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Breaking down the tribes: Opening night films at Frameline and Sydney Mardi Gras Film Festival

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The opening night film for an LGBTQ film festival is a rare opportunity to bring all the members of the community together. As such, it is imperative for the films in this privileged position to resonate with audiences beyond merely having a gay or lesbian character. The queerness of the films of these festivals can be judged beyond the identities of the central players involved. While these film festivals have moved toward labeling themselves as being more inclusive, as I and others have argued,[1] whether this actually translates to the programming of films is another story. Are they still primarily programming films that speak to a key identity category (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or Trans) or are they now including films that are queer in other ways, either in their aesthetics, politically, or formally?

Identity-affirming programming strategies have always been evident in identity-based film festivals.[2] In Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover's review of the 2014 BFI Flare festival, a clear objective in the festival's name change was to break 'up any tribal affiliation and seeking to create audiences across communities'.[3] In drawing on this idea of breaking up tribal affiliations, I refer to programming strategies that aim to dismantle the segregation between groups within the LGBTQ community. I argue in this review that this is the aim of the opening night film. This speaks to the increasingly multifaceted use of the term 'queer'. Commonly, the term is now used as an umbrella term for identities that deviate from heterosexual and cisgender norms. The recent addition of Q to the alphabet abbreviation by many festivals speaks to the formalisation of an anti-normative fluidity that queerness provides. In other words, while these festivals programme films that explicitly feature gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender themes, they also programme films that move beyond rigid identity categories.[4]

In 2017 I attended Queer Screen's Sydney Mardi Gras Film Festival (hereafter SMG)[5] and Frameline: San Francisco International LGBTQ Film Festival (hereafter Frameline).[6] Both festivals present a significant crossover in their programming. Prominent films at Frameline will usually be selected for SMG. Both cities also have a significant history of queer activism, which is often celebrated in speeches at both opening nights. Commencing in 1977, Frameline is the oldest festival of its kind in the world. The first festival was organised by a group of local filmmakers and activists that wanted to exhibit their work. This centrality of community continues to resonate within much of the festival's image today. Much like San Francisco itself, the festival has a strong vibrant history of queer activism, making it an influential player in queer media internationally. In attendance every year are a vast number of stakeholders within the queer film industry, including either outgoing artistic director Paul Struthers or new artistic director Lisa Rose from SMG. SMG has an influential position within the Australasian queer film festival circuit, given the attendance of several festival directors from the Southeast Asian region. The festival is coordinated by Queer Screen, which also runs a shorter festival in September each year. After attending each festival this year, it was apparent with both festivals that a current objective in programming is to bridge these tribal affiliations and move away from having the festival dominated by screenings across the gender binary. While conservative audiences are hesitant to accept the queer label, this direction in programming is evident in larger LGBTQ film festivals embracing their queerness. Due to the ephemeral nature of queer film festivals,[7] I find it imperative to document experiences at these festivals, as audience responses, Q&As, and sometimes the films themselves are too easily forgotten. The opening night choices for both the 2017 Frameline and SMG festivals demonstrate an increased push towards mixed screenings beyond presenting a focus on LGBTQ identity alone.

Queer

While a historical account of the changing dynamics of queer as a concept is beyond the scope of this review, the adoption of the label 'queer' highlights the inadequacy of the terms 'gay and lesbian' or even LGBT. Queerness seeks to reject the rigidity of identity categories and opens the potentiality to challenge contemporary structures of power and oppression. Not only does the

term reject the gender binary, it also rejects the binary of heterosexuality and homosexuality. This stems from a Foucaultian post-constructionist concept of identity.[8] To *be queer* is to resist normative power structures. As I have discussed earlier, the professional adoption of the label queer has the potential to rid this term of its activist mentality and community-building potential.[9] As I will argue in my review of both Frameline and SMG, queerness is invoked to build community resonance beyond identity to more politically oriented themes; or, to recall Galt and Schoonover's review, queer programming strategies can break down the tribal affiliations in the LGBT community.

SMG opening night: *A Date for Mad Mary*

Choosing an opening night feature for a queer film festival is always difficult. The film has to be, first and foremost, of an excellent standard to warrant the increased ticket price. This will also encourage a discussion of the film amongst patrons at the succeeding party. Festival programmers often say that a 'controversial' film will have the punters talking afterwards. I maintain that everyone talking about the film at the party afterwards is not necessarily a good thing. Second, the film has to attract a strong audience, which might leave a cynical programmer tempted to just select gay male content, as these films tend to sell out more quickly.[10] This leaves the programming of non-gay male content as an innovative choice, such as a previous Frameline opening with the premiere of *Gun Hill Road* (Rashaad Ernesto Green, 2011) starring Harmony Santana in 2011. Strategic programming such as this encourages the appreciation of cinema that has been historically marginalised in the queer film industry.

It is here where the queer film festival programmer can primarily push their artistic vision for the festival. Outgoing SMG director Paul Struthers has an ethos of pushing lesbian and trans stories into the spotlight in his programme. In his opening night speech, his yelling into the microphone 'Lesbians rule!' received much applause. This ethos was evident in the 2017 SMG festival, with some of the stronger films being *Suicide Kale* (Carly Usdin, 2016) and *Women who Kill* (Ingrid Jungermann, 2017). The spotlight placed on these films creates an overarching narrative of strong lesbian cinema for the festival. It is important for an artistic director to back their quality films and this is exactly what Struthers has done with his opening night choice, *A Date for*

Mad Mary (Darren Thornton, 2016), an Irish drama featuring Mary (Seána Kerslake), an alcoholic freshly out of prison who must fulfill her duties as bridesmaid and find a date for the wedding. Tensions arise when the bride to be Charlene (Charleigh Bell) painfully demonstrates that Mary is now considered a pitiable peripheral friend who will struggle to find a date. Thornton's film is a familiar coming of age story set in lower middle class Drogheda, painting an often hilarious and sometimes heartbreaking portrait of working class Irish life that thankfully had the crowd talking afterwards for the right reasons. Matters of class were a focus in a number of SMG features, such as the intensely sad *The Pearl* (Jessica Dimmock, 2017) and the loosely-structured *Check It* (Dana Flor & Toby Oppenheimer, 2017). This speaks to another thematic focus of SMG 2017: economic inequality. Programming *A Date for Mad Mary* forces audiences who would not actively choose a lesbian film – but who would also not miss opening night – to grapple with these characters in political ways beyond identity.

