

**SUSTAINING LIFE DURING THE AIDS CRISIS:
NEW QUEER CINEMA AND THE BIOPIC**

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This dissertation examines the discourses of health, crisis, and personal narrative that coalesced during the AIDS crisis of the 1980s and 1990s, and that shaped the responses of queer artists and activists to the pandemic. More specifically, the sexual politics and biopolitical discourses of that moment explain why queer filmmakers would turn to such a conservative film genre as the biopic as viable terrain. Because film scholars have almost uniformly positioned the biopic as a genre reinscribing Western subject formation, it makes sense that critics like B. Ruby Rich might fail to apprehend queer filmmakers' biographical films as biopics. Since the biopic has such an enduring history from the early studio era to the present, including queer biographical films as part of the genre precludes the separation of queer filmmakers from dominant film history and cinematic conventions established during studio era Hollywood. The cost of this quarantine is a history in which queer films existed and continue to exist independently from a long line of films that inscribe personhood and personal history. However, the biopic's interest in recording personal histories made it a particularly salient choice for queer filmmakers during the AIDS crisis when they sought to tell stories of damaged lives lost and lived.

Chapter One explores how queer filmmakers John Greyson, Todd Haynes, and Bruce LaBruce responded to the AIDS crisis as precisely a crisis of queer visibility. The case studies of Tom Kalin's *Swoon* (1992) and *Savage Grace* (2007) guide the next chapter's return to cinema's biomedical history, as well as psychoanalytic models of suturing, to excavate queer filmmakers' disruption of normative models of spectatorship. Chapter Three reads Matthew Mishory's

Delphinium (2009) as a new point of entry into Derek Jarman's cinema in order to understand both filmmakers as part of a queer genealogy. The fourth chapter investigates Elisabeth Subrin's and Barbara Hammer's creation and use of queer archives to tell the stories of feminisms—via particular feminists—past. The final chapter discusses the queer biopic's relationship to People With AIDS (PWA) photography, looking finally to contemporary media practices to reflect upon the current AIDS media landscape.

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PREFACE

“Use what is dominant in a culture to change it quickly.”

--Jenny Holzer¹

This project started a long time ago, long before I was ready to carry out the magnitude of the work that unfolds in the next five chapters, and that will continue to unfold over the next stages of my career. It is work that lived in the recesses of my mind for a handful of years before making its way to the foreground as I revisited films such as *Swoon* (Tom Kalin, 1992) and *Caravaggio* (Derek Jarman, 1986). In coming back to Kalin’s and Jarman’s work, I was struck by how much these films were based in *a desire for biography*, a drive to tell stories of (anachronistically) queer life. These films were biopics. However, as I worked on this project, committee members and colleagues frequently asked me if the biopic was truly essential to my research: “Can you not just talk about queer biography?” “Are these queer films even biopics?” “Are you not talking about a specific moment in gay and lesbian cinema?” And there were moments when those voices started to overtake my work, when I second-guessed myself. I decided, at one point, to take my theorization of the biopic out of the project completely to see

¹ Jenny Holzer, *Survival* series, 1983-85.

what happened. The results were obvious: as soon as I took the biopic out, I discovered how central the genre and cinematic formation is to a full appreciation of queer cinema.

In taking up queer filmmakers' work in this manner, the dissertation asserts that media studies scholars and film critics have failed to appreciate the queer biopic's rich legacy by not recognizing queer biographical films as biopics. The recurrent misrecognition of queer biopics as simply another iteration of New Queer Cinema separates them from a much larger history of genre and, in some ways, from the history of cinema itself.² By positioning the queer biopic within the biopic's history of formation, I am working against impulses toward canonicity that define film movements and genres in rigid, isolated ways. The biopic does often support national identity and dominant ideology, but it is also connected to histories of health science and projects of life-building. The queer biopic engaged with these histories and took up projects of sustaining life during the AIDS crisis, a time of queer life's fragility. The queer biopic further intervened in the sexual politics of the epidemic's historical moment to put forth a queer sexual politics rooted in the body.³

This project is driven by my desire to understand why some lives are made less livable than others and my accompanying attempt to construct a politics of ethical relation. Methodologically, this research takes form in my thinking queer history and theory together. Put another way, my efforts to make visible histories and lives that have been effaced by dominant narratives stems from my larger intention to examine how we define ourselves in relation to one another and how we articulate projects of care. The AIDS crisis created a moment of rupture that

² I use the label New Queer Cinema as both a descriptor of cinematic style and an indication of a particular moment in film history.

³ The body politics I am referring to here is connected to a history of feminist thought and practice, which I further explain in the fourth chapter.

changed the ways in which queers thought about the care of life and a moment when many lesbians and gays began to consider themselves queer. In other words, the crisis presented queers with a crisis of how to build, sustain, and repair life in the face of annihilation.⁴ Queer filmmakers' engagement with the biopic evokes the genre's history of building life through the portrayal of lives worthy of admiration and emulation, but it also points to another biopic history, that of representing lives damaged. By portraying lives damaged by inconceivable loss, queer filmmakers challenge the illusion of a coherent self presumably reinforced by the biopic genre and in doing so, their films open up the potential for a relationality based in a shattering of the self.

Through understanding the queer biopic as a biopic, I hope to change the way we understand the biopic genre; that is, I hope to reorient understandings of the biopic as an inherently conservative, closed-off cinematic form. People may groan when you mention the biopic, but that groan comes from the fact that we know that genre so well; we can recognize a biopic as a biopic throughout film history, which can be said of few other genres.⁵ The biopic's premise is simple: it tells the life story of a prominent figure deemed important by dominant history.⁶ Its form is dictated by this premise—it draws on (excessive) melodramatic modes of expression and typically uses a readily identifiable narrative structure.⁷ In this project, I identify

⁴ Repair is a term I use under erasure. I do not believe that life could be repaired, an argument I most clearly articulate in my reading of Tom Kalin's films, *Swoon* and *Savage Grace*.

⁵ Melodrama represents another genre for which this statement is true. However, it is also one that functions more as a mode and genre cross-pollinator than the biopic, which typically has a more identifiable form and content.

⁶ I am drawing on George Custen's definition of the biopic in his book *Bio/Pics*.

⁷ See George F. Custen, *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992). Classical Hollywood perfected the biopic genre during the studio era, establishing the genre tropes we recognize today. I discuss Custen's landmark

the queer cooption of the biopic form in order to counter the assumption that the genre always supports conservative political projects and upholds normative ways of being, arguing for a re-conception of the biopic genre. The queer biopic does not necessarily transform the biopic or break with its history—national, biomedical, and educational—but instead, uses that history to produce something else. Queer filmmakers’ recourse to the biopic form demands that film scholars move away from simplistic understandings of what a genre can be and can do, and demands that we instead look to genre’s openings and moments of possibility.

The dissertation unfolds as a set of case studies of sorts. More specifically, each chapter is structured around dealing with a different aspect of queer filmmakers’ drive to take up the biopic genre, examined through the perspectives and preoccupations of a particular filmmaker or set of filmmakers working on a particular concern of queer practice. The dissertation opens up a set of problematics, but while I seek explanation, I do not necessarily seek (simple) answers. I pull at the threads of dominant histories of the AIDS crisis and New Queer Cinema movement to look towards what these histories have elided or quarantined.

The first chapter deals with the moment of the AIDS crisis as a crisis of public health and of the public itself. The AIDS crisis brought damage and devastation, but it also produced a new way of thinking about political practice and belonging. I interrogate Bruce LaBruce’s, Todd Haynes’s, and John Greyson’s approaches to community and belonging in the midst of the epidemic, in particular, looking to their articulations of queer desire and to their respective cautions about (mis)taking what appears before the human eye as truth. Following suit, my

scholarship throughout the dissertation, but he created a useful taxonomy of these tropes in his book *Bio/Pics*.

employment of seemingly self-evident concepts like community is always under erasure.⁸ More precisely, I avoid discussing the queer (or gay and lesbian) community as something we already know and understand. Instead, I work to complicate how terms like “community” function—who they include and who they exclude, what they produce, and how they affect queer embodiment.

The case studies of Tom Kalin’s *Swoon* (1992) and *Savage Grace* (2007) are the basis of the second chapter’s return to cinema’s biomedical history, as well as to psychoanalytic models of suturing, to excavate queer filmmakers’ disruption of normative models of spectatorship. Kalin’s films are concerned with the biopic’s premise of proximity, being close to an individual, but in such a way that puts forth alternative modes of vision and inspection. I turn to Leo Bersani and Adam Phillip’s theorization of impersonal narcissism to demonstrate how the queer biopic can be a means of experiencing modes of queer relationality produced by the HIV virus.

The third chapter challenges a New Queer Cinema canonicity that positions the entire movement as “homo pomo,” or postmodern deconstruction.⁹ Instead, I argue that queer filmmakers’ recourse to the biopic genre illuminates queer affective longings for the past and origins. I reorient understandings of both family and genealogy with a consideration of where queers might look for family—the past. I position Matthew Mishory, Derek Jarman, and Ken Russell as a lineage of queer filmmakers looking back to the past to reimagine it differently, to reimagine it queerly. Family is perhaps one of the most normalizing structures imaginable, and

⁸ Martin Heidegger first used the term “under erasure” (*sous rature*), but Jacques Derrida would later make the term a cornerstone of poststructuralist theory. In critical writing, using concepts or words under erasure is an indication that there is not a better or more accurate term available. The use of said concept, then, is provisional and open to complication and revision.

⁹ I more fully discuss critic’s use of “homo pomo” as a descriptor of the New Queer Cinema movement in the third chapter. In my employment of the term, I am drawing particularly from B. Ruby Rich’s writing about queer films screening at major film festivals such as Sundance Film Festival during the early 1990s.

yet, I turn to the concept of family in order to explain a queer desire for belonging and care. As with notions of community, the longing for lineage involves the desire, the need to see images of those like one's self. The biopic offered a cinematic formation in which queers could locate longed-for images of community and lineage, as it continues to offer a generic form ripe for queer identification.

