New Queer Cinema Today: Film and the Critique of Neoliberalism

In 1992, B. Ruby Rich coined the term New Queer Cinema to describe a cycle of films in the late 1980s and early 1990s that broke with conventional cinematic practices to show alternative subjectivities, generic subversions, and revised histories. 1992 represented a landmark year as queer films and their directors, including Derek Jarman and Todd Haynes, enjoyed a shocking level of success, both commercial and critical. As festivals emerged full of queer features, it became clear that these films constituted a new genre, one that broke "with older humanist approaches that accompanied identity politics," creating works that were "irreverent, energetic, alternately minimalist and excessive" (Rich 16). Altogether, these films showed something new, something revolutionary. Many suggested that the AIDS crisis inspired such groundbreaking filmic techniques: "the tragedy and trauma of AIDS have led to a new kind of film and video practice, one which takes up the aesthetic strategies that directors have already learned and applies them to a greater need than art for its own sake" (Rich 17). The revolutionary force behind AIDS activism, exemplified in groups like ACT UP led by filmmaker Tom Kalin, inspired new cinematic practices that captured the affect of AIDS. The emergence of New Queer Cinema coincided with the proliferation of new queer theory writing, proving that the AIDS crisis was a driving force behind theoretical work as well. The AIDS crisis both produced a queer politics united through activism, artistic expression, and theoretical work.

New Queer Cinema, however, saw little of the same bursts of innovation after 1992. This lag in revolutionary filmmaking left many evaluating queer cinema's current state, even mourning the supposed end of New Queer Cinema. In 2000, *Sight & Sound*, notably the journal in which Rich first coined the term New Queer Cinema, reflected on the current state of queer filmmaking, discussing the highly commercialized nature of works such as *Boys Don't Cry*,

Being John Malkovich, and *The Talented Mr. Ripley* ("Queer and Present Danger"). Films like these were more or less made possible by the films of early New Queer cinema; leading to the conclusion that the success of queer directors led mainstream filmmakers to capitalize on the newness and success of the genre to cast big name actors in films that would go on to be Academy Award-winning (Hilary Swank in *Boys Don't Cry*). B. Ruby Rich herself has also commented on the absence of films like those of New Queer Cinema's heyday. Speaking frankly of the loss of the urgency felt in the early 90s, she describes the current remains of the genre as "the 'worst nightmare' of those film pioneers,…referring to the 'commodification and assimilation' of queer cinema evident in television shows like *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and *Will and Grace*" ("Films can make"). Such statements beg the question: What has happened to New Queer Cinema since the early 90s? What happened to the revolutionary force propelling the genre's films?

New Queer Cinema has not been lost entirely. I argue that queer filmmaking does not lack revolutionary potential; instead, the driving force behind these films has changed. The revolutionary force propelling current queer cinema reflects the current turn in queer theory. While queer activism and filmmaking in the early 90s reacted to a conservative government that failed to respond to the AIDS crisis, the current cycle of queer films employ radical politics that react to a contemporary government steeped in neoliberal ideology. Like the queer activism of the early 90s, queer interrogations of neoliberalism become visualized in queer cinema. By performing a cycle study of recent films, I reveal that the driving force behind New Queer Cinema today comes from radical, revolutionary antisociality. I read the work of filmmakers Bruce LaBruce, Todd Solondz, and Jamie Babbit through this lens. These filmmakers are

somewhat disparate in their influences or points of origin, but I argue that they are unified through a commitment to antisocial politics.

Neoliberalism encompasses political thought that supports government regulation of sociality and morality in much the same way it regulates the economy. This social regulation or organization necessitates a reliance on identity categories; neoliberalism presupposes that all will subscribe to a discrete number of (heteronormative) categories. As a consequence, those who deviate from an easily understood identity are made unintelligible as citizens of a neoliberal nation state. Social regulation performed through categorization attempts to control the social chaos assumed to occur in the absence of strict government involvement. Just as a post-Fordist economics stress the privatization of business, the post-Fordist social order stresses the privatization of sex, for its removal from the public closes down its potential to disrupt the current social order. Any public expression of sexuality is then channeled into the image of a heterosexual family.

Neoliberal politics profoundly affected gay politics as dominant gay activism turns to assimilationist rhetoric and a privileging of family values. The demand for gay marriage and the repeal of the "don't ask, don't tell" policy expose a fight for normality and access to the very regimes that traditionally excluded those who do no fit heterosexual norms. This appeal to assimilation creates a condition in which queer activists "are trapped within the historical categories of liberalism—economy, state, civil society, and family—trying to emerge into another conceptual and political universe" (Duggan). In other words, neoliberalism renders queerness stable, stagnant, and unable to affect social change. For queer politics and activism to once again possess revolutionary possibility, they must critique the neoliberal ideology that silences radical queerness.

