queer film festival network. In the larger spectrum, queer film festivals are connected to social movements, and I will draw from this theoretical framework to explore the key points listed above in more depth.

⁶ For the sake of clarity, “Out on Screen” (OOS) refers to the Society name of the organization and the “Vancouver Queer Film Festival” (VQFF) is the primary event they produce. I will therefore refer to the event itself throughout this thesis, unless referring to something that relates directly to Society directives, such as the Audience Survey.

⁷ Throughout this thesis, a ‘program’ is defined as a scheduled screening or event in the festival, i.e. a feature-length film, an artist talk, a program of shorts, etc. It does not reflect the number of films and videos screened since a program of shorts may include 3 to 8 films and videos. While I define a feature length film as 75 mins or longer, I have included “featurettes” with a 60 – 75 minute run time in the features category as well.

⁸ In 2006 the Halifax Pride Committee approached filmmaker Thom Fitzgerald about resurrecting a queer film festival in the city. Fitzgerald has subsequently programmed a weekend of queer screenings each year as part of the Pride Festival.

⁹ It is interesting to note that the acronym GLBT can also be located, placing ‘gay’ before ‘lesbian’ in the acronym string. In recent years, however, the use of LGBT has become more common as a means to acknowledge the contributions made by lesbians throughout the history of the gay and lesbian social movement.

¹⁰ It is important to make this distinction, since all the festivals I have listed in Canada and the majority of international festivals I will discuss in the following chapter, are all based in larger urban centres. Therefore, the challenges they face must be framed in a ‘modern’ context.

¹¹ Despite its inception in 1988, Out on Screen did not receive any government funding until 1993 and they did not start receiving funds from The Canada Council for the Arts until 1997.

¹² One exception being an historical reflection of the festival on their 15th anniversary in the 2003 program.

¹³ It is noteworthy that the festival changed its description from a “gay and lesbian” festival to a “queer” festival in 1996, a change that facilitated the gradual shift from gender-specific to gender-inclusive galas.

¹⁴ It is significant that the film *Punks* is the only title that is not in circulation owing to problems with the original distributor. Despite several requests to the director, Patrik-Ian Polk, I was unable to procure a copy. Given that this film features an African American and Latino cast, its absence from mainstream distribution speaks to market discrimination.

CHAPTER 3. FROM GRASSROOTS TO GLOBALIZATION

3.1. The Double Bind of the Queer Film Festival

Despite their tremendous growth from grassroots to global entities, queer film festivals exist as both cultural and political entities. While the Vancouver Queer Film Festival, like other Canadian film festivals, evolved from the artist-run centres in Canada, on a larger scale, queer film festivals are derived from social movements, “their mere creation was a form of activism, bringing visibility to an invisible community and providing a nexus for social change” (*Persistent Vision* 15). The history of this activism travels across generations, each incarnation with its own distinct positionality. B. Ruby Rich articulates these generational differences in a rather insightful way:

[T]he older generation, shaped by civil rights struggles aimed at equal protection under the law,... the middling generation, shaped by AIDS and ACT UP and the politics of confrontation, and the younger generation, shaped by queer families and matter-of-fact sexualities, the newest kids on the block.... (2006:624)

This generational shift can be felt across filmmakers, programmers, viewers and critics placing the festival at the centre of polemical debates between: visibility / invisibility; assimilation / liberation; gay-lesbian theory / queer theory; grassroots / globalization; socialism / capitalism; niche / mainstream. And yet, the international circuit of queer festivals are often viewed as a “transnational queer public” and discussed in relation to their ‘collective’ identity (White 74). In this regard, the festival space is the locus for a continuous cycle of expansion and contraction of identity politics. It is not my intention to elaborate on all these

polemics and present all the debates, but rather to suggest that all these debates are active just below the surface in any discussion of queer film festivals. In this chapter, I will focus primarily on an analysis of several published forums on the subject featured in *GLQ: Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* as a means to shed light on key flashpoints that inform my thesis research. The mainstream vs. niche debate is central and it impacts programming and audiences on the macro and micro levels. I will argue that the collective memory of the festival as a social movement collides with the “crossing over” of the festival into mainstream relationships with sponsors and programming choices, and this ultimately interferes with critical analysis of mainstream queer images. The presence of the “new queer spectator” alongside the “queer mainstream spectator” further problematizes this situation, as the former is viewed as *critical* while the latter is viewed as *visually illiterate*.

Several critics, curators and filmmakers have contributed to journals and conferences on the current state of queer media. Joshua Gamson’s 1996 essay “The Organizational Shaping of Collective Identity: The Case of Lesbian and Gay Film Festivals in New York” is frequently cited for its astute commentary on the philosophical and political shifts within and between The New Festival and MIX New York, a commentary that echoes the larger shifts within queer/festival discourse. Drawing from in-depth analysis of social movement theory, Gamson hones in on the fact that “collective identity formation is an ongoing (political) process, and it is a process in which multiple, overlapping identities inevitably conflict” (236). He notes that in order for the festivals to survive, each one must

“balance its relationship to “the community” with its relationship to sponsors,” a position often viewed as a double bind within these socially formed spaces (236). “Sponsorship” creates “resource dependency” that influences the collective identity the festivals construct.¹⁵ However, without this support, the festivals would not be able to survive and queer work would not have a public life. Sponsorship represents a direct relationship with the mainstream, its own ‘crossing over’ of sorts, and it is intertwined with the professionalization of the festivals in the 1990s. Professionalization refers to the increased credibility, stability and prestige garnered from an expanded queer film and television industry, combined with the festivals’ development of marketing strategies that include corporate sponsorship and commercial venues. Within his essay, Gamson also identifies the disparate identity politics in each New York festival, isolating the post-Stonewall gay/lesbian politics of The New Festival and the queer politics that MIX New York aspires to. The New Festival politics embody “gayness-as-ethnicity,” “visibility-as-politics,” and “coming-out-as-everything” agendas (242). Conversely, MIX New York’s experimental focus speaks to “oppositional politics,” the experimental form existing in opposition to dominant narrative forms, and therefore acting as a metaphor for a dynamic, ever-changing queer community that exists outside conventions (240). Therefore, the fundamental philosophical difference oscillates between a stable and recognizable “us” with shared sexual status, vs. an unstable “we” that is always being questioned (243). Although Gamson’s paper was published in the mid-

1990s, the points raised here are still active within contemporary discussions of queer film festivals.

3.2. Global Debates: the *GLQ* Forums

GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies has been at the forefront in recent years, creating a space for critical discussion and debate around queer media. Since 1999, *GLQ* has published four forums on queer festivals: “Queer Publicity: A Dossier on Lesbian and Gay Film Festivals,” 1999; “Queer Film and Video Festival Forum, Take One: Curators Speak Out,” 2005; “Queer Film and Video Festival Forum, Take Two: Critics Speak Out,” 2006; and “Queer Film and Video Festival Forum, Take Three: Artists Speak Out,” 2008.¹⁶ Collectively, the four published forums draw from twenty-two critics and curators representing nine different countries in North America, South America, Europe and Asia, and seven film and video makers from Canada, the United States, India and France. Together they give voice to approximately twenty international queer film festivals.¹⁷ Michael Barrett, former Programming Director of VQFF was included in the Curator’s forum. Individually, the commentary and essays featured in *GLQ* highlight different issues within the debates. The influence of the mainstream on the queer festival audience features prominently in all four; however, the attitudes differ greatly. While the published discussions are not exhaustive by any stretch, they provide incredible insight into the intertwined roles of curators, critics and filmmakers in the maintenance and regulation of queer communities and identities.

In a comparative analysis of these four documents, the following differences become apparent: the 1999 dossier of critics presents an acute resistance to the mainstreaming of queer images, as it is viewed as a negative homogenizing force; the 2005 curators are engaged with the pragmatics of festival longevity and investigate ways of taking advantage of the mainstream, while simultaneously responding to the changing and diverse needs of their audiences – they are inside and outside simultaneously; the 2006 critics are opposed to mainstream queer images inside and outside the festival space and largely view globalization as “Americanization;” and the 2008 filmmakers speak directly to the experience of creating work for queer audiences in an ever-changing political and technological landscape. One can view these four published discussions as moving outwards from a centre of identity construction to an inside-out perspective, towards global specularization and finally returning to the pragmatics of queer production. If we take these four documents as a collective conversation on queer film festivals, we can locate the following polemics:

- experimental works and short forms are political and therefore ‘good’
- conventional narrative features are apolitical and therefore ‘bad’
- DV technology offers accessibility; production values are high
- queer artists lack training in narrative storytelling; content values are low
- queer audiences are less forgiving of technical “flaws”
- queer audiences want to see “real” films for validation

- queer audiences are not visually literate
- queering the mainstream = visibility, validation
- mainstreaming the queer = heteronormativity, homogenization
- queer film festivals can be limiting in their queer exclusivity
- queer film festivals are a lifeline for the queer community

It is worth exploring these forums in more detail to delve into this minefield in search of the structuring absences within the arguments presented.

Within the 1999 *GLQ* dossier, there is a confident air. Focused on North American critical analysis, it rests in a post-New Queer Cinema, post-queer theory era. Throughout the “Introduction: On Exhibitionism,” Patricia White’s references to “mixed publics,” “new audiences,” and “queer media” connote the evolution of (queer) festival discourse from a focus on collective identity to what seems to be ‘collectivity’ and ‘identity’ as separate concepts. White elaborates on her impression of the festival experience and illuminates its complexity:

At screenings, multiple publics experience forms of collectivity that involve desire, identification, and disidentification ... programming must weigh the phenomenal pleasure of collectively consuming identity-based programs addressing “you” against the challenge of achieving “mixed” and formally varied programs that construct new horizons of reception and attract new audiences. (75)

While she notes the exponential increase in mainstream representations of queer characters, she quickly points out that the lesbian and gay film and video festivals offer “a crucial forum for *self*-representation” that “resist(s) any unitary definition of queer media” (73, emphasis in original). For White, the festival is a site for promotion, an instigator of production and a “counter public sphere,

providing a collective experience and a literal site of *critical* reception” (74, emphasis in original). The festival space therefore makes both queer works and the audience visible, a “double representation” elaborated upon by Richard Fung in the same dossier:

When one programs a festival, one also programs the audience and the community. One presents queer community to itself and then, as a festival becomes more “mainstream,” to the larger public as well. In the work that is selected and the way in which it is grouped and promoted, one not only represents but also produces specific instances and interpretations of queerness... (90)

Fung’s articulation reinforces the assumption that the festival space has both a political and a pedagogical function. However, his interpretation describes the festival’s relationship to the mainstream as well, rather than being a closed entity. I am particularly interested in his comment that the festival “programs the audience and the community” since it ties into Joshua Gamson’s contention that collective identities are “filtered and reproduced through *organizational* bodies” (235, emphasis in original). However, I’m not convinced that programming is a one-way street and/or that the audience is without control in programming the festival, a point I will return to shortly. Both White and Fung, as well as Eric O. Clarke and B. Ruby Rich who are also featured in the dossier, acknowledge the mainstream encroachment on the festivals and respond to it head-on. However, while White and Fung are relatively diplomatic, Rich and Clarke are far more pessimistic.

In her essay, “Collision, Catastrophe, Celebration: The Relationship Between Gay and Lesbian Film Festivals and Their Publics,” Rich elaborates on

the tremendous growth of the festivals from grassroots organizations to corporate sponsored events and poses the question: “What happens when audiences reject programmers’ choices?” (79). Rich’s essay consists of a reflection on her experience of international festival audiences throughout the 1980s and 90s. In particular, she identifies significant resistance by viewers towards the following elements within queer narratives: the presence of negative representations; political agendas; heterosexual subplots; and experimental subjectivity. It is interesting that these points of resistance are essentially the core ‘conventions’ of New Queer Cinema, here rejected by a queer audience. To elaborate a little further on the ‘anti-convention conventions’ of NQC, I turn to Michele Aaron’s essay “The New Queer Spectator.” Here I have summarized the conventions she identifies that are relevant to the resistance Rich identifies:

- an unapologetic approach to character faults, crimes, violence – they eschew positive imagery
- a defiance of the sanctity of the past, especially the homophobic past – they revisit the past and reinstate overlooked homosexual content
- a defiance of cinematic conventions of form, content, genre – they defy the sanctity of mainstream cinema history
- a defiance of death – they embrace “total liberation” from the fear of death

These characteristics are presumed to be inherent within the text and recognizable to a ‘new queer spectator,’ that is, NQC opens up a space for avowing and affirming queer sexuality that did not previously exist. The new queer spectator that results is important in our “continued understanding of the

machinations of cinema, but we must not forget that he or she is a product of the old queer haunts, and these haunts [are] the very stuff of classical film” (Aaron 185). What is interesting about this description is the implicit oscillation it suggests between the old and the new and the fact that recognition of the terms of reference are essential for full critical effect. However, there is no guarantee that an audience, whether queer or non-queer, will recognize or wish to engage with the critique that is at play. The New Queer Cinema argument relies on and assumes the presence of the new queer spectator within and outside of the queer festival space, a spectator that is rooted in the “different spaces of exhibition where queer work has historically been shown – art cinema, underground cinema, porn theatres and consciousness-raising contexts” (White 76). However, what happens when the “queer mainstream spectator” encroaches on the festival space? When the audience seeks positivist and polished representations of queer experience, when they “just wanna have fun” (Rich 1999:83)? Eric O. Clarke’s essay in the same dossier sheds some light on the critical response to this dilemma.

Clarke continues the analysis of queer audiences in his essay “Queer Publicity at the Limits of Inclusion.” While Rich focuses on the audience within the festival space, Clarke considers the mainstream influence on that audience more closely. He suggests that the homogenization of values and representations that result from the ‘democratic’ inclusion of lesbian and gay politics in the public sphere, results in a “phantom normalcy” (84). For Clarke, notions of queer citizenship and social enfranchisement are marked by a series

of value determinations designed to maintain heteronormative morality and impose self-censorship on queer culture. Whether targeted in corporate marketing campaigns or featured in positive media representations, value-determined inclusion risks the loss of “differentiation between commercial and noncommercial spheres,” presumed to be a threat to the well being of the festivals and to ‘queer culture’ (88). Fundamentally, the contrasting viewpoints expressed by the four writers of this dossier – White, Fung, Rich and Clarke - reveal a central misnomer that circulates about queer audiences, that is, that they are *always* engaged in critical reception of mainstream conditions of oppression. On the contrary, some viewers do “just wanna have fun” and I would argue that the queer festival audience, empowered by their newfound mainstream identity, is now more than ever poised to influence programming decisions and “sharply re-pose the paradoxes of identity, access and power” *of the festival space itself* (White 75). Festivals must contend with queer mainstream spectatorship defined by the white, affluent, middle-class targets of value determination Clarke describes. This spectator contrasts greatly with the critically engaged new queer spectator. One can argue that the queer mainstream defaults to an outmoded concept of collective identity as a cohesive, homogenized, ‘shared experience’ while the festivals attempt to embody a queer philosophy of transgression and multiplicity within under-represented communities. Regardless, the history of the queer festival as a form of social movement is in collision with the contemporary capitalist interests of its audience,

and this is a fundamental conflict for critics: the niche festival audience has been transformed into a niche “market for sale” (Gamson 255).

A major point of departure arises here that is worth considering more closely, that is, the festival and its relation to collective *memory*. For many critics in the forums, the maintenance of a queer “legacy” is primary. Filmmakers and festivals actively engage in the production/presentation of retrospectives and the active queering of normative classics. The sense of community envisioned by this historicist agenda can be related to memory studies. Maurice Halbwachs associated collective memory with comparative witness testimony, a vocabulary that B. Ruby Rich uses in several of her essays to describe audience engagement. For example, in her essay “The New Homosexual Film Festivals”, she describes the audience as “gathered to bear witness” (620). Later in that essay she suggests that the queer festival space is a “destination to which folks make pilgrimages to fix memory and reclaim history, a sort of moving-image version of, say, Gettysburg” (624). Halbwachs used the analogy of the return to a ‘place,’ where what we perceive helps restore or reinforce the picture in our memory. Each time we return to that place, in reality or remembrance, we are (re)constituted as another witness to that memory. Each point of entry represents another point in time, another point in our relationship to our ‘self’ and the ‘collective’. Thus, multiple layers of memories act as multiple witnesses to the past and corroborate or amalgamate any discrepancies in order to (re)create a cohesive memory body that we recognize. His theories encourage a critique of film as remembrance and the festival as communion. In this regard, a return to

the festival space, to cinematic memories, can constitute a new witness viewing position, a re-connection to a living, breathing memory body that helps to alleviate our fears of oppression and abuse. However, as Rich astutely points out, the festivals can also become “crucibles of identity for their attendees, and like House of Wax attractions they hold many such identities that viewers have outgrown, even if in some cases they refuse to throw them out” (2006:624). The social programming within queer film festivals, i.e., their documentaries, biographies, and experimental works fit comfortably into an historical legacy of collective remembrance. However, the lighter fare of the “Gay Nineties” such as romantic comedies, are viewed as a break from this process. I disagree, and I would argue that the representational strategies used in queer romantic comedy do suggest an historical “return” to an absent space within Hollywood/cinema/history and can equally be viewed as the (re)creation of a “cohesive memory body” through a type of parody of both Hollywood and queer histories, a point I will return to in subsequent chapters. Furthermore, queer romantic comedies can also be read in the context of New Queer Cinema conventions: they take an unapologetic approach and eschew positive imagery; they revisit the past to reinstate overlooked homosexual content; they defy the sanctity of mainstream cinema history and attack it fearlessly; and they embrace “total liberation” from the fear of death through their resurrection and reclamation of genre form for a queer audience.

3.3. The Force of the Mainstream

The GLQ forums “Queer Film and Video Festival Forum, Take One: Curators Speak Out” and “Queer Film and Video Festival Forum, Take Two: Critics Speak Out” expand on concepts from the 1999 dossier but take an international perspective. The primary difference expressed in these two forums is the symbiotic relationship between the mainstream and the festivals, as expressed by the curators, and the negative impact of mainstream globalization, as expressed by the critics. Liza Johnson, of MIX New York Gay and Lesbian Experimental Media Festival describes this new symbiotic relationship:

While queer festivals can certainly continue to be an important cultural force, there is little doubt that we need to take into consideration the new marketplaces and media products we have helped bring into existence, as well as real changes in the queer cultures that constitute our core audiences. (Straayer and Waugh 2005: 593-594)

Several curators comment on the growing press coverage they have received for their festival, which they attribute to the mainstreaming of queer television.

Giampaolo Marzi of Festival Internazionale di Cinema Gaylesbico e Queer Culture in Milan is conscious of this new landscape and its effects on marketing and audience development:

The mainstreaming of queer TV has definitely influenced in a positive way the mainstream press and TV perception of our festival, making it easier for us to talk about the event, the individual movies and the theme we choose to focus on each year. (Straayer and Waugh 2005:595)

For several curators, the counter-public space of the festival is encouraged by queer mainstreaming to offer alternatives to the popular images, or as Rich

describes in her critic's essay, future queer festivals will act as "repositories of that which mainstream popular culture does not intend to embrace" (2006:621). Brian Robinson of the London Lesbian and Gay Film Festival elaborates further on these ideas. He suggests that the queering of television "captured a mood of populist gay consumption not represented elsewhere" but argues that in the long-run televised queers are still a "narrow range of polite, sexless, playfully outrageous characters" that he believes will motivate viewers to seek out a "wider range of role models that reflect/inform diverse histories," a project the festivals are poised to embrace (Straayer and Waugh 2005:594). Responding to the popularization of queer images, several curators are encouraged to continue challenging their audiences with panels and critical talkback sessions, engaging in dialogue about representational strategies and expectations. Even the *LesbenFilmFestival* in Berlin, while a 'women's festival,' strives to provoke debate rather than complacency within its audience. Nanna Heidenreich of the festival suggests "the disturbing moments when no immediate recognition is provided for the audience not only justify the use of the word *difference* but actually engage that concept" (Straayer and Waugh 2005:591).

The mainstreaming of queer images is largely viewed by curators as the creation of "more space, and there are different kinds of space, for queer representation" (Steve Gutwillig in Straayer and Waugh 2005:596). Likewise, globalization, especially with its technological support systems like the Internet, "helps smaller events grow faster and offer better selection" (Giampaolo Marzi in Straayer and Waugh 2005:589). However, while they are optimistic about the

newfound visibility, curators are critical of who is visible and who is not within and outside of the festival space. As Heidenreich states, “it is problematic to assume in this international search [for work] that some notion of homosexual identity is applicable to all countries and cultures.... If we take *queer*, however overused the term may be, for what it’s supposed to mean - the questioning of the normative – then we cannot assume what shape normativity will take from place to place” (Straayer and Waugh 2005: 588). The issue of globalization connects the curator and critic forums; however, the critics are much more vehement about the impact of the circulation of “white-muscle-boy programming” (Ching 606). The romantic comedy is explicitly targeted in this regard.