The fourth chapter investigates Elisabeth Subrin's and Barbara Hammer's creation and use of queer archives to tell the stories—via particular feminists—of feminisms past. This turn to lesbian filmmakers is an assertion that the preservational impulse that accompanied much AIDS activist art and practice is connected genealogically and aligned politically with feminist historiographical practices and body politics. Queer activists' and artists' impulse to represent and preserve the past was equals part an attempt to rescue history and, at the same time, an attempt to keep the future safe for generations of queers to come. Hammer and Subrin look to feminist history archives where they exist, and where there is no evidence of queer life lived, they invent it by repurposing and refashioning a history marked by lesbian absence.

The fifth chapter closes with a discussion of the queer biopic's relationship to People With AIDS (PWA) photography and media representation, looking finally to contemporary media practices to reflect upon the current AIDS media landscape. Moreover, I explore the way in which the virus functions as a legacy and inheritance that shapes artist Kia LaBeija's photography and video. The images of history and endurance that emerge in LaBeija's work reflect the impossibility of conceiving queer life as separate from a history of AIDS crisis loss.

1.0 THE DESIRE TO SEE AND BE SEEN: NEW QUEER CINEMA'S RESPONSE TO A PUBLIC HEALTH CRISIS

Like dreams traversing the conscious and the unconscious, the parasite is opportunistic, searching for holes, openings. Politically speaking, to become the virus is to become the agent—the agency for change.

-Simon Leung, 1991¹⁰

The AIDS epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s was a crisis of public health in that it led to social panic over how to differentiate between healthy and unhealthy bodies, and then how to decide what to do with the unhealthy ones. But even more pointedly, AIDS brought about a concern over how to define publics and how to determine which bodies should be (in)visible in the public sphere. As members of the queer community disappeared from view with each passing day, the community needed a way to preserve and memorialize those lost. The epidemic thus brought about an urgency to tell personal narratives, to tell queer life stories. Because of this urgency to portray life stories, the biopic genre functions as an unrecognized driving force behind the formation of New Queer Cinema. The biopic's importance in the proliferation of radical queer films has gone unacknowledged because of the way that scholars and critics have positioned the genre as inherently conservative, a clichéd and old-fashioned form that supports dominant ideology and (hegemonic) national identity. But because of queer cinema's fascination with

¹⁰ 1991 NYLGEFF program notes for *Transcripts: Some Notes Between Pricks*, Box 3, Folder 233, The Mix Collection, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University.

biography and with recovering or preserving historical queer figures, the biopic form critically shaped New Queer Cinema and the lineage of queer films to follow. It is important to understand queer biographical films as biopics because of, not in spite of, the genre's attempt to cohesively construct life narratives and popular identities. The genre's conventions shape the way lives appear on screen, and in conjuring the biopic form, queer filmmakers engaged with a history of representing lives and bodies in particular ways. The biopic is a cinematic formation that deals with the convergent histories of Classical Hollywood Cinema, life sciences, public health, and biography, histories that extend beyond the borders of film itself to encapsulate literary biography, medicine, and clinical psychoanalysis.

Queer filmmakers like John Greyson, Tom Kalin, and Todd Haynes engaged with the biopic's public health and life science history in order to show the ways in which the media and medical community had rigidly codified and stigmatized the queer body. These films revealed and rejected the lenses through which queer bodies had been viewed, and they sought to portray those bodies differently. In taking individual lives as their case studies, these films re-presented the building of queer lives and queer selves. As gay and lesbian film festivals formed around works that portrayed lives lost and lives living on, festival cultures affirmed the power of the cinematic image in working through processes of mourning and melancholia, with the latter, of course, incapable of ever being fully worked through.

In the final minutes of Greyson's *Zero Patience* (1993), the face of the film's principal subject, Patient Zero, fills not only the screen of a museum exhibit created to document his epidemiological importance, but his visage also dominates the screen that theatrical audiences saw. Spectators were left to contemplate Zero's face from the point of view of an onscreen museum curator, Sir Richard Francis Burton, who longingly gazes at Patient Zero's luminous

image. Though mediated by a screen (or in the spectator's case, two screens), these last moments offer a final moment to be in Zero's virtual presence and bask in his image.¹¹ Across the space of the exhibit, Burton exchanges a set of glances with Zero's larger than life image. Zero looks back at what should be Burton, according to shot/reverse shot principles, but his look is also a direct address to us, the audience, as he holds out a cigarette with a coy smirk and asks, "Got a light, sailor?" Obliging, Burton holds up a candelabrum to Zero's cigarette and smoke begins to fill the screen, billowing out into the space of the museum before water sprinklers turn on and an electrical short causes Zero's spectral image to vanish. With this scene, Zero's presence reaches out beyond the screen to touch the audience who, by this point in the film, feels an intimacy with Zero, a closeness that they must acknowledge is finally coming to a close, but this closure is also an alarm.

With its irreverent sendup of transmission narratives, sexual promiscuity, and criticisms of the politics of the gay movement itself, John Greyson's *Zero Patience* stands out as one of the most controversial and daring films of the early 1990s. The film is a biopic that takes as its source the then familiar tale of Patient Zero, a French-Canadian flight attendant blamed in the media for the spread of HIV to North America. But in calling forth familiar AIDS discourses only to flip their script, Greyson's film tells the story differently, gives the HIV virus a different

¹¹ As soon as Burton's Patient Zero exhibition goes up in the Hall of Contagion exhibit at the Museum of Natural History, the media latches onto the story to re-villainize Zero. Zero decides he wants to just disappear instead of being a museum specimen, and ACT UP activists invade the museum as the titular "Zero Patience" musical number begins. This moment provides a release from the frustration surrounding the scapegoating and stigmatization of Patient Zero by the media and the medical community that hangs over the film. Zero's friend Mary, an ACT UP activist who leads the raid, at one point sings: "We've got zero patience for know-it-all doctors who don't know nothing from nothing...from nothing." Curator Burton eventually begins to sing the song's callback responses as the film closes, while an onscreen Zero sings his own rendition of the number as he fades from view.

face.¹² This fanciful biopic directly confronts mainstream media's figuration of the threat posed by gay promiscuity, by telling the story of the afterlife of Gaëtan Dugas, popularly known as Patient Zero or simply as Zero in the film; Zero instantly emerges as the charismatic face of the AIDS crisis in Greyson's film and appeals to viewers' desire to know more, to spend more time with him through thick and thin. *Zero Patience* takes our collective fascination with biography as a given; whether Zero is in fact the guilty source of HIV or the exonerated slut who inspired safer sex, the film positions the audience to want to know more about his personal history, secrets, and scandals. The film's investigative probing into Zero's life story through Burton's interviews with Zero's friends, lovers, and his mother situates the film in a lineage of documentary exposé and the conventions of sensationalized true crime and social problem reporting. But while Burton's interviews start out as a search for incriminating evidence that might confirm Zero as the villainous ground zero of the HIV virus, Burton's perspective on Zero slowly changes, and he begins to see Zero as the epidemic's unsung hero.

I open with these final moments of *Zero Patience* because they open up a set of concerns that I pursue in the sections that follow, including why queer filmmakers turned to the biopic as a particularly salient form during the AIDS crisis, how queer filmmakers utilized the biopic to represent the self, and how the desire to be close to biopic subjects like Zero transforms the way audiences viewed themselves and others. I return to *Zero Patience* in a later section of the

¹² Randy Shilts's labeled Canadian flight attendant Gaëtan Dugas "Patient Zero" in his 1987 book *And the Band Played On: People, Politics, and the AIDS Epidemic*. The nonfiction best seller is a work of investigative journalism that makes a number of claims (varying in truth) about the origin and spread of AIDS. Patient Zero became both an enigmatic urban legend and a convenient scapegoat.

As a testimony to the Patient Zero myth's continued cultural import, the narrative serves as the source material for the recently produced British horror film titled *Patient Zero* (Stefan Ruzowitzky, UK, 2017). The film was set to release in February 2017, but was stripped from release with an unknown date for future distribution.

chapter to fully unravel the ways in which it illuminates New Queer Cinema's engagement with medical science's codification of deviant bodies, as well as queer filmmakers' accompanying efforts to see and represent queer bodies differently.

1.1 DESIRING IMAGES: FILM FESTIVAL CULTURE IN THE AIDS CRISIS

Because gay and lesbian film festivals debuted so many of the films that launched the movement that B. Ruby Rich would come to name New Queer Cinema, it is impossible to talk about New Queer Cinema without addressing the energetic moment that created it.¹³ During a time when queers needed images, gay and lesbian film festivals emerged as a space for a collective consumption of queer lives, characters, and those who looked and lived as they did. The public consumption of these films and the energy generated by community screenings not only created a greater demand for films telling queer stories, but also shaped the way those films were received by audiences. In this section of the chapter I focus exclusively on MIX NYC, acknowledging that it was only one of a countless number of queer film festivals that emerged during the late 80s and early 90s.¹⁴ But while it was only one of many, MIX NYC set the scene

¹³ B. Ruby Rich first debuted the term "New Queer Cinema" in the *Village Voice* piece titled "A Queer Sensation" (March 24, 1992), which was later reprinted in *Sight and Sound* 2.5 (1992) under the headline "The New Queer Cinema." New Queer Cinema organically came out of Rich's observation that there was something new and revolutionary happening in this late 80s-early 90s cycle of gay and lesbian films. She states in *New Queer Cinema: The Director's Cut* that she decided to publish the phrase in the *Voice* after a conversation with then editor in chief Phillip Dodd. Dodd and coeditor Pamela Cook then sought out responses to Rich's now legendary piece from Isaac Julien, Derek Jarman, Constantine Giannaris, and Patibha Parmar, and commissioned articles by Andy Medhurst and Amy Taubin.

