



PROJECT MUSE®

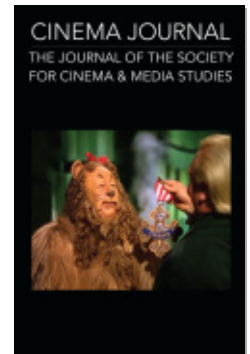
Six Crises

Matthew Hays, Thomas Waugh

Cinema Journal, Volume 53, Number 2, Winter 2014, pp. 126-132 (Article)

Published by University of Texas Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2014.0012>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/535711>

and—perhaps most risky of all—his students, that his own sissiness will not only be unrepressed but also indulged, displayed, and fully performed?

The Wizard of Oz's great trick—a scam, of course—toward the end of the film is to simply bestow superficial symbols for the possession of a brain, a heart, and courage upon Scarecrow, Tin Man, and Cowardly Lion. We are meant to understand from key moments in the narrative that only they believe they lack these qualities, which they have in fact possessed all along. Alex does not otherwise discuss this major element of the story (except insofar as their particular rewards link to Dorothy's more complex desire for her lost "home"), and, again, despite admitting his early, ambivalent identification with the sissy Lion, Alex was not bold (or arrogant) enough to assert about himself what I want to emphatically affirm: like the figure who he first thought was a shameful role model but only later a figure in whom he could take pride (and what better figure for "gay pride" than a lion with a perm?), Alex *always* possessed great courage, even if he could not recognize this in himself or admit that this, too, could have been a source of his close identification with the (anything but) Cowardly Lion. (Alex of course had a brain and heart as well: I think he could have admitted to those, even if he demurred acknowledging his own bravery.) Alex was in fact and in deed that most compelling of seeming contradictions: a fierce, fearless sissy. His courage awed and continues to awe me, as I anticipate it will others who inherit and continue his brave queer legacy. *

Six Crises

by MATTHEW HAYS AND THOMAS WAUGH

What were we thinking of back in 2008 when the two of us pitched the series Queer Film Classics (QFC) to our beloved community-based Canadian publisher Arsenal Pulp Press? Did we really think a pop-and-pop enterprise known among much else for vegan recipe books and trans fiction—as well as queer collections by both Waugh and Hays and translated scholarly works on late Genet and homophobia—could compete with the British Film Institute's heterosexual film classics series (*Queen Christina*, *Wizard of Oz*, *Brief Encounter*, *The Servant*, *Victim*, *Fear Eats the Soul*, and *Far from Heaven*—out of seventy-eight titles, that's it?).¹ We saw our project as a salvage operation on our forgotten queer film heritage—including the "minor" Canadian one: transformative canon surgery, if you like, a kick in the archive. It was also a return to textual criticism, a refusal to fit that year's fashion for grandiloquent abstraction and wordplay.

1 Marcia Landy and Amy Villarejo, *Queen Christina* (1996); Salman Rushdie, *The Wizard of Oz* (2012); Richard Dyer, *Brief Encounter* (1993); Amy Sergeant, *The Servant* (2011); John Coldstream, *Victim* (2011); Laura Cottingham, *Fear Eats the Soul* (2005); and John Gill, *Far from Heaven* (2011)—all published in London by the British Film Institute Film Classics.

It seemed like a grand idea at the time: to take a diverse group of academics and/or critics and let them micro-riff on a single queer film for the length of a book, thereby anchoring the burgeoning and rapidly evolving universe of queer film and cultural studies in the text. This is just the book series our peers and students needed, and one we'd subscribe to ourselves—if we hadn't thought of it first.

Whatever we were thinking, we're not sure we realized the series would be a litmus test of the peregrinations of queer film and media studies in the twenty-first century, and we're sure our brave publishers did not. Still, in 2013, with eleven books under our belts and a now-atritioned list of eight still to go taking us through to 2017, representing the voices of a transcultural and transgenerational spectrum of authors and filmmakers, we're getting a pretty good idea of certain crises that face us in the valley of queer film and media studies.²

Although it may just be a catchy and fortuitous echo that led us to choose Richard Nixon's 1962 format and title for this informal reflection, perhaps we have more in common with the self-justifying petulance of the US president who obliviously presided over Stonewall than we'd like to admit.