Juan A. Suarez offers a fairly diplomatic response to the “increase of inane commercial fare” citing Jim Fall’s romantic comedy *Trick* (1999) as one example. He states:

Even when the programming does little to titillate me – as is the case with the commercial fare since the late 1990s – it still has the interest of topicality. Following the old dictum of classical hermeneutics, every text is an answer to a question or an imaginary resolution to a conflict, even Jim Fall’s bland 1999 title *Trick* tells us something about currents of sensibility out there that might be worth pondering.... (600)

Suarez is the most open-minded of the critics towards the possibility that romantic comedies have a social and/or political function. Otherwise, critics move towards blaming the audience for these choices. In her essay “Camps and Shifts,” Margaret R. Daniel identifies one trend that emerged in the 1990s in U.S. festivals, that of the “concession to audience desire for traditional feature-length

narratives, particularly romantic comedies built on classic Hollywood formulas,” and she cautions:

A focus on European and European American gay male-centred narratives reflected the gender realities of access to the means of production, and who was and is primarily perceived as driving the box office. (609)

She notes that Frameline’s choice to open their 24th San Francisco International Lesbian and Gay Film Festival “with African American director Patrik-Ian Polk’s black male-centred [romantic comedy] *Punks* (2000) was a landmark event in this respect” (611).¹⁸

The critical response to romantic comedy is present in the earlier 1999 dossier as well, as evidenced by Patricia White’s commentary:

Dismissal of the vapid assimilationist values of the romantic comedies and coming out stories that festivals are often obliged, by economic and publicity demands, to highlight need to take into account viewers’ varying cultural competences, their access to innovative forms (White 75-76).

What begins to emerge here is a condescension towards “audience competence” and a feeling of disdain towards viewers who influence these programming decisions. If we consider the ramifications of this rather elitist attitude on “international” queer audiences, the question of “diversity” within critical analysis all but disintegrates. B. Ruby Rich is not without her own criticisms of the audience in this 1999 dossier. Although her concerns are motivated by the fear that the “communal” drive of the festival space can become prescriptive and exclusive, she echoes the concerns expressed by other critics:

Audiences don't want disruption. They don't want "difference." Instead they hunger for sameness, replication, reflection. What do queers want on their night on the town? To feel good. To feel breezy and cheesy and commercial and acceptable and stylish and desirable (82).

This type of evaluative audience criticism can be located in other discussion forums published in subsequent *GLQ* volumes. In "Queer Film and Media Pedagogy," a roundtable discussion of academic scholars, Roy Grundmann of Boston University comments on the changing viewing habits of his students who are more tuned into television than film. He states:

Their queer media diet focuses more on *Queer as Folk*, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, *The L Word*, *Will and Grace*, and *Six Feet Under*. This change in viewing habits is not insignificant. It alerts us to the importance of addressing television critically. These shows pretend to be accurate reflections of queerness, when they are, first and foremost, reflections of mainstream television's values and politics of representation....TV is really a leveler of identity, not a diversifier (Ginsberg 120).

If audience incompetence isn't enough, we are now subject to 'victimization' by television and the mainstream that "pretends" to be "accurate." The ideological construction and maintenance of a vulnerable audience that must be protected and educated is hugely problematic. This is not to overlook the fact that television is a propagandist machine, or that media literacy is a pedagogical concern. However, the suggestion that the audience is completely without agency, and the implicit suggestion that there is a 'right' and a 'wrong' choice that viewers face in making decisions about their viewing habits, exposes the queer machinations of identity construction that undermine both visibility and oppositional politics. While

queer oppositional politics vie for a “we” that is always questioned, it favours fluid diversity of which “conventions” are a part. In each case, collective identity can be viewed paradoxically as both a fetishizing of heterosexuality and a rejection of heteronormative conventions. Contemporary debates on queer film festivals and the mainstream are continuously confronted by this paradox.

Within the curator’s forum, programmer Stephen Gutwillig, of Outfest: Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Film Festival, concedes to the “increasingly light tone” of queer work produced for ancillary markets that are “dominated by male-themed content” (Straayer 2005:584). However, he finds himself in a double bind:

Despite being the centre of American film production, L.A. is not a town of cinephiles.... General audiences favor blockbusters, and our audience tends to mirror mainstream attendance patterns and tastes.... We regularly fill screenings with narrative reflections of the experiences of sexy white men, a common practice among queer American festivals (599).

This “common practice” yields conflicting responses from critics in relation to the global circulation of these images. In her forum essay “Bridges and Battles,” Yau Ching describes the “vicious cycle” that occurs when festival resources are geared towards Euro-American white gay culture. She stresses that Hong Kong film festivals and their audiences “have been “programmed” to take the white, mainly gay culture as “natural,” “desirable,” and “progressive,” contributing to “further suppression and marginalization of a localized and regional queer culture” (Ching 606). The “global gay” sensibility “affects how film and video makers in Asia see themselves” resulting in a mirroring of “identities and issues

of an imaginary globalized white culture” (*ibid*). Jon Binnie elaborates at length on this problem in his text *The Globalization of Sexuality*. He states that “the very nature of writing of the ‘global’ means we must appear at home everywhere, yet at the same time none of us can know more than a small fragment of the world” (4). Binnie maintains that “national differences in the regulation and control of sexualities do matter and reveal much about the specific construct of national identity and sexual cultures,” (12) because control of sexualities is crucial to nationalist projects. Conversely, he acknowledges the tremendous appeal of the queer model of desire in numerous countries, confirming the presence of a transnational constellated community of spectators. However, the primary fear lies in the fact that global rhetoric can underplay historical dimensions and overstate the uniqueness of processes. Nanna Heidenreich succinctly criticizes this imposed global identity:

[I]t is even more problematic to think that the West’s identity politics mean that “here” you can be queer, while “there” you are oppressed, and that it is all a question of progress and enlightenment (Straayer and Waugh 2005:588).

Fundamentally, the double bind of Gamson’s “organizational bodies” is at work here through the conflicting agendas represented by the queer festivals with their history of critical reception, and the mainstream market (i.e. the United States) with its history of entertainment. In their respective crossover agendas, concepts of “exposure” and “inclusion” are co-opted by mainstream markets, while festivals have increasingly included lighter, entertaining fare into their programming to maximize audience draw and box office revenue.

The final installment of the *GLQ* forums, “Queer Film and Video Festival Forum, Take Three: Artists Speak Out,” provided a platform for artists to speak to the enabling and disabling factors of exhibiting their work in a queer festival space. Fundamentally, the artists are ‘on the ground’ moving through identity processes in a very public way. Since many artists rely on their film and video work for their livelihood, this forum brings us back to the pragmatics of queer production. Process and identity, creativity and control, business and exposure all commingle in this forum and the contributing artists have a multifaceted point of view. Some artists caution that queer film festivals can be limiting in their explicitly queer-themed programming, while others view the queer film festival as a “lifeline” (Bradley 132), and still others navigate crossover opportunities. Bill Basquin admits feeling “an interesting and frustrating tension between wanting to be known as queer and shown in a queer context and wanting to make films that are from a queer point of view without being explicitly queer in subject matter” (123). Building on this idea, Q. Allan Brocka applauds the technological advances that have made it easier for queer filmmakers to produce and distribute their own work. While he values the queer film festival, he identifies the changing needs of both filmmakers and audiences when he states “I *hope* to see a lot more financially successful films coming out of queer festivals and ideally giving back to them” (126). Indian filmmaker Onir, also stresses the need for queer work to circulate beyond queer designated space and into mainstream systems in order to reach a broader public. Olivier Ducastel and Jacque Martineau, commenting on French cinema and the international queer film festival circuit

suggest that “the gay community is stronger than language communities” and they applaud the international queer film festival circuit (133). In doing so, they reinforce the concept of queer as a cultural and/or nationalist entity akin to (in this example) a French language community.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, Maureen Bradley comments “I don’t need a gay multiplex” opting instead for the return of the small, more intimate queer film festival space. She echoes Barbara Hammer who suggests that festivals need to return to a ‘non-normative’ (queer) philosophy, changing their form to complement the changing technological needs of artists and viewers. Hammer, a highly respected lesbian activist and experimental filmmaker who has been creating work since the 1960s, also raises the issue of censorship. Not only does she refer to the early days of censoring gay and lesbian works in general but also to the ‘censoring’ of experimental form by festival programmers who prefer feature length mainstream forms. Complementing Hammer’s sentiment by drawing attention to the importance of both mainstream and niche queer space Ducastel and Martineau offer their vision of the future of queer film festivals:

We dream that eventually queer feature films would need queer festivals less and less because they would be shown in theaters, and their commercial run would be profitable and their profile really high. Teenagers would go see them with their parents and grandparents. Queer festivals would refocus on documentary, experimental, and art videos. (134)

Prompted by the question of the utility of queer film festivals, Su Friedrich fears that queer film festivals may go the way of the women’s film festivals “which were

so essential, empowering, and wonderful back in the day but which now barely exist except in countries where women still have a much harder row to hoe...” (128). Friedrich’s comments seem to undermine globalization theory which would have us believe that given the inequities of the women’s movement around the world, the persistence of a women’s film festival that supports a global women’s movement would be essential. This fear of loss is significant amongst critics, curators and artists and is perpetuated by the perceived absorption of cultural identities into the ‘melting pot’ of assimilation; however, the question of whether it is better to expand or contract as a queer cultural entity is central in this forum.

What is absent from the *GLQ* debates, or conversely, what they reveal, is the possibility that all the viewpoints expressed can and *must* occur simultaneously in order for a truly diverse community to exist. Collectively, they signal an active engagement between culture and counterculture or what Gamson describes as “a process in which multiple, overlapping identities inevitably conflict” (236). Lisa Henderson’s concept of queer relay is appropriate to consider in this context as a means to frame and navigate this conflicted space. Henderson’s thesis originates from her analysis of the production, marketing and distribution experiences of the queer short drama, *Desert Motel* (Liza Johnson 2005), a film that she contends exists “at the interstices of industry and independent resources and aesthetics” (569). As a result of this positionality, the film was subjected to the critique of “crossover dreaming” that she describes as follows:

In the queer case, crossover dreaming signifies a spatial and cultural polarity between a queer *here* that is pure and sequestered and thus makes outsiders want in and some denizens want out, and a nonqueer *there*, mixed, polluted, driven by capital and cultural normativity, both morally compromised and the target of recognition and success – a dream, after all, not conscription. (569)

In order to address this criticism, Henderson articulated the process of queer relay, which she describes as an “ongoing, uneven process of cultural passing off, catching, and passing on, if not always among members of the same team” in which “subcultures become the fantasy target of recognition and success and where dominant culture itself is necessarily *in play*, not at the mercy of subcultural forms but lifeless without them” (571). Henderson subsequently draws from the polemical positions within mainstream - niche debates to locate symbiotic opportunities. To begin, she suggests that the industry orientation is motivated by recognition “by the mainstream” and its “industrial career markers” can be measured by the “individual success model” with the goal of “seeking economic clout and wealth.” Conversely, queer orientation is recognized “from queer to queer” and it is motivated by “art/queer world career markers” measured by the “autonomy of expression” for the purpose of “evolving film culture toward a better world” (588). Within her thesis, she lists a series of polemical dyads to compare industry and queer orientations respectively: integration/worldmaking; despecification/specification; stigmaphobic/stigmaphilic; aesthetic convergence/aesthetic innovation; and crossover avowal/crossover disavowal. Henderson imagines “not two opposed groups but contiguous cultural spaces

whose borders are open and whose inhabitants are sometimes locals and other times guests, with both states in formation and transition” (587). While not intended as a prescriptive formula to end repression, nor as a disregard for what she identifies as “the pleasures or safeties of queer separation,” Henderson’s concept of crossover space, and by association the queer romantic comedy, can be conceived of as sites of disruption and perpetual transition (594).

All utopian ideals of globalization aside, the international queer film festivals can be viewed as the “cultural watchdogs” of global issues that affect a transnational queer community. The queer romantic comedy reflects the changing currents of a media landscape, now saturated with queer images. Several curators and critics in the *GLQ* forums attest to its function as a reflection of social conditions. While the purpose of the *GLQ* forums was not to undertake a close textual analysis of queer films, there was a clear evaluative critique aimed at genre-influenced films like the queer romantic comedy. Henderson’s conceptualization of crossover as part of a process of exchange is lucid and pragmatic. Her thesis speaks to the need for complex analysis of queer cultural production in order to gain insight into the possibilities within this exchange. I take my lead for the following chapters from these debates. In chapter four, I will discuss the significance of queering a classical genre form, while in chapters five and six I will undertake an analysis of the films studied in order to flesh out the process of exchange these films engage in as well as the disruption they incite.

¹⁵ In the larger centres such as New York where multiple queer film festivals exist simultaneously, the need to differentiate one's programming and 'communities served' is more pronounced as festivals compete for the same resources.

¹⁶ The *GLQ* curators' forum follows a roundtable discussion so the essay is comprised of a collection of excerpts organized thematically. The *GLQ* critics' forum and artists' forum are comprised of a series of single essays from each contributor. The participants in the critics' forum are primarily professors from academic universities in Spain, China, Brazil, The Philippines and the United States or critical writers in queer culture. With the exception of Juan A. Suarez, all participants in the critics' forum are also involved with queer festivals around the world.

¹⁷ I have chosen to identify these festivals as "queer film festivals" for my thesis. Other descriptions that come up within festival references and citations will include "gay and lesbian film festivals," "GLBT (or LGBT) festivals" and "GLBTQ festivals."

CHAPTER 4. TROUBLE WITH TROPES

4.1. (Queer) Romantic Comedy

What is a romantic comedy? In the simplest sense, it can be defined as the light comedic treatment of romance that ends with a happy union. According to Billy Mernit, author of *Writing the Romantic Comedy: From 'Cute Meet' to 'Joyous Defeat,'* the basic structure of a romantic comedy is the 'meet-lose-get' formula. This genre is extremely predictable and according to Mernit, the challenge (for the writer) is to create *doubt* in the viewer that the couple can actually get it together enough to be together, *despite* this inherent predictability. In this sense, romantic comedy attempts to undo itself as it reveals itself, much like the characters within it. Mernit suggests that romantic comedy protagonists are "emotionally incomplete" and before the couple can be united, they must overcome formidable obstacles, one of the most significant being their personality differences (16). The explicit meaning within romantic comedy narratives can be summed up as love conquers all and/or love is a humanizing or transformative force. This definition, while it may appear overly simplified, reflects the 'sameness' that films in this genre category embody and, from here, all manner of variations and classifications can take place each with its own symptomatic interpretation. *Queer* romantic comedy is a subgenre of romantic comedy whose primary narrative revolves around a same-sex couple rather than a heterosexual couple. Queer romantic comedy exists as a significant historical and political marker: as a revision of a Classical Hollywood form which privileged heterosexual romance; as a mainstream genre that presents queer characters

and situations in a denotative rather than a connotative form; as the perceived antithesis of New Queer Cinema; and as an instigator for the creation of new viewing positions for queer audiences.

Throughout the golden years of the Hollywood studio era and the formative years of genre classification, queer representation was absent. Between 1934 and 1961, the Motion Picture Production Code banned the depiction of homosexuality in film unless used thematically for moral purposes. If gay or lesbian characters were represented on screen, they were buffoons, eunuchs or predators. Romantic comedy was the stuff of heterosexual romance and queer viewers were forced to imagine not only the possibility of that romance for themselves, but they were also left to imagine what that representation might look like. The visible community of queer film and video makers in North America as we know it today is a relatively recent occurrence, a distinct attribute of the gay liberation movement launched into action in the U.S. in the late 1960s. Hollywood's refracted images of gays and lesbians served as a catalyst for the development of a distinct queer cinema whose evolution includes hardcore experimental forms, (auto)biographical documentary, sexually overt expression, dystopic gay and lesbian representation, transsexual and transgender representation and recent genre features like the queer romantic comedy. In this chapter, it is not my intention to undertake an exhaustive study of romantic comedy, nor is it of interest to me to engage in a 'straight vs. queer' genre comparison. While this comparison is implicit within my thesis, the 'sexual revolution' was not exclusive to the queer community and, therefore, my interest

in queer romantic comedy is focused primarily on the representational strategies and ideological positioning these films utilize.

Several texts have been written on the Hollywood romantic comedy, but sustained critical analysis of queer romantic comedy appears to be absent. The majority of genre critics attach their classification strategy to specific time periods and by association draw from the social, political and/or cultural turmoil of those historical times to explain the representational formulas utilized and the corresponding ideological function of the genre within that period of time. It is important to note, however, that genre analysis is interpretive and not definitive. Genre cycles do not necessarily have end points but often overlap, exist simultaneously and/or continue into the future, and/or they are absorbed into hybrid genre studies. Genres can be defined as a classification system, and I would suggest that they are cumulative across time, that is, each cycle builds on the previous cycle and *relies on* those cycles for its existence. Rick Altman suggests that genres are formed through the processes of “label” and “contract,” label being the “category central to the decisions and communications of distributors and exhibitors,” and contract the “viewing position required by each genre film of its audience” (14). With this in mind, I will consider queer romantic comedy as an accumulation of excess genre convention. I’m taking the liberty of presenting an historical trajectory for romantic comedy while simultaneously puncturing this linear evolution to pluck out key conventions that are utilized in queer romantic comedy. This process reflects the cumulative value of genre I have described and demonstrates label and contract in action.

As the romantic comedy revolves around sex, romance and desire, the historical time periods in which each subgenre emerged are significant. In a sense, each subgenre has attempted to 'top' the last one, as the sex-romance envelope is pushed further within the bounds of the time period. Many critics locate the early screwball comedies and the sex comedies as the roots of romantic comedy and contextualize them accordingly. For example, the screwball comedies of the 1930s and 40s were framed by the Depression, the Second World War and the Production Code. The sex comedies of the 1950s were influenced by the sexual (re)awakening of American culture thanks to events such as Alfred Kinsey's report on female sexuality, the inaugural publication of *Playboy Magazine*, the weakening of the Production Code, and the advent of television, which focused on general family entertainment.¹⁹ The process of labeling romantic comedy from the 1960s onward is marked by heated debates amongst genre critics that run parallel with the anxiety surrounding the sexual revolution and the breakdown of marriage and relationships in the public sphere. As a starting point, it is interesting to consider Brian Henderson's seminal essay from 1978 entitled, "Romantic Comedy Today: Semi-Tough or Impossible?" in which he concludes that romantic comedy is dead, arguing that the fundamental point on which romantic comedy is founded is 'the sexual question' that "must remain unstated if the genre is to survive." Henderson states quite bluntly:

Although romantic comedy is about fucking and its absence, this can never be said or referred to directly. This is perhaps the fascination of romantic comedy. It implies a process of perpetual displacement, of euphemism and indirection at all levels, a latticework of dissembling and hiding laid over what is constantly present but denied, unspoken, unshown. (22)

Henderson's 'repression theory' is interesting to consider in relation to queer romantic comedy since this subgenre relies almost entirely on the opposite idea, that is, 'fucking and its presence.' In *Slutty Summer*, Markus discovers his boyfriend in full mutual fellatio with another guy on their living room floor. On making this discovery, the boyfriend boldly exclaims "this is not what it looks like!" In *But I'm a Cheerleader!* Megan fantasizes about her fellow cheerleaders, revealed through mental subjectivity that places the viewer in a low POV looking up their skirts. Fellatio, cunnilingus, masturbation and 'fucking' are standard fare in queer romantic comedies. Whether represented full frame, positioned just out of frame or concealed beneath bed covers, these scenes represent a bawdy send up of sexuality that knows no bounds. Countering Henderson's essay years later, Steve Neale claims, "it could be argued that the (ideological) dislocation of fucking from 'commitment' and the (ideological) dislocation of both these things from marriage, formed both the precondition and the problematic of nervous romances" of that time period (286). Neale's 'ideological dislocation' theory is equally interesting in this context as it can be viewed not only as the precondition and problematic of queer romantic comedy, but as the *enabling* factor in the emergence of this subgenre.

In her recent text, *Romantic Comedy: Boy Meets Girl Meets Genre*, Tamar Jeffers McDonald classifies comedies that emerged in the 1960s and into the 1970s as “radical romantic comedies.” This subgenre abandoned “the emphasis on making sure the couple ends up together, regardless of likelihood, instead striving to interrogate the ideology of romance” (59). Influenced by the political and social upheavals of the 60s and 70s, they are marked by tremendous self-reflexivity on a number of levels: about the romantic relationship itself; in the films’ intertextual references to other filmic texts; and as a “modern and more realistic form of romantic comedy” (67). This concept of self-reflexivity is very interesting for queer romantic comedy, as these films are extremely self-reflexive not only in the ways Jeffers McDonald describes but also in the ways they embody a self-reflexivity about gay and lesbian cultural politics as well as genre conventions themselves. For example, the film *All Over the Guy* features blatant references to Hollywood’s constructions of gay characters and offers a pithy commentary on genre tropes. In his first meeting with Tom, Ely invites small talk about gay films he has seen and makes the mistake of suggesting that the film *In and Out*, starring Tom Hanks and Kevin Kline, is “fun” to which Tom explodes:

Fun?! Fun to see Kevin Kline get on his sorry-ass, middle-aged knees and give us a big old Hollywood blowjob by catering to every cliché and homophobic stereotype of what it means to be gay?

In case this diatribe was missed the first time around, *All Over the Guy* takes a stab at *In and Out* again in a later scene in which Ely’s psychoanalytic mother (played by Canadian comedian, Andrea Martin) exclaims:

What a piece of shit film! Honestly! Like we're supposed to believe that this woman is going to fall in love with a middle-aged, homophobic, self-hating teacher who's only now discovered he's gay?! I don't think so!

This overdetermined attack on Hollywood is significant as the film becomes much more than a comedy about gay lifestyles and dating; it is an overt attack on the very industry that spawned the romantic comedy genre itself and, by association, the queer romantic comedy. In this regard, one can easily argue that this subgenre is an ideal vehicle for drawing a captive audience into a generic system of (political) meaning making.