¹⁴ A short list of other festivals includes: Boston LGBT Film Festival, Reeling—Chicago International Gay and Lesbian Film Festival, Outfest—Los Angeles Gay & Lesbian Film

for film festivals to come; the sprawling scope of the festival, along with its success in promoting queer filmmakers and uniting the queer community, created the possibility for festivals that would pop up across the world.¹⁵ MIX NYC is one of the longest running queer film festivals in the country, beginning in 1987 and continuing through the present day, and it helped launch or expand the films and careers of directors who would come to define New Queer Cinema, including Todd Haynes, Barbara Hammer, Derek Jarman, Gregg Araki, Bruce LaBruce, Isaac Julien, and Gus Van Sant.¹⁶ The festival was originally named The New York Lesbian and Gay Experimental Film Festival (NYGLEFF) and was changed to MIX NYC in 1993 to reflect a change in leadership and its broader community and global outreach.¹⁷ In this chapter, I use both names, MIX and New York Lesbian and Gay Experimental Film Festival, somewhat interchangeably, using MIX to refer to the festival broadly and NYLGEFF in instances where I am discussing a specific festival year prior to the name change. But the festival's name change also signifies a broader transition that was happening during the AIDS crisis years: the transition from gay and lesbian communities to the formation of a queer community.

Throughout the dissertation, I use the term queer to describe festivals, films, and filmmakers that use a vocabulary of gay and lesbian. In part, this difference marks my own theoretical framework that I bring to the history and materials I am working with—I identify

Festival, Gaze—Dublin International LGBT Festival, identities. Vienna's Queer Film Festival, Image + Nation—Montreal LGBT Film Festival, Austin Gay & Lesbian International Film Festival, Frameline—San Francisco International LGBT Film Festival, Lesbich Schwule Filmtage Hamburg, and Queer Screen: Mardi Gras Film Festival.

¹⁵ MIX NYC is also one of the most documented film festivals with NYU's Fales Library holding an extensive collection of festival programs, correspondence, promotional materials, newspaper clippings, and many other documents from the festival's debut in 1987 up to 2001.

¹⁶ "About MIX," *MIX NYC*, accessed December, 21, 2016, <http://mixnyc.org/about/>.

¹⁷ "The NYGLEFF is changing!" Festival Statement, Box 4, Folder 403, The Mix Collection, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University, New York.

these festivals and films as part of a lineage of queer cinema that takes up a transformative relationship to dominant culture, aesthetic forms, and political rhetoric. I think of queer as more than an adjective or label; it is a verb; it works on and transforms people, aesthetic objects, and communities. Unlike the somewhat static categories of gay and lesbian, queerness destabilizes and unsettles the things we thought we knew. And yet, I am also interested in the specific conditions that made the transition from gay and lesbian to queer not only possibly, but also necessary. I use the queer biopic to trace the mechanisms through which the AIDS crisis brought about a move from identity politics to coalitional queer politics. While the HIV virus is typically figured as that which destroys, the virus was also productive: it produced a moment of uncertainty and instability that allowed for the formulation of new ways of thinking about bodies, identity, and community.

Activists and artists Jim Hubbard and Sarah Schulman founded the NYLGEFF in 1987 out of their desire to use art forms to better understand the social and political moment of the AIDS epidemic, and to work through art as a form of queer political practice.¹⁸ The festival provided a space in which other queer filmmakers and artists could come together to devise ways to use art to combat social inequality. In this way, the festival offers one, perhaps founding, example of the inseparability of art and activism during the crisis. Gay and lesbian film festivals worldwide distributed and screened films to an audience for queer films produced in response to the AIDS crisis, but these festivals were also in and of themselves fueled by AIDS activist consciousness. The AIDS crisis's status as a public health crisis points to the way in which the epidemic brought about concern over how bodies are allowed to occupy public spaces, as well as how bodies deemed unhealthy are dealt with in the public sphere. In the face of this crisis of the

¹⁸ "About MIX," *MIX NYC*.

public, gay and lesbian film festivals produced a space for queer publics formation and a space in which to contemplate how queer bodies might best navigate the civil society as well as the health care system.¹⁹

These festivals, then, emerged as a crucial site for queer communities to think about identity and representation, by providing a forum in which to publicly view and consume images of queerness. In a 1989 *Outweek* article on the NYLGEFF Karl Soehnlein notes: “if there’s one thread that holds the festival’s diverse offerings together, it’s the creation of gay visions by gays and for gay.”²⁰ Soehnlein cites founder Jim Hubbard’s observation that there are audiences out there who are hungry for images; the festival filled a burning desire to see images of gay sexuality, desire, and identity, and attendees were deeply interested in the visions then being crafted by gay and lesbian filmmakers. Queer film festivals built a community organized around a desire to see images of those like themselves, and through the seeing of these images, so the logic goes, one can also be seen. Audiences’ core fascination with the biopic, after all, involves a desire to see captivating figures on screen; figures that captivate through both an audience’s admiration of them and filmic identification with them. This desire to see individuals’ lives takes on a particular intensity for queer communities during the AIDS crisis, who in the face of death,

¹⁹ Queer critic Michael Warner frequently discusses the tension between straight and queer publics, or the queer struggle to define oneself as part of the public. He most clearly describes these conflicts in his book *Publics and Counterpublics* (2002). Warner writes, “If we did not have a practical sense of what publics are, if we could not unself-consciously take them for granted as really existing and addressable social entities, we could not produce most of the books or films or broadcasts or journals that make up so much of our culture” (8). Publics cannot exist outside of our ability to imagine them, and he emphasizes the performative nature of publics, stating, “publics exist only by virtue of their imagining. They are a kind of fiction that has taken on life, and very potent life at that” (8).

²⁰ “Fighting the Phobes: In the face of Increasing Censorship, the Lesbian and Gay Experimental Film Festival Forges Ahead” in *Outweek*, 1989, Box 2, Folder 132, The Mix Collection, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University, New York.

loss, and a totalizing assault on queer selfhood needed to see images of those lives lost, as well as those continuing to live in the face of those losses. And film festivals like MIX provided a forum in which queers could discuss what kinds of images they wanted to see and what sorts of experiences they wished queer filmmakers to acknowledge and to present.

MIX's programs over the years show an incredibly diverse range of films, from meditations on identity and memory from filmmakers like Abigail Child, to the punk aesthetics and irreverent attitude of those like Gregg Araki. Araki's director's statement on *The Long Weekend (O' Despair)* (1989) reads: "All its characters are presented as just people—who are fucked up, insecure, fall in love—without regard for which set of genitalia they prefer. Unfortunately in this era of worldwide AIDS—hysterical homophobia, hateful sexism, neonazi bigotry and violence, this seems like a revolutionary idea."²¹ True revolution seems impossible for this disillusioned bunch of queers disappointed by the revolution sold to them by punk groups like the Sex Pistols, as well as by the failed radical politics of the 1970s. Araki's explanation for the film asserts that simply existing in the world as queer in the midst of the epidemic was a radical act; and this claim further suggests that perhaps the most revolutionary representation during the epidemic was the representation of mundane queer life.

²¹ *The Long Weekend (O' Despair)* Press Kit, Box 2, Folder 125, The Mix Collection, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University, New York.

1.2 QUEER PUBLICS, COMMUNITY FORMATION

Festivals like MIX form a space where attendees are not just spectators but active members of a public. Writing about what she calls the queer publicity formed in queer film festivals, Patricia White states, “At screenings, multiple publics experience forms of collectivity that involve desire, identification, and disidentification—forms as akin to a party or a demographic category.”²² This statement involves a series of socio-political terms that begins with the naming of multiple publics, a naming that echoes the alterity and coalition building inherent to the category of “queer.” But she then goes on to describe a collectivity formed by the experience of watching films, experiences that involve the multiple and heterogeneous processes of identification and disidentification with the filmic image, noting that these (dis)identifications are bound up in desire. And finally, her use of the words “akin to a party” and “a demographic category” strike me as her most abstract designations, but also the most suggestive. What White seems to indicate here is a certain *democratic* quality to the festival community. This notion of a democracy makes sense when film festivals are thought of as a space in which to make decisions about queer social needs and political strategy. The question of what a community needs is a somewhat tricky one insofar as these needs span a wide array of personal and political demands; in other words, queer audiences’ intensely personal desire to see images of those like them are not depoliticized desires, and at the same time, films that fulfill this need may not perform the type of radical political work activists during the AIDS crisis demanded.

The AIDS crisis radicalized gay and lesbian communities, politicized them in such a way that led to the formation of the queer community. MIX’s festival programming performed the

²² Patricia White, “Queer Publicity: A Dossier on Lesbian and Gay Film Festivals,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 5.1 (1999): 75.

symbolic act of bringing together gay and lesbian artistic production, echoing the festival's creation by gay filmmaker Jim Hubbard and lesbian writer Sarah Schulman.²³ From early on, the festival sought to bring lesbian and gay filmmakers onto the same program and onto the same screens, priding itself on the number of female filmmakers listed each year. Speaking of the 1989 NYLGEFF Alisa Lebow writes, "Of the 61 filmmakers whose work is being presented here, over one third are women."²⁴ Given women's historically fraught position in the film industry and women's lack of visibility in the midst of the AIDS crisis, as infected bodies, as caretakers, and as leaders of grassroots activism, these numbers evidence a commitment to changing lesbian artists' marginalization. In the same piece on the 1989 festival, Lebow continues, "Most of the films by men (and a few of the women's) are informed either explicitly or implicitly by the AIDS crisis, which has given rise to a whole genre of AIDS activist films. Many of the women filmmakers are grappling in their films with their relationship to representation and desire—which is in and of itself a political endeavor."²⁵ Lebow's comments speak to a certain essentializing and splitting of gay and lesbian filmmakers' work, but importantly, her words seek to counter lesbian filmmakers' ghettoization as "personal cinema." In other words, politicizing lesbian cinema functions as a broader politicization of films representing queer desire and life stories, making the argument that these films are as much activist cinema as explicitly AIDS crisis films.

Yet, MIX's efforts to bring gay and lesbian filmmakers and filmgoers together was far from an isolated phenomenon, and instead falls in line with other activist work that sought to fill

²³ I recognize that each of these artists wore many other hats in the art world.

²⁴ "Three Points of the Pink Triangle: AIDS, Representation, & Desire," Box 2, Folder 131, The Mix Collection, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University, New York.

