

Fields of Loves: Historicising and defining (French) queerness

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This year's gay pride celebrations were particularly important as both community-based groups and official institutions organised various symposiums, exhibitions, and festivals to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Stonewall riots – an event often credited as the birth of the gay political movement. In Europe, several municipalities and official institutions capitalised on this anniversary and proposed, often for the first time, cultural events that paid homage to the LGBTQ community.[1] This recent proliferation of LGBTQ programming is significant as official institutions in Europe have historically been reluctant to offer programming dedicated to and/or focusing on the LGBTQ community.

This article analyses *Fields of Loves: 100 Years of Rainbow Cinema* (Champs d'amours: 100 ans de cinema arc-en-ciel), a free exhibit organised by and on display at Paris' City Hall (June–September 2019). Curated by Alain Burosse with the help of Jean-Baptiste Erreca, Michèle Collery, Laurant Bouchut, and Didier Roth-Bettoni, *Fields of Loves* features over one hundred film excerpts, posters, pictures, and documents – half of which are drawn from the archives of the Cinémathèque française.

Importantly, the exhibit is one of the first LGBTQ-themed events organised by a French cultural institution. Indeed, France's universalist doctrine often precludes museums or municipalities from addressing a minoritarian perspective: queer cultural expressions run the risk of being read as counter-ing France's so-called 'one and indivisible' society model. As Denis M. Provencher makes clear, queerness must 'emerge in specific relation to the French republican universal associated with *La Déclaration des droits de l'Homme et du Citoyen* [The Declaration of Rights of Man and Citizen] and not in relation to [American modes of identity politics]'. [2] In that context, this

review argues that *Fields of Loves* marks a shift in the cultural positioning of queer subjects and oeuvres in the public sphere: the exhibit is organised by and advertised on Paris' City Hall, a cultural institution traditionally tasked with preserving France's 'universal' citizenship model.

As the title of the exhibit makes clear, *Fields of Loves* explicitly aims to cover '100 years of rainbow cinema' – a relatively vague concept that encompasses both films made by/on queer people and straight films that contain some sort of queer representation. As a whole, the exhibit documents a shift from the oppression of LGBTQ people/films to their contemporary consecration through both the adoption of gay-friendly legislation (marriage) and the increasing visibility of 'rainbow cinema' at international film festivals. As this review will argue, the exhibit capitalises on social discourses traditionally associated within the Festival de Cannes and the Oscars in order to propose a French definition of 'rainbow cinema'.

This political project is particularly clear in the exhibit's use of space. The exhibit is divided in two main areas: a long mezzanine (upstairs) and a few thematic rooms (downstairs). The mezzanine, which corresponds to the beginning of the exhibit, enables visitors to stroll through the history of queer representation. Its walls act as a spatialised timeline: various posters, film excerpts, and archival documents, ordered chronologically, provide visitors with a sense of queer cinematic history. These walls also feature a few brief texts that detail major events in the history of queer activism (for instance: the Weimar Republic, Stonewall, HIV/AIDS, the Culture Wars). Although the mezzanine aims to draw a history of queer cinema / representation, it insists heavily on the past ten years: this multiplicity of recent documents locates the present as an index of queer visibility. Overall, the mezzanine corresponds to a developmentalist perspective that highlights the progress made by queer filmmakers/people.

This play on a homophobic past and a brighter present is also present in the second half of the exhibit – a series of rooms illustrating some of the issues faced by queer audiences and filmmakers. Indeed, the organisation of these thematic rooms echoes the mezzanine's developmentalist perspective. Visitors are first invited to explore censorship, homophobia, and queer cinema's relation to pornography. The second half of the thematic rooms focuses on canonical art-house films, recent award-winning features, and box office successes. While this divide between oppression and commercial/artistic success does not correspond neatly to a past/present dichotomy, it does reinforce the idea of queer films being increasingly visible. In particular, the

exhibit's choice to end on box office successes and festival features produces a narrative in terms of a recent proliferation of queer films.

The exhibit's use of international film festivals as a metric of success is particularly instructive: it corresponds to the circuits of cultural legitimacy favored by and traditionally associated with its main sponsor, the Cinémathèque française. In linking 1960s and 1970s European arthouse films to the recent success of queer fares at Cannes and/or at the Oscars, the exhibit emphasises the legitimacy of (some) queer films. While the exhibit systematically insists on films screened at Cannes and lists the winners of the Queer Palm, it only briefly mentions the Berlin International Film Festival (and its Teddy Awards) or Sundance – two festivals that have been central in establishing a viable queer film circuit.[3] Similarly, films made in the gay niche and/or activist videomaking are only discussed in passing. This insistence on cultural legitimacy and downplaying of identity is partly a consequence of France's universalist doctrine: it stems from a fear of what Ger Zielinski calls 'negative capital' – that a film might be understood as being solely about sexual identity and/or as targeting only a queer audience, thus negating its artistic merits.[4]

This emphasis on festival screenings and awards also corresponds to the exhibit's other political project: locating France as a prime node in the queer film ecosystem. Around a third of the films discussed in the exhibit are either made in or coproduced by France. French films are systematically juxtaposed with their international counterparts, thereby counterbalancing the anglophone nature of the queer canon. It is particularly clear in a press release announcing the exhibit:

