The Living End of New Queer Cinema

One of the many attractive characteristics of film is its ability to provide a medium for representing the changing sentiments of society and culture. In certain circumstances, film or film movements can themselves operate as catalysts that initiate alternative ways of thinking. Often times, films or film movements need to be analyzed from a historical constructivist approach in order to gain a full grasp of the weight, significance and context of the subject matter and their potential to serve as social catalysts. Such is the case concerning the film movement labeled “New Queer Cinema.” As the title suggests, the movement consisted primarily of the emergence of a large number of independent gay and lesbian films. The significance of the movement, however, is not simply accounted for by the presence of these films. Rather it stems from the fact that these films struck peak popularity during the mid 1980s and early 1990s: a period in American history when being an active participant or supporter of the homosexual lifestyle was seen as a detriment to the health and well-being of the heterosexual population. The common stereotype during this time period was to view AIDS and HIV as the “gay” disease.

The misinformed opinion of the general populace directed at homosexuals, due to their “responsibility” for the AIDS epidemic, is a noticeable theme within the subtext of many films of the queer cinema movement. Many also effectively capture the essence of the homophobic hysteria prominent during the time. On a whole however, the movement has been characterized by its post-modern approach to narrative and character, reworking history with “social construction” in mind. In this regard “gay” films carried the brand and stereotype of being experimental in nature, effectively “othering” the genre within the cinematic world, much like homosexuals were by the general populace. One particular film of the New Queer Cinema
movement, Gregg Akari’s *The Living End* (1992), manages to not only embody this unstable and hostile sentiment of the historical period, but does so by simultaneously restaging a successful narrative model from the Hollywood vault. By reapplying traditional rules of character and narrative within the “experimental” movement, Araki’s *The Living End*, emerges as a standout critique of gay prejudices within cinema and society. As a direct result of such techniques, Araki’s film consequently opened the door for the marketability and commercialization of the queer genre.

In order to appreciate and understand the full discourse of the film, it’s important to deconstruct the sentiments of the historical period which the film comments on. During the first half of the 1980s, when the disease emerged as a spreading epidemic, there was no concrete scientific explanation given to satisfy the worried individual. The simple fact that the disease seemed to be more concentrated within the homosexual population sparked an unfathomable amount of speculation about its origin and how it could be contracted. AIDS was discussed in a variety of veins during this time period including; “As an irreversible, untreatable, and invariably fatal infectious disease that threatens to wipe out the whole world…A gay plague, probably emanating from San Francisco…A Soviet plot to destroy capitalists” (Treichler 12). The vast disparity and in some instances utter absurdity of these statements, that at one time or another were scientifically credited, only captures a fraction of the hysteria that surrounded the disease. Since its inception into the consciousness of the human mind, particularly the mind of the American, the biggest fear swirling around AIDS has been the overall uncertainty the disease lends itself to.

The early research involving the AIDS virus was focused on understanding how the disease attacked and reacted within the human body. Findings were released explaining that
AIDS traveled through the bloodstream as well as how the most notable function of the disease was that those infected don’t die as a direct result of the virus. Instead AIDS attacks and destroys the immune system making infected individuals susceptible to a variety of other illnesses that eventually lead to death. Compound that idea with the fact that there was no known cure for AIDS, and the potential for widespread panic manifests. Panic with respect to AIDS in the early 1980s emerged through the creation of a scapegoat, the male homosexual population, which first exhibited symptoms of the disease. “In June 1981 the Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report reported on 5 cases of Pneumocystis carinii pneumonia (PCP) in previously healthy gay men from Los Angeles. This was the first indication of immune deficiency in this population” (McCombie 11). With a plausible, but unconfirmed explanation in place, the rumors and speculation pin-balled out of control. The stereotyping was in a way natural, male homosexuals had already been excluded within dominant society and classified as “others” due to their sexual orientation. Similarly, ill-informed concept that AIDS was a gay disease justified the persecution and prejudice towards the entire homosexual population, fostering sentiments of homophobia within the everyday individual.