One queer critique of neoliberalism takes shape within the framework of antisociality. The rise of antisocial queer writing coincides with the 2006 PMLA publishing of "The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory," a conference debate that took place at the 2005 MLA Annual Convention. It is worth noting that the piece opens with a quotation from Leo Bersani who during and shortly after the AIDS crisis questioned: "'Should a homosexual be a good citizen?'" (Caserio 819). Bersani's opposition to the social order is exemplified in texts like "Is the Rectum a Grave?" which criticizes the government's failure to respond to the AIDS crisis. The state's immediate response focused on protecting heterosexual families and children from the virus; they attempted to assuage public panic rather than treating or curing those (mostly homosexuals) living with HIV. The attention the AIDS crisis received mostly came with projections of heterosexual anxieties as the media targeted "'an imaginary national family unit which is both white and heterosexual'" (8). The antisocial current in queer politics represents a contemporary reaction to the national government and its regulatory systems by articulating a critique of normality and the family structure that neoliberalism makes unthinkable.

Arguably the leader of current New Queer Cinema, Bruce LaBruce puts his revolutionary politics into praxis with his films, which are best described as political-pornographic spectacle. In his 2004 film *The Raspberry Reich,* the audience follows a group of terrorist-chic revolutionaries who enact their politics through the guerilla tactics of kidnapping, stealing, and sexually liberating. The main character, Gudrun's, group clearly plays off the Red Army Faction (RAF), the most violent, radical, left wing group of post-WWII Germany. The RAF was a communist "urban guerilla" faction who engaged in armed protests such as murder, bomb attacks, and arson to combat what they deemed a fascist government. Gudrun in *The Raspberry Reich* is an obvious allusion to RAF founder Gudrun Ensslin. The RAF's actions culminated in a

national crisis known as "German Autumn," an event that is parodied at the end of the film. The politics presented in *The Raspberry Reich* are directly influenced by Wilhelm Reich in their insistence that sexual revolution will lead to widespread social revolution. Antisocial politics and a critique of futurity are presented in *The Raspberry Reich* in the context of the film's use of pornographic spectacle, consumerism, and ironic use of political rhetoric to parody conservative politics.

In his recent work *Otto; or Up with Dead People* (2008), LaBruce employs the zombie figure as a means of communicating his push for radical resistance and absolute alterity. The film begins with young gay zombie Otto stumbling around in full abject regalia—clothes that appear to have been worn for years hanging by threads from his body and a mix of blood and filth covering all exposed skin. Otto's wanderings continue until Madea, an avant-garde filmmaker and Maya Deren lookalike, discovers him and wants to put him in her filmic study of Berlin's gay zombie subculture titled *Up with Dead People.* At this point, the film breaks into a film within a film, making it difficult to distinguish which part is the "real" movie. LaBruce's semicolon-ed title does little to aid this deciphering.

Unlike filmmaker Bruce LaBruce who delivers in-your-face, unmistakably antisocial attacks on civilized ideology, Todd Solondz's film *Life During Wartime* provides a nuanced commentary on family structure, primarily executed in the film's visuals. *Life During Wartime* (2009) deconstructs the notion of the family as the ultimate source of happiness and comfort. Director Todd Solondz's body of work is characterized by his representation of the underbelly of American society, unflinchingly showing the darkest of themes, including: loneliness, suicide, and pedophilia. Accordingly, his film *Life During Wartime* refuses to shy away from these touchy subjects. The film centers on a family made up of three sisters, Joy, Trish, and Helen,

each with their own set of struggles related to marriage and family relations. The film opens with a close-up of Joy melancholically gazing off into the distance. Behind Joy is a psychedelically patterned fabric, part of the décor at a restaurant with "a lot of vegetarian options." The mood of the restaurant suggests that Joy will have a calming, peaceful dinner, yet this is far from the case. Joy brushes off her obviously bothered state, saying "just a little déjà vu." This déjà vu nods to the fact that *Life During Wartime* follows as a sort of sequel to Solondz's *Happiness* (1998); the first scene of is nearly identical to the first scene of *Happiness.* However, this film is far from a traditional sequel, if only for the fact that the characters are played by different actors who do not remotely physically resemble the originals.

As the scene progresses, it is revealed that Joy is at her anniversary dinner with her husband Allen and he presents her with a gift to commemorate the occasion. Beginning to weep, Joy opens her gift to reveal an antique ashtray engraved with "Joy," ironically purchased on eBay. Joy holds the ashtray sobbing suggesting that while marriage is typically thought to be what gives one's life the most joy, the opening scene reveals quite the opposite. Everything about Joy's life, even her name, is bitterly ironic; joy proves elusive for Joy. Throughout the film, tiny Joy grimly peers out of her abundance of hair and wanders about with her fragile frame shrouded in voluminous dresses, appearing to search for the happiness she never finds.

