

Dossier

QUEER PUBLICITY

A Dossier on Lesbian and Gay Film Festivals

The essays gathered here were presented at "Queer Publicity," a panel organized in conjunction with the tenth anniversary of the New York Lesbian and Gay Film Festival (the New Festival) in May 1998. The panel was held at New York University under the auspices of the Queer Faculty Group conference "Queer Publics/Queer Privates." This dossier is intended to make visible the critical and cultural work performed by the lesbian and gay film festival sector in a changing media culture.

Introduction: On Exhibitionism

Patricia White

The number of mainstream lesbian and gay representations has increased exponentially in the past decade. With *Ellen's* unprecedented prime-time run last season and a crowded field of 1997 Gay and Lesbian Alliance against Defamation (GLAAD) "wide-release" media award nominees (*In and Out*, *My Best Friend's Wedding*, *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, *As Good as It Gets*), we may well wonder if this is as good as it gets. Fortunately, during this period lesbian and gay film and video festivals have maintained a crucial forum for *self*-representation and have constituted a distinctive feature of queer life. The range of work they have exhibited is so various in length, format, budget, style, politics, address, national or regional provenance, and sexual explicitness as to resist any unitary definition of queer media. The nature of these representations is less the concern of the essays gathered here than lesbian and gay film festivals as contexts of reception.

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Indeed, as Martha Gever points out, “our identities are constituted as much in the event as in the images we watch.”¹

Besides giving public exposure to thousands of works (and, as exhibition venues, *causing* work to be produced, as mushrooming annual submissions bear out) and—one hopes—garnering publicity for gay and lesbian media, film- and video makers, and organizations, the festivals constitute a counter public sphere, providing a collective experience and a literal site of *critical* reception. What they exhibit and make visible, alongside their programming, is an audience. In turn it has become possible to stage “outings” (“we are watching”), to issue demands for images more accurately reflecting community diversity, and to stand up and be counted by market researchers. For paradoxically, the audiences that festivals identify and address are now targeted by a growing number of feature films whose distributors’ release plans bypass the festivals (GLAAD even gave a special award to Harvey and Bob Weinstein of Miramax, one such distributor).

To be sure, the festivals have proliferated as rapidly as such crossover films (even as identity-based events such as women’s film festivals have flagged). Popcorn Q (<http://www.planetout.com/kiosk/popcornq>), a Web site for lesbian and gay film and video, lists nearly a hundred, from Hong Kong to Iceland; from well-established events in Toronto, Montreal, Los Angeles, and Chicago to regional festivals and to fledgling transgender events in London and San Francisco (cities that already support high-profile lesbian and gay film festivals). New York sustains both the New York Lesbian and Gay Film Festival (the New Festival), on whose board and programming committee I serve, and the Mix Festival, dedicated to experimental lesbian and gay media, with spin-offs in Mexico and Brazil.² Since annual programming tends to travel, festival audiences comprise a transnational queer public. Although the New Festival’s tenth anniversary, the occasion of “Queer Publicity,” marked only part of this history (the venerable San Francisco event presented by Frameline is now in its twenty-second year), the decade it commemorated has coincided with a decidedly new period in this type of exhibition. B Ruby Rich, who identified the features of the “New Queer Cinema” of the nineties, recounts this historical shift in her essay here, “Collision, Catastrophe, Celebration: The Relationship between Gay and Lesbian Film Festivals and Their Publics.”³

When it debuted (several years after the demise of the New York Gay Film Festival), the New Festival had the proud mission to serve “the gay and lesbian community.” Thus it encouraged the not unreasonable belief that it was our civic duty as members of that community to go to the movies. But could we presume to know who “we” were? One cannot predict the loose collectivity brought together

by moviegoing. At film festivals the “movement” may simply sit still. Festivals, however political in conception, have always had to think of lesbian, gay, and queer identities in terms of consumption. One New Festival program ad illustrates the ease with which the “community” is identified with a market segment: “Where diversity is a way of life: Tower proudly serves the gay & lesbian community with a full selection of CDs, books, videos & magazines.”⁴

As Eric O. Clarke’s essay, “Queer Publicity at the Limits of Inclusion,” forcefully demonstrates, lesbian and gay film festivals present an opportunity to think about the concept of publicity because the term’s commercial, media-oriented sense clearly overlaps with the sense of having a voice in the rational-political public sphere. If the media seem to be “all about” homosexuality at the moment, homosexuality seems increasingly to be *all* about media. Clarke’s careful attention to questions of value helps us conceptualize our constitution as public subjects of niche marketing and assess the risks of homo-genizing ourselves. The syndrome he identifies as homosexual “phantom normalcy” removes us from the diversity visible at actual festival sites—both on screen and in the auditorium.

For festivals remain community-based rather than industry-oriented events, despite a touch of corporate branding, and function in a climate in which arts organizations and artists themselves are devalued and defunded. Richard Fung’s essay, “Programming the Public,” foregrounds the politics of *address*. Within a festival’s already multiple address to a lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender public, curated programs and individual works inscribe specific forms of address, which all share both a physical and a discursive site. At screenings, multiple publics experience forms of collectivity that involve desire, identification, and disidentification—forms as akin to a party as to a meeting or a demographic category. Internal contradictions prompt creative responses. Decisions about gender- or race-based (what Fung calls “dedicated”) 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. The festival public encompasses gender, ethnic, and racial differences and widely divergent communities of taste. Questions of high and low, glossy and cheap, art and entertainment—questions that animate film and video reception—sharply re-pose the paradoxes of identity, access, and power. As Pierre Bourdieu has shown, tastes are rooted in economics, geography, education, and language, and their hierarchies often reinscribe gender, race, and class differences.⁵ Dismissals of the vapid assimilationist values of the romantic comedies and coming-out stories that festivals are often obliged, by economic and publicity demands, to high-

light need to take into account viewers' varying cultural competences, their access to innovative forms.