This innovation in choosing a lesbian-themed film for opening night lies in its challenge to the perception that gay men are the economic drivers of the queer film festival. Elsewhere, I have argued that the professionalisation of some queer film festivals has seen an embrace of the pink dollar economy, which is seen in the increase in corporate sponsorship.[11] This growth lies in this convergence of visibility and the commodification of the LGBTQ community. The global rise of the queer film festival is a result of the 'political motivations of gay and lesbian film communities [coinciding] with the economic motivations of one of the largest export industries in the United States'.[12] At the height of the pink dollar, Alexandra Chasin and Katherine Sender both argued that marketing to an LGBTQ audience invokes a dominance of both whiteness and maleness (I would also add the dominance of cisgender representation).[13] For Sender, this gay visibility for economic means comes at the expense of political confrontations as 'division of business from politics disavows the extent to which all economic activity has political effect'.[14] Selecting an Irish lesbian film challenges preconceptions of LGBTQ film festival audience tastes. The decision also allowed Struthers, as artistic director, to highlight key themes present in the 2017 festival.

Frameline opening night: *The Untold Tales of Amistead Maupin*

Opening night at Frameline is always a grand affair. Frameline's home during the festival is the Castro Theatre, a grand palace theatre seating over 1,400 audience members. Opening the festival was *The Untold Tales of Amistead Maupin* (Jennifer Kroot, 2017), which detailed the life and career of the author of *Tales of the City*, including his friendships with Laura Linney, Olympia Dukakis, and Sir Ian McKellen. Frameline has had its fair share of gay male stories for its opening night. A recurring comment made by programmers is that gay male-dominated screenings are unavoidable at queer film festivals.[15] A similar observation was made by Galt and Schoonover, who observed that male-dominated screenings also tended to be older, while queer women-dominated screenings, such as Frameline's screening of the stellar *Becks* (Daniel Powell & Elizabeth Rohrbaugh, 2017), tended to be more mixed. These are observations I have made at screenings in Melbourne, Sydney, Hong Kong, as well as San Francisco. Other Frameline gay male highlights were *4 Days in France* (Jérôme Reybaud, 2017), *Dating My Mother* (Mike Roma, 2017), *Lazy Eye* (Tim Kirkman, 2016), and the stellar *God's Own Country* (Frances Lee, 2017), which thankfully exceeded the highest of expectations given its rave reviews. Being a showcase screening, *God's Own Country* was the only film of these to attract a diverse audience.

I argue that *The Untold Tales of Amistead Maupin* resonates with members of the wider LGBTQ audience through the emphasis on communal themes beyond LGBTQ identity. While the film specifically details the experience of a gay man's career, the narrative becomes more about the social changes of San Francisco as a city across generations, such as his dalliances with Rock Hudson, his experience of the AIDS crisis, the gentrification of the Castro, and his work with conservative politician Jesse Helms. In the age of VOD, where many of these titles will eventually be accessible, it is imperative for these events to push an experience that would otherwise be unavailable. Much like other Pride festivities, the queer film festival allows for 'an opportunity for various subcategories of the queer community to come together and experience an imagined collective identity'.[16] The programme notes identify Maupin not just as a 'multifaceted trailblazer' but the 'consummate maestro' of San Francisco.[17] By positioning the city as a queer Mecca, the film is positioned as a celebration of San Francisco's queerness. Much like SMG and *A Date for Mad Mary*, the opening night pushes particular themes

that will resonate with audiences beyond gender and sexual orientation. This will allow for engagement beyond the LGBTQ tribes.

Conclusion

LGBTQ/Queer film festivals will always be dominated by audiences segregated by gender. It is naive to expect such festivals to survive otherwise and it is folly to ignore the importance of identity-affirming experiences that take place at these festivals. However, both 2017 festivals in Sydney and San Francisco are indicative of a trend towards pushing for mixed screenings in key programming positions, such as the opening night film. This is through programming films that highlight themes that could resonate beyond identity. *A Date for Mad Mary* is a working class coming of age narrative. *The Untold Stories of Amistead Maupin* is a celebration of San Francisco's queer history. In the age of increased access to queer content on VOD streaming sites, this community atmosphere is a key component to attracting an audience. This speaks to the provocative direction in which queer cinema is moving.

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Notes

- [1] Galt & Schoonover 2014; Benson 2016; Richards 2017.
- [2] Loist 2012.
- [3] Galt & Schoonover 2014, p. 223.
- [4] For further information, please consult the chapter 'Queer Film Festival Programming and Homonormativity' in my book *The Queer Film Festival: Popcorn & Politics* (Richards 2017).
- [5] <http://queerscreen.org.au>
- [6] <https://www.frameline.org>
- [7] Zielinski 2016.
- [8] Foucault 1980.
- [9] Richards 2017.
- [10] Ibid.
- [11] Ibid.
- [12] Rhyne 2006, pp. 617-618.
- [13] Chasin 2000; Sender 2004.
- [14] Sender 2004, p. 3.
- [15] Several interviewees in my book address this (Richards 2017).
- [16] Richards 2017, p. 113.
- [17] Nault 2017.