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## Queer City Cinema's 'Qaleidoscope': Festival movements, curation experiments, and queer experimentalism

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Regina is a relatively small Canadian city with around 215,000 inhabitants in the province of Saskatchewan. It is also home to one of the most experimental LGBTQ+ film festivals in Canada. Queer City Cinema was founded in 1996 by multimedia artist and executive artistic director Gary Varro. In 2001, the festival started going on tour to bring its experimental programming to other Canadian cities. The name of the 2020 festival tour is 'Qaleidoscope': a queer kaleidoscope. Qaleidoscope visited the Canadian cities of Ottawa, Sackville, Winnipeg, St. John's, and Montreal. Never Apart, a non-profit organisation and art gallery, hosted the Montreal event, which took place from 24–25 January 2020. Encompassing 12,000 square feet, Never Apart includes a gallery, exhibition spaces, and a saltwater pool [1]. This non-profit was founded by Dax Dasilva, CEO of the startup Lightspeed – one of Montreal's most successful entrepreneurs [2]. Located in a rapidly changing neighborhood, the space also reflects tensions around gentrification [3]. Yet, as an experimental formation itself, it turned out to be a fitting space to host Queer City Cinema's visit to Montreal. The two-night event was a collective exploration of experimental queer visions.

Queer City Cinema is known for its experimental curation: risky films with daring content and experimental aesthetics [4]. On tour, however, festival audiences become uncertain and curators resort to less risky choices. The touring program of Queer City Cinema abandoned experimentation in form to counteract this uncertainty. The travelling program's aesthetics were not representative of Queer City Cinema's usual experimental form. One thing stayed the same: the festival's commitment to amplifying marginalised

voices [5] and experimental articulations of queerness. Thus, even as experimental form was toned down for the tour audience, the films stayed experimental in their content. The programming included, to list a few: a queer person of colour's resignification of suicide in *I Want to Kill Myself* (Vivek Shraya); an exploration of femme kinkstership in *Call Tony* (Mée Rose, Wy Joung Kou); a decolonisation of sex through indigenous cruising in *Indigenous Luvv* (Demian DinéYazhi). As the festival moved away from experimental form, which has traditionally been afforded to and developed by white people, it further privileged narratives of marginalised people – curating new forms of queerness. Touring film festivals, with their movements and curation experiments, reveal the variability inherent in festivals. The experiments a queer film festival tour conducts in movement generate ways of reimagining festivals, their movements, and queerness itself.



Figs 1,2: Never Apart hosted Queer City Cinema's visit to Montreal. Courtesy of Never Apart.



Fig. 3: Queer City Cinema went on its sixth tour in 2020. From Queer City Cinema's website.

## Festival countermovements

Film festivals move, even when they are not on the move. They show moving images that move people to the screen and to the room by representing them. They can also move people emotionally, and motion them to take action by curating political movements. When the festival itself moves on tour, new festival movements arise. Queer City Cinema's nonurban experimental movements and touring patterns are countermovements that lead film festivals in different directions.

The emergence of Queer City Cinema is a countermovement. The festival, in all its daring experimentality, comes from the relatively rural and conservative city of Regina. The development of experimentality in the most conservative places is in fact not that unlikely; the need for a countermovement becomes most pressing in such an environment. The festival's experimentality can be further explained by its funding mechanism. Queer City Cinema is financed by a Canada Council for the Arts grant which privileges

risk-taking [6]. Grant-funding that awards experimentality funds experimentations in curation. The funding structure further moved Queer City Cinema towards curating in novel ways.

Queer City Cinema's tour movements also run counter. Kaleidoscope brings not only the countermovement of small city experimental queerness to urban centers, but also a curation that is more experimental than their own metropolitan festivals. The countermovement of nonurban queerness to the metropolitan counteracts metronormativity; it shows that queerness does not originate from or reside in the big city [7]. The festival's movements relocate queerness and queer cinema. A queer city can be a screening room, revisited each time festival-goers meet; at each stop, the festival moves and expands the perimeters of the queer city.