Not surprisingly, the most salient splits—and the most stubborn programming issues—fall along gender lines. There is still a divergence between male and female work at lesbian and gay film festivals (in the average length if not the number of submissions, in production values, in format, etc.), and it corresponds to differences among the members of the audience: their histories of movie consumption, their cultural capital. (The 1998 New Festival's opening-night feature neatly sidestepped any assumption that lesbians lack urbane art-house tastes by simply declaring itself "High Art.") As "Queer Publicity" moderator Roger Hallas pointed out, "Gay film festivals have their roots in different spaces of exhibition where queer work has historically been shown—art cinema, underground cinema, porn theaters and consciousness-raising political contexts (gay liberation/lesbian feminism). Each type of exhibition posits a different kind of spectatorship." Modes of spectatorship specific to festivals' multiple publics and histories compete and are transformed in their institutionalized forms.

Institutional histories are apparent when it comes to sexual representation, surely one of the most successful forms of cinematic address and one of the most contradictory interpellations in the lesbian and gay festival context. The dissymmetric history of opportunity for public consumption of sexual imagery by lesbians and gay men has been creatively addressed by film festivals—memorably in a mixed-gender, multi-erotic-media installation organized at an "adult entertainment center" for the Mix Festival by Jim Lyons, Christine Vachon, and Derek Kardos in 1993. The festival allowed "space" for women to go on location and to transgress gendered zoning restrictions. But this historical dissymmetry continues to structure reception: when the New Festival showed some fairly straight-minded commercial erotica made by women directors for women viewers of cable television—the idea was that collective consumption, achieved through a shift in exhibition venue, would render it a different kind of work—the program provoked one of those scenes of vociferous lesbian protest that Rich's essay details.

In the rhetoric, the programming, the works, and the audiences, gender lines are increasingly problematized and blurred at lesbian and gay film festivals. The emergence of transgender film festivals is a sign of the vitality of festival culture rather than of its identity-based restrictions. The mythologized gender divide—the unspoken threat that festivals will split down the middle—is better conceived as a productive tension, a mark of multiplicity. If the rational-political public sphere is uneasy with mass entertainment and sexuality and with the association of both with femininity, the queer public sphere in which the festivals oper-

ate promises an important refunctioning, of which these divisions, contradictions, and debates are symptoms. Taken together, the essays in “Queer Publicity” attempt to diagnose the condition.

The “Queer Publicity” panel, held in an academic rather than a festival venue, received dubious publicity in the form of Roger Kimball’s coverage of the “Queer Publics/Queer Privates” conference at New York University. Without mentioning the topic of film festivals, Kimball included quotations from all three panelists, among other participants, to substantiate his muddled claim that queer theory is “not primarily an intellectual or theoretical movement, but a social phenomenon.”⁶ If the festival was unrecognizable without the movies, queer theory travels well in the festival context, as the involvement of all of the panel participants in both spheres indicates. Annual festivals feature panels on such topics as race and representation, pornography and art cinema, seventies film criticism, and stars and fandoms, and lectures by film scholars such as Richard Dyer and Judith Mayne acknowledge that those addressed by as well as in queer theory can be found among the moviegoing public. If, as Mayne cautions, a “critical audience” is not an automatic result of queer consumption, the festivals have a definite pedagogical function in shaping one.⁷ For example, documentary, international, series, and retrospective types of programming address different audiences and address audiences differently. But theoretical debates on queer publics can be equally well served by the institutional and discursive example of lesbian and gay film festivals, which are also excellent test cases for film theory’s turn from textual to reception studies and to the conditions of cinema’s status as a (potential) counterpublic sphere.⁸

The New Queer Cinema, it is now familiar to observe, garnered publicity mainly for feature-length narrative films that could travel beyond lesbian and gay festivals. At best, these works “queered” both cinematic forms and the contexts of their reception. At worst, their innovations were assimilated to a pattern of self-congratulatory art-house consumption (queer films directed by mainly white and male cine-literates offering a new version of the kinky sexuality that first recommended postwar European cinema to U.S. audiences). Short films and videos, documentaries, transnational works—often produced by women, youth, people of color—did not fit under the rubric of New Queer Cinema. New and queer as they might be individually, they did not meet the market conditions that organize the wider social field of production, distribution, exhibition, and publicity that is properly called *cinema*. But lesbian and gay film and video festivals present these works *in* the cinema, as social phenomena, not just as ephemeral products or even as texts. Imagine the New Queer Cinema as a venue—like a movie palace. In his

essay Clarke explains that “publicness is a quality, not a place.” Lesbian and gay film festivals, as they raise larger issues concerning mediated identities and communities and the queering of the public sphere, help redefine that quality, but they are also events that take *place*. They are, as Dorothy insists about Oz, “a real, truly live place.”