With the high-risk sexual activity that some gay males practiced, (multiple sexual partners, anal intercourse, no contraceptives worn) an attitude evolved that those infected with AIDS deserved what they got. “The promiscuous gay male body-early reports noted that AIDS victims reported having had as many as a thousand sexual partners-made it clear that, even if AIDS turned out to be a sexually transmitted disease it would not be a commonplace one.” (Treichler 19). Those carrying HIV were in many cases avoided or abandoned, even by friends and loved ones, as rumors circulated that the disease could be contagious through close contact or proximity to infected individuals. These ignorant ideologies were tested in 1985 when Rock
Hudson, an American film icon and signifier of masculinity and heterosexuality, publicly announced he was infected with the AIDS virus. By 1986 scientifically supported data revealed that the disease could be transmitted through blood across genders and races through both homo and heterosexual activity. “Common sense should tell one that a virus ignores the sexual orientation of its potential host. Yet some have received the claims of heterosexual transmission with astonishment, skepticism and outright denial (McCombie 17). This continued lack of consciousness in the midst of new scientific fact helps portray how the stigma of AIDS being a “gay” disease continued to thrive within some of the populace. Whether to continue to use the disease as a rationalization tool for their own homophobia, or as an excuse to continue to condemn the homosexual lifestyle in general, the ideology remained within the populace.

From this historical context, a greater sense of understanding can be discerned from the New Queer Cinema movement. The movement effectively captured the unrest and frustration from the homosexual perspective, directed toward the media and the dominating heterosexual culture. Nowhere is this concept more apparent than in Gregg Araki’s film, *The Living End*. The film juxtaposes two HIV positive individuals, (Luke a rage-filled drifter and Jon a bored, high-strung writer) against one another, setting up an inevitable collision between them. The collision manifests as a result of spontaneous and guiltless murder, introducing a theme sutured throughout the movie of what life can be like when there’s nothing to lose and you’re pissed off. These two characters are marked for death and tired of the prejudices against them, so they pose the question; why not go out in a wild and risk-ridden blaze of glory throwing remorse and caution to the wind? One particularly effective example of this mentality occurs when Luke uses a new stereo, purchased with a stolen credit card, to bash in the head of a racist stranger. Essentially Luke enacts on screen the deep rooted desires of homosexual males, whose
community and lifestyle choices have been condemned since their discovery. References to a heterosexual domination of society are inherently apparent throughout the film. The doctor that diagnoses Jon with HIV, maintains an apathetic demeanor toward and noticeable distance from him during their encounter. This use of character performance and blocking suggests to the audience the overall distance between the two sexual orientations and the disdain that the heterosexual population exhibited toward homosexuals.

The series of violence within the film demonstrated by the gay pair against the society and system which has repressed and “othered” them effectively suggests the palpable hostility of the time period. This string of violent and aggressive behavior climaxes when Luke kills a police officer, putting the pair on the road and on the run. While on the road, the violence subsides as well as the sense that these two are ever in real danger of being caught. In fact there isn’t even a single scene where the police are shown in pursuit of the two individuals. As these plot points fade into the backdrop, the pair share their mentalities on the world and existence while facing their impending mortality. As a result the films subtext becomes less about the tumultuous times of the era and more about the creation of a collective identity aimed at disrupting established conventions of homosexuals. A closer reading of the films narrative structure reveals the unmistakable parallel between another “pair on the run movie” from mainstream cinema, Bonnie and Clyde (Penn, 1967).

While re-writing the history of this well told tale from Hollywood’s golden years is itself a post-modern concept, that in large part is the extent of the post-modern content within the film. The narrative structure itself lies on the conventional side of the spectrum when compared to the avant-garde style of many other films within the movement. In fact, references to post-modernism itself can be noticed during the film such as the Andy Warhol posters and paintings
adorning various walls in Jon’s home. It begs to answer the question, what would Araki’s rationale be for subverting the genre specifics of not only traditional cinema, but to a certain extent New Queer Cinema as well. The answer comes from what is termed an oppositional consciousness or ways of thinking that emerge within the struggles of subordinate groups. “Since the dawn of cinema, gay cinema was synonymous with experimentation because dominant culture has never provided a story of homosexual life and so no formal structure was available for filmmakers to simply assume” (Gamson 10). In that regard gay films which choose to subvert traditional formations of narrative structure, through expressive aesthetic choices within the film, reaffirm stereotypes created against the genre. The unconventional alterations queer cinema filmmakers made to narrative actually allowed society to ignore or dismiss their existence and overall significance as cultural art. Araki’s film on the other hand utilizes the conventions of dominant culture to provide a story of homosexual life, successfully giving context to the lifestyle.