One of the works screened was *I Want to Kill Myself*, a film that resignifies suicide and stillness. Vivek Shraya is a South Asian Canadian trans artist of colour, six-time Lambda Literary Award finalist, and a best-selling author [8]. 'Can the desire to die be inherited?' she asks in the film. As she goes on to show, intergenerational trauma makes the inheritance of suicidal tendencies possible [9]. Queer people of course know 'the necessity and freedom of naming'. Once she names the suicidal intention, and declares her suicide to others, friends come to her help. 'Saying I want to kill myself kept me alive,' she explains. A declaration of suicide allows Shraya to establish care webs. By relocating the origin of suicide in intergenerational trauma and reclaiming the suicidal tendency, she constructs a countermovement. She resignifies a queer person of colour's suicide as transgressive by reformulating it as a way of asking for care, which, for some, can be more radical than asking for death. As Shraya's film shows, in a world that moves queers of colour towards death, living as a queer person of colour can be a radical countermovement.

The aesthetics also construct a countermovement for the film. Most of *I Want to Kill Myself* is made from still images that in their culmination generate the effect of endless jump cuts. The film's movement out of stillness corresponds to the movement of queer bodies in the world. Frame by frame, minute by minute, it embodies the halted existence that queers of colour can experience. After Shraya's reclamation of suicide, the jump cuts that sever the skin of the film stop. The film and the skin heals. Shraya captures queer forms of moving and seeing that come out of stillness and resignification. Against all odds, the movements of Shraya's film embody the countermovement of the life of a queer person of colour.

Shraya's countermovements, like Queer City Cinema's, create a queer experimentality that takes its audience in different directions. Experimentality is usually imagined to be non-narrative. Yet as queer people of colour, we have such an urgency for our stories to be told. Moving unseen worlds to the screen, filmmakers like Shraya make film move differently. In the daring, transgressive content of Queer City Cinema's program, a new queer experimentality is being curated. For queers of colour, one of the most radical movements out there can be daring to exist in all the experimentality of one's counterexistence.

## Qaleidoscopic curation experiments

Film festivals also experiment. Curation is a curious maneuver against the uncertainty of audience reception. The audience is one of the most unpredictable variables in a film festival. A tour audience is even more unpredictable; the audience and their reactions can differ in each city, and the festival cannot count on its usual hometown crowd for a positive reception. The tour name Qaleidoscope is not only a metaphor that encapsulates the experimental visions the festival creates through movement, but also a new method of curation. A kaleidoscope is a device that generates colourful, imaginative visions by the turn of its handle. It conducts experiments in seeing through movement that result in unforeseen visions. One can easily see the analogy between a kaleidoscope and a camera. Both are apparatuses of seeing that allow visions into other worlds through shifting, moving images. Qaleidoscope is a different, queer spelling of a name, as Gary Varro tells me [10]. Curation can also take the form of a qaleidoscope: it superimposes the visions of the filmmaker, the curator, and the festival-goer in ever-shifting ways. Curating qaleidoscopically means privileging the perspectives of marginalised people in the program. It does not erase difference, and can counteract the erasures that homogenisation of vision enacts [11].

*Call Tony* is a film about queer experimentation. The filmmakers Mée Rose and Wy Joung Kou are two multimedia and multidisciplinary artists [12]. Their collaborative work reimagines kink as corporeal reclamation and community creation. 'The mark on my body is mine, I can take care of it,' the kinkster in the film says, signifying pleasurable self-mutilation as a method of dealing with bodily trauma. A healing through hurting takes place as the filmmakers formulate kink as a way of asking for and receiving care.

The kinkster establishes a care web – a kinkstership – through an appropriation of negativity, a transgressive reclamation not unlike Shraya's. Rose and Kou's bodily experiments offer new visions of kink, embodiment, and queer kinship. Curating such films results in kaleidoscopic visions, inviting the audience to see from different perspectives.

## Queerness as Kaleidoscope

Demarcations of content and form can in fact be privileges afforded to those whose narratives have already taken place and form: those who enjoy the privilege of representation often not afforded to marginalised people. Queerness is when your identity takes different forms; it teaches us that content cannot be divorced from form. Queerness itself can be the kaleidoscope that brings together form and content to redefine experimentality. The programmed films contained experimental content that moved beyond normative identity expressions. Though experimental aesthetics were forsaken, the experimental content gave birth to new forms of seeing and being.

*Flora* is a film that conducts experiments in movement that dismantle the boundaries of gender and the distinctions between form and content. Chaerin Im is a freelance illustrator from South Korea [13]. Her film is an ever-changing artwork of interchanging genitalia depicted through flower animation. 'At kindergarden I thought I could grow a penis from my vagina, just like the other boys,' Im says. She goes on to do just that; as she shows genitalia from different, moving perspectives, bodies take different forms. The film conducts kaleidoscopic experiments in movement that produce new visions. As Im experiments with the forms of film, possibilities of new forms of being in the world arise. Through a queer transformation of bodies and art, Im offers a rearticulation of both genitality and experimentality in this kaleidoscopic body of work.