Several critics agree that the romantic comedy genre continued to evolve and moved away from the radical, nervous, self-reflexivity to a much more traditional formula in the 1980s and 90s. Jeffers MacDonald labels this conservative genre neo-traditional romantic comedy, a subgenre that "prefers to reference popular culture and consumer products rather than political or historical events" (88) and one whose larger project is the insistence that "sex is meaningful only within a committed relationship" (98). Her description of this subgenre suggests a strangely apathetic view of sexuality combined with displaced desire expressed through consumer fulfillment. The key points Jeffers McDonald raises are significant in that queer romantic comedies frequently construct an affluent world of consumption and leisure where homophobia is noticeably absent. This playground of free sexual exploration is a primary component of the generic dream factory, and I will return to this point in the following chapters to consider its relevance to gay and lesbian representation

within queer romantic comedy. However, Jeffers McDonald's description also suggests a nostalgic return to a time and place when romance was easier and surprisingly this nostalgia is also tangible within queer romantic comedy, although it is questionable what that nostalgia is about for queer viewers. Does it refer to a lost time of representation? To a longing for a cinematic presence that never existed? Or does it refer to the process of overwriting history and creating space, a process queer romantic comedy is heavily engaged in?

By comparison, Neale labels this subgenre "new romance" and identifies four interesting tropes: eccentricity and neuroses within characters; endorsement of 'old-fashioned' romance; a conflict between deviance and conformity that privileges the latter; and the prevalence of a 'wild' heroine who must become ordinary in order to win the hero (294-298). Neale's character description is intriguing as the construction of opposites within this queer subgenre is often injected with an excess of neuroses across characters. The presence of a 'wild' partner is also common and, in most cases, they do defer to their more conservative partner by the end of the film. This is one of the primary bones of contention within queer romantic comedy as it feeds into an assimilationist agenda more than any other convention and ultimately tempers the more radical elements. However, this is precisely the element that makes these films marketable to a mainstream queer audience and enables them to become "great date films." The couple's relationship therefore follows a more traditional trajectory, while the social space they occupy assumes a post-homophobic, post-

AIDS landscape where public social commentary is possible and notions of the closet are absent.

4.2. The Act of Queering Romantic Comedy

In their 2000 essay “The End of Romance: The Demystification of Love in the Postmodern Age,” James J. Dowd and Nicole R. Pallotta contend that a “problem facing lovers today is the almost complete absence of impediments, with the ironic consequence that romance itself is socially inconsequential and distinctly unromantic” (553). Dowd and Pallotta locate the genre’s downfall in social, historical and cultural shifts that resulted in a drive towards social realism in the 20th Century, which, in turn, abolished the obstacles required for the creation and maintenance of romantic fantasy. In Table 6, I have paraphrased the key points Dowd and Pallotta raise regarding traditional obstacles to union vs. impact of social realism:

Table 6. Traditional obstacles to union vs. impact of social realism

Traditional Obstacles to Union	Impact of Social Realism
Romance as transgression; marriage as routine	Romance with the “wrong partner” has lost narrative power as multiple romances common
Intervention of structural or powerful forces that impede union	Risk of impediments such as war and insurrection, not as “relevant”
Risk of social ostracism or social disapproval	Deconstruction of ideologies of race, class, gender weaken impact of union between “dissimilar others”
Love thrives in the forbidden	Changing attitudes towards sex and love shift notions of the forbidden
Love as irrational, mysterious; love as fate; love as ‘completion’; permanent	Love as rational, demystified; love as agency; love as need satisfaction; temporary
Search for “the one”	Search for “one of...”
Romance pitted against tradition	Romance pitted against postmodern irony and disbelief

Like Brian Henderson, Dowd and Pallotta fear the death of romance given that its transgressive power has been absorbed into every day life. In the midst of their social critique, they suggest that the goal of romantic comedy today is not one of satire or social commentary a la Woody Allen, but rather “the modest [goal] of providing amusement or entertainment for their audiences and a profitable investment vehicle for its costly stars and financial backers. These films place only the mildest hurdles in the path of true love...” (564). I disagree with Dowd and Pallotta’s description of the diminished use value of romantic comedy, as they overlook the potential for social commentary to exist within comedy, as if entertainment and politics were mutually exclusive. In their essay “The Politics of Gay Culture,” Richard Dyer and Derek Cohen suggest “We tend to ignore pleasure as part of the business of politics – at our peril. At a minimum pleasure clearly allied to politics keeps us going, recharges our batteries” (Dyer 16). Moreover, I would suggest that in their focus on classical romantic comedy conventions that favour heterosexual traditions, Dowd and Pallotta overlook the possibility of social commentary that extends beyond this binary code.

Queer theory and genre theory share characteristics of classification and identification processes that relate to production, marketing and community building. In each case, similarity and difference is essential in order to bring freshness to the vocabulary used and to expand the field of naming and coding. Historical referencing is also active as each theoretical position exists as a cumulative entity and neither can exist without reference to a past. In their essay, Dyer and Cohen share their respective experiences as gay men and their

insights feed directly into my study of queer romantic comedy. Dyer elaborates on his experience of coming out prior to the advent of the gay liberation movement, a position he defines as 'traditional' while Cohen elaborates on his experience of coming out "straight into the gay movement and the already altered gay world," an experience that positioned him within 'radical' gay politics (Dyer 16). They caution that these positions are not mutually exclusive, but inform one another. Comparatively speaking, traditional gay male culture is marked by its clandestine, connotative strategies and its camp sensibilities. In contrast, Cohen describes his 'radical' experience as "self-conscious culture" characterized by "the emergence of a self-defining, self-asserting gay identity, as opposed to a furtive or concealed homosexual one" (Dyer 22). Queer romantic comedy, in its genre form, can be viewed as both traditional and radical. As Dyer and Cohen state:

Between the growth of the radical gay cultures and the renewal of the traditional, and perhaps as a result of them, there has been the emergence of a gay mainstream culture, operating in neither the alternative modes of the radical culture nor the subcultural languages of the traditional. This mainstream culture signals the presence of gay expression in the wider general culture of the society... (Dyer 2002: 27)

Dyer and Cohen identify three key forms this gay mainstream culture takes that include gay-themed television programs, a revitalized disco culture and, most importantly, "the increased and confident use of straight artistic forms for gay content" (Dyer 27). Their use of the terms 'traditional' and 'radical' to describe gay culture are not unlike the terms genre critics use in their classification of romantic comedy cycles. I would argue that queer romantic comedy pays

homage to the traditional genre form while simultaneously paying homage to the cumulative history of gay and lesbian culture. This subgenre is radical in its “queering of the canon” which can influence the overarching process of meaning making. However, radical queer politics often exclude any form of ‘heteronormative’ coding and for some critics the ‘queering’ of this genre does not suffice.

In her essay “Can Romantic Comedy Be Gay? Hollywood Romance, Citizenship, and Same-Sex Marriage Panic”, Debra A. Modellmog suggests that “romantic comedy is a genre about citizenship, impressing on viewers the form their desire must take for full citizenship to be granted” (162). Modellmog suggests that same sex pairings function as a ‘substitution’ for heterosexual pairings and do nothing more than reveal the position of queer people as “second-class citizens” (163). Modellmog draws attention to the endings of gay romantic comedies that often feature a kiss in the absence of marriage since this practice is prohibited. She suggests that “the alternative endings of these films are marked by anxiety over the displacement of the traditional ending, an anxiety that can be connected to the societal hysteria that provoked the passage of the federal Defense of Marriage Act (1996)” (163). Her essay is intended as a platform to show that Hollywood colludes with the state in privileging this mode of desire and marriage. However, she does not consider queer-produced films or the significance of queer collusion on this sanctioned form of bonding, *even though she references several gay and lesbian produced films*. I would ask *why* the marriage scene is absent in queer romantic comedy, in a medium that

revolves around fantasy, a genre that perpetuates the “having it all ways” mentality. Despite the influence of social realism, I am not convinced that the absence of the marriage scene reflects a lack of citizenship in and of itself. Within the films I am studying, only one character poses the question “will it ever be us?” with regards to marriage. More often than not, the characters are far more critical of marriage than Modellmog would have us believe. At the onset of *Kiss the Bride*, Jake, the editor of a gay magazine bluntly states, “You know what’s great about sucking cock? It doesn’t taste like wedding cake.” Interestingly, at the end of the film, it is the heterosexual buddy couple that reject the institution of marriage. This anti-marriage attitude is prominent in several films and while it is connected to an intratextual critique of the gay lifestyle, it can also be read as a stand-alone symptomatic critique of gay marriage and heteronormative politics. While queer romantic comedies are often criticized as being assimilationist for taking advantage of classical and heteronormative value systems, the characters’ attitudes towards tradition and the rules of romance, are far more radical and self-determined than a surface reading of this subgenre would suggest.

Jeffers McDonald identifies a series of classical conventions that are visible throughout romantic comedy in all its subgenre forms, and I have outlined them in Table 7 below.²⁰ In the right hand column, I have explored the effect of ‘queering’ these conventions, that is, I have considered how these conventions are altered within the queer romantic comedies studied. One can easily suggest that the conventions I list on the right reflect the parodic form of romantic

comedy. However, I believe these conventions, when applied to the queer films I am studying, are far more than this and, in fact, reflect the convergence of the traditional and the radical gay culture that Dyer and Cohen describe.

Table 7. Queer romantic comedy conventions

Romantic Comedy	Queering Romantic Comedy
Meet cute	Meet cute
Adversarial relationship turns to love	Adversarial relationship turns to love
Break-up and make-up	Union not always guaranteed
Slapstick delivery	Self-reflexive delivery
Conflicting “best friend” advice	Conflicting intergenerational advice; conflicted heterosexual buddy couple
Idiotic public gestures	Political public gestures
Love montage	Sex montage
Masquerade	Unapologetically self-determined
Wedding that goes wrong but it’s ok	Wedding largely absent

In this regard, I believe queer romantic comedy is always politically self-aware and historically rooted. While some conventions are shared – the meet cute, the adversarial meeting - several, when queered, take on different characteristics.²¹ I have replaced the “slapstick delivery” characteristic of classical romantic comedy with “self-reflexive delivery.” While I have elaborated on the significance of self-reflexivity already, and offered a scene from *All Over the Guy* as an example, I must emphasize that this is the most powerful convention within this subgenre as it grounds the films in historical, political and social reference points that can then be held up for commentary within the film. *Billy’s Hollywood Screen Kiss* offers another example of the power of this convention, the title alone references the *absence* of the gay kiss in Hollywood cinema. The main character, Billy, is played by Sean Hayes of *Will and Grace* fame, thereby reinstating his position as

a recognizable gay icon. His opening monologue sets the stage for the self-reflexive framework the film utilizes:

Contrary to popular belief, all homosexuals don't get laid all the time. Some of us, in fact, long for true love, kids, a house in the country with a white picket fence. I mean, face it, you straights have it all. Well, this is what I've got: a story, which I offer to the homos and the heteros to bring us all a little closer to understanding those words straight and gay, if, in fact, they have any meaning at all.

Jamie Babbit's film *But I'm a Cheerleader* is equally self-reflexive in its characterization of a 50s style reform camp for "homosexuals" designed to "cure" queer youth by enforcing the correct codes of heterosexuality. In its casting of gay icon and drag queen extraordinaire, RuPaul, as the 'straight' camp counselor, the film pushes this convention over the top. Overall, one can say that self-reflexivity is used *in excess* and serves to interrupt the surface reading of the film as pure entertainment and/or as assimilationist in sentiment.

In contrast to the "conflicting best friend advice," queer romantic comedy often emphasizes the "conflicted heterosexual buddy couple." This buddy couple can be viewed as an homage to classical romantic comedy, or as a parallel for the express purpose of affirming the gay relationship; however, the buddy couples are consistently represented as buffoons within the narrative, and these couples undermine the heteronormative prerogatives found in the classical form: in *All Over the Guy*, the buddy couple is saccharine in the excess of their romance; in *Billy's Hollywood Screen Kiss*, they are bordering on inept; and in *Bedrooms and Hallways*, they are a cold, New Age couple who are excessively cerebral. The "faghag" is an offshoot of the heterosexual buddy couple and she

is present in almost all gay romantic comedies listed, serving as a confidante for the main protagonist and sometimes existing as one-half of the heterosexual buddy couple. Interestingly, the buddy couple is less frequent in the lesbian romantic comedies studied; however, “conflicting intergenerational advice” must also be considered in this category since it is a common element in both the gay and lesbian romantic comedies. This convention, once again, places queer romantic comedy within an historical and political framework and ties into traditional/radical cultures. In *Itty Bitty Titty Committee*, a traditional (and much older) lesbian-feminist is coupled with a young radical ‘baby-dyke,’ creating a dramatic tension that cannot be rectified within the relationship, sending a significant message regarding the schisms that can exist within these political positionalities. In *Boy Culture*, the main protagonist “X,” a young twenty-something hustler, becomes involved with a closeted 70-year-old “trick” with whom he develops a close bond. Their relationship stands as an explicit reference to traditional and radical gay culture and, in the end, the “traditional” provides guidance for the “radical,” while the “radical” incites the “traditional” to change his self-oppressive tendencies. The presence of “political public gestures” is directly related and replaces the “idiotic public gestures” of classical forms.²² In *Itty Bitty Titty Committee*, an underground lesbian-feminist cell known as the “C(i)A” for “Clits in Action” instigate a series of anti-patriarchal actions that culminate in the construction of a penile head on top of the Washington Monument which is promptly blown up on national television. Overt political gestures are more common in the lesbian romantic comedies studied as they

embrace a feminist agenda, although the German gay romantic comedy *Guys and Balls* does carry a strong pro-gay/anti-straight message through the construction of rivaling soccer teams – one gay and one straight – and the presence of homophobic threat within the homosocial space. In general, however, political public gestures in the gay romantic comedies studied manifest in a more subtle way. For example, in *Bedrooms and Hallways* the main character is given a book for his birthday entitled *The Obsolete Penis*, and a main comedic element in the film is a men's group whose members must eventually come to terms with the varying sexualities within their small, safe, 'warrior' space.

The "masquerade" holds an interesting place within the films selected. Three titles use this convention as a primary comedic element: Q. Allan Brocka's film *Eating Out*, Phillip Bartell's *Eating Out 2: Stopping Seconds* and Jamie Babbit's *But I'm a Cheerleader*. In Brocka's film, 'straight' Caleb pretends to be gay to attract fag hag Gwen and in Bartell's follow-up, 'gay' Kyle pretends to be straight to draw in the closeted country boy Jacob. Throughout Babbitt's *Cheerleader*, reform camp participants are regularly 'forced' to practice the masquerade of heterosexuality. However, characters are incapable of overriding their gay and lesbian impulses and the masquerade is quickly discarded. Likewise, in both *Eating Out* films all characters return to their proper sexual space despite their exploration of "the other." In general, characters in the films studied are unapologetically gay and lesbian as though a history of the closet is close enough that masquerade has been abandoned, unless used simply as a

means to create comedy in the concept of the *heterosexual* other. Perhaps this is precisely why the 'wedding' is largely absent in several of these films despite its fantasy potential in this classical-inspired form. It seems logical that a generic form that subverts the classical conventions of romantic comedy might want to try queer marriage on; however, this may constitute a form of masquerade that undermines the larger project of queering romantic comedy.

In her text, *Hollywood Romantic Comedy: States of the Union 1934-65*, Kathrina Glitre drills down into genre theory to provide insightful analysis of classical genre cycles of romantic comedy during the Hollywood Studio era. She rejects conservative and evaluative judgments of the romantic comedy as a genre that simply reinforces the status quo and instead chooses to analyze the 'states of the union' represented, focusing on union as stability and social integration. For Glitre, the ending is not the meaning of the film. Rather, she draws from Rick Altman's concept of a 'dual focus narrative' that involves a process of compromise, not conquest:

Where classical narrative privileges the values of the hero by villainizing his opposite in a good-versus-evil conflict, dual focus narrative lends positive weight to both sides of the argument, continually renegotiating the balance of power and creating a more egalitarian structure of desire. Indeed, this process may include the reversal of the couple's original positions, enabling a degree of mutual re-education to take place and suggesting the potential for change.
(15)

While her analysis and the films she studies focus on heterosexual couplings, the application of her analysis to gay and lesbian couplings can be used to suggest the ideological context for my analysis. For example, the themes she outlines provide an appropriate touchstone for contemporary gay/lesbian and queer

politics. She suggests that “Hollywood romantic comedy often draws attention to the gap between reality and fiction by embracing artifice” (16) and she notes that romantic comedy themes include “the nature of love, courtship rituals and marriage, identity, liberation, transformation, renewal, and the relationships between individuals and society” (18). Consideration of her text in relation to queer romantic comedy is particularly interesting to me as one can ponder the ‘state of the union’ within these films as well as the ‘relationship between individuals and society’ within a queer context.

Rick Altman’s analysis of genre cycles can be used to further qualify the significance of queering a classical genre and provide insight into the self-determined nature of this subgenre. Altman suggests that adjectival modifiers (or modes) of genre, such as comic drama, can themselves become substantive nouns, or stand-alone genres, such as comedy. These ‘new’ nouns can be modified by future adjectives such as ‘romantic comedy,’ which can be transformed into ‘romance,’ modified to ‘musical romance’ and so on. Adjectives therefore help define a particular genre. However, once the adjective is “loosened from the tyranny of the noun” (50) the qualities of the new genre (or subgenre) also change, that is, “the development of the stand-alone noun signals the liberation of the former adjective from its noun and the formation of a new category with its own independent status” (51). For example, ‘burlesque comedy’ stripped of its comedy noun is simply burlesque, a slightly different genre incarnation from its previous modal address. Altman suggests that these independent terms enable a standardization process, the development of ‘proto-

generic relationships.’ In this state, shared attributes such as iconography and conventions can be more easily located and/or allocated. Once the public is able to identify generic patterns, they can participate in the process of generic meaning-making.

Altman’s theory of adjectival/noun evolution can suggest that adjectives (and by association the industrial makers of those adjectives) desire transformation into a stand-alone noun for the purposes of “liberation” and “independence.” In the modification of romantic comedy to queer romantic comedy, or queer romance, the genre is reframed adjectivally as Altman describes. And like his burlesque example, queer romance, loosened from the tyranny of the noun to become “queer” has a very different connotation. However, queer cinema and new queer cinema preceded what I am now calling queer romantic comedy and these former labels existed outside the Hollywood production system (as does the queer romantic comedy for the most part). In this case, the once independent queer cinema can be modified to become *dependent* on Hollywood genre classification as a means to enable the public to “identify generic patterns” and “participate in the process of generic meaning-making.” While this process can be viewed as assimilation, it can also be viewed as cannibalistic: queer cinema can be viewed as appropriating the tyranny of its adjectival-noun forefather for the express purpose of attaining liberation and independence from *within the industrial/studio system*. This strategic, business-savvy movement garners as much criticism as it does celebration; however, I believe the process of infiltrating a system, of learning generic vocabulary, in

order to turn the system back on itself, is the essence of social movement theory that combines both an assimilationist and radical agenda simultaneously. Since 'stability' or some form of universalizing is required for a generic (or queer) text to be identifiable and classifiable, the language surrounding genre (or queer) identification itself needs to be evolutionary and unstable to maintain interest, that is, genres (including queer genres) must be adaptable to their surroundings, across time and space. For every instance of 'generic' or 'genre' in the preceding sentence, we can insert 'queer' and arrive at a comparable argument for the construction of queer cinema and queer identity. In both cases, retrospective and prospective engagement is imperative and, by association, the need for combined diachronic and synchronic analysis. Therefore, rather than thinking of genre (or queer representation) as a permanent model attributable to a single moment of origin, one can consider genre (or queer representation) as "the temporary *byproduct* of an ongoing *process*" (Altman 54).

Film criticism and film studies frequently place Hollywood cinema centre stage as the fulcrum from which analysis of all film occurs. The impact of this placement is one of a constant regurgitation of ideological function and effect, and the erasure of those works that are not produced within this system. Therefore, films deemed worthy of analysis are subsequently those produced by the major studios and those that have achieved box office success. This narrow focus within film studies has a huge impact on independent producers, and in this case queer cinema, as these works are not included in critical debate. In the case of romantic comedy, several critics suggest that romantic comedies with

gay and lesbian characters are virtually unheard of and, if they are, they do not enjoy significant box office success. In his 1992 essay, Steve Neale boldly states “to my knowledge... there exist no romantic comedies in which the members of the couple are lesbian or gay or Asian or black” (288). Considering his essay was released at the point that New Queer Cinema was taking hold, a decidedly anti-Hollywood, anti-genre form, there is some relevance to this claim as it relates to both independent and Hollywood produced work and we can use this as a reference point. However, Jeffers McDonald falls short of expanding the critique in 2008: “It seems that the final convention of the romantic comedy to be disposed of is the gender of the protagonists. To date there has yet to be a successful mainstream romantic comedy which permits the narrative to focus on a homosexual couple although there have been several financially profitable independent films which have done so” (80). While she criticizes the major studios for their conservatism, it is clear that she, too, is guilty of this same blind spot. Dowd and Pallotta do not mention any gay or lesbian themed films produced by Hollywood despite the breadth of their study (romantic comedy films produced between 1930 and 1999) and, as they focus their study on this production system, they do not consider independent works either. But even Modellmog who is writing specifically about gay romantic comedy is equally guilty of taking a narrow focus in her analysis of the queering of this genre form. In fact, Modellmog suggests that “introducing gay content into the romance script is not enough to subvert or rescript this narrative” thereby actively resisting

ownership of romance by gay, lesbian or queer couples (164). She effectively defers ownership back to Hollywood and the state and perpetuates the problem.