Notes

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1. Martha Gever, “The Names We Give Ourselves,” in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. Russell Ferguson et al. (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art; Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990), 201.
2. For a sociological perspective on the issues treated in this dossier see Joshua Gamson, “The Organizational Shaping of Collective Identity: The Case of Lesbian and Gay Film Festivals in New York,” *Sociological Forum* 11 (1996): 231–61.
3. See also B Ruby Rich, “Homo Pomo: The New Queer Cinema,” in *Women and Film: A Sight and Sound Reader*, ed. Pam Cook and Philip Dodd (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 164–74; and Rich, “Reflections on a Queer Screen,” *GLQ* 1 (1993): 83–91.
4. New Festival program, 1998, 28.
5. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984).
6. Roger Kimball, “What Next, a Doctorate of Depravity?” *Wall Street Journal*, 5 May 1998.
7. Judith Mayne, *Cinema and Spectatorship* (London: Routledge, 1993), 157–72.
8. The papers presented at the conference “Queer Publics/Queer Privates” contributed to these debates. See also Michael Warner and Lauren Berlant, “Sex in Public,” *Critical Inquiry* 24 (1998): 547–66. For an important argument on silent cinema as an alternative public sphere for immigrant women see Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), 90–125.

Collision, Catastrophe, Celebration: The Relationship between Gay and Lesbian Film Festivals and Their Publics

B Ruby Rich

The past two decades have witnessed phenomenal growth in the size and number of film festivals focused on gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender work and representation. The festivals predominant in the seventies and eighties, conceived as political interventions and playing to small, self-selected audiences, have morphed into the large events of the nineties, complete with corporate sponsors and huge audiences that return annually and grow exponentially. This essay focuses not on the success stories or myths of progress, however, but on a particular point of stress. What happens when audiences reject programmers' choices? Why does this dissonance occur? What are the implications and consequences?

A few examples help describe the territory. I first experienced this dissonance in 1982, when I viewed the Italian film *Immacolata e concetta* (dir. Salvatore Piscicelli, 1979) at the gay and lesbian film festival in New York City. I had already seen the film at that spring's New Directors/New Films festival: in that heterosexual crowd, the film was nonetheless so devastatingly sexy and tragic that my friend Joan grabbed me when the lights came up and whispered, "We have to kill them all now, because they know too much." So I could hardly wait to see it again with the lesbian crowd at the festival—until I got there. The snickering began early on, escalated whenever the plot turns moved from acceptable territory to rawer elements (jealousy, bisexuality, pregnancy), and turned to anger with the murder at the film's end. The starkly convincing realism of the film was repudiated. With this audience, laughter took the place of empathy. Furious, I stopped members of the audience out in the street after the screening to ask them why they had laughed. "Because it was a prick movie," spat one butch at me. "And I came out here with my girlfriend to have a good time."

Throughout the eighties and nineties, other films have taken turns at playing lightning rod for the festivals' gay and lesbian audiences. Sheila McLaughlin's *She Must Be Seeing Things* showed at the San Francisco Gay and Lesbian Film Festival in 1987 right after its premiere at the women's film festival in Creteil, France. A breakthrough film for lesbian representation, it was informed by the sex controversies of the early eighties in which pitched battles were fought over the acceptability of practices involving dildos, bondage, sadomasochism, butch and fem roles, pornography, even penetrative sex. The film pushed buttons for a Bay Area audience unwilling to have its borders expanded by McLaughlin's free-ranging fiction. The fact that its tale of a lesbian relationship in crisis cen-

tered on one woman's nightmarish paranoia of heterosexual betrayal by her lover didn't help: fantasy and action became conflated in the minds of the audience members, who objected in no uncertain terms. In San Francisco objection took the form of grumbling; in London, in a workshop scene reported by British cultural critic Sue O'Sullivan, the antiporn lesbian audience turned militant and tried to rip the film out of the projector. Its representation of lesbian sex play, betrayal, and insecurity was too much for them to bear, but their response was cloaked in ideological rectitude.

Canadian filmmaker Midi Onodera's *Ten Cents a Dance: Parallax* (1986) also stirred up some surprising lesbian resistance, in part because of its tripartite structure: a lesbian scene, in which the women talk and talk but barely touch; a gay scene, in which the men fuck and fuck but barely speak; and a heterosexual scene, which turns out to be paid phone sex. The beginning of the movie was okay, but the absence of further lesbianism angered the audience, which as usual came to the festival expecting 100 percent lesbian content. The whimsy of the lesbian filmmaker's satire was lost on them, as was her avant-garde split-screen strategy.

In Amsterdam in 1991 I eagerly awaited the Dutch lesbian reaction to screenings of Su Friedrich's and Sadie Benning's works, which showed off some of the best U.S. lesbian visions. To my amazement, the Dutch women scorned them as "so badly made." Their verdict ignored the aesthetic importance of avant-garde film and obliterated a breakthrough moment for video, because they condemned both Friedrich and Benning for failing to deliver the glossy feature-film products they wanted. They felt that gay men got such films and insisted that the lesbian avant-garde consigned the women it portrayed to aesthetically inferior, less entertaining "movies." Categories were severely self-regulated in Amsterdam, on all fronts. The fags flocked to the guy movies, the girls to the dyke shows. There were even separate festival T-shirts: one with Rock Hudson hugging John Wayne for the guys, one with Marilyn Monroe and Brigitte Bardot for the girls. When British critic-producer Mark Nash requested the shirt with girls instead of guys on it, he set off a crisis. No, he could not have it. He had to wear the shirt with the guys.