²⁵ "Three Points of the Pink Triangle: AIDS, Representation, & Desire," Box 2, Folder 131, The Mix Collection, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University, New York.

in the gaps created by a homogenous gay community. Queer Nation formed in spring of 1990 in New York City's West Village and the name was officially put into action on May 17, 1990. The group modeled itself after ACT UP's direct action, but put a greater emphasis on minority participation—the branding of queer was intended to include those who had felt excluded by ACT UP's early iterations. In speaking of the group's name and objectives, founding member Jay Blotcher states: “We were specifically formed to fight homophobia.”²⁶ Queer Nation's use of the word “queer” reappropriates and disempowers its use as a homophobic slur, and importantly, Blotcher's words suggest that queer politics oppose homophobia in its many forms. The organization's “Queers Read This” leaflet (1990) elaborates: “Using ‘queer’ is a way of reminding us how we are perceived by the rest of the world. It's a way of telling ourselves we don't need to be witty and charming people who keep our lives discreet and marginalized in the straight world. We use queer as gay men loving lesbians and lesbians loving being queer.”²⁷ Queer represents a type of visibility that breaks away from positive gay representation and/or politics of respectability, and unlike gay, queer does not equal male. The organization's cry for visibility is echoed in their oft-cited demonstration chant: “We're here! We're Queer! Get used to it!” Instead of appealing to the hearts of America, queerness demands to be seen on its own terms and disrupts the straight world's demands for discreet, charming lives.

While the official film festival name change did not come until 1993, queer was used in the festival's vocabulary as early as the second annual NYLGEFF, as the festival program cover

²⁶ Folder 3, Jay Blotcher Collection, The Center Archive, New York.

²⁷ Anonymous, “Queers Read This,” June 1990, <http://www.qrd.org/qrd/misc/text/queers.read.this>.

is splashed with the words “A Queer Kind of Film.”²⁸ The festival from its origins signals itself as working to expand conceptions of the gay and lesbian community, as well as the types of films produced by gay and lesbian filmmakers. In 1992, a year before the NYLGEFF would be renamed, *Cineaste* writer Roy Grundmann compared the queer cinema’s politics to those of Dziga Vertov’s radical cinema and claimed, “This is the moment when gay films turn into queer films.”²⁹ This moment refers to queer film festivals’ rethinking of aesthetics, politics, and sexuality to transform the aesthetics and objectives of gay cinema. The change from NYLGEFF to MIX NYC is a shift from a name that inscribes lesbian and gay identity categories to one that does not purport to describe anything in particular. The word “mix” implies a lack of organization and integration of difference, and this idea of mixing was something that the festivals always sought to do, from the mixing of identity categories to aesthetic sensibilities. Like mix, queerness works against commonsensical understandings of where one thing ends and another begins, allowing lives and identities to intermix into a collective belonging.

1.3 NEW QUEER CINEMA AND RADICAL FORM: BRUCE LABRUCE’S RE- PRESENTATION OF “THE HOMOSEXUAL”

While AIDS crisis consciousness fueled Hubbard and Schulman’s founding of the festival, most of the films screened in the first two years did not explicitly deal with the epidemic. But according to the 1989 NYLGEFF festival statement, “In the face of these assaults, gay people

²⁸ The 2nd Annual NYC Lesbian & Gay Experimental Film Festival Schedule, Box 1, Folder 69, The Mix Collection, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University, New York.

²⁹ “Politics, Esthetics, Sex: Queer Films and Their Festivals,” Box 4, Folder 336, The Mix Collection, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University, New York.

have become increasingly politically active. This commitment to direct action also drives the films and challenges artists to become activists themselves. In 1987, one film was about AIDS. This year the entire Festival is informed by the AIDS crisis.”³⁰ The statement suggests that the virus radicalized gay and lesbian populations, and that this radicalization became realized through queer filmmakers’ cameras. And pushed further, festivals like MIX became a public space in which queers could overcome a homophobic nation’s assaults on queer life. But the 1989 festival statement also raises the question of what an AIDS-informed film looks like, as well as what it does. Moreover, how do we define what makes a film responsive to the AIDS crisis? Is it the film’s content? Must the film portray characters afflicted with HIV/AIDS? Can the form (instead of content) be informed by a health crisis? Are there specific art forms, such as experimental film, that more clearly serve the representation of the AIDS crisis than others? The festival’s formation as an activist response to the crisis, performed via the cinematic medium and its spectatorial community suggests that cinema has the potential to visualize and realize queer political practice, and with this possibility, queer filmmakers and writers began to think about film differently.

In this moment of political energy, artistic production of films was, for many key filmmakers, bound up in theories and writing about queer practice. Filmmakers like Bruce LaBruce, Jim Hubbard, and Barbara Hammer generated discussions about what films should be and what they should do, as these artists produced daring new work that challenged the expectations of what a gay or lesbian film should look like. Activism, art, and theory were not discrete areas of intellectual production; the AIDS crisis represents a time in which none of these

³⁰ “The Third New York Lesbian and Gay Experimental Film Festival: Anthology Film Archives September 18-24, 1989” Festival Statement, Box 2, Folder 113, The Mix Collection, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University, New York.

things could be done in isolation. MIX provided a forum in which discussions could take place about what it means for art to be politically productive.

Filmmaker Barbara Hammer organized one such panel titled, “Does Radical Content Require Radical Form?,” at the 1988 NYGLEFF. The panel featured Abigail Child, Su Friedrich, Jim Hubbard, and Tom Chomont to address the relationship between film aesthetics and politics. The panel’s rationale was based on the assertion that “the experimental process mirrors, in many ways, the process of understanding a gay identity[;] both demand an endless re-imagining of the self and the world in order to envision and create what the mainstream believes should not and must not exist.”³¹ This description already includes an optimistic assumption that experimental aesthetics are the most effective means of creating politically effective queer cinema. Bound up in this assumption and demand for an experimental aesthetics is the belief that film can be a space in which to re-imagine the self, a space in which new ways of taking up a gay identity can be thought and visualized; in other words, the ways of being that mainstream culture have rendered invisible could be continuously brought to the screen in new ways. Festivals like MIX certainly provided the space for filmmakers to tell queer stories that have been silenced by dominant history in ways that challenged normative, accepted means of storytelling, but the collapsing of experimental aesthetics with radical form is one that troubles me, and one that I think many queer filmmakers of the era put into question. For me, this impulse to equate radical form with radical sexual politics begs the following set of questions: did a film have to be formally radical to be queer? Is an experimental film always a radical one, and does a film have

³¹ “Does Radical Content Require Radical Form?” Festival Panel Statement, Box 1, Folder 38, The Mix Collection, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University, New York.

to be experimental to be radical? Moreover, can filmmakers not take up a queer approach to normative, traditional modes of filmmaking?

In contrast to experimental form's rejection of mainstream representation, filmmaker Bruce LaBruce carves out a different relationship to popular culture. In "Modern Diseases: Gay Self-Representation in the Age of AIDS," he writes, "Rather than annihilate 'the homosexual' (what would please the moral majority more?), perhaps style and strategy should be considered in an attempt to rethink what it means to be a homosexual in a virulently homophobic society."³² When LaBruce talks here about annihilating "the homosexual," he most explicitly refers to destroying the easily recognizable, mainstream-media-codified representations of homosexuality; annihilating these images performs a certain form of queer work in that it rids queer cinema of images of "the homosexual" that can only ever understand queerness in terms already assigned by mainstream media. But LaBruce's parenthetical aside also reminds its reader that removing understandable, recognizable images of gay identity from representation would, in essence, remove gay identity from public consciousness. The issue of how to represent gay identity and queerness in the age of AIDS was a question of how to address the very real and lethal AIDS epidemic that primarily affected the gay community in terms that acknowledge a known and familiar "homosexual" while stylistically and strategically re-presenting that stereotypical image.

LaBruce and his work in films like *Super 8 ½* crucially pointed to the important role of queer public *self*-representation. Especially in the context of biographical cinema, representing queer narratives is always already a reflexive practice of the self. LaBruce makes this fact explicit in his semi-autobiographical biopic *Super 8 ½* (1994), which challenges nearly all

³² "Modern Diseases: Gay Self-Representation in the Age of AIDS" in *Gay Love and Rage in the Age of AIDS Program*, Box 32, Folder 1390, The Mix Collection, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University, New York.

accepted notions of what it means to represent oneself and, in so doing, irreverently challenges notions of *positive* gay representation. Within the first minutes of the film, the title flashes across the screen followed by a subtitle that reads, “A Cautionary Bio-Pic.” From the outset, *Super 8 ½* engages with the biopic as a genre that uses an exemplary figure to teach the audience something about how to be in the world, but the world that the film represents appears far from the world represented in those canonical films that defined the biopic genre that LaBruce cites. With reference to LaBruce’s previous film *No Skin Off My Ass* (1991), Cameron Bailey commented in *Now Magazine* that the earlier film’s glorious capture of zine, trash, and underground porn culture demanded a sequel: “‘Super 8 and a Half’ is, indeed, a sequel of sorts to Bruce LaBruce’s first feature, ‘No Skin Off My Ass,’ although perhaps more accurately it serves as a melodramatic, demystificatory expose of this twilight world of gay underground cinema.”³³

LaBruce stars in the film as a washed-up porn star who, in an attempt to revive his career, agrees to be the subject of lesbian filmmaker Googie’s latest film. The press release describes LaBruce’s film, “A faux-documentary of sorts, ‘Super 8 ½’ is composed largely of interviews and movies-within-the-movie tracing the rise and fall of our unfortunate hero, Bruce.”³⁴ The film’s title references the Fellini classic *8 ½* (1963), and it follows the Fellini narrative insofar as it charts an artist’s existential crisis and personal demise, but LaBruce replaces the self-seriousness of the Fellini original with irreverence and abjection. When Googie’s film first introduces Bruce, he is shot in front of a poster of Andy Warhol’s *Blue Movie* (1969) with Bruce’s face in the foreground concealing and revealing Warhol’s face on the movie poster as LaBruce subtly repositions himself throughout the shot. Moments like this one play with the

³³ *Super 8 ½* Press Release, Box 1, Folder 28, Jay Blotcher Papers, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University, New York.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

Western notion of the great (white male) artist, and evoke the long-recognizable artist biopic.³⁵ LaBruce's self-inscription in the film, however, rejects the somber and serious tone of most artist biopics, as he hilariously appears in a number of less-than-flattering porn scenes in the film that credits him merely as "Bruce" and the film's ubiquitous butt double. *Super 8 ½* functions to demystify gay underground film, as the press release states, but by making Bruce the unfortunate hero, it also demystifies the process through which the biopic genre constructs its subjects to elicit respect and admiration for a life well lived.