The Crisis of the Market. The toughest crisis we've had to deal with is in the marketplace. If the queer theory boom of the 1990s was fueled not only by endowed university publishers but also by baby boomers hitting their stride in the academy, then the perceived bust of the twenty-first century reflected at the same time certain hard realities of the digital age and the vagaries of the neoliberal academic-industrial publication complex. Trying to publish work outside of that complex, despite our idealism around crossover audiences and lay readership, has been an uphill struggle. The continuing surge of LGBTQ film festivals does not translate into an eager market even for inexpensive single-title monographs, and the temptation to sell out to the anti-intellectual populism of the *Out* and/or *Advocate* brand and even of aspirant highbrow *Gay and Lesbian Review* is easier said than done. Our fantasy that our books would be adopted en masse as textbooks in the proliferating queer film courses evaporated at dawn—except in our own courses, naturally. Yet the publication beginning in 2010 of a very different series, three interdisciplinary “Against Equality” anthologies, also published outside the above-mentioned complex, thanks to grad student and community activist credit cards, gives one hope for a continuing queer public sphere that includes book objects you can hold in your hand.³

2 Existing volumes in *Queer Film Classics* as of 2013 are Will Aitken, *Death in Venice* (2011); Helen Hok-Sze Leung, *Farewell My Concubine* (2010); Shohini Ghosh, *Fire* (2010); Noah Tsika, *Gods and Monsters* (2009); Thomas Waugh and Jason Garrison, *Montreal Main* (2010); Lucas Hilderbrand, *Paris Is Burning* (2013); Jonathan Goldberg, *Strangers on a Train* (2012); Jon Davies, *Trash* (2009); Greg Youmans, *Word Is Out* (2011); and Wendy Gay Pearson and Susan Knabe, *Zero Patience* (2011). Still to come are *Arabian Nights*, *C.R.A.Z.Y.*, *Female Trouble*, *Forbidden Love: The Unashamed Stories of Lesbian Love*, *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing*, *L.A. Plays Itself / Boys in the Sand*, *Manila by Night*, and *Scorpio Rising*—all published in Vancouver by Arsenal Pulp Press (<http://www.arsenalpulp.com/seriesinfo.php?index=10>).

3 Ryan Conrad, ed., *Against Equality: Queer Critiques of Marriage* (Lewiston, ME: Against Equality Publishing Collective, 2010); Conrad, ed., *Against Equality: Don't Ask to Fight Their Wars* (Lewiston, ME: Against Equality Publishing Collective, 2011); Conrad, ed., *Against Equality: Prisons Will Not Protect You* (Lewiston, ME: Against Equality Publishing Collective, 2012).

The Crisis of Heritage. Another crisis that we face in the arena of queer film and media studies could be characterized as intergenerational. By this we do not mean that the queer film and media network has been remiss in interrogating the place of intergenerational sexuality in the cauldron of sexual politics and its screen representations, although that is true—along with much of what Gayle Rubin would characterize as “outer limit” sexualities, from sex work on out.⁴ (We explored child sexual subjectivities and man-boy sexualities in our 2010 *Montreal Main*.) What we mean here is the crisis around the transmission of a heritage of lesbian and gay studies and cinema to the post-social media generation. Hardly anyone is carrying the torch of literate cinephile-humanists Parker Tyler and Richard Dyer these days, and they’re too often squeezed off the comps lists by Brian Massumi and Slavoj Žižek (*The Pervert’s Guide to the Cinema* [Sophie Fiennes, 2009], indeed!). Some of Waugh’s cohort of twentysomething queer grad students are frankly perturbed by a gap in mentorship due to the loss of a generation to AIDS, anxious about restoring their legacy from departed ancestors as diverse as Andrew Britton, Jack Babuscio, Stuart Byron, Stephen Harvey, Vito Russo, Craig Owens, Jay Scott, and John Rowberry. Yet few of them have seen *Buddies* (Arthur J. Bressan Jr., 1985), *Parting Glances* (Bill Sherwood, 1986), *Longtime Companion* (Norman René, 1989), or *Zero Patience* (John Greyson, 1993)—not to mention *Different from the Others* (Richard Oswald, 1919) or *Mädchen in Uniform* (Leontine Sagan, 1931) (all titles we would love to devote books to, except for *Zero Patience*, which Wendy Pearson and Susan Knabe covered in 2011). Positioned as undergraduate teachers in queer and sexuality film studies courses in a large, diverse metropolitan university, we (born the year of *Rope* and *My Hustler*, respectively) are even more alarmed by the historiographically and mnemonically challenged culture of our students. To many contemporary undergrads, ancient history is Britney Spears’s first album. We are reassured, however, by their embrace of the four recent documentary features on the AIDS crisis of the 1980s—*United in Anger* (Jim Hubbard, 2012), *Vito* (Jeffrey Schwarz, 2011), *We Were Here* (David Weissman and Bill Weber, 2011), and *How to Survive a Plague* (David France, 2012)—so enthusiastic as to almost suggest a nostalgia for an era they did not know. All is not lost. We only wish they didn’t believe everything they heard in *Gay Sex in the 70s* (Joseph F. Lovett, 2005).