This critical absence points to the significance of international film festivals and to the importance of queer film festivals. While gay and lesbian characters and documentary subjects are appearing more and more on television, there remains an aversion of sorts to the presence of the queer spectator and the queer subject. Or as critics and filmmakers contest, more production opportunities are becoming available; however, distribution and marketing is still waning. Queer romantic comedy is, therefore, omitted from critical discourse and genre studies because it is not a significant studio endeavor or a box office hit, and simultaneously, queer romantic comedy is criticized within analysis of queer independent cinema because it resembles Hollywood despite its absence from this apparatus. On an ideological level, these films speak to representation and romance, not in the sense of 'realism' but in the sense of how imagery moves through a series of viewing systems. It is constructive to analyze these queer representations with all their absences, ruptures, clichés and parodies as they reveal an astute self-awareness of the genre, its history and queer absence. It is essential that we create dialogue around queer cinema – mainstream and independent – in order to historicize and politicize critical discourse in new ways without falling back on evaluative dismissals. Queer romantic comedy is 'the wolf in sheep's clothing,' the 'femme fatale' of a genre that has become profoundly self-reflective. The presence of queer romantic comedy in queer film festivals does not suggest a *fait accompli*. Upon closer analysis, we learn that this genre

mode is still largely absent in textbooks and in Hollywood. The omission of independent queer films from genre studies reinforces the policing of images within mainstream culture as well as critical academic studies. An analysis of romance that does not consider queer representations is simply an incomplete analysis.

¹⁹ Within screwball and sex comedies, several critics identify subgenre comedies of marriage, manners, re-marriage as well as career woman comedies.

²⁰ These conventions represent the inherent similarities within this genre's evolution. We must always keep in mind that there are variations within individual groupings of film and across genre cycles. Such is the mutability of genre study.

²¹ It is important to note, however, that while I use "queer" as an umbrella term for the process of altering these conventions, there are differences in the way these conventions translate within gay and lesbian romantic comedies studied. I will touch on some of those differences here and elaborate on them in more detail in subsequent chapters.

²² Interestingly, when idiotic public gestures are present in the queer romantic comedies studied, they are the exclusive domains of the heterosexual buddy couples.

5. GAY (WHITE) MUSCLE BOYS

5.1. Gay Romantic Comedy and Assimilation Processes

Throughout this thesis, I have emphasized the need for a more complex analysis of crossover films, in this case the queer romantic comedy, and I have identified several critics who recognize the value of dual processes of exchange: a dual organizing strategy for social movement that utilizes both assimilationist and radical tactics (Rimmerman); the critical process of 'queer relay,' which speaks to the active exchange of ideas between mainstream and niche markets (Henderson); and the dual narrative focus of romantic comedy in which protagonists and antagonists (re)educate one another (Glitre). Exchange can therefore be conceived of as occurring at multiple levels simultaneously within society, amongst critics and within the filmic text itself. I do not conceive of this exchange as a neutral process with harmonious outcomes; on the contrary, I think of it as a process of disruption that decentres society, critics and the filmic text once it is activated. In chapters five and six, I will explore the gay and lesbian romantic comedies respectively, to locate these dual processes within and outside the filmic texts. In doing so, I will identify the disruptions within these generic texts that serve as sites of transgression. While I seek to avoid clear-cut binary analysis of the gay and lesbian collections, I will study them separately as their gendered histories impact the representational strategies they use. As Richard Dyer explains:

Gay men have, for all their oppression, gained practically all the advantages of men generally... Men have always had greater access to culture, both as producers, where their greater material assets have enabled them to have greater access to resources, and as consumers, with men having more leisure time as compared with the all-consuming domestic labour of women. (2002:17)

Therefore, while the LGBTQQIA community has unity in the academic sense, that is, the acronym exists as a signifier for a politically-rooted social movement, it is largely a fractured and hierarchical community, one in which the 'head of the family,' or 'breadwinner,' is perceived as being gay, male, white and affluent. The recent entrenchment of gay characters into mainstream culture can therefore be viewed as yet another notch in a patriarchal system of address. The gay romantic comedies in particular are marked by a drive towards upwards mobility that encourages individuals to strive for capital gains in order to be rewarded with status and citizenship. These films prioritize the individual over the community, separate that individual from his/her socially based support system, and as such, the gay romantic comedies in particular, feed into assimilationist politics that are viewed as apolitical. Therefore, *what* queer filmmakers produce – their message, their representational strategy, their stylistic choices - and *to whom* they market and distribute their products become primary flashpoints, that is, while these films fill a void, they are carefully scrutinized.

The gay romantic comedy represents the mass marketability of homoerotic appeal and it ignites a variety of debates that hinge on the overdetermined spectacle of the gay (white) muscle boy, a trope that is at the helm of assimilation politics and has many reference points. First and foremost, it

reflects a hyper-masculinized image that runs counter to the homophobic interpretations of gay as equal to the weakling, the effeminate, the sissy, all manner of feminized criticisms of gay men. In its historical form, it can be contextualized in relation to the fetish of the Greek Adonis and more recently to 1950s physique magazines, both of which have cultural significance as forms of artistic expression and counterculture significance as clandestine forms of eroticism. The muscle boy can also be viewed as a means of passing in masculinized society, since the image of the buff, sexy, athletic model has a particular status within society, one that is associated with discipline and success as well as sexual virility, and therefore it can be viewed as representative of survival through assimilation. In each case, it connotes power and dominance. In cinematic terms, the gay (white) muscle boy is out, has a supportive circle of family and friends and has middle to upper-middle class status. He is primarily 18-25 years old, gainfully employed, has an excess of leisure time and he is an affluent consumer. Within the gay romantic comedies studied, gay characters are not viewed as pariahs who live off the system, but as individuals who pass and blend, and pose no threat. In short, the gay (white) muscle boy has 'use value' as a citizen engaged in the construction and consumption of 'romantic capital.' One can argue that this characterization represents a progressive and liberating change from the pathologized gay characters of classical Hollywood; however, gay male dominance within queer culture is highly charged and the gay (white) muscle boy can be criticized for the very same reasons it is celebrated: as

an assimilationist tool, it holds the oppositional distinction of being too queer and not queer enough simultaneously.

5.2. The Construction of a Monoculture

In her text, *Selling Out: The Gay and Lesbian Movement Goes to Market*, Alexandra Chasin analyses the surge of niche marketing in the 1990s that specifically targeted gays and lesbians. Supported by inflated market studies – undertaken by both gay and straight companies – the result was the creation of identity-based consumption models for gay men and lesbians which could be interpreted as “an invitation into mainstream culture, the turning of the tides of homophobia to enfranchisement” (41). While many would argue that the creation of this consumer group was cause for celebration, Chasin aptly notes that “the cost of enfranchisement, the property requirement, prices some consumers out of citizenship... gay identity marketers, in their assumption of group unity on the basis of sexuality, cover over class differences in the gay and lesbian community” (44). Not surprisingly, the A-list icon within this marketing campaign was the gay, white, upwardly mobile and educated male consumer, a trope that was not only the mascot of the image campaign but also the source of survey results. According to Chasin’s research, one of the more popular consumer reports cited income figures for gay men and lesbians that exceeded the average income of men and women in general due in part because they were based on non-random samples collected through distribution systems such as gay and lesbian magazines that, in and of themselves, target specific demographics (36).

In circulating these inflated figures, a double-edged message was sent: the gay and lesbian community is as affluent and as visible as the straight community; therefore, the gay and lesbian community has nothing to complain about any more. Herein lays a major flashpoint surrounding assimilation politics, that is, in its oversimplified form it focuses only on sexuality and capital and strives to smooth out difference, thereby undermining a larger queer politic that seeks to disrupt normative underpinnings.

The image of the sexy muscle boy is further exemplified in the Vancouver Queer Film Festival program guides as this image is used in numerous sponsor advertisements for hotels, night clubs, vacation resorts, clothing companies and chat/sex lines, all of which constitute forms of consumption. In fact, as genre programming increased at the VQFF festival starting in 1997, it appears there was an exponential increase in the number of ads using this representational strategy: one ad in 1997 and 13 in 2008 for a total of 78 ads featuring sexy muscle men during this time period. By comparison, when we consider the number of ads featuring sexy women during this same period of time, the gender discrepancy is staggering - two ads in 1997, a peak of four ads in 2004 and a drop to one ad in 2008, for a total of 17 ads during this period of time. Suffice it to say, gay male culture has dominated historically, socially and culturally within the festival space as well. The audience demographics collected for the Out on Screen Audience Survey further reinforce this point, as the dominant audience attributes are male, gay, Caucasian, age 30-39 with an annual income of \$60,000+.²³

Table 8. 2006 OOS survey results: descending audience demographics

GENDER	Male	Female	Trans	Other			
	49%	39%	5%	7%			
IDENTITY	Gay	Lesbian	Queer	Bisexual	Hetero	Other	
	45%	24%	10%	6%	4%	11%	
ETHNICITY	Caucasian	Asian	Latin	Persian	Native	African	Other
	54%	9%	3%	1%	1%	1%	30%
AGE	30-39	50 or older	40-49	24-39	19-23	Other	
	30%	22%	22%	13%	6%	7%	
INCOME	\$60 K +	< \$20 K	\$30-\$39 K	\$20-\$29 K	\$40-\$49 K	\$50-\$59 K	Other
	22%	18%	14%	13%	10%	8%	15%

Other = personal category not listed and/or no response

The obvious comparison here is between the viewing subject and the filmic object as there is considerable crossover, and one can easily argue that the films' representational strategies and the audiences they serve are part of a self-aggrandizing gay circuitry, a phenomenon that is much bigger than the festival audience and the filmic content itself.

The issue of 'whiteness' is significant within these films. There is no denying that several of the main protagonists within the gay and lesbian films studied possess 'whiteness,' that is, they are coded as being American and/or Western European and are assumed to have access to all the privileges afforded white, middle to upper class citizens. A small number of the gay romantic comedies studied include mixed racial and ethnic characters that become secondary to the main protagonists, and it is important to consider the dynamics of white / non-white represented in these films. The films *Leather Jacket Love Story*, *Billy's Hollywood Screen Kiss* and *A Four Letter Word* all feature an

African American character as secondary, in the role of drag queen, tertiary love interest and boyfriend-of-a-friend, respectively, and we might argue that difference is once again relegated to the shadows, much like the clandestine coding of gay and lesbian characters in early Hollywood cinema. However, the character of Derek (*A Four Letter Word*) while secondary, is the wise sage of the cast, the loyal partner who is cool, calm and collected throughout the film and he stands in marked contrast to the sexual excess that surrounds him; an excess that is exercised (or exorcised?) by the gay white muscle boys around him. This is not to say that Derek is non-sexual. On the contrary, he is equally fetishized as a 'black' gay muscle boy; however, he also has depth.

The films *Boy Culture* and *Punks* stand out in relation to the other gay romantic comedies, as they bring race and ethnicity to the foreground of the gay (white) muscle boy universe and effectively disrupt the monoculture that is constructed. *Boy Culture* features an African American actor in a primary role as the main protagonist's love interest, Andrew, who pointedly comments on the place of African American men in gay culture when he says, "I hate guys who say 'I'm not normally into black guys but...'" In this simple statement, Andrew lays bare the racial fetishism that can be located in gay culture, a fetishism that is explicitly and implicitly represented in several films in this collection. In an interesting on-line interview, Matthew Rettenmund (who wrote the original novel *Boy Culture* on which the film was based) asks Q. Allan Brocka, the director of the film, about his choice to cast Andrew as African American. Rettenmund's original story emphasizes white, gay male culture as a means to criticize that

culture and he admitted to initially being annoyed when he discovered that Brocka was breaking that structure. In the interview, Brocka defends his choice saying:

I just did not want to make another all-white gay movie, and when you're making movies for no money you have to make something you really, really feel strongly about. I couldn't do it. I could, but it's not worth it to me. It's damaging to me. I just don't see people of color in queer films and didn't wanna make another one without one. (Rettenmund)

Brocka elaborates further on his casting choice and the questions that were thrown at him by producers - "Could you make the money back with a black lead? What could you make the money back with? Latino?" - thereby exposing the commercial relationship between race and financial return within the industry. Rettenmund concedes that the choice to cast Andrew as African American was "creatively and politically, a smart and brave decision" and he admits that the change in race from his original white character reinforced his criticisms of gay, white male culture.

Punks takes this disruption of gay, white monoculture further as it is the one film that boasts a prominent non-white cast of African American and Latino actors. Released in 2000, this film premiered at Sundance and subsequently opened numerous gay and lesbian film festivals around the world. Unfortunately, *Punks* is also the one film from this collection that is not in circulation owing to problems with the original distributor, and this absence is significant in perpetuating the exclusivity of the gay white muscle boy trope within cinematic and industry space.²⁴ While the film was a hit at Sundance, Polk says "the

distributors were really afraid of the movie – you know, a black film with gay themes. They really shied away from it and we watched while all kinds of films at Sundance got picked up for distribution. Films that I thought arguably were much tougher sells than our movie was” (*Punks: Interview*). Building on this idea in a roundtable discussion in *Genre Magazine*, Polk comments on the perceived political progress within the gay and lesbian community and he states quite bluntly, “we have gay white people, but they’re still white ... in theory, you think gay people should be inclined to be more tolerant and open-minded, but it’s just hogwash ... we’re so fragmented” (15!). While Brocka and Polk are actively engaged in the disruption of gay white muscle boy culture, there is, paradoxically, a distinct dissolution of diversity; the homoerotic appeal of the ‘muscle boy’ ultimately reduces race and ethnicity to a collection of ‘flavours’ emphasizing the candy-story quality of their presence and playing into the utopian ideal of equality through *sameness*. Therefore within the construction of ‘Queerwood,’ the classical convention of hierarchical casting that privileges white male leads is still in active play, and while it can be viewed as ‘progressive’ in its gay form, it simultaneously registers as a lack, as an emptying out of cultural diversity.

5.3. The “Gay Lifestyle” as a Site of Transgression

While the gay white muscle boy trope is a product of assimilation strategies within mainstream and niche markets, this does not mean that gay romantic comedies are devoid of political meaning. On the contrary, one can argue that the politics within the gay-centred films are a self-reflective politics

focused on the nature of gayness and the gay lifestyle, and that they utilize stereotypes within that community for comedic release as well as social commentary. In short, it is an inward politics. The negotiation of the gay lifestyle is a central theme across all gay romantic comedies studied and it is a primary site of disruption within these films. The use of this theme can be read as transgressive, that is, as a “recuperation of the forbidden;” however, it is not only the forbidden topic of gay sexuality within mainstream public space that is conjured, but also the forbidden topic of the mainstream queer within the queer niche space of the festival, and also the forbidden questioning of the gay lifestyle (in practice and representation) within queer niche space.²⁵ In this regard, gay romantic comedies, like the queer film festival space itself, can be framed within the discourse of “carnival,” which Mikhail Bakhtin conceived of as the “temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions” (Bakhtin 10).

While Bakhtin’s thesis is derived from a specific historical study of medieval folk culture, the key points he raises have been articulated by numerous critics as the basis for discussions of carnival as representative of “the oppositional culture of the oppressed, a countermodel of cultural production and desire. It offers a view of the official world as seen from below – not the mere disruption of etiquette but as a symbolic, anticipatory overthrow of oppressive social structures” (Stam 95). While the queer film festival is easily contextualized in this way, the gay romantic comedy can be conceived of as a ‘carnival within

the carnival' as it challenges the "established order" of queer radical culture as well. However, to problematize this concept further, Umberto Eco relates the carnival to the comic, the comic relying on the violation of a rule, usually a minor rule such as those related to etiquette, that is committed by a character that the viewer *does not* sympathize with. As such, the viewer is motivated to feel superior to the character that violates the rule and the viewer's pleasure is derived from transgression of the social order through the sadistic pleasure gained from the character's demise. Eco's articulation seems to override the possibility for exchange or re-education across characters and viewers; however, I would argue that we must first ask what rule is being violated and by whom, as it is not necessarily the gay protagonist that the viewer does not sympathize with. Furthermore, we must locate the source of "the comic" in order to locate the ridiculed character and we must not overlook the fact that the characters within the filmic text are also viewers in their cinematic world. In this way, we can find utility in both Stam's and Eco's articulation of the transgressive possibilities and apply them to an analysis of the gay romantic comedies.

Within the fourteen gay-centred films studied, I have identified three primary modes of address: traditional, sexually ambivalent and club culture. These modes are visible throughout the time period studied and suggest a larger cultural dialogue on the nature of gay relationships. There are numerous similarities across these modes of address, most notably, the setting of the films, which is consistently urban with New York and Los Angeles prominently featured.

Mernit's meet-lose-get arc is consistently problematized and this relates to the representation of the gay lifestyle.

Table 9. Mode of address in gay romantic comedies

	FILM TITLE	DIRECTOR	PROD YR	MODE OF ADDRESS
1	Leather Jacket Love Story	David DeCoteau	1997	Club Culture
2	Bedrooms & Hallways	Rose Troche	1998	Sexually Ambivalent
3	Billy's Hollywood Screen Kiss	Tommy O'Haver	1998	Traditional
4	Gypsy Boys	Brian Shepp	1999	Club Culture
5	Trick	Jim Fall	1999	Traditional
6	All Over the Guy	Julie Davis	2000	Traditional
7	Punks	Patrik-Ian Polk	2000	Club Culture
8	Guys and Balls	Sherry Hormann	2004	Traditional
9	Eating Out	Q. Allan Brocka	2004	Sexually Ambivalent
10	Slutty Summer	Casper Andreas	2004	Club Culture
11	Boy Culture	Q. Allan Brocka	2006	Club Culture
12	Eating Out 2: Sloppy Seconds	Phillip J. Bartell	2006	Sexually Ambivalent
13	A Four Letter Word	Casper Andreas	2007	Club Culture
14	Kiss the Bride	C. Jay Fox	2007	Traditional

Ultimately, love and romance compete with sexual promiscuity and the main protagonists must ask themselves whether they can leave “the lifestyle” for “the right one.” The journey to monogamy is riddled with comic and dramatic obstacles and, at the end of these films, the union of the characters is not guaranteed, nor is the vow of monogamy. While I have identified the central theme within this collection as a negotiation of the gay lifestyle, the construction of that negotiation differs: in the traditional mode, the gay lifestyle is consistently compared to heteronormative value systems through the presence of a heterosexual buddy couple and/or a dysfunctional family; within the sexually ambivalent mode, negotiation occurs across a heterogeneous mix of characters and this mode constitutes the most literal translation of carnival in its burlesque representation of sexuality; while the club culture mode frames negotiation as a

specifically gay subject in the absence of heterosexual counterparts for comparison. When described in this way, the inherent politics within these films come into sharper focus. If we consider Billy Mernit’s description of the love antagonist in romantic comedy, we can modify it for the gay romantic comedies as follows: *love challenges the gay lifestyle (conflict); the characters must accept or deny the lifestyle (crisis); love transforms the lifestyle, and vice versa (resolution)*. This dual resolution speaks to a re-education process that connotes a symptomatic shift in the search for a new definition of relationships and this is quite pronounced within all three modes. In order to explore this theme further, I will elaborate on each mode of address in more detail.

Table 10. Primary attributes of modes of address

Traditional	Sexually Ambivalent	Club Culture
Classical form	Screwball form	Classical / gay porn hybrid
Setting: urban	Setting: urban	Setting: urban
Union – not guaranteed	Union – not guaranteed	Union – not guaranteed
Obstacle: gay lifestyle	Obstacle: gay lifestyle	Obstacle: gay lifestyle
Comedy derived from antics of the straight characters	Comedy derived from ironic situations characters find themselves in	Comedy derived from self-reflexive jokes about gay stereotypes and sexual excess
Gay community = absent or minimal	Gay community = integrated in heterogeneous mix	Gay community = dominant
Gay lifestyle exists in relation to dominant society	Gay lifestyle = sexual lifestyle; available to everyone	Gay lifestyle is celebrated; infused with politics
Gay characters much more subdued than straight characters	Gay characters and straight characters interchangeable	Gay characters constructed as a series of overdetermined stereotypes
Not sexually explicit	Moderately sexually explicit; bisexuality common	Sexually explicit; promiscuity common
Heterosexual buddy couple present	Heterogeneous mix of gay and heterosexual characters	Devoid of heterosexual characters
Eschew marriage & promiscuity; embrace “idea of” tradition	Separate sexual act from sexual identity; expand field of relational options	Eschew marriage & tradition; seek commitment and sexual freedom simultaneously

The traditional category exemplifies the classical construction of romance and these films can be viewed as the most literal attempt to rewrite gay

characters into Hollywood genre. The story within these films revolves around a gay couple largely in relation to their heterosexual counterparts in the absence of a connection to a larger gay community. The slapstick of the straight characters and the othering of heteronormative values is a primary source of their comedy; however, the absence of gay space suggests an isolation or estrangement from a sense of community and/or history. More specifically, there is a tangible melancholy that suggests a memorializing of the past, as if implicitly acknowledging that the 'gay nineties' much less the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 70s is over. As a result, there is considerable uncertainty for the gay characters in their attempts to create a model of relationships that eschews both marriage and promiscuity, while embracing some concept of tradition. The alternative is grim: within these films, the heterosexual couples, whether represented as buddy couples or family members, are profoundly dysfunctional. Within the film *All Over the Guy*, Ely's parents are manic psychoanalysts while Tom's parents are chronic alcoholics. The representation of Ely's parents is played with comic sentiment; however, Tom's parents are shrouded in dark drama and at the end of the film, we learn that Tom has an institutionalized sister with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. While gay sexuality is never questioned by friends and family, the choice to represent 'family' in this way can be conceived of as a desire to move away from traditional heteronormative value systems, which are represented as hypocritical and destructive. The main protagonist, Ecki, in the German film *Guys and Balls*, seeks gay-positive space by moving from his rural home to the urban centre. This is the one film in the gay romantic comedies in

which the main protagonist is not initially out of the closet. The opening of the film is quite dramatic and the tension mounts as the Ecki prepares to come out to his family and his soccer teammates. It is only after he is forced to leave his small town and enters an urban milieu that the romantic comedy commences. However, the dramatic undertone of homophobic threat, which is associated with heteronormative values, is present throughout the film, thereby tempering the comedic moments, or perhaps rendering them *more comic* precisely because the need for a comic release is heightened in the presence of threat.