As both the festival panel "Does Radical Content Require Radical Form?" and LaBruce's statement about queer self-representation implicitly acknowledge, onscreen representations of specific selves present portraits of queer subjectivity that influence the way members of the queer community come to define their own sense of self. In the way that such representations of selves construct what it means to be a self, they also question how one comes to understand oneself in relation to others, as well as how one becomes part of an identity category or community. The practice of LaBruce's building of a self in the world of *Super 8 ½* makes the case for preserving the gritty, dirty, and counterculture aspects of queerness, during a time when those aspects were either being annihilated or pronounced shameful in an effort to create positive gay representations to counter the stigma of being gay that emerged during the AIDS crisis.³⁶

The film makes an argument for the shift from gay and lesbian identity categories to a more

³⁵ An abbreviated list of artist biopics includes: *Lust for Life* (Vincente Minnelli, 1956), *Edvard Munch* (Peter Watkins, 1976), *Savage Messiah* (Ken Russell, 1972), *Caravaggio* (Derek Jarman, 1986), *Basquiat* (Julian Schanbel, 1996), and *Love is the Devil: Study for a Portrait of Francis Bacon* (John Maybury, 1998).

³⁶ As LaBruce hints to in his mention of "the homosexual," gay and lesbian representation during the epidemic took a turn towards sanitized images of romance and monogamy that elicited public sympathy and countered narratives of gay promiscuity that blamed the queer community's lack of morality for the spread of the HIV virus. I discuss this topic and specific films in a later section of the chapter.

generative understanding of queerness, by pushing at the rigid boundaries and constraints required by the figure of “the homosexual.” Moreover, *Super 8 ½* makes a statement about what it means to be part of a community, or more realistically, what it means to not be part of one, by representing the bodies and lives necessarily abjected from positive gay and lesbian representation.

LaBruce’s *Super 8 ½* —in a scene where the film lists queer heroes who have contracted and/or died of HIV/AIDS—shows its protagonist’s vulnerability to the very real effects of the AIDS crisis, but in pairing that concern with a character with whom mainstream America will never identify, much less sympathize, it campily reveals the constructed and insincere nature of such appeals to the hearts of America.³⁷ More specifically, it reveals how dominant sociality has deemed some bodies worthy of sympathy and not others, while exposing biographical film’s participation in the mechanics of that hygienic process. The film reveals the types of lives that make mainstream America comfortable and the types of lives that do not, and in doing so argues for the power and necessity of representing those lives. Discontents Press, a group of queer writers, activists, and artists dissatisfied with the status quo, reiterate this sentiment, “The new work of queer writers is not meant to comfort but to challenge us to see worlds beyond our own

³⁷ Rosa Von Praunheim’s *Neurosia: Fifty Years of Perversity* (1995) takes a similar irreverent approach to the biopic and queer authorship. The film has been labeled a mockumentary, a faux documentary, that is, but it more accurately presents as an investigative biopic told from the perspective of a journalist sent on a mission to investigate the mysterious death of Rosa Von Praunheim. The film unfolds in much the same tone as LaBruce’s *Super 8 ½*; the journalist finds clues in strawberry-flavored condoms and a jar of collected cum, continually marveling at the abject and perverse life of the filmmaker. And yet, *Neurosia* refuses to minimize Von Praunheim’s work and its significant contributions to queer culture, for it is queer life that mainstream culture so readily deems perverse.

insular lives.”³⁸ And *Super 8 ½* demonstrates that the biopic form provides a means of telling life stories that challenge viewers to see lives outside of their own; in doing so, the film reveals the biopic to be effective for queer community formation.

1.4 *SUPERSTAR*: PUBLIC MOURNING AND IMAGINATIVE COMMUNITY FORMATIONS

LaBruce’s *Super 8 ½* comes toward the end of the AIDS crisis’s immediacy. The list of queers lost to the virus carries a sense of elegiac pastness; it haunts the film’s underground sex culture, lurking in New York’s dingy corners. In the same year, a MIX festival panel titled “AIDS: Expression and States of Mind,” pointed to the diminishing AIDS consciousness. It also charted queers disengagement from political action, with the panel’s description noting, “something vital is slipping out of focus in our community: the coherence and cohesion in the fight against AIDS.”³⁹ The fight against AIDS, according to this panel’s rationale, brought queers together and ignited their collaboration, and without the immediacy of the epidemic, they lost that momentum. A MIX festival report by Robert Reif-Pharr offers similar sentiments: “More than anything, the festival rekindled my yearning for the moment at which our cultural politics would become truly Queer, the moment at which our grips on received notions of who we are [let go],

³⁸ “High Anxiety New Queer Writing Deals with the Discomfort of Strangeness,” Discontents Press, Box 5, Folder 189, Dennis Cooper Papers, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University, New York.

³⁹ 1994 MIX NYC Festival Program Guide, Box 6, Folder 564, The Mix Collection, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University, New York.

and begin the exciting and frightening process of learning to constantly recreate ourselves.”⁴⁰ AIDS activism ignited queer consciousness and fueled the formation of communities under that label, but with AIDS awareness diminishing by the mid-1990s, a certain nostalgia formed within the community, a nostalgia for their time of formation. From here, I take a further step back into queer film history to recover the pleasures and possibilities occasioned by “learning to constantly recreate ourselves.”

While Bruce LaBruce self-consciously adapted the biopic narrative and aesthetic form for the radical subject of *Super 8 ½*, Todd Haynes opted to represent an iconic American star in decidedly experimental ways in *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (1987). The inaugural NYLGEFF 1987 program description for the film describes it as the “Life and death of the late pop singer exploring anorexia, femininity, and the all-American brother-sister duo using Barbie dolls.”⁴¹ The film’s title immediately evokes the singer’s haunting voice and tragic undoing, setting the viewer up for a traditional biopic. However, it quickly denies those expectations within the first few minutes. For while the film introduces itself as the story of Karen Carpenter, and thus demands the image of Karen, that image never comes. Or more accurately, that image does not come in the anticipated bodily form of the pop star. The image, instead, comes as a plastic commodity, as *Superstar* uses Barbie dolls, scaled hand-crafted sets, and artsy montage to offer an unconventional portrayal of the singer.

Karen Carpenter remains one of America’s most beloved singers, and, on the surface, the Carpenters represented traditional morality and family values, particularly during the late-1960s

⁴⁰ *Fuse* Winter 1993/1994, Box 5, Folder 467, The Mix Collection, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University, New York.

⁴¹ 1987 NYLGEFF Festival Program, Box 1, Folder 11, The Mix Collection, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University, New York.

to early-1980s when their easy-listening style contrasted with the era's cultural and social unrest.⁴² Karen Carpenter thus appears a ready choice for a biopic film, according to the studio-era standards that cemented the biopic as a recognizable cultural formation. Scholars George Custen and Thomas Elsaesser have identified the ways in which the genre selects historical figures that uphold hegemonic ideologies and national values, reinforcing accepted identities and traditional ways of being in the world. Biographical cinema, Custen explains, retells the stories of how public figures came to successfully inhabit the world, thereby modeling acceptable modes of being; these films shifted audience's understandings of themselves by bringing certain lives to the screen in certain ways while excluding other lives and other ways of living. Custen specifies, "the Hollywood biographical film created and still creates public history by declaring, through production and distribution, which lives are acceptable subjects."⁴³ This promotion of acceptable individuals positions the biopic as something of an educational genre that teaches its audience how to define their own subjectivity, as well as those of others.

Elsaesser takes a step further the genre's potential to educate while it fascinates and groups the studio-era biopic with other mechanisms of interpellation; the genre hails subjects and asks them to participate in a collective. He writes,

The different forms of broadcast radio, the press and later television would automatically be regarded as intertexts of cinema, within the overall context of social, educational spaces (family, school, the home, the street or neighborhood) given over to socializing

⁴² The film primarily takes place in the Carpenter family's home, re-enforcing their tightknit family image. While watching one of their televised performances on their living room television set, Karen's mother remarks, "Now you kids are getting big alright, but you're not gonna get big-headed," and then recommends that they take up some sort of charity work. Richard responds to her suggestion by stating that charity is "very keeping with our image." This moment suggests that The Carpenters's squeaky clean image is about as manufactured as the dolls that play them.

⁴³ George F. Custen, *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 12.

and integrating individuals: this might lead to a different definition of the social for cinema in general and for specific groups of texts in particular.⁴⁴

Elsaesser points to the biopic's unique ability to inscribe the viewer as an individual; it draws the spectator into the trademark subject-position of Hollywood cinema and in doing so, makes the spectator a member of a collective, what Elsaesser calls a "civic audience."⁴⁵ The film addresses the spectator as a national citizen, and this mode of civic address produces a social imaginary in which the audience, united by their identification with an individual personality, is "addressed as humanity in general rather than in terms of vested interests and classes."⁴⁶ Audience members are connected by their shared subjectivity, and part of this subjectivity involves their active participation in key historical moments. Spectators are able to locate themselves in a nebulous national imaginary and feel their role in the production of its history and sociality; as such, through their immersion in the cinematic apparatus, they become integrated into the nation.

The biopic relies on audiences' desire to identify with the character on screen, and as such, the biopic's subject must be exceptional enough to inspire admiration, but recognizable and human enough that viewers can identify with the film and see themselves in it. But the biopic subject must also be part of the national imaginary in order to interpolate the spectator. As a result of these identificatory requirements, certain lives appear more readily available for the biopic form than others because of their cultural intelligibility. Beloved singer Karen Carpenter reads as a somewhat obvious choice for a mainstream production, but her availability for queer identification seems a bit trickier. Even if we accept Carpenter as a gay icon, what makes her a figure with which queers would *identify*? And why would NYLGEFF screen *Superstar* alongside

⁴⁴ Thomas Elsaesser, "Film as Social History: The Dieterle/Warner Brothers Bio-pic," *Wide Angle* 8, no. 2 (1986): 19.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 30.

films like *A Moffie Called Simon* (Greyson, 1987), a tribute to Simon Nkoli, a black gay activist in South Africa who was on trial for treason, and *Mayhem* (Child, 1987), a comic-book style montage exploring how modern culture sends contradictory messages about sexuality? What type of reading practices or conditions allow us to label Haynes's biopic a *queer* biopic?