From Richard Oswald's 1919 *Different from the Others* to Céline Sciamma's 2011 *Tomboy*: cinema progressively touched upon the issues of homosexuality and gender. A few notable and troubling films in this chronology: John Schlesinger's *Sunday, Bloody Sunday* and Luchino Visconti's *Death in Venice* (both in 1971), Patrice Chéreau's 1983 *The Wounded Man*, Pedro Almodovar's 1988 *The Laws of Desire* or Virginie Despentes's 2000 *Rape me*. Abdellatif Kechiche's *Blue is the Warmest Color* won the Palme d'Or and Alain Guiraudie's *Stranger by the Lake* was awarded the Queer Palm in 2013. In 2017, Barry Jenkins received an Oscar for *Moonlight*. In 2018, Robin Campillo won the César and Festival de Cannes's Grand Prix for *Beats Per Minute*. [5]

Importantly, several of the French films presented as part of the exhibit do not explicitly touch on queerness and/or do not target a gay audience. These films, which range from popular comedies to French classics, cannot

be claimed as queer: most of the French popular comedies included in the exhibit simply contain one or two secondary gay characters used for humoristic ends (for instance in Yves Robert's *Pardon Mon Affaire* [Un éléphant ça trompe énormément, 1976]). These films are mentioned alongside explicitly queer French films (among them those of Ozon, Chéreau, Vallois, Ducastel and Martineau, and Téchiné).[6] While it insists on well-known French films as speaking to the issue of LGBTQ representation, the exhibit does not aim to propose an alternative queer canon. Rather, it seeks to appeal to French visitors' shared cinematic knowledge – thus knitting queerness into the fabric of French cinema. To some extent, the inclusion of these well-known films enables the curators to propose 'rainbow cinema' as speaking to both French universalism and LGBTQ communities.

As such, the exhibit's avoidance of identity-related terminology enables its curators to justify a focus on queerness while maintaining a non-identarian mode of address. Tellingly, the title of the exhibit *Champs d'amours* (Fields of Loves) evokes Jean Genet's 1950 film *Un chant d'amour*. This reference to Genet cleverly announces the exhibit's play on both a shared national culture and queer references. Either celebrated as a national hero emblematic of France's literary tradition or as a precursor of queer politics, Genet is a flexible figure that can be mobilised through both anti-identarian and community-oriented modes of address.[7] The exhibit's poster, built around a picture of Divine, performs a similar function: as such, Divine appeals to both cinephile and queer cultural knowledge. Elsewhere, I argued that the popularity of Divine (and John Waters' cinema) in France reflects the recent adoption of the word queer, redefined as aesthetic sensibility and artistic subversion.[8]

Fields of Loves thus targets a broad audience – reaching beyond the LGBTQ community. The exhibit is resolutely not *made for* a queer audience; it does not aim to highlight why cinema matters *for queer people*. Symptomatically, the texts displayed within the exhibit never use the first-person plural 'we'. Preferring instead the third person, they maintain queerness at a distance. This may be at times uncomfortable for people who operate through American modes of identity politics: in the US or Canada, a similar exhibit would probably insist on community-based concerns. For instance, it would likely emphasise the role played by the HIV/AIDS epidemics in shaping queer lives (Fields of Loves discusses HIV/AIDS primarily as a form of historical marker), insist on the contributions made by queer people of color (non-white queer filmmaking is often reduced to non-Western films – a full

room in the exhibit), and be critical of the recent wave of trans-themed films made by cisgender directors. The inclusion of Lukas Dhont's *Girl* (2018), a film featured three times throughout the exhibit, perfectly exemplifies the insistence on 'art cinema' over community concerns; while the film won the Queer Palm award and was a commercial success in France, it has been heavily condemned by the trans community.[9]

While this critique makes sense in a North American context (it certainly reflects my own positionality), one should not underestimate the work performed by Fields of Loves: articulating an institutional take on the history of queer cinema, the exhibit proposes a path for the inclusion of LGBTQ minorities within the French national fiction. This is particularly courageous given the recent resurgence of an anti-queer discourse in France; queer theory has been heavily condemned in the public sphere as the imposition of an American mode of identity politics that would aim to divide the Nation.[10] Given the relative absence of queer cultural expressions in the public sphere, there is something particularly moving about seeing a giant poster of Divine hanging on the walls of Paris' City Hall or about touring a queer exhibit alongside dozens of older straight couples. The constant balancing between universalism and queerness enables the exhibition to successfully weave queerness into the fabric of national culture, thereby imagining a form of alliance between minorities and citizenship that cannot be reduced to American modes of identity politics.

Antoine Damiens (McGill University)

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Notes

- [1] For instance, the Goethe Institute launched the 'Queer as German Folk' initiative – a series of screenings, conferences, and exhibitions held in New York, Toronto, Montreal, Mexico, Chicago, and San Francisco that aimed to introduce international audiences to German queer histories and activists. Symposiums and conferences on the history of LGBTQ movements were organised in Manchester, Porto, and Paris. In London, the European Commission sponsored a cartoon exhibit titled Stonewall 50 – LGBTQI+ Life Before & After.
- [2] Provencher 2007, p. 2.
- [3] On festivals and the queer film circuit, see Loist & Zielinski 2012.
- [4] Zielinski 2008, p. 260. See also Damiens 2018, 2020.
- [5] Ville de Paris, press release 'Champs d'amours'. I chose to leave the expression 'the issues of homosexuality and gender' to illustrate the very French modes of discourse through which the exhibition articulates queerness.
- [6] On French queer cinema and its renegotiation of republicanism and universalism, see Rees-Roberts 2008.
- [7] See for instance Provencher 2007; Amin 2017.
- [8] Damiens 2015. On France's adoption of the word 'queer' and its redefinition as a form of aesthetics, see Perreau 2016, pp. 93-94.
- [9] The under-representation of queer people of color can be partly explained by the exhibit's prioritising of film over video. While some canonical films/videos are mentioned (i.e. Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman*), excerpts are rarely shown and notions such as intersectionality are not discussed.
- [10] See Perreau 2016.