The ridiculed characters of the traditional mode are, first and foremost, the heterosexual characters, which are represented as buffoons. In *All Over the Guy*, Jackie and Brett are ecstatic and neurotic about their new found love. As the heterosexual buddy couple of Tom and Ely, they are saccharine in their obsession for one another and the excess of their relationship deflates the love motif. In *Billy's Hollywood Screen Kiss*, Georgiana is Billy's close friend and confidante and her relationship with her boyfriend Peter is a lesson in the attraction of opposites: Georgiana is outgoing and vibrant, while Peter is completely inept. Following a jealous misunderstanding, Georgiana leaves Peter and has an affair with a drug-enhanced, bohemian named Gundy. While Peter is inept, Gundy is base; his love songs to Georgiana are riddled with requests to 'eat her.' Georgiana's relationships are devoid of romance and her sex lacks the 'sexiness' of her gay counterparts. Ironically, while the traditional mode is the most palatable to a broad-based audience, it has the most difficulty resolving its narrative. The absence of closure in these films is emphasized by the setting the

characters find themselves in at the end: Tom and Ely sit at the bottom of a stone stairwell in a park (*All Over the Guy*); Gabriel and Mark part ways at a New York street intersection in the early morning (*Trick*); and Billy stands alone in a tightly framed doorway until an anonymous new character enters the frame (*Billy's Hollywood Screen Kiss*). Thus, a pattern of heterosexual buffoonery, the inability to create or locate gay-positive space and gay malaise over an uncertain future is consistent throughout this mode and brings a dark, transgressive undertone to these films.

Films in the sexually ambivalent mode combine gay, lesbian, straight and bisexual characters into a heterogeneous sex farce. While the main protagonists are gay, they exist in relation to a larger social community. Not surprisingly, these films feature an ensemble cast and a web of relationships that crisscross in romantic mayhem. This category of films thrives on derailing fixed notions of identity and sexuality and seeks to challenge the gay lifestyle and heteronormative conventions simultaneously. Collectively, they possess qualities of both the traditional and club culture modes. In these films, viewers and characters are rewarded with sexual union and romance; however, the union often occurs as a masquerade of another sexual identity and embraces bisexual fluidity. Conversion fantasies are common, that is, the possibility that anyone, whether straight or gay, can *crossover* to the other side of their prescribed sexual orientation. This mode can be directly connected to carnival's rejection of social decorum, and the process of masquerade in these films speaks to the transgressive tendencies of the "mask" which is "connected with the joy of

change and reincarnation, with gay relativity and with the merry negation of uniformity and similarity; it rejects conformity to oneself” (Bakhtin 39). Rather than striving for a new definition of relationships and/or struggling with loyalty to the gay lifestyle, this mode of address reflects a more relaxed, yet pansexual attitude towards sex and relationships. Desire is based on the separation of sexual acts from sexual identity and these films are aligned more with a queer politics based on an “everchanging we,” albeit a soft politics swaddled in romantic comedy conventions. The ridiculed character of the sexually ambivalent mode is shared amongst the heterosexual and gay characters and they become the subject of a continuous cycle of “crowning and uncrowning” in the Bakhtinian sense, thereby emphasizing the temporary nature of identity and meaning.

At the beginning of *Bedrooms and Hallways*, we meet Leo, the gay protagonist. Through the course of the film, we watch Leo successfully seduce Branden who turns out to be involved with Sally, whom we later discover is the childhood sweetheart of Leo. At the end of the film, we see Leo heading to his bedroom with Sally to recuperate their (lost moment of) lustful desire, with no promise of commitment or change of sexual identities. While this can suggest a return to a default position, the excessive critique and exchange of sexual identities that occurs throughout the film renders this union redundant as we witness multiple transformations throughout the film. The process of mixed and multiple partnerships ultimately render the concept of fixed identities somewhat obsolete. A far bawdier dismantling of social and sexual decorum can be located in the films *Eating Out* and *Eating Out: Sloppy Seconds* which also incorporate a

web of misfit relationships that play on the masquerade of sexual identity to the point of mocking all monosexual identities. In *Eating Out*, the straight protagonist Caleb is willing to 'play gay' to attract his love interest Gwen, and accepts the offer of fellatio from her best friend Mark. In *Eating Out 2*, the gay protagonist Kyle is willing to 'play straight' to attract his love interest Mark, and cringes through cunnilingus with Tiffani.

The club culture mode can be identified by its sharp focus on gay club culture, and here the landscape is largely devoid of heterosexual characters. This mode of address targets an exclusive gay audience and the crossover concept can therefore be conceived of as the appropriation of mainstream genre conventions for the gay niche space. The celebration of sexual excess and multiple partners is prominent, and sex scenes often have the earmarks of soft porn as full frontal nudity and explicit sex scenes are common. The representation of club culture as a 'candy store' of muscle boys is also prominent. The comedy is the most self-reflexive of all these modes, generated as a result of the omnipresence of sex within stereotypes of the gay lifestyle. Sex is at the forefront of these films and in many cases, an explicit comparison of "sluts" vs. "hustlers" comes into play. Two examples stand out in this regard, *Boy Culture* and *A Four Letter Word*, since each film includes a primary character that openly identifies as a hustler. Moving stealthily through a variety of clients, both "X" (*Boy Culture*) and Stephen (*A Four Letter Word*) are business-savvy men, each with impressive designer wardrobes and condominiums. X attributes his wealth to smart *investments* while Stephen alludes to an *inheritance*. Their

vocabulary is significant as it marks a sense of entitlement to and engagement with a capitalist market. The unapologetic language the characters use, combined with their overdetermined obsession with sex and the body feeds into the Bakhtinian concept of the “corporeal semiotic celebration of the grotesque, excessive body and the “orifices” and “protuberances,” of the “lower bodily stratum” (Stam 93). However, characters struggle to keep up with the lifestyle, and these films stand in as radical sites of resistance not only for their content but also for their self-conscious reflections on the nature of sex that suggest a longing for something different. Ultimately, these films attempt to locate an alternative model of relationships that eschews marriage and tradition, while simultaneously longing for commitment *and* sexual freedom. In addition, there is an implicit critique of club culture as an overdetermined ‘tradition’ in and of itself and as such, these films attempt to reframe desire and, redress gay-centred representation. While they celebrate their homoerotic excess, they simultaneously devalue ‘the gay lifestyle’ as an empty string of men. Since these films find their primary audience within gay viewers, this critique targets its own niche audience. Within the club culture mode the ridiculed character can therefore be the gay protagonist and/or the gay secondary characters and/or the viewer who all participant in the gay lifestyle. Therefore, within this mode, the process of ridicule narrows the distance between subject and object to hit its mark.

These modes of address are directly related to the intended markets/audiences for these films. However, as gay films cross over into

mainstream space, they are subjected to dominant systems of heteronormative critique and conversely, as mainstream genre forms enter the niche festival space, they are subjected to queer radical critique. In order to consider these dynamics in more depth, I will undertake two tasks: I will analyse the media response to Jim Fall's film *Trick*, a film that falls into the traditional mode of address and is therefore 'palatable' to a broad audience; and I will undertake a close analysis of Q. Allan Brocka's film *Boy Culture*, a club culture film that attacks its own mode of address. While I have focused my attention on critics, curators and filmmakers up to this point in this thesis, I will now turn to the film reviewers who occupy this crossover space. Film reviewers can be viewed as the conductors of public/audience response, ultimately enabling or disabling the crossover potential of a film. As such, the media response to each film mirrors the mode of address within the film and the primary market in which each film is identified.

5.4. The Media Response to *Trick*

Trick has a compact, twenty-four hour plot line. It is the story of Gabriel, an aspiring young Broadway musical composer who is incapable of writing about love because he has never experienced it. Gabriel is sheepish and virginal in his demeanor. Following a failed audition, Gabriel heads to a gay bar where he is awe-struck by beefcake go-go boy Mark. Overwhelmed by this muscle boy, and unable to handle the oozing sexuality of the bar, Gabriel exits and heads for the subway. As is the formula of the "meet cute" convention of romantic comedy,

handsome Mark, now in street clothes, appears on the subway: their eyes meet, there is mutual attraction, an awkward exchange takes place on the subway platform and the two set out to find a place to have sex. However, Gabriel shares a small studio flat with his heterosexual roommate and Mark lives with his mother so the spontaneity of an anonymous sexual encounter is lost and replaced with the *fantasy* of the anonymous sexual encounter which motivates the couple to search for a place to have sex. In true romantic comedy form, Jim Fall creates doubt in the viewer that the couple can actually get it together enough to be together. Coitus interruptus is perpetuated by a host of characters: Gabriel's straight lothario of a roommate Brad who takes over their apartment; Gabriel's best friend Katherine, who constantly calls upon him for favours; Gabriel's older friend and gay mentor Perry, who is more than happy to accommodate them until he is suddenly reunited with his ex-boyfriend; and Coco the drag queen, who slanders Mark in a gay bar bathroom. Having exhausted their options and been unsuccessful in consummating their lust, they realize that abstinence makes the heart grow fonder and their lust is transformed into romantic tenderness. The union that we doubted was possible comes in the form of a public kiss at a New York street intersection at dawn and the promise of something more meaningful than anonymous sex. In a sense, we have doubted the possibility of their union and we have been right - their 'love' has not been consummated at the end of the film and the only thing that binds the two men is Mark's phone number, now tucked inside Gabriel's pocket.

Trick fits into a traditional mode of gay romantic comedy and as such the gay couple exists largely in relation to their heterosexual counterparts. As is the case with all the gay romantic comedies studied, the central narrative revolves around the attraction of opposites, between a geek-type protagonist (in this case Gabriel) and his sexier muscle-boy love interest (Mark). Here I use the word 'geek' reluctantly, as the awkward characterization is created primarily through baggy, unappealing costumes. As Gabriel becomes more confident in expressing his sexuality, we discover that he is quite svelte in his physique. Likewise, the objectified muscle boy Mark eventually comes into his own and we discover that he is college-educated and intelligent. While Gabriel and Mark initially meet at a gay bar and there is plenty of camp sentiment and gay characters throughout the film, they are not comfortably connected to gay culture and in fact, appear quite alien within it. The sexless (or presex?) nature of their relationship is a far cry from the raw representational strategies that New Queer Cinema was founded upon and the prohibition of sex hearkens back to the Hollywood screwball comedies of the 1930s, 40s and 50s, a time when gay and lesbian characters (and viewers) were relegated to the shadows, forced into a coded, clandestine underworld. Furthermore, it is interesting that the viewer is first set up to doubt the possibility of the couple's union, followed by the expectation of union, and ending with the prohibition of union in favour of *platonic* excess. These points are significant when we consider the media reviews that accompanied the film.

In a random sampling of twenty-eight media reviews of the film, *Trick*, many critics raved that *Trick* was "one of the best gay comedies in many a moon"

(Bob Graham, *San Francisco Chronicle*) and “the most appealing and most erotic gay date movie ever made” (Emanuel Levy, *Variety Magazine*); however, their rave reviews were heavily qualified and, oftentimes, the film was critiqued based on its accessibility for heterosexual audiences. Ed Gonzalez (*Apollo Guide Review*) states, “what makes *Trick* different is that it tells a story that heterosexuals can also relate to” and Steve Davis of the *Austin Chronicle* concurs in his description of *Trick* as “a romantic interlude that may very well be the first gay date movie that’s equally accessible to straight couples.” In addition to accessibility, critics hailed the film for its “non-threatening” gay content that doesn’t “push too many safety buttons.” (Paula Nechak, *Seattle Post Intelligencer*) Levy suggests *Trick* belongs to “a new cycle... of gay movies that are not about AIDS or social issues, but “simply” deal with situations, such as dating and first love, relevant to everybody regardless of sexual orientation.” Moreover, some critics felt gay audiences should be proud of this crossover potential, as Graham suggests *Trick* is “a gay comedy that never once looks over its shoulder for approval of non-gay audiences, and they, too, should like it all the more for it.” Despite these qualified stamps of approval, some critics panned the film precisely because of the heteronormative framework that surrounds it. Roger Ebert (*Chicago Sun-Times*) bluntly asks “what message would it send to “support” a gay film like “Trick”? The message, I suppose, would be that gays should have romantic comedies just as dim and dumb as the straight versions -- although I cannot offhand remember many recent straight films this witless.” He ends his diatribe with another question and answer: “Would this same movie be

entertaining with heterosexual characters? In today's world, it would hardly be thinkable.” Dennis Lim of the *Village Voice* shares Ebert’s disdain for the film from a slightly different angle. He states, “Post-Sundance raves have claimed that *Trick* represents a new, agenda-free brand of gay film (call it the Gay Gay Cinema), “revolutionary” (as more than one reviewer has frothed) precisely for its lack of revolutionary qualities.” His attack of the film is as unrestrained as Ebert’s and he attests “This film is so retrogressive that it would, in a sane world, inspire not drooling praise but a revolt.” Summing up the film as “a neutered dicktease,” he shuns the drive towards accessibility that the film seeks.

This selection of quotes can be viewed as the foundation of debates surrounding the mainstreaming of gay cinema and gay culture played out here with an early gay crossover film. Once again, the assimilationist flashpoint rears its head: while traditional gay romantic comedy can crossover into the mainstream, it must become a neutered version of itself in order to be marketable and/or socially acceptable. The media reviews ultimately reveal the refracted distribution network that the film attempts to move through. What the reviewers are focused on for *Trick* is its degree of palatability for a heterosexual mass audience and the pleasantries of its assumed anti-political stance. Ultimately, the film’s proximity to heteronormative conventions is at stake and the critiques become somewhat circular.

5.5. Negotiating the Lifestyle in *Boy Culture*

Within the club culture mode, the deconstruction of the gay lifestyle is far more explicitly stated and, as such, film reviewers tend to respond vehemently to the typologies represented, not to the films' proximity to heteronormative conventions. I will consider the film *Boy Culture* in this regard, a film that critics frequently referred to as literate, philosophical and cerebral – rare comments for a romantic comedy. Stylistically, the film is grainy and grey, complementing the rainy, urban setting of Seattle in which the story takes place. It incorporates voiceover narration serving as the mental subjectivity of the main protagonist “X,” a twenty-five year old gay hustler. The film opens with X on his way to a new trick, the reclusive 79-year-old Gregory. The opening shot is composed in a 90 degree canted frame so that the character is ‘lying down’ as he rides the bus to his appointment. Combined with the fast forward movement of the bus, this framing creates a profound sense of disorientation as the character is hurled forward in time. Through voiceover monologue, X says “If you’re smart, you’ve guessed that I’m a hustler. If you aren’t here are two clues: I’m gay and they’ve made a movie about me. Try to keep up.” This self-reflexive turn is historically rooted, serving as both criticism of and celebration of a gay cinematic stereotype.

X is a high-end hustler with twelve repeat customers or “disciples” as he refers to them, thereby placing himself in the position of a Christ-like messenger. His disciples, whom we only ever see as a fast edit sequence of facial expressions in sexual climax, are identified as types: The Judge, Mr. Jowls, Chaps, Daddy’s Boy, Gin Martini, The Accountant, Father of Six, The Mummy,

Screamer, Bruce Lee, Breath Mints and Barely Breathing, most of whom are middle-aged men whose nicknames reflect their professions, fetishes, or states of rapture. To further enhance this Christian overtone, X's voiceover narration is frequently inflected with cynical commentary on gay culture that often begins with "Forgive me Father....", and his sessions with Gregory take on a confessional format as they discuss their inner feelings about love and life rather than engaging in sex, an activity that occurs only in their final session. At home, X shares his spacious designer condo with two roommates, Andrew and Joey, as a means to keep the IRS from inquiring about his financial status. Love triangles abound in this "nuclear reactor family" as X refers to it, since X is in love with Andrew but can't express it, Andrew is in love with X but doesn't approve of his lifestyle, and Joey is in love with X but settles for sex with Andrew instead. This primary quartet of characters represents a series of gay stereotypes and each has a specific attitude towards sex, love and romance. Gregory is a self-professed "closeted queer" who is lost in the nostalgia of his first and only love, Rinaldo, a man he has known for fifty years but cannot admit to loving for fear of losing his social status and his trust fund. For him, sex requires some degree of romance. X describes himself as a "hustler with morals; a whore who's not a slut." Sex represents business and capital, while love is extremely high risk to him since he cannot control it as a transaction, and cannot guarantee its outcome. Herein lays the source of the film's promotional tagline: Sex pays; love costs. X is highly critical of indiscriminate sex and harbours contempt for gay cultural expectations. Andrew is searching for his soul mate and is critical of X

and his profession. He has recently come out as a gay man and when his attempts at attracting X fall flat, he decides to experiment with indiscriminate sex. Joey describes himself as “Blowey Joey.” He is a seventeen-year-old gay “slut” with multiple sexual partners and a penchant for mood-enhancing drugs. His lifestyle is high risk.

This mixture of typologies creates considerable tension amongst the characters but ultimately spawns much dialogue in the film around the subject of sex, love and romance as part of a negotiation with the gay lifestyle. X is explicit in his disdain towards the gay lifestyle, which he describes as a “neapolitan community where every flavour is separate but equal.” But he doesn’t stop there. X claims that gay men are not capable of loving anything but themselves and in one lengthy monologue delivered through mental subjectivity, he pontificates about club culture:

Why do guys pass themselves around so frequently? I mean I have a lot of sex but at least I get paid. I get something in return. You may think that’s the lowest of low but isn’t it better than spreading for any smooth operator for the cost of a Bud Light and cab fare? Maybe it comes down to pleasure but do they get that much pleasure from all these hook-ups? There’s so much energy put into cruising, socialization, fashion - months at the gym, myoplex shakes - and finally you get laid and never hear from the fucker again. Then you invest all your energy and money back into grooming and working out, making yourself perfect again for the next lay.

When a gay character in a gay film intended primarily for a gay audience delivers this type of monologue, it is intended as a direct punch. And while a traditional gay romantic comedy like *All Over the Guy* takes a punch at empty Hollywood films like *In and Out*, Brocka’s *Boy Culture* turns its sights on the emptiness of

club culture and demands an honest rethinking of what the culture is really about, that is, what drives it and why. In doing so, Brocka activates the three layers of ridiculed characters I identified previously: the main protagonist, the secondary characters and the viewer. X's dilemma registers as an ironic and complex demand considering he does not wish to leave his career as a hustler; he feels superior to his gay counterparts who have random sex without anything to show for it, and yet he admits to his fears of intimacy. At the end of the film, X, nee Alex, admits his feelings for Andrew. They unite with the following conditions: they have an open relationship so Andrew can see other men and "X" can continue in his career until his stocks mature enough for him to retire from the business. This ending epitomizes what I have described as the primary drive in the club culture mode, that is, the desire to eschew marriage and tradition while seeking commitment and sexual freedom simultaneously.

While some reviewers describe *Boy Culture* as a "guilty pleasure" (Phil Hall, *Film Threat*) and as a "harmless, well-packaged bit of overly familiar fluff" (Edward Hardy, *The Village Voice*), several reviewers acknowledged and commended the critique of gay culture within the film. What is most interesting to me in these reviews, however, is their focus on gay typology revealed through the reviewers' descriptions of the characters. Both X and Andrew are frequently objectified. X is described as a "sex bomb," (Don Willmott, *Film Critic*) as a "late-90s pinup with sparkling blue eyes, rippling abs," (James Reed, *The Boston Globe*) and as an "attractive piece of hustler meat" (Ed Gonzalez, *Slant Magazine*). Andrew is described as "built and butch," (Willmott) as a "sweet,

somewhat shy hottie,” (David Wiegand, *San Francisco Chronicle*) and as a “studly black jock.” (Ernest Hardy, *The Village Voice*) Comparatively speaking, reviewers harboured a deep respect for Gregory and an outright disdain towards Joey. Gregory is described as “sophisticated, well-spoken and seductive in his own way,” (Willmott) as a “kind of father figure, shrink and trick, all rolled into one” (Wiegand) and as the “soul” of the film (Hall). Joey is described as the “loud-mouthed teen who sleeps with anyone in trousers,” (Mike Goodridge, *Screen Daily*) as the “barely legal vixen,” (James Reed, *Boston Globe*) as a “nelly,” (Hall) as a “grating young queer,” (Hardy) and as an “outrageous teen twink” (Ronnie Sheib, *Variety*). This is not to suggest that X’s character does not have its detractors, nor that Joey is devoid of fans; however, the name-calling that is connected to Joey’s character is quite pronounced and distressing considering Joey is the “queen” of the narrative, that is, the flamboyant, sometimes neurotic, ‘feminine’ character. The reviewers engage in the same process of typological categorization that the film explores; however, while the film attempts to deconstruct gay stereotypes, the reviewers reinforce them, revealing a hierarchy that places the effeminate Joey at the bottom and the all-knowing, yet unattainable, un-nameable “X” at the top. X’s contempt for all three men renders each of them as a ridiculed character at different points in the text, most notably when they attempt to get close to him emotionally.