Speaking of another distant decade, one of the fine contributions that Dyer has made, of course, is to keep his earlier and otherwise ephemeral publications in print, thus ensuring access to our lesbian and gay studies heritage. His marvelous 2012 collection *In the Space of a Song: The Uses of Song in Film* contains four delectable reprints from that long-lost era (the 1990s!) that even we had never seen.⁵

The Crisis of Accessibility. Access is one thing, accessibility another. We are gratified that one reviewer opined, correctly we hope, that our cheerful series is “a parry against the nihilistic arguments of queer theorists such as Lee Edelman author of *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004) and more in line with the hopeful opinions

4 Gayle Rubin, “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” in *The Gay and Lesbian Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (1982; New York: Routledge, 1993), 3–44.

5 Richard Dyer, *In the Space of a Song: The Uses of Song in Film* (London: Routledge, 2011).

of those such as José Muñoz in his book *Cruising Utopia* (2009).⁶ Interestingly, three of our books cited Edelman (two positively), and only one cited Muñoz. For the record, four of our books cited Rich, Russo, or Sedgwick, and three cited Dyer, White, or Wood, while only one brought up Butler. Certain stalwarts, from Doty to Halberstam, were conspicuous by their total absence, and even more conspicuous, several of our books (notably and tellingly non-American ones) cited none of the above! Needless to say, one of the latter heretics was the favorite of the critics (Aitken on *Death in Venice* [Luchino Visconti, 1971]). Andrew Holleran, in his *Washington Post* review of our 2011 trio, called *Death in Venice* a “romp,” lashing out as well against queer theory’s “jargon” and “esoteric language,” which made reading the lucid and elegant book on *Zero Patience* that was the brunt of his wrath “a bit like eating rocks.”⁷ Another reviewer praised our 2009 vintage for “mov[ing] us bracingly beyond the dark, tyrannous oppressiveness of Lacanian and Foucauldian queer theory, as exemplified by Lee Edelman’s and D. A. Miller’s work, respectively.”⁸ We recognize hostile caricature as a standard scenario faced by scholarly work being reviewed in nonacademic media, whether or not we secretly agree with the theory bashers (often yes, often no). Yet we cannot deny that the growing institutional pressure to eat rocks constitutes a major problem for our subfield. As Anne McClintock has said, we are facing a “crisis in language” in the academy, torn between our day jobs as peer-reviewed obscurantists and our vocation as public intellectuals and activists.⁹ It’s no coincidence that so few of us have spoken out in defense of queer experimental filmmaker Lawrence Brose, scapegoated by Homeland Security and the “incipient fascism” of our civilization—McClintock again.¹⁰ We hope that the surfacing of the new *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ World Making* will provide more alternatives to the rock pile.¹¹

The Crisis of Diversity. Our other key criterion in assembling the series, of course, was diversity. How can we plead for diversity while not striving to practice it ourselves—two white gay men with real estate? Subalterns are of course part of the QFC mosaic—in front of the camera, behind the camera, at the authorial keyboard. We also know we are fighting against the grain of a culture at large—at least in North America, and arguably in the West in general—where an ongoing march to an IKEA-furnished, Saturn-driving, Abercrombie & Fitch-wearing, same-sex-marriage-fixated consumerist mind-set leaves much of gay culture and identity stranded in Stepford

6 Glyn Davis, “Queer Film Classics Series,” *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 21, no. 2 (2013): 148–154. Davis is citing Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), and José Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

7 Andrew Holleran, “News Volumes in Queer Film Classics,” *Washington Post*, March 9, 2012.

8 David Greven, “Queer Film Classics,” *Cineaste* 36, no. 1 (2010), <http://www.cineaste.com/articles/queer-film-classics-web-exclusive>.

9 Anne McClintock, “Invisible War: Militarized Masculinity, Rape Culture and Torture-Porn,” *Rethinking Race and Sexuality: Feminist Conversations, Contestations, and Coalitions Conference* (keynote address, Concordia University, April 17, 2013).