The film critic B. Ruby Rich embodies this idea in an article published in Village Voice, where she first coined the term New Queer Cinema. “There are two ways to dismiss gay film; one is to say “Oh it’s just a gay film”; the other, to proclaim, “Oh it’s a great film, it just happens to be gay” (Rich 34). In that regard a new reading or justification for Araki’s film can be seen. The Living End makes a direct comment on the stereotypes that exist within cinema through a close reading of its subtext. Araki acknowledges the stereotypes and prejudices made against gay film by using a conventional narrative structure in a gay film. The film then in this manner cannot be so easily dismissed as another “gay” film by the cinematic world because its structure mirrors that of classical Hollywood cinema. The Living End and films similar to it carried the weight and meaning of New Queer Cinema, but managed to do so in a way which forced the
cinematic world to acknowledge their content. Rich acknowledges this point by describing the success of *The Living End* and other queer films that embodied this idea shown at Sundance Film Festival in 1992. “They were great precisely because of the ways in which they were gay. Their queerness was no more arbitrary than their aesthetics, no more than their individual preoccupations with interrogating history” (Rich 34). These “great” films of the movement were not dismissed by cinematic powerhouses in the industry, but consequently queer cinema began being seen for its popularity beyond the gay community and overall marketability.

As a result, queer cinema in the mid-late 90s was accepted and embraced to an extent by mainstream Hollywood, which adapted and watered down the films from their core essence. Ironically, it was the misinterpretation of such films as *The Living End*, which ignited the change. Instead of being seen as a critique of the disparity of heterosexual vs. homosexual culture, the film and movement was seen by the big wigs in Hollywood as introducing a new profitable medium to tell the time-old stories. Films such as *Happy Together* (Kar-Wai’s, 1997) and *High Art* (Cholodenko, 1998) that have been branded with the “queer” label in these modern times in many ways completely abandoned the fresh, edgy and stylistically unique characteristics that had served to define the movement. The films enjoyed too much commercial success and created stars out of their actors, results that served to undermine the original purpose of New Queer Cinema.

The queer movement was never about money or commercial success, instead it owed more to the repression it represented through its film’s aesthetics. In an article written eight years after his first, Rich acknowledges the transition. “Lacking the concentrated creative presence and focused community responsiveness of the past, the New Queer Cinema has become just another niche market, another product line pitched at one particular type of discerning consumer” (Rich,
These modern films are missing the weight and suggestively embodied by their predecessors which defined the movement. The transition can be explained by what some theorists have termed the culture industry, defined as conglomeration of those which aim to control and manipulate the forms of media and entertainment which have an impact on society, thus controlling and manipulating society itself. A modern example of such a film is *Brokeback Mountain* (Lee 2005). The film won three academy awards and had tremendous commercial success but distracted audiences from its “questionable” content through the inclusion of big name stars such as Heath Ledger and Jake Gyllenhaal. “In the old days the New Queer Cinema tended to be peopled by friends or lovers of the director, or sympathetic actors who wanted to help put the picture over. Now it's turned out that starring in a gay-or lesbian-themed film can be a career-making move” (Rich, 2000).

In juxtaposition to the movement which gave birth to such subject modern queer cinema is an underwhelming novelty which doesn’t carry the creativity or meaning of the authentic moment in time.

In essence, New Queer Cinema emerged in the early 1980s as a response to a hostile moment in America history, manifesting from a generated fear of the AIDS virus. The movement effectively captured the prejudice and stereotyping against the homosexual population and through its film’s subtexts provided an opportunity to form a new collective identity. Proper recognition and appreciation for the movement could not be discerned without a deconstruction of the time period itself. Through this historical constructivist approach, new readings to films of the movement such as Araki’s *The Living End* can be made. While the film successfully captured the tension between the heterosexual and homosexual population of the time, through its narrative structure Araki’s film also commented on the domination of heterosexual culture on society. By subverting some of the post-modern conventions and traditions of the movement,
*The Living End* opened the door for the commercialization of the movement by the culture industry which effectively pacified the collective identity which homosexuals intended to create through the film movement.
Works Cited


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