This pronounced typology coupled with the pattern of name-calling is present in several films in the club culture mode reaching its self-reflexive peak in *A Four Letter Word*: the main protagonist, Luke, is referred to as a “gay cliché”

early on in the film precisely because he embodies the qualities that critics despised in the character of Joey in *Boy Culture*. However, Luke's unapologetic display of what Josh Rosenblatt of the *Austin Chronicle* describes as a "sashaying, prancing, quipping embodiment of all things proudly and insouciantly gay and promiscuous in modern American life" is meant to provoke viewers, and Luke is not unlike the dystopic protagonist in the New Queer Cinema classic *The Living End* (Gregg Araki 1992). *A Four Letter Word* is set in New York and the promotional tagline states "Romance is so profane," thereby setting the tone for the commentary. Like *Boy Culture*, the typological dynamics amongst characters are significant and the polemics of sexual excess vs. social responsibility to "the community" are actively at play. Despite the film's overarching political thrust, however, Luke maintains that "Being single and easy makes me feel good. If I want to fuck, I fuck." At the end of the film, when Luke is completely spent, he concedes that he *might* be willing to have a committed relationship *if* the right guy comes along. Thus, while the traditional mode resists assimilation of heteronormative traditions, and the sexually ambivalent mode rejects conformity of any type, the club culture mode boldly challenges queer culture and the homonormative expectations within.

Collectively, there is a shared drive across gay romantic comedies to locate a new definition of relationships and discard old formulas while simultaneously using the recognizable framework of genre in which to explore difference. While the lightness of the romantic comedy genre is maintained, characters wrestle with their place within the time and space of their romantically

defined moment, that is to say, these films make explicit the symptomatic reality of their existence as a cultural phenomenon and as a genre newly infused and confused by the constraints of the conventions. That is not to suggest that these films suffer as a result of this genre but in fact, they are unapologetic in their desire to secure public space. Gay romantic comedies exist within a live political framework and both filmmakers and viewers are aware of their historical significance. Fundamentally, there exists a simultaneous celebration of and a deconstruction of the representational strategies used to describe gay culture (and the gay consumer). The gay romantic comedy can therefore, be viewed as part of a larger project of assimilation that speaks to a slower process of political change. However, the sites of resistance it utilizes to challenge notions of sex, romance and relationships disrupt both niche and mainstream expectations.

²³ Here, I'd like to acknowledge that any survey is comprised only of the individuals who choose to participate. One can argue in the simplest sense that those in a position of power and dominance may be more inclined to come forward and self-identify whereas for those individuals who *choose* to exist or for various reasons *must* exist on the margins, the question remains as to whether they are less inclined to come forward and self-identify.

²⁴ Despite the film's release in 2000 and despite numerous attempts to secure a DVD copy of this film, at the time of this research, it was not obtainable.

²⁵ This concept of the recuperation of the forbidden is a Bakhtinian reference that Robert Stam uses in his text *Subversive Pleasure: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism, and Film*.

CHAPTER 6. CHOCOLATE, CHEERLEADERS & ITTY BITTY TITTIES

6.1. The Absence of Public Space

To discuss lesbian romantic comedy I must begin by describing it through a series of absences. The lesbian romantic comedy is largely absent from discussions surrounding romantic comedy and/or queer romantic comedy within genre study. Likewise, these films are absent from the *GLQ* forum discussions. Within the gay and lesbian romantic comedies studied, despite the fact that nine of the twenty films are directed by women, only six are lesbian romantic comedies. In the context of the Vancouver Queer Film Festival, with the exception of 1998, in which an equal number of gay and lesbian feature films were screened, and 2003, in which there were twice as many lesbian features presented, gay male feature film content has dominated the festival. Historically, this discrepancy has been and continues to be a major point of contention. In an on-line essay entitled “We Want Our Dykeback Mountain” posted after the 2006 *Persistent Vision* conference in San Francisco, writer Dolissa Medina paraphrased the conversation that resulted from the panel discussion of the same name. The underlying message of that panel was that lesbians in the film industry are still struggling to ‘break through’ like their male counterparts. The panel was comprised of Guinevere Turner, Angela Robinson, Jamie Babbit and Lisa Thrasher, all lesbian-identified directors, producers and writers. Collectively, they pointed towards sexism, homophobia, lack of studio leadership, and “poor marketing strategies by companies clueless about gay audiences” as primary points of contention within the “boys club” of production (1). At no point does the

article critique the presence and/or the possibility of the crossover film. Rather, it points definitively to the professionalism of the women listed above and their desire to etch out a place in the Hollywood-identified, male-dominated film industry.²⁶

Building on this idea further, it is interesting to note that lesbian characters are largely absent in gay romantic comedies (and for the most part, gay characters are absent within the lesbian romantic comedies studied). When lesbian references are made they are often wrapped in backhanded compliments. In the film *Slutty Summer* Luke states, "Sorry to tell you, but it's not in man's nature to be faithful. Yup, the only creature on the planet that's ever been faithful is the seahorse. Make that seahorses and lesbians." Similarly, in the film *Boy Culture*, X muses about lesbian relationships saying, "The lesbians have it easy. Sure, they have all that dyke drama but it's only because they give a shit about each other." The perception of an over-determined loyalty within and towards the lesbian community is an interesting counterpoint to the perception of sexual narcissism associated with the gay community. I have argued that the politics within the gay-centred films are a self-reflective politics focused on the nature of gayness and the gay lifestyle, and can therefore be described as an inward politics. Conversely, the majority of lesbian-centred films studied embrace a politics rooted in feminist discourse and the 'community' is often represented as anarchistic. Their politics move outwards in reaction to a dominant, heteronormative ideology, but they are also self-reflexive and comment on the fragmentation within lesbian / feminist communities. We can

describe these politics as inward and outward simultaneously. Within this chapter, I will undertake a comparative analysis of the politics within the gay and lesbian collections in order to emphasize the political striations that dominate the lesbian romantic comedies. Utilizing a close analysis of the lesbian films studied, I will pay particular attention to the representation of youth culture and the feminist / postfeminist tension that is at play.

I have identified six lesbian romantic comedies. While this is a significantly smaller control group compared to the gay romantic comedies, there are two distinct modes of address present: youth-centred and sexually ambivalent. Within these

Table 11. Modes of address in lesbian romantic comedies

	FILM TITLE	DIRECTOR	PROD YR	MODE OF ADDRESS
1	Better Than Chocolate	Anne Wheeler	1999	Youth-Centred
2	But I'm a Cheerleader	Jamie Babbitt	1999	Youth-Centred
3	D.E.B.S	Angela Robinson	2003	Youth-Centred
4	Itty Bitty Titty Committee	Jamie Babbitt	2007	Youth-Centred
5	Out at a Wedding	Lee Friedlander	2007	Sexually Ambivalent
6	Puccini for Beginners	Maria Maggenti	2006	Sexually Ambivalent

modes, setting and the age of the protagonists are significant. The films *Out at a Wedding* and *Puccini for Beginners* are set in New York and aim for Woody Allenesque neuroses complete with sexual misunderstandings and love triangles. The main protagonists in these films are thirty-something professionals. Allegra (*Puccini*) is a writer and opera aficionada while Alex (*Out*) is a restaurateur and wine connoisseur. Both Allegra and Alex decide to 'try on' a different sexual identity. These two films can be identified as having a sexually ambivalent mode of address, and they share many attributes of this same mode in the gay

romantic comedies. The remaining four films – *Better Than Chocolate*, *But I'm a Cheerleader*, *D.E.B.S.* and *Itty Bitty Titty Committee* - contrast two key settings: suburban middle class culture, a signifier of heteronormative value systems, vs. underground culture, the sight for lesbian-feminist community and individuation. As mentioned in the introduction, my use of this language to describe lesbian space is significant as a means to distinguish the difference between lesbian and gay community; it alludes to a social hierarchy within and between these gendered communities. The main protagonists in the youth-centred mode are high school or college-aged, seventeen to nineteen years old; they are not yet out to themselves, the world and/or their families, and they are painfully unsure of their goals. These films incorporate a strong feminist agenda into their narratives that is specifically targeted at youth culture.

6.2. Lesbian Romantic Comedy and Mode of Address

The key attributes of each mode are listed in Table 12. What is noticeable in both collections is the prevalence of the union at the end of the film, thereby completing the meet-lose-get arc. In the youth-centred mode the rescue precedes the union; in all four films, the main protagonists are rescued from danger, from homophobic separation or from their apolitical life by their love interest. In classical romantic drama, the rescue is formulated as a male-centred activity, the female being the passive object needing to be saved. Within the context of these lesbian films, however, this patriarchal formula is uprooted by a

community of women engaged in their own agency in the absence of a male chaperone.

Table 12. Primary attributes of modes of address

Youth-Centred	Sexually Ambivalent
Satire, Parody form	Screwball form
Setting: suburbia	Setting: urban
Union; often follows rescue	Union
Obstacle: heteronormativity as force to be reckoned with (explicit)	Obstacle: heteronormativity as force to be reckoned with (implicit)
Comedy derived from sexual and/or political awakening	Comedy derived from ironic situations characters find themselves in
Lesbian lifestyle = (radical) lesbian feminist	Lesbian lifestyle = urban chic, politically ambivalent
Lesbian community = present as youth culture, underground	Lesbian community = integrated in heterogeneous mix
Lesbian characters defiant	Lesbian characters and straight characters interchangeable
Heterogeneous mix of gay and straight characters	Heterogeneous mix of gay and straight characters
Not sexually explicit	Not sexually explicit; bisexuality and love triangles common
Embrace tradition; seek commitment	Embrace tradition; seek commitment

Overall, the lesbian romantic comedies studied embrace tradition on their own terms and characters seek committed relationships. If you recall, union is conditional in the gay romantic comedies studied and it is not always guaranteed; the rescue is notably absent. Within the gay and lesbian collections as a whole, there are a number of representational differences that are noteworthy, emphasizing the cultural and economic differences within their gendered representations. There is far less sexual exploration with multiple partners within the lesbian romantic comedies. Sex is associated with romance, sensuality, eroticism and/or discovery and lacks the graphic displays found in many of the gay romantic comedies studied. While a primary obstacle in many gay romantic

comedies is the gay lifestyle itself, a primary obstacle in many lesbian romantic comedies is heteronormativity, which presents itself as a force to be reckoned with, either explicitly or implicitly. By association, the radical underground culture within the youth-centred mode can be contrasted with the mainstream monoculture represented in the gay romantic comedies, each marked by their absence or presence in relation to dominant society and, by association, their anti or pro capitalist values.

If we consider an adaptation of Billy Mernit's concept of the love antagonist, we can modify it for the lesbian romantic comedies as follows: *love challenges politics (conflict); the characters must accept or deny politics (crisis); love transforms the politics, and vice versa (resolution)*. Love and politics are equally antagonist in these films and while Mernit's resolution stage is represented as a one-way transformation, within the gay and lesbian collections, there is a mutual 're-education' of the antagonistic forces and the characters subjected to them. This transformation registers as a disruption of genre expectations and while I have emphasized the Bakhtinian 'ridiculed character' within the gay romantic comedies, I would emphasize the 'violation of the rule' in the lesbian collection, a violation that is explicitly connected to the extratextual and intratextual politics of each film, as well as a violation of the conventions of the genre itself. In this regard, the lesbian romantic comedies can be conceived of much like Stam's elaboration on carnival as a "complex crisscrossing of ideological manipulation and utopian desire" (96). Within this collection sexual politics are explicitly used as an obstacle that the characters must overcome.

Within the sexually ambivalent mode, these politics are much more implicit and manifest through an unstable bisexual 'masquerade' that problematizes lesbian and heterosexual relationships. In its explicit representation, the politics are more forceful: in *But I'm a Cheerleader* and *Better Than Chocolate*, the characters must overcome aggressive homophobia; in *D.E.B.S.*, Homeland Security becomes a euphemism for securing heteronormative values; and in *Itty Bitty Titty Committee* characters are faced with intergenerational lesbian/feminist conflicts. At the centre of these politics, heteronormativity is a force to be reckoned with.

As mentioned, the sexually ambivalent mode in both the gay and the lesbian collections share attributes, and they can be conceived of as a single collection of films. *Puccini for Beginners* and *Out at a Wedding* incorporate a cast of lesbian, straight and bisexual characters into a homogenous mix and the comedy is derived largely from the ironic situations the characters find themselves in. As such, they are marketable to a broad-based audience. In *Puccini for Beginners*, Allegra attempts to prove that a lesbian can have meaningless sex just like a man can. She subsequently has a fling with a philosophy professor named Philip and later with a recently single woman named Grace, only to discover that her two lovers know each other and were a couple until Allegra slept with Philip. By the end of the film, Allegra overcomes her fear of commitment and reunites with her ex-girlfriend Samantha, satisfying romantic comedy conventions and reinforcing the myth of loyalty within the lesbian community. *Out at a Wedding* is largely devoid of a distinct lesbian or gay community and the comedy builds from the mistaken identities of two sisters:

Alex is heterosexual but is presumed to be a lesbian (due to a misunderstanding at her sister's wedding); while Jeannie is a closeted lesbian whom everyone thinks is heterosexual having just married her high school sweetheart. Alex uses her alleged 'lesbianism' as a means to hide her engagement to her Jewish African-American fiancé, fearing her Southern family is too racist to accept him as her partner. In turn, Jeannie falls head over heels in love with Alex's surrogate girlfriend. In the end, all fears of racism and homophobia are unwarranted and the 'blended' family comes together in perfect harmony at a dinner party. *Puccini for Beginners* reflects a temporary departure from the familiarity of lesbian community, while *Out at a Wedding* reflects a temporary departure from heteronormative expectations. Both films follow the formula of the early screwball comedies. For the remainder of this chapter, I will focus my attention on the youth-centred mode to explore the explicit politics within and outside the filmic text in more detail.

6.3. Youth Culture as Counterculture Space

The films that focus on youth culture offer an interesting counterpoint to the gay romantic comedies studied, and I will focus primarily on this mode of address. These films speak to a generation of queer youth that Ruby Rich describes as "shaped by queer families and matter-of-fact sexualities, the newest kids on the block..." (2006:624) While the coming out process is prominent in these films, it is a temporary obstacle, an intermediary stage that is aligned with political awakening. The central arc in *But I'm a Cheerleader* centres on Megan,

a suburban teenager who loves being a cheerleader. When her friends and family suspect her of being a lesbian, they send her to True Directions rehabilitation camp to be 'cured'. Sweet and innocent, Megan doesn't think she's a lesbian until she meets spoiled tomboy Graham at True Directions. The closet is therefore used as a comedic device in this film as all the participants at True Directions are clearly unchangeable. A similar process of coming out is used to organize the central narrative in the film *D.E.B.S.* Amy Bradshaw is in training to become a spy at a secret paramilitary college. She has recently broken up with her boyfriend, who works with Homeland Security. Amy is not aware that she is a lesbian until she meets villainous Lucy Diamond during a warehouse stakeout. Although they are archenemies, the sexual chemistry between them builds until Lucy 'kidnaps' Amy and they consummate their lust. Amy's coming out impacts Homeland Security temporarily, but her friends rally around her to assist her in running away with Lucy. *Better Than Chocolate* utilizes a coming out strategy to create comedic tension that interrupts the flow of the character relationships. Maggie works at and lives in the back room of a queer bookstore called Ten Percent Books. She meets sexy artist Kim who is new in town, and also discovers her mother and brother are coming to live with her - all in the same day. The problem is that Maggie's mother doesn't know she is a lesbian and Maggie does not have her own apartment. She fast-tracks getting a sublet in a warehouse flat, moves Kim in with her as her 'roommate' and waits for the arrival of her mother and brother. Maggie and Kim continue their affair in the back room of the apartment, unbeknownst to her mother who is completely preoccupied with

her ex-husband's infidelities. By contrast, *Itty Bitty Titty Committee* frames the coming out process as political, not sexual. Anna is a suburban teenager who is sullen after a break-up with her girlfriend. She is out to her family and her sexuality is a non-issue. Anna lives at home and works in a plastic surgery clinic as a receptionist. One night while leaving work she discovers Sadie spray-painting feminist slogans on the front door of the building. Sadie is part of the Clits in Action or C(i)A, a radical lesbian feminist cell group. Sexual sparks fly and Anna joins the C(i)A to be close to Sadie. In each film listed, the construction of a supportive family (whether biological or surrogate) is primary and the main protagonists are 'privileged' in that their sexuality is or becomes a non-issue.

Within these films lesbian characters are defiant and as a result, heteronormative conventions are represented as outmoded, something to be overcome. As such, lesbian characters frequently emerge from or retreat to an underground space suggesting an active separation from the dominant status quo, and this point is significant especially when we compare the lesbian-centred mode with the gay-centred mode. While gay characters in the gay romantic comedies studied hook-up in the everyday world of the local gym, on the bus, the subway or at the gay nightclub, lesbian characters often meet on the margins: a dark back alley warehouse bar called the Cat's Ass (*Better Than Chocolate*); a rehabilitation camp for homosexuals called True Directions; a secret paramilitary college; and the warehouse of an underground lesbian feminist cell group (Clits in Action). Lesbian bars are consistently aligned with punk or alternative culture in these films and represent a 'safe' place for cathartic release. The naming of

these bars – Cat’s Ass, Junk Pit (*DEBS*), and Cocksucker (*Cheerleader*) - connote a residual space that is markedly different in name and tone than the “Boy Kultur” bar in the film of the same name. “Cocksucker” in particular suggests the absence of lesbian-centred space, the positioning of lesbians on the margins in an already marginalized space. The “we are everywhere” utopia voiced implicitly within several of the gay romantic comedies is tempered by a hint of homophobic threat within the lesbian romantic comedies. The presence of this threat is never completely eradicated and the focus on underground culture suggests an as yet unformed or suspicious relationship with assimilation processes.

The status of women is marked by varying degrees of marginality and this becomes more explicit when we consider the transgender and transsexual characters in the films. The lesbian protagonists are primarily ‘femmes,’ a status that enables them to ‘pass’ and become the sexual objects of male or female viewers. Like the gay muscle boy characters discussed in the previous chapter, this status can be viewed as invisible difference or as a reclaiming of assumed heteronormative identity. The secondary characters surrounding the main protagonists represent a host of stereotypes and we can locate a hierarchical process at play. Within this construction, transgender and transsexual characters are profoundly marginalized and their place within the lesbian community is represented as tenuous at best. In the film *Better Than Chocolate*, Judy, a transsexual woman, is physically assaulted in the women’s washroom of the Cat’s Ass by an angry lesbian who insists that Judy is in the wrong

washroom. Judy is beaten with her own purse until she is rescued by Maggie and Kim. Later in the film, Judy sings the song “I’m Not a Fucking Drag Queen,” thereby regaining her dignity and her status in the film. In *But I’m a Cheerleader* Jan is transgender and is forced into feminine reprogramming. Jan is very butch, has a short Mohawk haircut, as well as a light moustache. Jan is the only character who is unable to ‘act’ the part of ‘straight’ even in jest, and Jan is the only character who appears to feel shame in being different. Jan subsequently breaks into tears during a session and leaves both True Directions and the cinematic space. In *Itty Bitty Titty Committee*, Aggie is also transgender and he is constructed as a boyish, baby brother figure in the C(i)A. Although an important member of the group, he often stands on the sidelines as a quiet observer. At one point in the film, Anna has a drunken fling with Aggie as a way to get back at Sadie. When Anna suggests it was a ‘meaningless’ encounter, Aggie is definitively cast as secondary to the primary ‘femme’ Sadie.

The construction of marginal space and the defiance of the lesbian characters within these films is part of a larger feminist project that has a distinct pedagogical function. The issues expressed do not take away from the romantic comedy conventions and therefore the ‘heaviness’ of the politics is countered with the ‘lightness’ of the genre form and vice versa. Speaking of the casualness with which the lesbian relationship is treated in *D.E.B.S.*, director Angela Robinson says, “My goal was to have people have such a good time watching it that they didn’t even realize that this message and politics was kind of coming into their consciousness” (*Infiltrating DEBS: The Making of the Featurette*).

Likewise, in the behind the scenes short film *The Nitty Gritty Behind the Itty Bitty Titty Committee*, producer Andrea Sperling expresses her hope that the film can be used as an educational tool for young girls to teach them that it's ok to be political, to have a point of view, to be a feminist, a sentiment that director Jamie Babbit shares. However, this contrast disturbs the process of escape these films promise. In order to counter the politics and simultaneously draw attention to them, the filmmakers utilize various stylistic devices, most notably the creation of a 'retro' or retrospective feel within the films. This device links the comedy and the politics as it acts as a distancing mechanism with which to simultaneously laugh *at* and be informed *by* the politics within. *But I'm a Cheerleader* utilizes a 1950s aesthetic and value system within a present-day setting. While the idea of a rehabilitation camp for homosexuals is a contemporary reality, *True Directions* is constructed as an artifact from the past, complete with a 'Technicolor' mise-en-scene that dates the film. The overdetermined reference to 'proper' boy-girl roles further emphasizes the outmoded place of the film. Ultimately, the creation of a retrospective space places homophobia in the past for social commentary and this reinforces the wish-fulfillment fantasy that this genre encourages. *Itty Bitty Titty Committee*, Babbit's follow-up to *Cheerleader*, uses frantic hand-held camera in several scenes, breaking the clean, classical form with stylistic disruption that is reminiscent of New Queer Cinema aesthetic. The film's use of a punk soundtrack inspired by the 1990s music of *Riot Grrrls*, and its homage to *Guerrilla Girls* radical activism, a highlight of 1980s and 90s feminism, also skewers the timeframe in which the film exists. This film stands as an archival

project bringing past activism to the foreground to reinforce the film's promotional tagline "Every generation needs a new revolution." *D.E.B.S* recalls the pathologized construction of gays and lesbians in Hollywood cinema and social space, as Lucy Diamond is described as a "narcissistic sociopath" and a "victimized girl-child." By the end of the film, Lucy overthrows these psychoanalytic labels and overcomes her 'villainous' status while maintaining her lesbian sexuality. *Better Than Chocolate* draws from the real censorship battle experienced by the Little Sisters Bookstore in Vancouver, B.C. The film also identifies key moments in Vancouver's queer history, one example being a re-enactment of a controversial case in which two lesbians were kicked out of a café for kissing. These constant references to the past and the construction of 'pastness' can also be viewed as a larger feminist project of cultural validation; it stands in as an active process of reclaiming space.