Joy's sister Trish, though she tries to pretend otherwise, possesses little more happiness. Trish's house masquerades as the picture of perfection: immaculate, matching décor, cheery floral patterns—in general, the image of the ideal American family. Reinforcing that Trish attempts to create the appearance of a happy home, her wardrobe often matches the rooms of the house. In one scene, Trish sits down to dinner with her children, her new boyfriend, and his son. Exemplarily dressed in conservative clothing reminiscent of a 1950s housewife, Trish sits down

with her family to enjoy a homemade dinner. This image of the ideal family proves superficial as conversation seems stilted and her daughter mourns the death of her baby carrots.

With scenes like Trish's family dinner, the film challenges this appearance of perfection as it interrogates what will make this facade shatter. Trish's ex-husband's pedophilia certainly marks a glaring blemish on this seemingly ideal family. The home never lives up to the appearance Trish constructs. For, "*Life During Wartime*, like its predecessor, is a brilliant diagnosis of a certain strain of American loneliness. It shows the solitude of shopping malls and new-build condos; the anguish of characters locked within their own private prisons" ("Pursuit of Happiness"). At one point in the film, shots of Trish's home rapidly transition to the prison her ex-husband is about to leave, hinting that the two locations are not so dissimilar. By replacing the image of the perfect home with that of a prison and showing the misery of Joy's marriage, the film establishes that family is not a sanctuary from life's problems but perhaps the source. Solondz dares to levy the unthinkable critique, an antisocial, dark look at marriage and family.

Feminist filmmaker Jamie Babbit focuses on increasing lesbian representation in her work that ranges from the popular film *But I'm a Cheerleader* to episodes of the iconic television show *The L Word.* Her more recent work takes a more politicized approach to this mission. Foregrounding the difficulties associated with implementing radical politics in a conservative era, Babbit's 2007 *Itty Bitty Titty Committee* highlights the tension between feminism and neoliberalism. The film focuses on a group of women attempting to modernize and synthesize the 1970s' radical feminism and 1990s' Riot grrrl culture.

The opening sets the tone for the film with gritty black and white Riot grrrl concert footage—the blaring music serving as a narration for images of girls crowd surfing, jumping, kissing, and dancing topless. The concert scenes transition straight to Anna trying on a

bridesmaid's dress for her sister's wedding, looking vacantly into the mirror while her mother calls her in the background. This transition is visually jarring through its juxtaposition of the grainy, pixelated black and white concert footage with the fully in focus bridal salon painted pink and filled with faux flowers. This contrast foreshadows the central tension of the film, the negotiation of radical feminist politics in a conservative society. The film follows Anna, a young lesbian who, recently dumped by her girlfriend and rejected by the one college she applied to, works at a cosmetic surgery clinic that appears to specialize in breast enhancement surgery. Anna passively lives her life in daze until one night after work, she runs into a woman defacing the outside of the clinic with graffiti. The woman introduces herself as Sadie and invites Anna to a C(i)A (Clits in Action) meeting. The C(i)A is a radical feminist group that utilizes both consciousness raising gatherings, reminiscent of those of the 70s, and guerilla tactics like public property reclamation.

The group's political leader is named Shulie after Shulamith Firestone, writer of 1970 feminist text *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution.* Shulie and the C(i)A as a whole organize around radical politics, much like the Marxist-inspired theories of Firestone. The group's actions and theories take extreme antisocial measures against the conservatism presented in the film: Anna's sister's marriage, the plastic surgery office, and the neoliberal gay marriage debate. In fact, many of the film's pivotal moments take place around the issue of marriage, including a gay marriage protest that threatens to destroy the C(i)A. Anna leaves her sister's wedding to help execute the C(i)A's ultimate protest. As her sister exists the church, the camera pans across the family's smiling faces—mom, dad, sister, and Anna's forced smile. The scene turns back to the sister and her perfect new husband, then back to Anna, just to reveal that Anna has run off. Anna leaves to meet the rest of the C(i)A at the set of the Marcy Maloney show, a

exemplar of conservatism throughout the film. The group has plans to hijack the show's coverage of the anniversary of the Washington Monument to broadcast their detonation of a penis-shaped explosive device on the top of the monument. The Washington Monument is indeed a phallic symbol, something that the C(i)A continually criticizes about architecture as a whole, but it is also a visual representation of the liberal ideology that served as the basis for the United States' founding.

The revolutionary ideas figured in the films of LaBruce, Solondz, and Babbit demand that we re-examine New Queer Cinema, instead of dismissing it as a dead era of filmmaking. As assimilation politics and homonormativity continue to take root, radical film practices like those seen during New Queer Cinema's rise in the early 90s become cast more and more outside of dominant cinema. Queer filmmakers today still release innovative work full of revolutionary potential, but they are competing with the commoditized, assimilationist films that receive mainstream distribution and critical attention. I believe that the works of filmmakers who remain true to New Queer Cinema's origins and provide a critique of neoliberalism demand our focus. A critique of neoliberalism, because neoliberal ideology is so normalized and naturalized, can be hard to conceive of, but turning to a fantasy structure such as film is a way to understand what this could look like. This possibility for film to visualize an otherwise unintelligible critique makes New Queer Cinema a vital aspect of queer work that needs to be celebrated and carefully studied.

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