Similar parochialism doomed festival screenings of Friedrich's 1991 film, *First Comes Love*, which used her footage of heterosexual weddings to make its point about the need to legalize gay and lesbian marriages around the globe. Alas, by the time the rolling title at the end revealed the filmmaker's strategy (a long list of the countries where gay and lesbian marriage is illegal), queer audiences at the mainstream Toronto International Film Festival were in a fury over being forced to sit through these heterosexual ceremonies. There was little room for modulation with this crowd.

Eventually, trouble crossed the gender aisle and set up camp among festivals' gay male audiences. It took the New Queer Cinema to start pushing buttons. In the early years filmmakers had some leeway. Tom Kalin got away with *Swoon* (1992), even though one of the European publicity campaigns touted it as the film that "put the homo back in homicide." But by the late nineties, gay male audiences had caught up to seventies lesbian-feminism and wanted positive images from their movies. When the late Mark Finch programmed *Postcards from America* (dir. Steve McLean, 1994) as part of the posh benefit tribute to producer Christine Vachon, it turned into his darkest hour. The lesbians in the house were mad at the exclusively male focus, while the gay men were furious at the "negative" representations. Hustling and drugs and alienation were not the image of gayness they wanted projected to America.

The following year *Frisk* (dir. Todd Vervow, 1995) upped the ante. Gay men nearly rioted when it was featured at a tribute to Strand's Marcus Hu, distributor and producer of the film, who feared for his life. Based on Dennis Cooper's novel of the same name, *Frisk* had the nerve to explore fantasies of murder in the context of anonymous sexual encounters. As in the book, the status of the murders as fantasy or reality was left ambiguous, but that ambiguity was rejected by the audience, which objected to the film as if it advocated serial killing. Similar objections greeted Ira Sachs's film *The Delta* (1997), which took a courageous look at the race and class conflicts at the source of the gay male sex-for-hire world. Once again audiences rebelled, this time against the film's grittily authentic representation of a rich white boy from Memphis society and the mixed-race Vietnamese hustler whom he picks up and who falls in love with him. As with *Immacolata e concetta* a decade and a half earlier, a murder at the film's end set off a conflagration of audience opposition. The Andrew Cunanan crime spree only weeks later riveted the nation and should have made these audiences reconsider their rejection of a film that went far to explain just such boy-toy behavior.

No doubt these examples will accumulate as the New Queer Cinema continues to mature and audiences continue to elaborate their own agendas. If this were all simply a matter of conflicting tastes, as with some mass-media assessments of mainstream festivals that claim to have no particular agenda apart from the specious one of quality, there wouldn't be much point in my tracking such incidents. But in the context of similar tensions that surface at other specialty festivals—whether Asian American, Jewish, Native American, or Latino—these points of conflict may have something to tell us about how gay and lesbian communities define and construct themselves and about the part culture has to play in those self-descriptions.

Gay and lesbian film festivals are uniquely positioned within the community because they deploy sacred notions of sexuality and oppression simultaneously as keys to identity and do so with an insistence as powerful as it is volatile. Audiences come to them with particular expectations. One survey conducted by the San Francisco festival a few years ago uncovered a surprising statistic: 80 percent of the audience never went to movie theaters the rest of the year. Were they all lesbian and gay coparents with VCR habits? Moreover, 80–90 percent of the works shown at gay and lesbian film festivals never play elsewhere. These figures suggest the existence of a world outside the mainstream, with its own communities, markets, and customs. What position do film festivals occupy, exactly? Is a gay, lesbian, bi, or trans film festival comparable to a bar? a gym? a club? a community center? a softball game? a queer conference? a magazine? a daytime talk show?

What we do know about film festivals is that they are frequently symbols of sociopolitical ambition. Most famous is the story of the Venice Film Festival, whose claim to be the world's very first film festival is somewhat clouded by its having been founded by Mussolini. Marcos started a film festival in Manila; the Shah of Iran started one in Tehran. After achieving independence, a joke once ran, a country has to do three things: design a flag, launch an airline, and found a film festival.

Gay and lesbian film festivals, which like film festivals in general have proliferated in the nineties, pose slightly different problems because they constitute communities within a larger society. They offer spaces where diverse queer publics can frame their attendance as a formation of community. They may well be comparable to such traditional populist gatherings as circuses, carnivals, courtrooms, and even sporting events. Perhaps they are more properly compared to opera (in its older proletarian stage) or to Shakespeare (ditto). Perhaps they are festivals in the oldest sense of the word, serving the important functions of instilling faith and inspiring agency. Perhaps attendance at them should be viewed as a form of pilgrimage for the faithful.

This kind of communion reinforces the faith of the faithful, assures supplicants of their worthiness, creates a bond to strengthen them individually once back in the larger world, puts audiences back in touch with shared experiences and values. However, the same dynamic creates a version of community that can be prescriptive and exclusive. 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. A six-pack and *Jeffrey*

(dir. Christopher Ashley, 1995). A six-pack and *Bound* (dir. Wachowski brothers, 1996). They just wanna have fun. And if the occasion is serious, then it had better be predictable: the AIDS quilt or lesbian adoption rights.

Of course, this desire drives mainstream audiences as well: my late father would go to movies only if assured of seeing a comedy. But for such politically constituted communities to have such complacent expectations is troubling, given the festivals' history of commitment to exploring new representations (across gender, race, or class) and new systems of representation. Their mandate, after all, is not to show the same matinee of *In and Out* that can be seen at any multiplex during the same season. In that sense, as the festivals try to stay true to their aesthetic and ideological agendas and as their audiences grow ever larger, the opportunities for conflict between them multiply.