Itty Bitty Titty Committee and *Better Than Chocolate* are the most explicit in their references to feminist and queer history, while *But I'm a Cheerleader* and *D.E.B.S* use satire and parody to reference historical stereotypes and contemporary hypocrisy. It is interesting to consider how this explicit political agenda is received by viewers. Are the films viewed first as genre texts or as lesbian texts? Within the queer film festival space, viewers have come to expect political commentary and, in this regard, these films are met alternately with disdain and celebration, precisely because of the brand of escapism they offer. As such, there are two primary polemics that are played out in criticisms of these films: for those who view lesbian romantic comedies as genre films first, the

politics interrupt the fantasy space that romantic comedies promise; and for those who view the film as a lesbian text first, the use of romantic comedy conventions empties the film of its political power. These points of view influence the crossover space these films move through and they can be located in the media reviews that accompanied these films. In order to analyse this space, I undertook a random sampling of ninety media reviews of these four films. While there were several critics who gave the films positive reviews, what I discovered in the negative criticism was an alarming pattern that speaks to the points raised above: a disdain towards genre films that incorporate political agendas; a disdain towards the romantic comedy genre for its lack of deep analysis or accurate representation of issues within the gay and lesbian community; and an ageist dismissal of youth-centred plots.²⁷ In order to illustrate the relationship between the filmic content and the reviewers' responses, I will undertake a close analysis of Jamie Babbit's two films *But I'm a Cheerleader* (1999) and *Itty Bitty Titty Committee* (2007). In doing so, we can search for patterns of change within these reviews as the films were produced and released eight years apart, and simultaneously explore two different representational strategies used by one filmmaker.

6.4. The Media Response to *But I'm a Cheerleader*

But I'm a Cheerleader is the story of Megan, a smart, happy Christian teenager and cheerleader. Through mental subjectivity, we witness her prolonged daydreaming about her fellow cheerleaders; the camera positioned

below them as they jump into the air, giving the viewer the opportunity to look up their skirts. When Megan's family and friends suspect she is a lesbian, they stage an intervention after school. Megan is shocked, as she does not think she is a lesbian. Providing 'evidence' of her predilections - including her recent taste for tofu and a poster of lesbian icon Melissa Etheridge in her bedroom – Megan's family and friends send her to True Directions, a rehabilitation camp for homosexuals. At True Directions, Megan meets the head director, Mary Brown, a pent-up 1950s throwback complete with blonde bouffant hairdo and pink skirt suit. Mary leads the Homosexuals Anonymous meetings and oversees all the reprogramming exercises that involve domestic practices and sexual simulation. At her first HA meeting, Megan meets the other recently admitted homosexuals. We quickly learn that the teenagers have been sent to True Directions by their families who would otherwise disown them and/or cut their trust funds. While they have been sent there for reprogramming, the presence of other gay and lesbian youth heightens their sexual interest and invites numerous late night encounters. When Megan and Graham are caught in an 'indiscretion,' Megan is kicked out of True Directions, while Graham is given one more chance. Megan turns to Lloyd and Larry, two defectors of True Directions who run an "underground homo railroad" to rescue youth from rehabilitation. At the end of the film, Megan sneaks back into True Directions on "Heterosexual Graduation Day" to woo Graham with a chipper, lovelorn cheer.

The use of satire to comment on the damaging effects of queer rehabilitation and the hypocrisy within conventional gender construction is

articulated throughout the film. Heavily stylized with over the top acting, the film has a B-movie aesthetic in the flavour of John Waters. Character inversions are established at the onset of the film and they enhance our ability to read the film as satire. Our first clue is the ironic casting of the interventionist and “ex-gay” Mike, played by gay icon and drag queen extraordinaire RuPaul, here playing a straight man who has been converted. Complete with a “Straight is Great” insignia on his tight blue t-shirt, Mike’s bouncy athleticism belies his full conversion, and viewers’ knowledge of his ‘true identity’ reinforce the comedy of this scene. There are other character inversions that undermine the heteronormativity of this intervention scene as well: Megan’s mom is played by Mink Stole, a John Waters’ alumni, while her father is played by Bud Cort of *Harold and Maude* fame.²⁸ Taking these extratextual references one step further, when Megan meets her True Directions cohorts, we are initially introduced to Hilary, played by actress Melanie Lynskey; Melanie is well known as the main protagonist in the film *Heavenly Creatures*, based on the true story of two girls who commit murder when their parents threaten to keep them apart. Babbit takes full advantage of queer stereotypes and even creates a gay white muscle boy in Mary’s son Rock, who loves to arouse Mike. Her construction of the queer teenagers of True Directions also draws from a distinct representational typology: Hilary is an awkward Catholic school girl; Jan is transgender and also a softball player; Sinead is a heavily pierced S&M punk who likes pain; Joel simply identifies as a Jew; Graham is a tomboy who likes girls *a lot*; André is fey and flamboyant, and also an actor and dancer; Dolf is a Varsity wrestler; and Clayton

Dunn is an average-looking American teenager, who works in retail. The collective use of the term “homosexual” to describe all the teens regardless of gender and sexual identity dates the film and also reinforces the film’s implicit reference to anti-gay Christian-based groups in the U.S.²⁹ The choice of a pink and blue colour scheme to designate feminine and masculine predilections not only connotes the girl-boy colour stereotypes but can also be read as an overarching ‘pro-life’ insignia. *True Directions* is drenched in saturated colour inside and out, and plastic materials (including the flowers in the front yard) further emphasize the artificial ‘nature’ of the environment. These extratextual and stylistic references fuel the entire film and create a powerful commentary.

The media reviews for *But I’m A Cheerleader* are particularly scathing and Babbit is constantly berated for her lack of experience – at the time of the film’s release, Babbit was viewed as an emerging filmmaker on the scene. The majority of reviewers identified the film’s stylistic homage to John Waters but they promptly dismissed Babbit’s ability to match Waters. David Noh of *Film International* is particularly aggressive, stating, “Rookie director Jamie Babbit has taken a potentially great subject to satirize and made a silly hash of it. *But I’m a Cheerleader* is a candy-coated, completely negligible bit of fluff that plays like emasculated John Waters.” However, Noh does not stop there and instead suggests that “If anything, the film might prove popular among real homophobes because the images of gays and lesbians she presents are so stereotypical and off-putting.” This sentiment was shared by many reviewers and considering the film is fairly innocuous the hostile tone in these reviews is quite surprising.

Shlomo Schwartzbert (*Box Office*) carries Noh's sentiment further claiming that the film "refuses to challenge viewer perceptions and prejudices...[and] soft-pedals the fundamentalist Christian thinking behind places like True Directions." Kevin Thomas (*New York Times*) suggests that the film's "jaunty, superficial humor tends more to confirm homosexual stereotypes for easy laughter than to skewer the horror of trying to change an individual's sexual orientation against his or her will" and he suggests that "In an era in which gay men and lesbians continue to face prejudice that results in assaults both political and physical, it's hard to find anything very funny about *But I'm a Cheerleader*." Conversely, Stephanie Zacharek (*Salon.com*) criticizes the film for being outdated in style and content, and then launches into a lengthy diatribe on Babbit's stereotypical portrayal of *homophobia*:

Worse yet, the movie is predicated on the embarrassingly retrograde view that most straight people view gay men and lesbians as aberrant. Of course, those prejudices still exist, and often in subterranean, dangerous forms. But we also live in a world where, out of genuinely good motives or overtly political ones, people are anxious to prove how tolerant they are. Average, reasonable people don't tend to believe that people can change their sexual orientation -- that's mostly the province of religious-extremist right-wingers. Large companies are starting to extend insurance benefits to same-sex partners; gay and lesbian unions are now legally recognized in Vermont. There are plenty of battles that still need to be fought, but Babbit seems stubbornly nostalgic for the bad old days, when the lines between camps were more starkly drawn, when blue really was for boys and pink was for girls.

These reviews reveal a significant backlash not only towards the presence of politics within this light-hearted genre but also to the perceived light-hearted treatment of the politics themselves. This dichotomy is perplexing. One might argue that the resistance to this film is the result of a lack of lesbian content in

the mainstream, which leads to the expectation that a single film must attempt to represent all possible points of view. In this scenario, the filmmaker is assumed to be responsible to the “community.” However, what is most prominent is the idea that there is an inherent ‘danger’ or at the very least discomfort in the circulation of this film beyond its niche audience. Cynthia Fuchs (*Nitrate Online*) takes a different approach in her review of the film and turns her attention to the critics who overlook the central themes saying “What gets left out of such criticism of the film is the important fact that homophobia and strict either-or gendering practices *do* prevail in today’s “civilized” cultures, liberal and tolerant as they may seem to those who don’t have to worry about such things.” The Zacharek and Fuchs reviews beautifully illustrate the polemical discourse surrounding representation and identity. Despite the light-hearted tone of the film and the masking of the politics in ‘candy-coated’ critique, *But I’m a Cheerleader* successfully disrupts the status quo.

6.5. The Media Response to *Itty Bitty Titty Committee*

Jamie Babbit accumulated numerous film and television credits in between the making of *But I’m a Cheerleader* and *Itty Bitty Titty Committee* and it is interesting to compare these two films and the subsequent reviews that followed its release. *Itty Bitty Titty Committee* revolves around the radical activism of the “Clits In Action” or C(i)A, a lesbian feminist cell group whose primary goal is public re-education through radical acts of vandalism as a means to disrupt patriarchal forces that demean women. They attack body image stereotypes by

spray painting slogans on billboards and store fronts, pay public homage to feminists such as Angela Davis of the Black Panthers by placing a raw 'statue' of her on the steps of government buildings, challenge binary systems by switching gender symbols on public washrooms, and speak out *against* legalized gay marriage. While this brief introduction suggests a clear call to action, the cast of characters portrayed in *Itty Bitty Titty Committee* reveals the fragmentation of politics within lesbian and feminist culture. The main protagonist, Anna, is an uninformed 'postfeminist' who is oblivious to the patriarchal system that contains her. She works as a front desk clerk in a plastic surgery clinic where breast implants are a popular commodity. She meets Sadie, a flirtatious C(i)A member as she spray paints "A woman is more than her parts" on the front door of the clinic Anna works in. Sadie invites Anna to a C(i)A meeting and thus begins Anna's feminist education or her 'coming out' as a revolutionary.

At their warehouse meeting place, Anna is confronted by the other C(i)A members who are suspicious of her. Shulie, an attorney and bisexual feminist who uses men for sexual release, challenges Anna's choice of employment and a feminist / post-feminist polemic is vocalized oscillating between "men's control of women's bodies" vs. "women's desire to feel good about themselves." The character Meat is the artist of the group and she designs the props that the C(i)A use for their political statements, such as body casts of women of all sizes and the penile head that is ceremoniously blown up at the end of the film. Aggie is transgender and is represented as the soft-spoken heart of the group, the 'baby brother' so to speak. During the course of the film, Shulie falls for Calvin, a sexy

butch-dyke and ex-soldier (having outed herself and been dishonorably discharged). With her background in explosives, Calvin becomes a valuable asset to the C(i)A. Countering the C(i)A's radical activism is Courtney, the much older lover (and former professor and mother figure) of Sadie. Courtney is founder of "Women for Change," a left, feminist non-profit organization. She is interested in organized platforms for change, not radical activist politics. While Courtney doesn't approve of Sadie's involvement with C(i)A and fears that it may hurt her own organization's progress, it is Sadie's philandering that ultimately leads to their break-up. Courtney and Sadie's age difference and their differing views on activism ignite another feminist conversation, this time between an assimilationist / liberationist polemic or, more specifically, a coalition politics vs. radical activism. This polemic is dramatically reinforced when the C(i)A members disrupt a rally in favour of gay marriage.

The climactic scene in *Itty Bitty Titty Committee* comes when the C(i)A take over a television studio in the middle of a live broadcast of *The Marcy Maloney Show*, a politically-rooted, point of view program that features guests who discuss controversial topics. The theme of this episode is the 125th anniversary of the erection of the Washington Monument. Courtney is featured as one of the guests, representing Women for Change, to offer a feminist perspective on why this celebration is offensive. She describes it as a distraction from the real political issues facing the country, the celebration of a 'symbol' overriding the importance of real issues such as health care and reproductive rights. Contrasting Courtney's POV is a Washington Senator who speaks of the

importance of “honouring the man who created this great country” through this “perpetually rigid” symbol of freedom that brings people together. Yet another layer of politics is played out, this time feminism vs. patriarchy. Unbeknownst to Courtney, the C(i)A have taken over the production booth and when it is time to cut to a shot of the Washington Monument, they insert their own camera footage of the Monument with a superimposed penile head on top. Calvin promptly detonates the ‘head’ and the viewers perceive that this overdetermined phallic symbol, and by association patriarchy, has been emasculated. The play on the acronym “CIA” that the C(i)A exemplifies has penultimate effect in this scene and the ‘central intelligence’ of the ‘clits in action’ is boldly revealed.

In considering the collective politics represented in the film, it is clear that Babbit is not attempting to offer a succinct definition of feminism and/or queer theory but, rather, she points to a multi-level political platform that requires constant (re)negotiation and (re)framing. This idea is directly related to contemporary debates within social movement theory and *Itty Bitty* reveals the complexity of this process. In one particular scene as the C(i)A members prepare to take over a television studio to gain wider exposure for their cause, they are shown pouring over the book *Television Production for Dummies*, a visual joke that can be read as undermining an industry that has historically privileged men and reinforcing notions of accessibility and empowerment for women. The idea of the C(i)A can be considered inside and outside the text, as the film is produced, directed and crewed almost entirely by women and produced by POWER UP, an independent production company dedicated to films produced by, for and about

women. What is most significant is the film's play on postfeminist culture, and ultimately Babbit identifies the need for a resurgence of feminist politics within youth culture.

The use of the music of *Riot Grrrls*, a radical punk girl group from the 1990s, signals a draw for a young audience by identifying with a sense of teen distress and unrest. The music is often coupled with a handheld camera for scenes of guerilla activism, which further emphasizes this draw. In this regard, the character of Anna can be viewed as the embodiment of postfeminism marked by "individualist, acquisitive, transformative values" (Tasker & Negra 7). Anna's entry into the C(i)A is her awakening into a feminist critique of power relationships. However, in order to draw youth culture into her web of feminist education, Babbit ironically must make 'revolution' look 'sexy' and 'cool' and she utilizes the 'transformative,' 'youth-centred' aesthetics of postfeminism to draw viewers in. In this sense *Itty Bitty* can be conceived of as a film within a film: on the outside, a satirical commentary on romantic comedies that limit entry into adulthood to the 'first kiss' of sexual awakening; and on the inside, a lesbian feminist call to action that uses sexuality as *bait*. Babbit, quoted in *The Advocate* by Jessica Stites, perpetuates this political tension when she says "Forget bars, radical feminist microgroups are the best way for girls to get laid." Feminism and postfeminism are therefore constructed as conflicting yet interdependent.

In his review of *Itty Bitty Titty Committee*, Jay Antani of *Box Office* states "Like all youthful and wrong-headed groups, even those with commendable values, CIA's approach is not only utterly annoying but about as effective a tool

for social change as any episode of Ashton Kutcher's *Punk'd*." Andy Klein (*LA City Beat*) attempts to level the field of gender politics but ultimately reclaims male-centred space when he says "Gay women – even radical agitator gay women – seem to have issues similar to straight women or even (gulp!) men." Maitland McDonagh of *TV Guide* is equally dismayed by the politics. She describes the film as a "scrappy little comedy about 21st-century lesbian identity politics" and says "the film's sense of humor is juvenile and C(i)A's satirical jabs at ingrained cultural misogyny are embarrassingly obvious." In addition to the dismissal of a political agenda, there is a definite ageist tone in some of the reviews. Leslie Felperin (*Variety*) echoes McDonagh's comments saying "much of the humor is fairly juvenile, perhaps deliberately so, as if the filmmakers were aiming to raise consciousness among teenage, proto-feminists." Felperin seems not only confused by the possibility of a political agenda but also surprised by the possibility that a political audience might exist. Reviewers also focused on the so-called 'outdated' elements in the film but took them at face value. Klein locates "raw camerawork and a punk style that seems strangely old-fashioned now" while Felperin suggests the film "feels quaintly retro, but that's not enough to redeem pic's hardly witty script." It is interesting that even some reviewers from the lesbian press questioned the function of the film. Kathy Belge of *Lesbian Life* states, "My biggest criticism is that the film is set in the present. I just don't see the youth of today involved in the kind of activism the Clits in Action take on. I was transported back to my days as a Lesbian Avenger in the early 90s. But who knows, maybe this film will inspire some new radical feminist micro-cells to pop

up around the nation.” Despite the fact that *Itty Bitty Titty Committee* was released eight years after *But I’m a Cheerleader*, the overall tone of this criticism is similar. In each case, reviewers contextualized the politics of these films with a ‘post’ sentiment, as if homophobia, feminism and radical politics were a thing of the past, exhausted of meaning. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra contend that postfeminism “in all its guises posits the contemporary as surpassing feminism, leaving it behind” (12) and, in this case, we can conceive of postfeminism as within and outside of the filmic text itself. Interestingly, Babbit refers to *Itty Bitty Titty Committee* as a “Trojan horse brain-washing of L.A.’s crazy apolitical gay world,” thereby turning her attention from the homophobic world of *But I’m a Cheerleader* to the apathetic world of queer culture (Stites).

We can conceive of all four youth-centred films as playing with this tension between feminist and postfeminist cultures and all filmmakers utilize this ‘post’ phenomenon to draw its audience in. The filmmakers’ use of retrospective space runs parallel to postfeminism’s propensity to view feminism in the past, and simultaneously, the filmmakers re-radicalize “moribund” feminism by placing youth culture at the centre of radical lesbian-feminist *action*, thereby feeding into teen rebellion fantasies. One might argue that an implicit theme in these films is the idea that a strict postfeminist culture does not support lesbian identity, and that lesbian identity is always political as it always exists in relation to feminism and the power dynamics of patriarchy. This theme gives resonance to the idea of ‘coming out’ *into politics*. However, there remains one key point to address: a number of reviewers suggest that *Itty Bitty Titty Committee* is a film that is for

feminists who are already 'in the know' and therefore should exist for a niche audience only, lest it be interpreted incorrectly. For example, Jen Watson (*Out in Nashville*) suggests that the film is "best used to preach to the converted." She states:

Just as *But I'm A Cheerleader* should not be seen by parents actually considering sending their kids to ex-gay camp, *Itty Bitty Titty Committee* should not be seen by anyone looking for their first introduction to the lives of young queer feminists unless they have an extremely developed understanding of satire.

On the surface, her comments run parallel to reviewer accusations that *But I'm a Cheerleader* perpetuates what it criticizes; however, Watson's review alludes to a different condition: rather than rejecting lesbian cinematic space, she is suggesting a reclaiming of lesbian cinematic space that promotes the niche. This niche-ing of lesbian films reinforces the desire to exist on the margins, to remain in an underground space, much like the main protagonists within the films. Therefore, the 'crossover' process that favours the mainstream market is redirected, and it is the mainstream genre itself that crosses over *into the niche*, complete with a host of queer characters that were previously absent from its form.

²⁶ The work of Angela Robinson and Jamie Babbit is included in this study and Guinevere Turner is an activist, actor and lesbian heartthrob who has numerous film and television credits.

²⁷ Analysis of media reviews included: 32 reviews for *But I'm a Cheerleader*; 19 reviews for *Better Than Chocolate*; 24 reviews for *D.E.B.S.*; and 16 reviews for *Itty Bitty Titty Committee*.

²⁸ Mink Stole appears in several films studied including *Leather Jacket Love Story*, *Eating Out: Sloppy Seconds*, and *Out at a Wedding*.

²⁹ Interestingly, following the release of *But I'm a Cheerleader*, RuPaul and Jamie Babbit were invited as guests on the television show *Politically Incorrect*. They were interviewed alongside two representatives of the group, Parents Friends Ministry, a Christian-based group who assist gays and lesbians who wish to leave the homosexual lifestyle. In one bizarre confession, the male representative admitted that he had had sex with over 400 men before his conversion. RuPaul flippantly asked him what he had done with all his Judy Garland records.

CHAPTER 7. CONCLUSION: Desperately Seeking Redundancy?