10 Ibid.

11 From Michigan State University Press, “The End of Bullying,” the inaugural issue of *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ World Making*, will appear in September 2013 (<http://msupress.msu.edu/journals/qed/index.php?Page=home>).

rather than our longed-for rainbow-hued becoming-utopia. We are now a community that congratulates Jodie Foster and Anderson Cooper for finally having come to the party—with the latter even accepting a GLAAD media award in the name of Vito Russo. The diversity of our series has made broad generalizations about its content extremely difficult. That’s a good thing, and it’s good to chafe the direction of too much of contemporary queer culture. For us diversity must be global, and two of our favorite QFC books are *Fire* and *Farewell My Concubine*, each bringing a wealth of local knowledges and feelings to texts that critics and audiences have all too often snubbed.

Crisis in Our Corpus. Perhaps our most difficult moment in developing the series was the brutal day in 2008 of poring over so many clever, invigorating, and screamingly fun book proposals. One of our criteria was to focus on films that may have been previously unfairly overlooked—we did not, for example, think that *Brokeback Mountain* (Ang Lee, 2005) needed to have its rose stemmed one more time, as much as we love that film. This also led to a discussion of what precisely constitutes a queer text or film. Since queer film and cultural studies have, since *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939) at least, encompassed queer readings of texts not necessarily created as explicitly queer—do unwittingly queer films fit in? This led to a discussion:

HAYS: What about *Grey Gardens* [Ellen Hovde, Albert Maysles, David Maysles, and Muffie Meyer, 1975], a film made by heterosexuals but claimed by queer audiences?

WAUGH: No. With no Araki, Arzner, Caouette, Chéreau, Cocteau, Fassbinder, Genet, Jarman, Judy, Julien, Jutra, Murnau, Ottinger, Smith, or von Praunheim on our list, you want to include heterocentric and sexist divagossip doxploitation? What queer audiences? You, Rufus Wainwright, and your jaded friends? Vetoed.

HAYS: Bitch.

Such conversations notwithstanding, with all this talk of festivals and their role, do we need a reminder of the crucial importance of festival studies as a growing subfield? Thanks to prophetic pieces in *Jump Cut*, two forums in *GLQ*, plus a proliferating raft of dissertations, we’ve already got a good lead here, but we must maintain our production levels as the landscape continues to evolve.¹²

12 Pioneering studies in *Jump Cut*—such as Marc Siegel, “Spilling Out onto Castro Street,” *Jump Cut* 41 (May 1997): 131–136, and Kaucyla Brook, “Dividers and Doorways,” *Jump Cut* 42 (December 1998): 50–57—led to historic symposia of scholars, critics, makers, and curators in *GLQ*. See Patricia White, ed., “Queer Publicity: A Dossier on Lesbian and Gay Film Festivals—Essays by B. Ruby Rich, Eric O. Clarke, and Richard Fung,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 5, no. 1 (1999): 73–94; Chris Straayer and Thomas Waugh, eds., “Queer Film and Video Festival Forum, Take One: Curators Speak Out,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 11, no. 4 (2005): 579–604; Chris Straayer and Thomas Waugh, eds., “Queer Film and Video Festival Forum, Take Two: Critics Speak Out,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 12, no. 4 (2006): 599–626; Chris Straayer and Thomas Waugh, eds., “Queer Film and Video Festival Forum, Take Three: Artists Speak Out,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 14, no. 1 (2008): 121–138; as well as doctoral dissertations now too numerous to cite.

Crisis in Film Journalism and Criticism. We hold the far-from-unanimous view that queer film and media studies are inextricably caught up with queer media criticism, journalism, blogging masquerading as journalism, programming, spectatorship, and the fan cultures of both community festivals and commercial exhibition. In this respect, perhaps the most intriguing issue facing queer film studies scholars is the ongoing fragmentation of audiences. Indeed, these are changes facing all of those engaged with film studies—and all media for that matter—but the massive shifts in how spectators receive their films, or moving images, are of distinct significance for queer scholars.

It was arguably precursors of such shifts that led to the do-it-yourself practices of the group of filmmakers that B. Ruby Rich legendarily identified as the new queer cinema. This movement was made possible at least in part through the burgeoning LGBTQ film festival milieu of the 1980s and the increasingly fractured VHS market, then in its death throes. As the independent films flourished, queer filmmakers free of the constraints of Hollywood studios' stodgy gatekeepers could tell their own stories, through their own lenses. While this was precisely the independent outbreak Russo was calling for in *The Celluloid Closet*, these films had little to do with the positive images he was earnestly requesting.¹³ Among its many outcomes has been our author Jonathan Goldberg's permission, two decades later, to torpedo the entire battleship of post-Stonewall "positive image" criticism of Hitchcock in his 2012 QFC volume *Strangers on a Train*.