There have always been contradictions and battles within the lesbian and gay community: gender splits, confrontations between academic and activist populations, fights between yuppie and on-the-dole contingents, mutual disdain between advocates of respectability and champions of radical rebellion. Cinematically, such conflicts have been played out both over aesthetic categories (avant-garde versus mainstream) and over the nature of characters or plots (the "Is it good for the Jews?" yardstick). In this regard, two films that challenged people's expectations and crossed over onto the art-house circuit made 1998 a particularly interesting year: Lisa Cholodenko's *High Art* and John Maybury's *Love Is the Devil*. Both films upset utopian views of gay and lesbian relations as inherently more equitable than or superior to their heterosexual counterparts. Both push the envelope of queer consumer expectation and force viewers to confront the less visible and less savory aspects of our most intimate interactions with those we claim to love.

Both films air some seriously dirty laundry. *High Art* catalogs lesbian infidelity, bisexuality, drug use, social climbing, and opportunism. *Love Is the Devil*, a U.K. production about the painter Francis Bacon, addresses such issues as exploitation, physical abuse, ugly class relations, and cruelty. Both films peer at our treatment of one another with the rose-tinted glasses removed. Both bring Fassbinder to mind, notably *The Bitter Tears of Petra Von Kant* (1973) and *Fox and His Friends* (1975). As *High Art* and *Love Is the Devil* wend their way through exhibition and distribution channels, the responses they elicit from lesbian and gay audiences will indicate their current level of maturity. The films' uncompromising views of lesbian and gay life are badly needed today, when idealized images too often take the place of authentic ones.

Queer viewer responses are inflected by something far more specific and

complex than the subjective tastes governing mainstream movie choices. Queer audiences see themselves as complicit in these representations, as if they were compromised or validated by them, and the cathexis they experience surpasses other audiences' investments. But there is seldom room for polymorphous perversity in the reactions of queer audiences, which too often accept or reject films and videotapes according to the acceptability of the representations they offer.

It is as though these works were tests—not tests of the audience (of its resilience or imaginative power or daring), alas, but tests of the filmmakers (of their obedience to community standards, their efforts to comply with the audience's expectations, their earned approval rating). I beg to differ. I continue to enter the darkened halls of movie theaters and festivals in search of new experiences. I continue to hope that my status as critic will not separate me from the community with which I watch these movies. I am ready to give up the game of “smart critic, stupid audience” if only they (you?) will give it up, too. Then film festivals will finally own their spirit of adventure, and we, as audiences, may finally get the films we deserve.

Queer Publicity at the Limits of Inclusion

Eric O. Clarke

Homoeroticism has gone public like never before. As an embodied identity for public persons and media characters and as a reference point in literary and visual culture, intellectual and political debates, and commercial media, homoeroticism seems to have become a staple, if conflicted, feature of the U.S. public sphere. In the national lesbian and gay press there have been triumphal narratives about an unprecedented visibility within public forms of representation, from television situation comedies, Hollywood films, glossy magazines, and lawmaking bodies to educational institutions and corporate marketing practices. “Visibility” has thus become the privileged sign of what is deemed an increasingly successful fight for lesbian and gay justice, legitimacy, and inclusion.

While the celebratory tone of narratives about lesbian and gay inclusion in the public sphere seems at first glance to be warranted, such narratives fail to ask how this inclusion is defined and on what terms it is granted. In its quest to secure inclusion, mainstream lesbian and gay politics in the United States has sought to reassure straight America that lesbians and gay men are “just like everyone else,” and in this sense it seems to have restricted itself to a phantom normalcy. It is tempting to read this strategy simply as an understandable and appropriate response to a pathologizing homophobia or, alternatively, as an

impoverished restriction imposed by mainstream lesbian and gay politics and media culture. Both readings have some truth to them. However, neither adequately explains the problematic entanglements between homoerotic representation and the inclusive procedures of the public sphere itself. The historical and structural nature of these entanglements and the normalizing representations they generate together comprise some of the most pressing concerns of queer politics and culture, especially with regard to alternative media and the formation and sustenance of queer counterpublics.

Traditionally, queer counterpublics, such as film festivals, have been formed largely as alternatives to the exclusion and stereotyping of queers perpetuated by mainstream commercial media and other dominant representational forms. I want to suggest that this counterpublic mission is at a crossroads. This is not earth-shattering news. As anyone who has been involved in projects like film festivals knows, the increasing commercial competition for queer-themed films threatens the survival of nonprofit, media-oriented, counterpublic institutions. While this competition seems to signal gains in the fight for the inclusion of queers in the public sphere, it also threatens to homogenize queer representation.

Even as the public sphere both draws on and legitimates specific forms of intimacy and erotic experience—indeed, is saturated by spectacles of intimacy, as Lauren Berlant has argued—those that do not conform to a heteronormative standard are abased and repudiated.¹ Paradoxically, the “affirming” spectacles of homoeroticism that one finds in contemporary public culture, and the embodied identities to which they are presumptively attached, largely conform to this heteronormative standard. The heroically bland, monochromatic homoeroticism found in the public sphere today pays for its admission with immiserating disavowals. By modeling homoerotic life along heteronormative lines, the inclusion of lesbians and gay men in the public sphere grants them a sense of entitlement, renouncing what defies or exceeds proprietary standards. In this way, the goal of representing lesbians and gay men as they “really are”—which is to say, “just like everyone else”—dissimulates the value codings that mediate such representations. The normalizing representations found in the public sphere have become the privileged signs of political progress for lesbians and gay men; the democratic ideals claimed by the public sphere require that we be critically vigilant of both the normative thrust and the material distribution of these ideals.