Throughout this thesis I have explored the queer film festival space from a number of vantage points. In order to pull these elements together and discuss the question of redundancy, I will extrapolate from Umberto Eco's essay, "The frames of comic 'freedom,'" in which he explores the relationship between the carnival and the comic, concepts that can be utilized to articulate the relationship between the queer film festival and the queer romantic comedy. The politics that surround the queer festival are easily linked to the idea of carnival, which, according to Mikhail Bakhtin, functions as the "temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order" (10). Fundamentally, Bakhtin views the carnival as an act of transgression and the queer film festival can be considered in this way as well. To reiterate Eco's position, he relates the carnival to the comic, the comic relying on the violation of a rule, usually a minor rule such as those related to etiquette. Eco's articulation connects and problematizes the relationship between the carnival and the comic and by association, between the queer film festival and the queer romantic comedy. For example, he explains that the violation of the rule is committed by a character that the viewer *does not* sympathize with. As a result, the viewer is motivated to feel superior to this character and the viewer's pleasure is derived from transgression of the social order through the sadistic pleasure gained from the character's demise. Fundamentally, within the comic, the viewer is not concerned with defending the rule or with the character that breaks the rule. If we consider these points in relation to queer film festivals and queer romantic comedy, we can conceive of

the 'viewer' as the subject within the theatre but also as a signifier for the larger social and political apparatus in which the festival and the films exist. Likewise, we can conceive of the 'ridiculed character' that violates the rule as representative of heteronormative and/or homonormative value systems depending on the film's intent. What remains to be seen is how we conceive of the queer film festival as symbolic of the character that violates the rule, without resorting to a ridicule of the festival itself. Eco's elaboration offers many avenues for consideration.

As a starting point, I would suggest that the queer film festival can be viewed as the performance of coalition politics, since the overarching programming scheme attempts to embody multiple attitudes and experiences, all expressed within a (perceived) safe viewing space. I envision the evolution of a queer film festival as originating from the need for social space within a queer community for both filmmakers and viewers. The result of this creation of social space summons the rise of political awareness and a political agenda which, in turn, is dependent on and/or influenced by an overarching historical context of oppression. Collectively, these processes feed into a cultural address of 'queer' as a multi-faceted identifier of unity within difference. I do not conceive of this evolution as linear or hierarchical, but I would suggest that all four processes of meaning making are interdependent and active within the festival space. Like coalition politics, there is dialogue within the festival space on issues that affect the community, issues that cut across race, class, gender and sexuality. Whether rooted in rights-based assimilationist strategies or radical activism, this

dialogue exists within the films and throughout the panel discussions, workshops and community outreach events the festival offers. Within this space, multiple generations of LGBTQQIA viewers come together to relive their history and celebrate the new. The queer film festival and the films presented therefore exist within an historical and political framework that relies on participant memorializing for its full impact. When reframed in relation to Eco's conception of carnival, this conceptualization of the function of the queer festival space can be dissected further.

Expanding on the language of carnival and comic, Eco challenges Bakhtin's concept that "cosmic carnivalization" is equal to "global liberation" (3). While Eco concedes that the comic, in its desire to transgress social rules, can be directly related to carnival, he questions whether it is possible to find situations "in which we are not concerned by the rules," that is, how do we negotiate the sense of freedom that results from the simultaneous ridicule of the hero and liberation from the rule that exists within the comic? (2) Fundamentally, he suggests that the comic, in and of itself, is limiting as it is impermeable across cultural divides due to its reliance on "specific social habits" (4). By contrast, he suggests that tragedy has an innate universality because it deals with 'eternal' problems (such as life and death or love and hate) and he turns to a detailed articulation of the violation of the rule to explore this idea further. In the case of tragedy, the "rule" is more than mere etiquette, it is a social code or law that is violated and committed by a character that, in this case, the viewer is encouraged to *sympathize with*. In the case of tragedy, the viewer therefore feels

the impact of the broken rule and suffers alongside the hero precisely because the viewer recognizes the necessity of maintaining the code. For Eco, a tragic or dramatic text is often “a lesson in cultural anthropology; it makes even its future readers aware of a certain rule, even though this rule was previously alien to their cultural sensitivity” (4). Eco’s diversion into the codes of tragedy resonates, and his focus on social habits vs. eternal problems is interesting as they can easily be injected into the dynamics of queer politics. Awareness of and reaction to the violation of the rule are also paramount within the queer festival space and the queer romantic comedy, and I would argue that comedy and tragedy are active simultaneously in each case, resulting in a violation of the rule that combines aspects of ridicule and empathy. Eco’s elaboration of this concept is easily connected to genre theory with its construction of recognizable conventions within a text. He states:

Carnival, in order to be enjoyed, requires that rules and rituals be parodied, and that these rules and rituals already be recognized and respected. One must know to what degree certain behaviors are forbidden, and must feel the majesty of the forbidding norm, to appreciate their transgression. Without a valid law to break, carnival is impossible. (6)

This idea also speaks to the self-reflexivity within this queered genre form and the dual representational strategy these films utilize when they combine humour and politics.

For Eco, to laugh means we are not concerned; however, I would argue that in the context of queer romantic comedy, laughter enables retrospective analysis to occur and this contradicts the idea that “we are not concerned” when

we laugh. As both Vanessa Kwan and Drew Dennis stated in their interview, as recently as the mid 1990s, the images of queer culture that circulated even within the festival space, were not consistently life-affirming, light-hearted, or celebratory. Therefore, the possibility of laughing at one's oppression was not fully authorized, if you will. The queer romantic comedy resonates in a particular way because it is directly related to the oppression of queer culture, that is, while these comedies revolve around the celebration of love, sex and romance between same-sex couples, they exist within a social code that continues to fear love, sex and romance between same-sex couples. Therefore, the mere presence of queer romantic comedies is profound if we situate these films alongside violent, state-sanctioned homophobia. However, Eco continues to problematize this argument when he states that carnival "can exist only as an *authorized* transgression ... comedy and carnival are not instances of real transgressions: on the contrary, they represent paramount examples of law reinforcement. They remind us of the existence of the rule" (6). Fundamentally, he claims that, "popular cultures are always determined by cultivated cultures" (7). On the one hand, this perceived ambivalence, that is, the films' reminder of the law but inability to overcome the law, is precisely what fuels disregard for crossover films. However, if we consider the origin of the queer festival space as separate from, but always in relation to, dominant mainstream society, we can recognize that in order for counterculture to exist, acknowledgement of the mainstream must be maintained and vice versa. Eco's description of carnival does not allude to the possibility of redundancy; rather, it speaks to the

construction and maintenance of cycles of social control and disruption. Rather than interpreting Eco's argument to mean that there is an inherent powerlessness within the structure of carnival (or festival), we can use it to reinforce the idea that the mainstream, when exposed to counterculture, offers the possibility for expanded consciousness and this is a key point in Lisa Henderson's theory of "queer relay" as a process of exchange. In this case, the potential power of queer romantic comedy as a crossover phenomenon begins to emerge.

Throughout critiques of crossover films like the queer romantic comedy, what becomes apparent is the polemical debate within queer culture itself that oscillates between market-based confidence through visible recognition and enfranchisement vs. radical rejection of the mainstream market as a selective and reductive space for identity formation. The question of whether queer films should or should not circulate beyond queer spaces and simultaneously the question of whether queer film festivals should program genre-based features is addressed by the filmmakers in the *GLQ* forums, and it is clear that this remains a contentious issue. By and large, the Vancouver Queer Film Festival, through its inclusion of crossover films, encourages this debate. However, as I have discussed, we must also conceive of both the politically-informed New Queer spectator as well as the queer mainstream spectator who may or may not exist in relation to politicized identity formation and reaction. When we dismiss genre forms as apolitical and assume that the use of genre constitutes an 'emptying out' of political meaning, we immediately create divisions between viewers based on evaluative conclusions about the films and the viewers' level of literacy. In

doing so, we miss the ‘politics within the popular’ and overlook the fact that beneath their seemingly innocuous surface, queer romantic comedies frequently bite the hand that feeds them by criticizing the Hollywood system that enables them. This self-reflexivity is powerful as a political tool and it disrupts the status quo in much the same way queer filmmakers have been doing for decades, albeit in a different form that makes politics *accessible*. Henderson suggests that the crossover film offers “visual transparency in cinema, a transparency sought to invite lay viewers into characters’ emotional states” (580). Her language is interesting as it speaks to the ‘average queer’ viewer who is not directly engaged with (or unable to openly engage with) academic and/or political processes of meaning-making. One can therefore argue that the queer crossover film exposes and interrupts the elite critique of queer cinema as an alternate and morally superior form.

The crossover film can be conceived of as a reminder of “the existence of the rule,” and simultaneously, as an act of revolution with the concession that Eco describes, that is, “even revolutions produce a restoration of their own [...] in order to install their new social model” (7). Lisa Henderson’s articulation of the exchange between “industry orientation” and “queer orientation” in the process of queer cultural production complements Eco’s sentiments (588). In the most literal sense, her conceptualization represents a distinct acknowledgment of “the existence of the rule” but it also offers the possibility for revolution through “restoration” of a “new social model.” The *GLQ* forums discussed in chapter one are interesting to reconsider in this regard as well, as they reflect the complex

politics within queer culture that enable and inhibit the possibility for Henderson's queer relay to exist. The festival curators who participated in part one of the forums are engaged with the historical significance of this subgenre as representative of one small part of the whole LGBTQQIA evolution, and they identify these films as important components within the festival space. Curators recognize the films' value perhaps because they are queer participants 'on the ground' so to speak, engaged directly with filmmakers, community groups and viewers. One can argue that the curator's function is to create a viable queer space that responds to the needs of a diverse array of participants for the purpose of creating a safe, social space while simultaneously promoting queer *literacy*. By contrast, the critics who were interviewed in White's 1999 dossier and those who participated in part two of the *GLQ* forums are far more critical of this genre mutation and they are extremely pessimistic about the impact of mainstream encroachment on the queer community. Their critiques provoke a fear of the growing *illiteracy* of queer viewers due to the circulation of generic queer products.

Part three of the *GLQ* forum series, in which filmmakers speak, is imbued with a tempered celebration of the increased access to production and distribution opportunities for queer filmmakers and queer subjects. Once again, filmmakers as participants are 'on the ground' creating space for queer expression and they are directly connected to the economics of production since their livelihood depends on access to production and financial return. We must also consider the role of the media, in this regard, as they are often the enablers

and disablers of a film's circulation and success. Film reviewers hold the dubious distinction of being evaluative monitors and market advisors through their recommendation and/or dismissal of films based primarily on emotional response, aesthetic and technical impact and plausibility of story. Despite their evaluative substance, however, film reviews can be situated within a larger cultural framework and as such, we can use them to assess the ideological framework in which they exist. Collectively, these positionalities from curators, critics, filmmakers and film reviewers reflect the complexity of debates within queer culture surrounding identity, community and representation. Moreover, like Henderson's thesis, they point to the interconnectedness of these reference points and the need to adopt a "both/and" approach to critical analysis rather than maintaining an "either/or" polemic.

Fundamentally, there is no doubt that the presence of genre features in the queer festival space marks a shift in filmmaking practices and queer festival presentations as it connotes a commercial relationship between queer filmmakers and the film industry and brings with it the encroachment of mainstream values into the 'sacred' space of queer culture. These fictional narratives are, in many ways, viewed as the antithesis of a queer documentary project that seeks to record queer experience for the purpose of creating a diversified cultural memory. The focus on Hollywood as a model for film production often overwhelms the constructive analysis of queer cinema and leads to assumptions regarding a film's value or utility and/or the filmmaker's access to production, distribution and exhibition opportunities. While the films I have

studied utilize the tropes and formal conventions of classical works, the fact remains that their perceived success is somewhat of an illusion if we rely solely on box office criteria, that is, while these films are assumed to be mainstream products, they simply do not move freely through mainstream markets. These films are, in fact, small scale and they rely on independent, marginal centres for their production, exhibition and distribution opportunities. These films do not attract significant financing, nor do they enjoy an extensive theatrical release or the support of major distribution companies. Their release strategies rely heavily on (mostly queer) film festival circulation without the promise of a distribution deal. Queer filmmakers as independent filmmakers continue to produce film from the ground up. The advent of digital technology combined with the possibility for promotion via web-based marketing to target niche groups coupled with the growing home DVD market have enabled the growth and visibility of queer cinema; however, it must be understood as a *qualified* visibility.

As I have discussed, the question of whether queer film festivals and queer cinema are becoming 'redundant' is a train of thought that began to creep into critical consciousness in the early 1990s in a post-New Queer Cinema, post-AIDS, post-civil rights landscape. While I use the 'post' adjective to suggest the past-ness of a condition or event, I am not suggesting an elision of those same conditions or events. That is, to 'post' New Queer Cinema or AIDS is not to suggest that they are no longer an issue or a reality, but rather to separate the everyday of these conditions from the moment of their origin (or from their cyclical flashpoints) within the public eye and within critical discourse. We can

therefore conceive of posting as a retrospective activity and it is directly related to the idea of redundancy, a word that connotes obsolescence, retirement or absorption. The question of redundancy can conjure up fears of dissolution of queer space, the excavation of queer history now reduced to a touristic gaze, the loss of an 'original' if only in the metaphorical sense. On the other hand, redundancy can imply an arrival, the solution to a problem, a celebration of unity, a compression of difference, the end of discrimination. I would argue that the question of whether or not queer film festivals are becoming redundant is a ploy, and it is directly related to the myth of enfranchisement Alexandra Chasin refers to, that is, that enfranchisement = power and therefore there is nothing left to fight for. We need only consider Eco's inference of the violation of the rule as the construction and maintenance of cycles of social control and disruption, or Henderson's thesis on queer relay to understand that a more dynamic and complex process of exchange is at play between the mainstream and the queer film festival space. In this configuration, both players have the power to influence and regulate the production and circulation of images, resulting in a constant (re)negotiation of visible/invisible space. Having arisen from a place of marginality, queer filmmakers are actively engaged in this discourse and the queer romantic comedy can be conceived of as the Trojan Horse of New Queer Cinema: while this appropriated genre appears to be the harmless gift of assimilation, it is defensive on the inside, poised for attack.

I wish to conclude this thesis with an ovation of sorts. All the films studied have screened internationally at numerous queer film festivals and the majority

have garnered awards in the process. Several films studied were presented at Sundance as part of their release strategy including *Billy's Hollywood Screen Kiss*, *Trick, But I'm a Cheerleader*, *Punks*, *D.E.B.S.* and *Puccini for Beginners* and many received nominations or awards from this prestigious film festival. Similarly, *Goldfish Memory* and *Guys and Balls* were presented at Cannes. The majority of the directors studied have lengthy film and television credits inside and outside the queer milieu. For example, Angela Robinson (*D.E.B.S.*) directed the Disney feature *Herbie Fully Loaded* (2005) and she was writer, producer and/or director on several episodes of the award-winning lesbian-centred television series *The L Word* (2004-09). Rose Troche (*Bedrooms and Hallways*) shares the same television accolades for the *The L Word* as well as directing single episodes of *Law and Order*, *Ugly Betty* and *Six Feet Under* among others. Jamie Babbitt (*But I'm a Cheerleader*, *Itty Bitty Titty Committee*) also boasts a long list of television directing credits. C. Jay Cox (*Kiss the Bride*) wrote the screenplays for the box office hits *Sweet Home Alabama* (2002 Andy Tennant) starring Reese Witherspoon and *New In Town* (2009 Jonas Elmer) starring Renée Zellweger. Patrik-Ian Polk (*Punks*) was writer, director and executive producer on several episodes of the award-winning television series *Noah's Arc* (2005-06) based on Polk's feature film of the same name. Both *Noah's Arc* and *Punks* are viewed as groundbreaking as they feature an African-American and Latino cast and showcase the lives of African-American gay men. In addition to his lengthy film and television credits, Q. Allan Brocka (*Boy Culture*, *Eating Out*) is the brainchild and writer/producer/director of the Gemini nominated animation

series *Rick and Steve: The Happiest Gay Couple in the World* (2007-09).

Constructing a gay-ghetto made entirely of LEGO Blocks; Brocka has created a cult classic.

The credentials listed above run counter to the historical perception of queer filmmakers and/or queer subjects as silenced, closeted and absent within mainstream space, excluded from the capitalist machine. Concurrently, the presence of romantic comedies and filmmakers of this caliber within the queer film festival space runs counter to historical notions of the festival as the site of the underrepresented, the silenced, the closeted, the political anarchists within a counterculture, anti-mainstream space. Clearly, this is not a cut and dry debate but rather a series of points on a continuous spectrum of analysis. As queer cinema develops, we have the advantage of grouping queer films and analyzing them for their own merits without needing to compare them to their heterosexual counterparts or forcibly reading against the grain in order to draw out queer signifiers and/or queer contexts. Queer romantic comedy is boldly confident and the presence of these films does confirm an arrival of sorts as they provide an opportunity for retrospective analysis. As a closing thought, I would suggest that the need to qualify this genre with the adjective 'queer' exposes the absence of queer discourse within genre study. Before the queer film festival and queer culture can be rendered redundant, queer must first be reconceptualized as a state of being, not just a series of conventions related to a lifestyle "choice." Furthermore, if we concede that Eco *is* correct in his assertions, and queer cinema is not *actual* transgression but rather the regulated *performance* of

transgression, then, the queer film festival must continue to exist as a counterculture space that promotes disruption.

Filmography

20 Centimetres [20 centímetros] (Ramón Salazar Spain 2005)
All Over the Guy (Julie Davis USA 2001)
Another Gay Sequel: Gays Gone Wild (Todd Stephens USA 2008)
Bedrooms & Hallways (Rose Troche UK 1998)
Better Than Chocolate (Anne Wheeler Canada 1999)
Billy's Hollywood Screen Kiss (Tommy O'Haver USA 1998)
Boy Culture (Q. Allan Brocka USA 2006)
Brokeback Mountain (Ang Lee USA 2005)
But I'm a Cheerleader (Jamie Babbit USA 1999)
Chutney Popcorn (Nisha Ganatra USA 1999)
Côte D'Azur (Olivier Ducastel, Jacques Martineau FRA 2005)
D.E.B.S. (Angela Robinson, USA 2004)
Desert Motel (Liza Johnson USA 2005)
Eating Out (Q. Allan Brocka USA 2004)
Eating Out 2: Sloppy Seconds (Phillip J. Bartell USA 2006)
Four Letter Word, A (Casper Andreas USA 2007)
Goldfish Memory (Elizabeth Gill Ireland 2003)
Guys and Balls [Männer wie wir] (Sherry Hormann Germany 2004)
Gypsy Boys (Brian Shepp USA 1999)
Harold and Maude (Hal Ashby USA 1971)
Heavenly Creatures (Peter Jackson New Zealand 1994)
Herbie Fully Loaded (Angela Robinson USA 2005)
In and Out (Frank Oz USA 1997)
Itty Bitty Titty Committee (Jamie Babbit USA 2007)
Kiss the Bride (C. Jay Cox USA 2007)
Leather Jacket Love Story (David DeCoteau USA 1997)
Living End, The (Gregg Araki USA 1992)
Monster (Patty Jenkins USA 2004)
New In Town (Jonas Elmer USA 2009)
Nina's Heavenly Delights (Pratibha Parmar UK 2006)
Nitty Gritty Behind the Itty Bitty Titty Committee, The (Lisa Thrasher/Adriana Torres USA 2008)

Out at a Wedding (Lee Friedlander USA 2007)
Puccini for Beginners (Maria Maggenti USA 2006)
Punks (Patrik-Ian Polk USA 2000)
Queens [Reinas] (Manuel Gómez Pereira Spain 2005)
Slutty Summer (Casper Andreas USA 2004)
Sweet Home Alabama (Andy Tennant USA 2002)
Transamerica (Duncan Tucker USA 2006)
Trick (Jim Fall USA 1999)

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: BREB Certificate of Approval

<https://rise.ubc.ca/rise/Doc/0/QAB3SDLTA1O475EIQUM51...>

 <p>The University of British Columbia Office of Research Services Behavioural Research Ethics Board Suite 102, 6190 Agronomy Road, Vancouver, B.C. V6T 1Z3</p>		
CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL - MINIMAL RISK		
PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: [REDACTED]	INSTITUTION / DEPARTMENT: UBC/Arts/Theatre and Film	UBC BREB NUMBER: H07-00698
INSTITUTION(S) WHERE RESEARCH WILL BE CARRIED OUT:		
Institution		Site
UBC		Vancouver (excludes UBC Hospital)
Other locations where the research will be conducted: Out on Screen Vancouver Queer Film Festival Office - West Hastings St., Vancouver, BC If interview subjects prefer to meet for interviews in a public space such as a cafe or their personal home, Renee Penney will accommodate them		
CO-INVESTIGATOR(S):		
Renee Penney		
SPONSORING AGENCIES:		
Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) - "DESPERATELY SEEKING REDUNDANCY? An Analysis of the Evolution of the Out on Screen Queer Film and Video Festival 1995-2005 "		
PROJECT TITLE:		
Queer Romantic Comedy and the Festival Audience: An Analysis of the Evolution of the Out on Screen Vancouver Queer Film Festival		
CERTIFICATE EXPIRY DATE: April 18, 2009		
DOCUMENTS INCLUDED IN THIS APPROVAL:		DATE APPROVED:
		April 18, 2008
Document Name	Version	Date
Protocol:		
Queer Romantic Comedy and the Festival Audience: An Analysis of the Evolution of the Out on Screen Vancouver Queer Film Festival	N/A	February 1, 2007
Consent Forms:		
Adult Consent Form	Version 2	July 28, 2007
Adult Consent Form	4	April 11, 2008
Adult Consent Form	5	April 16, 2008
Adult Consent Form	Version 3	October 31, 2007
Questionnaire, Questionnaire Cover Letter, Tests:		
Interview Questions	N/A	July 11, 2007
The application for ethical review and the document(s) listed above have been reviewed and the procedures were found to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects.		