On the most denotative level, the film has nothing to do with AIDS, the queer community, or anything culturally taking place during its 1987 production. Yet, as the film progresses and Karen's doll becomes whittled away as pieces are literally shaved off her plastic body, her physical deterioration starts to seem hauntingly similar to that of an AIDS-afflicted body. Moreover, non-diegetic inserts of Holocaust footage at the beginning of the film point to a more contemporary genocide. One soon starts to wonder if there something queer here? Instead of requiring that the content itself announce its queerness, the film makes the case for a queer media practice marked by sensibility, style, and an uncanny approach to presenting subjecthood. The communities formed in film festival spaces helped to bring gay and lesbian audiences into a new kind of queer reception, and supplementary information in the form of MIX's festivals programs, director and scholar-run panels, and interviews with the filmmakers further shaped audiences' education.

In a 1988 *San Francisco Chronicle* piece on Haynes's film, Edward Guthman writes, "Asked if his film isn't kinky and obsessed, Haynes thought a minute and answered, 'Well definitely there's a perverse obsessiveness on the part of the filmmaker. That's apparent. But in some ways it's reflected in the subject matter. Anorexia is an extremely obsessive condition,

which in some ways I can understand.”⁴⁷ What Haynes points to here might also be an obsessiveness inherent in queer practice itself, which Eve Sedgwick identifies as particularly alive in the moment of the AIDS crisis. In “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re So Paranoid You Probably Think This Essay Is About You,” Sedgwick explains why being paranoid may not always be a permanent position but is certainly a queer one. She relates an anecdote of speaking with Cindy Patton about the gay community’s widespread paranoia about a “natural history” of the HIV virus, a mounting concern as whether or not there was a conspiracy by the U.S. military to create a virus that would target specific communities.⁴⁸ After a dance through the various ways in which the government could have spread such a virus, Sedgwick quotes Patton, “Supposing we were ever so sure of all those things—what would we know then that we don’t already know?”⁴⁹ Paranoia latches onto what one suspects to be true and obsesses over what one might already know to be true, but Patton suggests that uncovering a government conspiracy behind the HIV virus would only confirm the homophobia and negligence of the government’s response to the crisis.⁵⁰ As such, Sedgwick is less concerned

⁴⁷ “Barbie Dolls in Film on Karen Carpenter” in *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 14, 1988, Box 1, Folder 28, Jay Blotcher Papers, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University, New York.

⁴⁸ Cindy Patton is a sociologist, historian, and activist who emerged as one of the most visible scholars writing about HIV/AIDS in the midst of the crisis, writing several influential books on the topic, including *Inventing AIDS* (1990), *Women and AIDS* (1993), and *Globalizing AIDS* (2002).

⁴⁹ Eve Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 123.

⁵⁰ With Sedgwick’s discussion of queer suspicion, I am reminded here of Craig Womack’s work on “suspicioning” (found in “Suspicioning: Imagining a Debate between Those Who Get Confused, and Those Who Don’t, When They Read Critical Responses to the Poems of Jay Harjo, or What’s an Old Timey Gay Boy Like Me to Do?”) that suggests that queerness is inherently suspicious.

Ellis Hanson, in “The Future’s Eve: Reparative Reading after Sedgwick,” positions Sedgwick’s reparative reading practices, which she ultimately argues for at the end of the chapter, against

about whether or not pieces of knowledge are true or with how we come to know them, and she is far more concerned with the effects of that knowledge—what it *does*. This approach to knowledge requires one to move away from a fixed, static position, so as to see knowledge as performative and conditioned by a given cultural climate.⁵¹

Perhaps most pointedly, what Sedgwick identifies in paranoid knowledge and practices is a problem of visibility. She cites D.A. Miller as an exemplary queer New Historicist whose scholarship seeks to make structures of oppression and state-sanctioned violence visible as a step toward dismantling such structures, but Sedgwick intervenes by asserting that violence is so often already unmasked and highly visible. She explains that violence is “*from the beginning* exemplary and spectacular, pointedly addressed, meant to serve as a public warning or terror to members of a particular community” and cannot be combated by expanding or recalibrating the lenses of visibility.⁵² What could further exposure offer or say about “social formations in which visibility itself constitutes much of the violence?”⁵³ Making violence visible provides further evidence for what one already expects, and, in many ways, knows to be true, and it is thus motivated by paranoia—a queer paranoia that can be unlearned by a queer reader such that they can transition from a paranoid position to a reparative one.

How queer practices might move from a position of making visible to one of repairing for Sedgwick, is not entirely clear, but I suspect that *Superstar*'s alternative stakes in visibility

antisocial writing exemplified by scholars Leo Bersani and Lee Edelman, commenting that there is something paranoid about their advocating for the proximity of jouissance and the death drive, as well as their rejection of hope.

⁵¹ Sedgwick draws on Melanie Klein's positions (depressive and anxious) to talk about paranoid as a position or a practice; instead of labeling a person as paranoid, a permanent state, Sedgwick argues that paranoia is a position from which one can move into another (more adjusted) position.

⁵² Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 140.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 140.

performs something like what Sedgwick gestures toward at the close of the chapter. Reparative practices, Sedgwick explains, attach to cultural objects without the suspicious clinging of paranoia but with something else; she writes,

No less acute than a paranoid position, no less realistic, no less attached to a project of survival, and neither less nor more delusional or fantasmatic, the reparative reading undertakes a different range of affects, ambitions, and risks. What we can best learn from such practices are, perhaps, the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture—even a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them.⁵⁴

Instead of re-exposing the violence of a negligent government and the mainstream media's hateful response to the AIDS crisis, the film positions the viewer to work through loss and confusion through identification with Karen Carpenter's story. By taking up a different relationship to the Karen Carpenter source material of *Superstar*, Haynes's shows a way of working through or navigating a dominant culture that would prefer to annihilate (or at least efface) your existence. The film goes through this navigation at the level of the biopic form, which positions its subjects in social history and popular memory to be preserved and revered. When Carpenter died of anorexia in 1983, her loss inspired nation-wide grief. Four years later, during a time when queers were dealing with the loss of their lives that were not deemed mournable by the Christian right, Haynes pushes at the limits of viewers' identification with Karen Carpenter, asking what it would take for her to no longer be recognizable as the star whose loss the nation collectively mourned. Carpenter's Barbie doll representation questions the bounds of audience's sympathy while also providing a mourning text for queer audiences.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Ibid., 150-151.

⁵⁵ "Karen Carpenter: Unlikely Gay Icon," Randy L. Schmidt, *Advocate*, accessed December 30, 2016, <http://www.advocate.com/arts-entertainment/music/2011/08/22/karen-carpenter-unlikely-gay-icon>.

Haynes's selection of Karen Carpenter works through the loss of a queer icon while also examining how individual figures become incorporated into the national imaginary. The Carpenters, and songstress Karen Carpenter in particular, represent a 1970s' nostalgia for American family values and a sense of purity before the 1960s counter-culture shift. The biopic's national imaginary, as defined by Elsaesser's civic address, addresses its spectator as a member of that imaginary, as a member of the imagined community. "Imagined community," as coined by Benedict Anderson, defines the nation as a culturally constructed community; this community, however, becomes imagined by those who already perceive themselves to be part of the nation; accordingly, these imagined communities support traditional values and beliefs.⁵⁶ The Carpenter family, in other words, appears to uphold the moral and ideological values that the imagined community seeks to preserve and imagine themselves as also upholding. *Superstar* denaturalizes, and thus subverts, the appearance of an imagined community by exposing its construction with the sort of irony characteristic of Karen Carpenter's singing. In her admiration of Karen's voice, one of the film's talking-head interlocutors emphasizes Carpenter's "ironic" stylization, which Haynes's film brings to life. The simple irony to Karen's voice is her ability to sing songs featuring insipid, empty lyrics with such a profound affect, but Haynes takes that irony even further in his contrast of Karen's singing voice and the film's stilted, campy dialogue. For while Karen's singing voice gives the audience some sort of access to the "real Karen," Karen's speaking voice points somewhere else. At the close of the film's "Top of the World" montage,

Many, such as Schmidt cited above, have discussed Karen Carpenter's status as an unusual gay icon. She was not the typical diva icon like Judy Garland or Barbara Streisand, but there was something about her ordinariness, tender soul, and camp quality that made her available for gay identification.

⁵⁶ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1983).

the last shot cuts to the Carpenters gathered around their family-room TV watching one of the duo's televised performances. This scene of familial domesticity is reinforced by their mother's insistence that they continue to live at home, avoiding fame's corruption by contributing to charities with their newfound income. But this picture of domestic bliss is undercut by the scene's dialogue and camp tone. Alarmed by Karen and Richard's delight upon seeing their image on TV, their mother shrilly warns, "Now you kids are getting big alright, but you're not gonna get bigheaded." This warning also comes with a reminder about their policy on drugs, a winking nod to Richard's rumored Quaalude addiction that lurked behind their squeaky-clean image. And in response to their mother's charity suggestion, Richard responds, "That's a great suggestion, mom, and it's very keeping with our image," positing their self-conscious construction. The scene, naturally, closes with a call from the President Nixon, requesting The Carpenters for a performance, and the next shot reveals Karen's Barbie-doll likeness singing in front a White House backdrop.