## Kaleidoscopic visions: Toward new forms and spaces

One might look through a kaleidoscope alone, yet film festivals are not experiments conducted on one's own. Touring queer film festivals are kaleidoscopic experiments in collective seeing. Claude Périard's *Looking for an Outer World* was the last film of the program. Périard, a multimedia artist from

Montreal, was in attendance that night. She explained the film as a recreation of the visions she imagined as a child in the car, driving by the oil refineries in Montreal-East. Watching the refineries' flashing lights, a scene that is terrifying and exciting at once, she imagined herself an astronaut. The film affects a similar spectatorship as it transmits a childlike vision that allows the imagination of and transportation into other worlds. A kaleidoscopic superimposition of darkness, moving lights, and ambient cosmic music, it is an outer space exploration of vision, a sci-fi experiment with the post-apocalyptic sublime – all movement and experiment, all queer affect.



Fig. 4: Kaleidoscopic experiments in seeing allow imaginative visions of a new world to take form. Still from the film *Looking for an Outer World* (Claude Périard) from Queer City Cinema.

This is a film that is very experimental formally, yet not explicitly experimental or queer in content – at first look. In fact, during the interview at the end of the program, Périard asks Varro why he decided to put this film in a queer film night. Varro justifies his curatorial choice by evoking the 'queer sensibility' of works made by queer artists, whether they directly reference queerness or not. Varro makes a good point: being queer can gift one with a queer vision of the world. As Périard shows, movement can animate queer visions and affects. Here, the car, like the kaleidoscopes of camera, spaceship, and festival tour, is an apparatus that transports one to another world. The film's cosmic form generates an experimental vision. The queer aesthetics make us imagine the contents of our being otherwise. Movement can also be sitting together, watching images move across screen, and feeling affect move and overflow out of our seats. The externalisation of inner affects through



collective feeling creates an outer space. Other worlds arise through collective seeing experiments, where different forms of feeling and living can take place.

Queer film festivals are about finding acceptance and representation; such happens when the moving images externalise an outer world that coincides with your inner world. But they are also about discovering other visions and worlds through experiments in *seeing and being together*. *Looking for an Outer World* offers an inhuman, extraterrestrial vision of queerness at ‘the outer edges of the human’ [14]. Such outer space experimentations can allow us to imagine new spaces, worlds, and beings here on Earth.

## Conclusion

‘Next tour, I don’t know what it will be like and that’s to be seen,’ Gary Varro tells me [15]. A film festival does not have to move to be a kaleidoscope. Festivals can create countermovements by curating kaleidoscopically. Privileging queerness of form, which has traditionally been developed by white people, can erase the narratives of queer people of colour. Giving space to stories about queer people of colour can allow new things to take form. Touring queer film festivals reveal identity as something that is always being curated and circulated, and always possible to be curated and circulated differently. The experiments of touring festivals create paths for new festival movements, queer countermovements, and kaleidoscopic visions.

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## Notes

- [1] <https://whitehotmagazine.com/articles/s-best-new-arts-venue/3891>
- [2] Ibid.
- [3] Against the gentrifying movements of AI enterprises into Mile-Ex, the artists pushed out of the neighbourhood started their own movement titled #NosAteliers (#OurStudios) in 2019 (<https://www.ledevoir.com/culture/545016/la-gentrification-menace-de-chasser-les-artistes-du-mile-ex>).
- [4] Petrychyn 2019.
- [5] Gary Varro, personal interview, 20 March 2020.
- [6] Petrychyn 2019.
- [7] Scott Herring and Mary L. Gray both offer queer anti-urbanism against metronormativity.
- [8] <https://vivekshraya.com/about/>
- [9] Luckhurt 2008.
- [10] Gary Varro, personal interview, 20 March 2020.
- [11] For a critique of nationalistic curation, see Rastegar 2012.
- [12] <https://meeroseart.com/about/> and <https://torontoguardian.com/2017/04/wy-joung-kou/>
- [13] <https://www.behance.net/Chaerinim>
- [14] Halberstam 2015, p. 239.
- [15] Gary Varro, personal interview, 20 March 2020.