But what exactly is “the public sphere” or its cognate “publicity”? Why does inclusion in publicity venues seem to insist on “normalized” representations? To answer these questions, I will make three interrelated points. The first concerns the conceptual difficulties of translation. By translating the German word

Öffentlichkeit as “the public sphere,” English speakers tend to get the somewhat mistaken impression that it refers mainly to a space, a material site, like a public square or park. While it is true that the ideals of publicity live in and through specific institutions, such as parliaments or media outlets, these institutions have only a normative relation to publicity. The German term is more an abstract noun than a material thing, and as such its most proximate translation is “publicness.” The term *publicity* used to have this sense in English, but it has now acquired a more restricted denotation. This is not simply an academic quibble. By insisting that *Öffentlichkeit* is a quality and not a particular place, those who are disenfranchised from the institutions that claim publicness can ask more insistently whether or not these institutions actually embody this quality. Moreover, understanding publicness as a quality enables the disenfranchised to question, and to formulate alternatives to, the norms to which publicness supposedly refers. Questioning the normative definition and material distribution of publicness as a quality is crucial to counterhegemonic formulations of “public interest.”

My second point concerns these formulations. The representations offered by the institutions that lay claim to publicness have a presumptive authenticity. However, the homogenization of values and representations that inclusion in the public sphere demands indicates that this inclusion requires deferred (and abased) remainders: queer persons and interests that would doubtless seem out of place on a city council or in an IKEA commercial. In this sense inclusion in the public sphere is mediated through value relations that belie institutional claims to authenticity. Rather than a transparent representation of minority concerns, inclusion entails fundamental transformations in a group’s self-identified interests. These transformations compress and thereby dissimulate processes of value determination.

My third point concerns these processes. Inclusion in the public sphere requires sanitized representations and dissimulates them as authentic through three interpenetrating modes of value determination. The first treats heteronormative morality as an adequate ground for democratic representation, citizenship, and social enfranchisement. The value coding of sexuality as ideally heteronormative, even where homoeroticism is concerned, has meant that queer efforts to become an integral part of a deliberative (however fictional) public have more often than not necessitated self-censorship (not least because of the uneasy relationship of sex to the ideal of a deliberative public). Elements of queer life that do not conform to bourgeois decency and propriety are expunged with little, if any, regard for the imaginative diversity of queer experiences. Over the past few years, for example, the denigration and disavowal of public sexual cultures within les-

bian and gay media themselves have confirmed the structural requirement of homogeneity working in concert with traditional sexual mores. Conformity to historically particular, class-inflected, yet universalized values has thus contoured what will and will not count as publicly legitimate elements of queer life. This mode of value determination recapitulates a historical problem: the inappropriate constriction of publicity through unreflexive moral codes of individual behavior.

In the second mode of value determination, queer interests are mediated by value formations unrelated to, yet often mistaken for, publicity's ideal of participatory democracy. Today, the most pronounced and powerful example is a commercial determination of value. This moment of value determination is paradoxically the most blatant but—perhaps for that very reason—the most unremarked. One finds it in every Absolut vodka image in lesbian and gay magazines, in every corporate sponsorship of a lesbian and gay event, and in every “community card pack” chock-full of lesbian and gay advertisements. These marketing devices, designed to expropriate economic value, are unproblematically seen to grant the political value of equitable representation. Thus they reap a “social profit” in excess of, yet originating in the drive for, the monetary profits they may realize while elaborating a lesbian and gay market. The saturation of dominant publicity forums with capitalist determinations of value—even forums defined in relation to traditional ideals of democracy, such as maximal access to and participation in determining the public interest—melds the political and economic value that lesbian and gay inclusion would accrue. This moment of value determination thus highlights, with peculiar brilliance, the tense contradictions between the publicity ideals of distributional justice and equality and capitalism's inegalitarian modes of determining and distributing value. What pass as “affirmative” lesbian and gay representations are thus imbricated in economies of value that not only extend beyond the sexual but also severely problematize the progressive ends that such affirmations seek to achieve.

In the third mode of value determination, publicity venues, by claiming to present authentic representations of their legitimized constituencies, obscure the mediations through which authenticity takes shape. Value adjudicates the question of public legitimacy and thus determines in large measure the representational proxies that inclusion will proffer and that will accrue all the phantom authenticity of the native informant. The phantom authenticity of these proxies, in turn, occludes their mediation through the expropriating and/or exclusionary value determinations of the second mode. Their occlusion allows such proxies to be coded as politically progressive in terms of achieving equivalent public representation. Authenticity under the sign of equivalence enables images designed to con-

strict and extract value to be read unproblematically as if they were designed to bestow it. In this way lesbian and gay visibility politics measures moralized, commercial representations only by the yardstick of “positive images.” The latter, as homogenized proxies, are celebrated as if they signified equitable representation and, perhaps more important, equitable access to the means of representation. The dissimulation of mediated inauthenticity appeases demands for justice and thus justifies the subjunctive deferral of an emancipatory promise.