This image of Karen Carpenter in front of the White House inscribes her central place in the national imaginary, but the obvious fakeness of the scene exposes the artificiality behind this image. The plastic Barbie doll's placement in front the blurry White House backdrop exposes the flimsy mechanisms used to bolster the image of an imagined community. This image of an artificial national imaginary asserts that the imagined community is a construction, and if the imagined community is not the naturalized social order it purports to be, then perhaps a different community could be constructed. In contrast to an imagined community, imaginative community, as theorized by Randall Halle, constructs a collective and world envisioned outside of the nationally imagined community's limitations. Moreover, imaginative community allows bodies and identities that are not recognized by the imagined community to become part of a

collective. During the AIDS crisis, a time when the imagined community excluded queers, film became a place to reimagine what community looks like and what it feels like to belong. *Superstar* defamiliarizes Karen Carpenter's place within the imagined community, and as such opens up the possibility for rethinking community construction and its ability to be undone. Halle further positions the cinematic apparatus as a means through which imaginative communities can become possible: "*In the productions of imaginative representation, individuals enter into a relationship with their real conditions of existence. This relationship is not ideological but one of the primary means whereby individuals engage with the systems of production and reproduction that organize human society* (italics in original)."⁵⁷ According to this formulation, the imaginary relations of the cinematic apparatus tap into the same imaginary relations that organize "real" human sociality. Put another way, the affective dimensions of human social organization—the things that allow one to feel like part of a community—come from the same sort of imaginary relations characteristic of screen relations. While the effect of imagined community is ideological, its mechanisms are not, and imaginative communities, then, cannot be constructed in discourse. Imaginative communities formed on screen then not only visualize alternative community formations, but they also allow the spectator to *feel* like a part of that community formation.

Imaginative community makes it possible to build community from the margins such that those who are marginalized by the imagined community can see themselves as the center of a new one. And in the case of *Superstar*, queer spectators can relocate themselves in relation to the imagined community. More specifically, by exposing and thus dismantling the construction of

⁵⁷ Randall Halle, *The Europeanization of Cinema: Interzones and Imaginative Communities* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 190.

the imagined community, the film re-articulates Karen Carpenter as a figure for queer identification. The film takes seriously the melancholic irony of Carpenter's vocal styling and recasts this dripping affect in such a way that makes the singer an available figure for identification and mourning in the midst of the AIDS crisis. In a time when queers struggled to grieve lives that were not deemed mournable by dominant culture, Karen Carpenter provides a sort of surrogate mourning text. Furthermore, the singer's tragic demise brought about by a seemingly perfect family's pressures and an adoring nation's demands, re-asserts the impossibility of building life within the imagined community.

Queer film festivals create a sense of community by satiating queers' desires for images, but these communities are also shaped by the film festival culture's embrace of queer reading practices. The obsessiveness and paranoia inherent to queerness and exacerbated by the AIDS crisis can perhaps be countered by reparative modes of cinematic spectatorship. In other words, queer reading practices allow audiences to read for slippages in meaning, moments of queer legibility, and bits of visual sustenance. Film festival culture created a forum for the critical reception of films that asked audiences to consume films in ways that made them think about the images they were consuming and that often challenged their comfortable modes of spectatorship. And in using the term critical reception here, I mean not only the film critic's reception, but also a mode of spectatorial reception that involves a critical, thinking engagement with the image. MIX brought audiences into a particular mode of spectatorship automatically by positioning itself as an experimental festival; the films themselves place audiences in a specific modes of spectatorship in that programmers sought to de-naturalize narrative filmmaking techniques and place viewers in a more critical, engaged mode of watching. The films of MIX, in this way, perform their own pedagogy. But instead of solely relying on the films, the Festival built in a

pedagogy of critical reception by including panel discussions, politically-driven social events, and public interviews with the filmmakers. The Festival program served as a sort of guidebook for learning to participate in a mode of spectatorship and engagement that drove the expansion and proliferation of queer film festivals. The program notes work to explain the political and artistic import of each film, and they take care to specify which films are particularly difficult or challenging for viewers. These notes explicitly work to demystify experimental aesthetics, but they also work to bring festivalgoers into a community shaped by shared queer viewing practices. The development of queer reading practices serves to bring audience members into a sort of queer civic address, and as such, these reading practices teach queers how to locate themselves in new imaginative communities. Within in these communities, spectators could experience and imagine their bodies differently, imagining their bodies and their lives outside of the AIDS crisis's supposed constraints.

1.5 ZERO PATIENCE: QUEER BODIES UNDER THE MICROSCOPE

Throughout Todd Haynes's *Superstar*, documentary and social-problem footage on the history and epidemiology of anorexia is intercut with Karen Carpenter's Barbie re-enacted life story. The film, in these sections, reveals how bodies are deemed pathological and how the medical community deals with a disease (anorexia nervosa) that it may never fully understand. The queer biopics of filmmakers like Greyson, Tom Kalin, and Haynes are responses to both the AIDS crisis as a crisis of public health and how the public distinguishes between healthy and unhealthy bodies. *Superstar* calls forth Karen Carpenter's role in pop culture as the face of anorexia while revealing the mechanisms through which complex narratives of ill health become channeled and

understood through a star image. *Zero Patience*'s narrative turns on the Toronto Museum of Natural History's chief taxidermist, Sir Richard Francis Burton, wanting to make the museum's Hall of Contagion more contemporary by creating a music-video display on the scandalous Patient Zero. Greyson's *Zero Patience* selects a subject whose face became famous for belonging to the original contagious body of the AIDS crisis. The film takes up one of the media's most successful pieces of sensationalized misinformation and seeks to provide a counterhistory; *Zero Patience* calls forth transmission narratives and figurations of the mobile, infecting queer in order to turn those images on their head. The film demands that audiences view the HIV-afflicted body through a new lens.

Scholars like Simon Watney and Cindy Patton, as well as filmmakers and artists like Stuart Marshall and David Wojnarowicz, drew attention to the way in which media representations of the AIDS body produced (false) stigmatizing knowledge about queer bodies at the time. Even mainstream media's most ridiculous claims about queer bodies, at least appeared to be backed by some medical authority, and those available narratives became the primary determiner for how the public dealt with queer bodies. Scare tactics, like an ad campaign containing images of ordinary faces with superimposed text like, "I got AIDS through the personals," gained a particular amount of traction through Randy Shilts's narration of Patient Zero, a French-Canadian flight attendant blamed in the media for the spread of HIV to North America.⁵⁸ The problem was that the concept of a Patient Zero was already in the media and part

⁵⁸ Douglas Crimp, "'Tell a Story, Save a Life' (Montage 1987-89)," in *Perils of Pedagogy: The Works of John Greyson*, ed. Brenda Longfellow, Scott MacKenzie, and Thomas Waugh (Ithaca, NY: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013), 60.

Leo Bersani and Simon Watney have also written about such scare tactics in various places, both noting that many of these claims are made with the explicit purpose of protecting children and the reproductive family.

of the medical community's imagination of AIDS—but now the disease had an embodied face. Put another way, “what [Shilts] forgot was that this is a world in which people's fantasies about homosexuality include gay waiters running into the kitchen to ejaculate in the salad dressing, or gay foreigners attending health conferences with no other purpose than to infect their fellow conferees with a deadly virus. Patient Zero is just such a fantasy, and it matters not one whit whether his story is true or not.”⁵⁹ The idea of Patient Zero provided the public with a face for the scandal, as well as a mobility (both physical travel and promiscuity) and foreignness (French Canadian) that, accordingly, seemed ready-made to capture imaginations. Shilts later claimed that he chose to tell the story of Patient Zero “because it was ‘fascinating.’”⁶⁰ But what, Douglas Crimp asks, “does it mean in the context of AIDS to be *fascinating*? What are the *unconscious* mechanisms that would account for this very selective will to truth?”⁶¹ The Patient Zero narrative begs the question: What does it mean to tell a story that fascinates to the point of its acceptance as complete truth?

Greyson's film, in a sense, opens with an explanation for how we arrive at the story of Patient Zero. The film does not open with Zero at all, but with his former friend and lover George, a public school teacher whose students are reading *Arabian Nights*, or *One Thousand and One Nights*. Instead of the spectacular, campy musical number that will eventually introduce Zero, the film begins with ordinariness in the form of one young boy standing up to recite the story of a murder-happy king whose wife could tell a story that would save her life.⁶² As the film

⁵⁹ Ibid., 64.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 63.

⁶¹ Ibid., 63.

⁶² Greyson's queers the biopic genre, in part, by making *Zero Patience* a musical-biopic hybrid, conjuring his other films that deal with queer identity, as well as queerness's longstanding relationship to camp and musical aesthetics. Queer scholars have produced several works on the

continues, the narration alternates between George's life as a person living with HIV and scenes of Zero and Burton, tracking George's health and his efforts to seek treatment. George's story throughout the film serves as a reminder of the realities of living with HIV and the need for research efforts, but the way the film sees George and the way the audience gleans information from him serves to counter the sensational representations of Zero. Speaking specifically of the "Positive" musical number, during which George acknowledges his ultimate fate, Thomas Waugh writes, "In contrast to the other songs, often energized by Greyson's compressed archness, self-reflexive wit, and allusion, this dialogue among a man, a lineup of children, and a virtual audience, between two spaces, private and public, is simple in its theme and direct in its appeal to pathos, desire and solidarity ('I want to plan ... I want to know ... I want to live')."⁶³ The frame story of *Arabian Nights* becomes the frame story for *Zero Patience*, as Burton's telling of Zero's story not only seeks to tell a tale that could redeem the life story the media gave him, but also save the lives of those suffering from AIDS.

Long before the AIDS crisis, studio era biopics of figures like Louis Pasteur and Paul Ehrlich evidence that giving a face to knowledge offered by the medical community, or to information that is simply part of the public's repertoire of scientific (mis)information, validates that knowledge through mechanisms of public recognition and identification.⁶⁴ William Dieterle

relationship between queerness and the musical, but Alexander Doty's landmark text *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture* was arguably the first to fully outline queer receptions of mainstream musicals.

⁶³ Thomas Waugh, "Notes on Greyzone," in *Perils of Pedagogy: The Works of John Greyson*, ed. Brenda Longfellow, Scott MacKenzie, and Thomas Waugh (Ithaca, NY: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013), 33.

⁶⁴ Early biopics of Leonardo da Vinci, Galileo Galilei, Thomas Edison, and many others establish the genre's perpetual interest in science and its project of educating the public about scientific culture. These films portray a great individual's rise to a position of scientific authority, crafting an image of a hero-scientist who advances modern society.

scientist biopics, *The Story of Louis Pasteur* (1936) and *Dr. Ehrlich's Magic Bullet* (1940), successfully transmitted medical knowledge because they conjoined that knowledge with a glamorous face. *Zero Patience* takes up the Patient Zero figure that was already deeply embedded in the national imaginary and seeks to associate that face with different knowledge. Instead of distancing queer representation from the AIDS epidemic, Greyson begins with how the queer HIV-infected body is presented in a homophobic society.