But while new queer cinema films like *The Living End* (Gregg Araki, 1992) and *Go Fish* (Rose Troche, 1994) seemed to buck the very idea that queer filmmakers were trying to please anyone, queer filmmakers and scholars were often asking crucial questions: What impact were alternative, independent queer images having on the mainstream? Was Hollywood beginning to wake up to the fact that Miramax could make serious amounts of profit from small, no-budget films? The question was always hanging over *My Own Private Idaho* (Gus Van Sant, 1991): How would Tinseltown react? Would it be willing to bankroll queer-themed films after all? What effect would all this have on popular culture? And did we invest all that energy in the new queer cinema phenomenon just so we could have *In and Out* (Frank Oz, 1997) and *Will and Grace* (NBC, 1998–2006)?

But the huge shifts in technology with which we are all too familiar have now complicated those premature debates immeasurably. As the boutique studios that Miramax inspired have been shut down by their corporate owners, as so much of the vibrant queer talent from the 1980s and 1990s has migrated to television—including Todd Haynes, Laurie Lynd, Lizzie Borden, Jeremy Podeswa, Patricia Rozema, Rose Troche, and Mike White (three of those being Canadians—tellingly once more?—refugees from our state-funded "minor" cinema?)—the three-channel universe we knew in the 1970s has morphed into a fifty-thousand-channel landscape packed with seemingly endless, if not inately repetitive, possibility. Print media that used to celebrate and champion queer artists are now vanishing, with papers folding—especially alternative weeklies, which held a crucial place in bolstering awareness of all things

13 Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981).

queer, including cinema—replaced by a disparate combination of Facebook pages, the Twittersphere, and unpaid and uneven blog-style writing swamping us from all directions. Indeed, the relatively new platform of the Internet means an unprecedented splintering of the audience. Warhol's maxim of everyone being famous for fifteen minutes has been updated: everyone will now be famous, but only among fifteen people.¹⁴ The very business models that created and sustained Hollywood and the film industry—as well as the music, porn, and magazine and newspaper industries—are collapsing, one by one, and what's left on the other end, what replaces them, if anything, is still entirely unclear. Profit drove the mainstream, and if there's no profit to be had, producers and studios will no longer be willing to fund it in the first place. Is crowd funding the answer that it seems to be?

So how do we fix a queer eye on a cinema and media culture that is splintered and marginalized, when what we once referred to as the mainstream, or popular culture, no longer exists in the tangible forms it once did? Movies are plentiful all over the Internet, and we are immersed in a cultural space where it could be argued that every audience is in fact marginalized. Even pornography studies, an absolutely essential endeavor for us, which only a decade ago seemed a cutting-edge subfield for queer film and media studies, now faces this challenge. The DVD market that allowed textual analysis is now drying up; the most interesting new queer work in this subfield is by a heterosexual Finnish woman focusing mostly on US e-mail porn spam and hetero gonzo websites.¹⁵ Another Warholism seems pertinent: if there is one thing that joins us, it is huge tragedy or cataclysm, like 9/11 or a tsunami. But an increasingly fragmented news media apparatus splinters even collective experiences, something our friends in journalism and in journalism scholarship are also wringing their hands over.

Confronting this crisis is one among many intriguing paths that future film and media studies will have to follow: but especially queer studies, insofar as much of our subdiscipline emerged from sociological readings of culture and of mass audience reception, together with their hitherto axiomatic binaries of mainstream and margins, straight and gay, art and commerce. Our methods and theories must reflect this volatility of our objects and corpuses, and remain as eclectic, incoherent, and promiscuous as they are. But as we embrace the postcinema, postpaper, postbinary future, let's also keep our heritage DVDs and our slim monographs in our hairy, sweaty palms and join the bums in seats in the darkened archive screening room. Let copulation thrive! *

14 Momus, "pop stars? nein danke! In the future everyone shall be famous for fifteen people . . ." Grimsby Fishmarket, originally published 1991, archived from the original on September 27, 2008, <http://web.archive.org/web/20080927023401/http://imomus.com/index499.html>.

15 Susanna Paasonen, *Carnal Resonance: Affect and Online Pornography* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011).