By opening up these compressed modes of value determination, we begin to attain a more complete understanding of the historical and structural dynamics underwriting queer publicity and the search for equivalence on its terms. The public sphere’s ability to correct its own historical exclusivity meets its limit when the public sphere’s presumptively universal, democratic norms prove incommensurate to an excluded group seeking legitimate representation. Inclusion demands not so much a reorientation of the public sphere and its norms as a reorientation of what is included.

This reorientation requires that queer counterpublicity articulate its interests not so much in terms of inclusion/exclusion, visibility/invisibility, and affirmation/homophobia as in terms of the representational norms and dynamics by which inclusion, visibility, and affirmation would be achieved. Despite their usefulness for understanding the structuring effects of homophobia, these oppositions do not exhaustively conceptualize the many value relations involved in the production, circulation, and representation of homoeroticism in the public sphere. As beneficial as working toward greater queer visibility can be, doing so more often than not leaves the value determinations that exceed the purview of homophobia or heterosexism largely unscrutinized. This is not to say that efforts toward antihomophobic representational inclusion can be dispensed with—far from it. In articulating what such inclusion might be like and on what terms it might be offered, however, one must examine the inclusive weight of norms neither reducible to nor utterly separable from homophobia. Corporate marketing aimed at (as well as offered by) lesbians and gay men, for example, is arguably nonhomophobic, but it also proffers quite particular normative images of lesbians and gay men as a supposedly lucrative market segment. Elaborating such a market segment, to which these images are meant to refer and appeal, corresponds to an interest in extracting from it economic value—which certainly includes but is not limited to profit margins. The lack of differentiation between commercial and (putatively) noncommercial spheres points, in fact, to the problematically general character of publicness itself.

I take this to be not just a political but also an ethical problem. For us to be

vigilant about the normative thrust and material distribution of publicness as an ideal, we as cultural critics and producers need to be as inventive in our ethical thinking as in our political thinking, particularly with regard to the saturation of publicity venues, such as the lesbian and gay press and even film festivals, with commercial interests. Even as they offer moralized images of queers, such interests have shown themselves to be arguably nonphobic. Indeed, one might claim that a commercial determination of value is often at odds with a moralized notion of publicity; conflicts between ABC/Disney and “family-values” groups over lesbian and gay representation are just one example. What is it about commercial activity that allows such uneven progress? Certainly, we should critique capitalist media for normalizing queer interests. But we must also come to terms with the contradictory progress that commercial interests seem able to advance. In other words, we must come to terms with this progress as both an irreversible historical development and a complex ethicopolitical challenge.

Notes

This essay is a condensed portion of the introduction to my book *Virtuous Vice: Homoeroticism in the Public Sphere*, forthcoming from Duke University Press. The issues I discuss here come not only from my role as an academic who works in queer theory but also from the four years I spent with the Pittsburgh International Lesbian and Gay Film Festival as a volunteer, as a board member, and as president. The 1990s have proved to be a complicated time to work with lesbian and gay film festivals, if for no other reason than the ambivalent impact that the relative commercialization of lesbian and gay film had on nonprofit festivals. This experience taught me much about the fraught relations between counterpublics and their official counterparts at the local and the national level.

1. Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997).

Programming the Public

Richard Fung

Whenever I go to a gay bathhouse, I'm struck by the ordinariness of so many of the men, who seem to evade all recognizable gay styles of masculinity and femininity: they aren't swishy or hypermasculine; they don't even have that soft butchness so well depicted by Paul Rudd in *The Object of My Affection*. Beyond the erotically imagined “straight-looking, straight-acting” men heavily sought in gay personal

ads, these men exude a regular guyness that seems just plain, well, straight, which is no doubt how some of them identify themselves.

If I were being rigorous, I'd contextualize this observation by pointing out that each such establishment has its own ambience and clientele or that in the unclothed environment of a steam bath, signs of gay acculturation must be detected right on the body: haircuts, piercings, neo-Celtic tattoos encircling the upper arm, evidence of the gym in the pecs, stiffness or flexibility in the hip. But rigor is not my aim. I recount this little epiphany merely as an example of the times when, for whatever reason, one is moved to ponder how extensive queer practice, if not community, must be: detectable gay men and lesbians represent only the tip of a queer iceberg.

Gay liberation has long used the slogan We Are Everywhere. But unlike women or "visible minorities," the preferred term for "people of color" in Canadian race-relations discourse, queers for the most part form an "invisible" minority that reveals itself, even to other queers, only through acts of queerness (from the use of discreet rainbow bumper stickers to the very public declarations of entertainers and politicians) or sites of community (Pride Day events, bars, community groups, women's golf tournaments, tearooms, film and video festivals). The more "underground" the venue, the lower the degree of identifiable gay and lesbian acculturation.

In this economy of queer visibility, gay and lesbian film and video festivals are especially important because they constitute a kind of double representation on and in front of the screen. So 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 in the same manner as a leather bar, a gay and lesbian synagogue, or a softball match does.

In 1997, the Inside Out Lesbian and Gay Film and Video Festival of Toronto programmed *Out at Work*, a film about gay and lesbian labor activists. Together with my partner, Tim McCaskell, I had previously worked with trade unions to bring gay labor historian Allan Bérubé to Toronto, so it was relatively easy to enlist organized labor in promoting the screening within union networks and in financing trips to Toronto for one of the film's codirectors, Kelly Anderson (the other is Tami Gold), and one of its subjects, auto worker Ron Woods. This screening was one of those rare sites at which gay and lesbian identities become articulated with labor issues.

The 1998 Inside Out festival featured several programs on transgender issues and one youth-curated program on work by and about young queers. As

with *Out at Work*, these screenings and the process of producing them served, through cosponsorships, speakers, and other efforts associated with them, to affirm, organize, and produce infrastructure for identities marginalized and/or emerging within gay and lesbian communities.

How one programs film and video in a festival both reflects and engages specific understandings of who queers are. Over the years the slotting of work by race and gender has shifted at Inside Out. Past programs have been segregated by gender, with men's and women's productions screened at different locations. In part this approach catered to a generation accustomed to gender-separate gay and lesbian social spaces, but it also made the offerings by and for lesbians more prominent in a context dominated by men's work. That this model of programming has persisted beyond the conditions that gave rise to it, however, betrays the mistaken assumption that identification is the principal or the only reason to choose a screening: people are interested only in seeing work about others like themselves. Most of our programs are now gender-mixed.

Inside Out has also largely moved away from ethnic or race-specific programming. Many film- and video makers "of color" resent dedicated screenings. In part, their resentment is a reaction to the "ghettoization" arising from curatorial laziness—it's Asian, so let's put it with other Asian work and include *rice* in the program title. But in the context of an art-world backlash against 1980s (U.S.-style) "multiculturalism," artists are also mindful of the lower status accorded racially hyphenated artists relative to "just artists." Never mind that a gay and lesbian festival is already identity-based and "segregated"; there is a well-founded concern that race-dedicated programs may spell smaller audiences and marginality within the festival. Yet a program of Asian shorts at the 1997 Inside Out festival drew a significant number of Asian viewers who did not attend any other screening, which points to identification as one important factor in how viewers select screenings.

In the post-gay liberation era, with its fragmentation of community and social groups, civil rights campaigns, and academic studies, gay and lesbian film and video festivals are among the few sites where different queer interests and communities intersect and interact (for the price of a ticket). They are also crucial sites of queer pedagogy, classrooms of queer images. But work, programming, and audience are interdependent. For example, how does Inside Out continue its support of queer workers without an *Out at Work* each year?

I've noticed two trends in the work submitted to and screened at gay and lesbian festivals, and each suggests different audience directions: the feature film and the feisty do-it-yourself short produced on super-8 or low-end video.

The blossoming of the gay and lesbian feature film is important to the widening of the audience at queer festivals; many people, even those with otherwise radical politics, want to see “real” movies. This trend is therefore exhilarating not only because of the strength of the works themselves but because of their growing legitimacy. As a maker of short videos, however, I am apprehensive about what the rise of the feature film may mean for the politics of queer representation. Although a handful of great filmmakers can offset a low budget with their creativity, feature filmmaking in general requires a level of financing and infrastructure that demands a return on the investment. This imperative may force on gay and lesbian filmmaking the codification and demographic appeal of the Hollywood feature, with its predictable plot and its good-looking, young, white, middle-class protagonist. The difficulty of finding a distributor for an accomplished film such as *The Watermelon Woman* (which won Inside Out’s audience award), a feature with a good-looking, young, *black* protagonist in mostly middle-class surroundings, raises my suspicions. In the meantime I’ve noticed the increasingly frequent appearance of the black best friend in “white” queer feature offerings, a phenomenon that mirrors the rise of the gay best friend in recent Hollywood fare.

Short experimental or documentary films or videotapes are not by nature free of these problems—God forbid that I should propose a determinism based on size or length. While the cheapness of do-it-yourself formats suggests their accessibility, the demographics behind the camera, in the image, and in front of the screen don’t imply racial diversity any more than those of other formats. And let’s not forget the artists who have recently made aesthetically and/or politically challenging films in long format, including Yvonne Rainer, Quentin Lee, John Greyson, and, of course, Cheryl Dunye.

In 1997 Inside Out hired a new executive director, Ellen Flanders, who oversaw a number of changes: the staff was expanded (for instance, the position of program coordinator, which I was offered, was created); the festival moved from its art-community venues to a center-city cinema complex that also houses the Toronto International Film Festival; significant corporate sponsorship was snagged; and the number of screenings and the proportion of feature films among them were increased. The festival audience nearly tripled. In such a case “mainstreaming” doesn’t mean less gay or lesbian, but it may open the way for a narrower, more aesthetically conservative take on gay and lesbian culture. There is a reciprocal relationship between the high profile now possible for gay and lesbian productions and the gay and lesbian festivals sometimes seen as launching grounds for them. It is possible, therefore, that features can be privileged over shorter work in publicity

and venue. Corporate sponsorship also raises the question of political and aesthetic (self-) policing and further favors the promotion of the feature.

Although they cannot be resolved simply through the will of festival organizers, the decision makers at Inside Out have recognized these problems and have designed productive strategies with which to address them. As Inside Out becomes more prominent in Toronto and as its audiences grow and begin to attract even “straight-identified” attention and attendance, it is an interesting possibility that—to borrow from Teresa de Lauretis—the festival will address its viewers as queer in an increasingly public space.¹ It will play its part in queering the public.

Notes

This essay is informed by my participation in gay and lesbian film and video festivals as a video maker and especially by my association with the Inside Out festival, as program coordinator in 1997 and as a member of the programming committee in 1998.

1. See Teresa de Lauretis, “Rethinking Women’s Cinema: Aesthetics and Feminist Theory,” in *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 127–48.