1.6 OPTICAL TRANSFORMATION IN *ZERO PATIENCE*

Zero Patience intervened in the media's linking of the queer body with disease and deviant sexuality and, in making space for queer desire during the crisis, Greyson implicitly critiqued filmic representations of gay and lesbian life that separated same-sex desire from the epidemic. In a press interview on the film Greyson remarked, "The science of AIDS, despite all of its high-tech sophistication, is hopelessly mired in Victorian concepts of diseased sexuality."⁶⁵ The "Victorian concepts of diseased sexuality" Greyson mentions here are, in fact, shaped by particular modes and technologies of viewing that still very much shape the "sophistication" of

Moreover, motion pictures devoted to the lives of Madame Curie, Florence Nightingale, Edith Cavell, and Louis Pasteur reveal the genre's preoccupations with public health, social hygiene, and disease/pathology. The scientist biopic mirrors film's role as a simultaneous source of entertainment and education; more specifically, narratives of fascinating individuals hold the power to captivate, and because of this power, biographical film became an accessible way to disseminate scientific knowledge to the public. Films like *Madame Curie* (Mervyn Le Roy, 1943), *The Story of Dr. Wassell* (Cecil B. DeMille, 1944), and *The White Angel* (William Dieterle, 1936) filled this lack by portraying individuals with all-too-human traits who are still able to carve out their role in society to assert their vision of cultural progress.

⁶⁵ "The Whole Truth: Patient Zero Myth Debunked" in *Zero Patience: A Movie Musical About AIDS* Press Release, Box 1, Folder 28, Jay Blotcher Papers, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University, New York.

AIDS science, exemplified by Victorian-era sexologist Burton whose exhibit is to become the authoritative scientific (misinterpreted) word on AIDS transmission narratives. The film's formal introduction to Burton, whose encounter with the Fountain of Youth in 1892 has kept him alive in the world of early 1990s Toronto, foregrounds his work's erotophobia and misogyny, ironically and spectacularly conveyed in a montage of specimens from his most famous study in which he measured the penis size of thousands of men. Burton, or, rather, John Robinson who plays the scientist explorer, provides a voice and a face of scientific certainty that seeks to identify deviation in anatomy and biology—a desire for truth that came to the surface during the medical community's inability to understand the HIV virus.

Beyond the diegetic world of the film, *Zero Patience* provides a model for representations of the AIDS crisis and queer sexuality that challenged melodramatic and homonormative films like *Longtime Companion* (Norman René, 1989) and the highly-lauded *Philadelphia* (Jonathan Demme, 1993), released in the same year. Playwright, author, and activist Larry Kramer contended that “to believe that seeing [*Philadelphia*] would make any viewer—particularly those I would like to have experience something meaningful watching this movie—change his or her point of view is like thinking Jesse Helms or George Bush would turn into a human being after watching an episode of ‘Another World.’”⁶⁶ Kramer's assertion that *Philadelphia* is worse than no film at all echoes scholars like Simon Watney who claimed that the AIDS crisis made gayness palatable only under certain conditions, primarily victimhood,

⁶⁶ “Lying About the Gay ‘90s: An AIDS Activist Says ‘Philadelphia’ Is Worse Than No Film at All” in *Washington Post*, January 9, 1994, Box 1, Folder 28, Jay Blotcher Papers, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University, New York.

pathos, and appeals to universal ideals like monogamy and family.⁶⁷ Films like *Philadelphia* make appeals to the mainstream to see gayness as something that is not so different from or entirely incompatible with “their” values and worldview. Queerness is stripped of any sort of sexual specificity, or any sexuality at all, and depleted of its politics. Put yet another way, the government’s negligence during the AIDS crisis and its assault of the queer community are utterly cast aside in favor of either a “humanizing” romance narrative or a personal narrative with which an imagined mainstream audience could readily identify.

At the heart of much of New Queer Cinema during the AIDS crisis, and clearly articulated in *Zero Patience*, stands the problem of invisibility—the lack of images that deal with what it means to be queer in the midst of the AIDS epidemic and what it means to queerly desire during a health crisis. Zero’s first concern about his literal invisibility (given that he returns to earth in a spectral form that only Burton and the audience can see) is the practical matter of how he will get laid, an instance in the film that stands in for a larger concern about queer subjects’ visibility as desiring subjects. The film again and again plays with what the naked eye can see, what surface vision does and does not reveal, and what information the human eye can and cannot provide. When Burton goes to an ACT UP meeting lead by Zero’s friend Mary to ask for their participation in the Hall of Contagion exhibition, the members are in the process of constructing a giant poster that imitates an eye chart with white letters that spell BLINDED BY

⁶⁷ Simon Watney, *Policing Desire: Pornography, AIDS and the Media* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 22.

Simon Watney is an art historian by training and has published widely in the field, but in the midst of the AIDS crisis, his writing turned toward activist work with books like *Policing Desire: Pornography, AIDS and the Media*, *Practices of Freedom: Selected Writings on HIV/AIDS*, and *Imagine Hope: AIDS and Gay Identity*. He also was the founding chair of the Terrence Higgins Trust’s Health Education Group, where he oversaw HIV/AIDS education and prevention projects.

GREED standing out against the black background; the poster echoes many of the posters and ads made by ACT UP to critique the intentional blindness to the lives of gay and lesbian people living with AIDS. *Zero Patience* suggests that a correction of shortsightedness is possible with the aid of optics, whether in the form of the microscope lens or the cinematic apparatus.

In looking through Zero's old medical records, Burton and Zero find a sample of the latter's blood, which they decide to look at under a microscope. Studying Zero's blood sample provides a look inside the patient, and with its connotations of life, being the medium of vital circulation, this blood provides a transmission of knowledge as we see beyond the surface, probing the patient's body to see something new. Zero's blood's circulation and movement gives way to an important transformation: the transformative powers of scientific viewing apparatuses. When Burton and Zero look at his blood underneath the microscope, their look inside Zero's body reveals to them something unexpected—communication with the HIV virus itself in the form of Miss HIV, played by HIV-infected activist Michael Callen. Michael Callen's appearance in drag as Miss HIV fits into the film's overall camp aesthetics and its bold take on the musical, but this drag performance takes on heightened meaning given its place inside the sample of Zero's blood.⁶⁸ Drag is at its essence a play with surface, a call to the physical body as surface through excessive layers of clothing, makeup, wigs, jewelry, and other adoration. This display of artificiality may seem better suited for the film's bombastic musical numbers, but in calling attention to the body's surface, Miss HIV's drag reveals the way in which surfaces can mislead, creating a need for the eye to look deeper. Looking inside Zero's body yields information they never could have anticipated; the gaze inside Zero looks at the patient with the same instruments

⁶⁸ Michael Callen cofounded the People with AIDS Coalition and advocated for people with AIDS's participation in AIDS research cluster studies. He also co-authored *How to Have Sex in an Epidemic* (1983) and appeared in German filmmaker Rosa Von Praunheim's *Positive* (1990).

employed in films like *The Story of Louis Pasteur*, but this time, instead of the answer's coming from a scientist's medical gaze, the answers come from the patient's body itself. In *Zero Patience*, medicalized bodies talk back. Miss HIV informs them that the original medical study that sought to condemn Zero as the person who brought the disease to North America actually established that HIV is sexually transmitted and, thus, inspired safer sex practices. Her re-reading of the original study not only points to the stigma and misrepresentations continuing to inform AIDS research, but also makes clear that the lens through which you view a study changes its results.

The microscope brings another form of vision in that it finally makes Zero visible to people other than Burton; a burst of liquid shoots from the microscope's lenses soaking Zero, making him appear on the viewfinder of Burton's camera. Zero's materialization fulfills his continuing desire for visibility, and when he begins to fade away once again, Zero desperately shakes the microscope over himself in the hopes that more liquid will come out.⁶⁹ His desire to be seen, though, is inseparable from or the result of sexual desire, as his first concern when he discovers that he is invisible is how he will get laid if no one can see him? Zero had first appeared on screen in a state of limbo, dancing in a swimming pool, before his ghost materializes in a local bathhouse, and while this is the first time the audience sees him, he lacks the form of visibility he most desires in the diegetic world of the film.

⁶⁹ In Christian Lassen's *Camp Comforts: Reparative Gay Literature in Times of AIDS* he reads this scene as Miss HIV's demand that Zero and others mourn the loss of the AIDS crisis. The blood she splashes into Zero's eyes not only comes out looking like the water of the pool scene seen below the microscope, but it also looks like tears. Lassen writes, "The stream that fills his eyes, however, looks like water and—considering where it comes from, namely a swimming pool—is water, so that this liquid is in fact a blend that, at once represents the blood from the sample, the water from the gay bathhouses—and Zero's own tears" (23).

In Greyson's *Zero Patience*, vision is twofold— vision as a scientific method used to research and to diagnose HIV/AIDS and vision as a form of desire, the desire to be visible. The film makes use of many of the same optical instruments found in the laboratories and hospital rooms of scientist biopics, but these instruments are employed differently and produce different results. Vision, moreover, encompasses both the ability to see, to gather knowledge of one's world, and the ability to be seen; this dual vision is deeply tied up with the virus itself. Using equipment like a microscope to look inside the patient provides a transmission of knowledge via microbiology, but the film also figures a different type of bodily knowledge, one borne of desire. Throughout the film, Greyson problematizes scopic desires and ways of seeing without condemning scopophilia in the manner of some earlier feminist and Marxist theorists.⁷⁰ Rather than critiquing the pleasures of looking, *Zero Patience* carves out a place from which to look and a new way to see, reflecting many of the tenets of queer activism, theory, and aesthetics of the 1980s and 1990s.

Zero's fleeting visible moments are captured on camera, preserved by a cinematic capacity, but his effect on Burton has more lasting effects. Zero's charisma and his ability to awaken Burton's repressed sexuality (in a reference to Bersani's writing, Zero informs Burton: "your rectum ain't a grave") and in doing so, transforms Burton's gaze or form of vision. The fact that Sir Richard Francis Burton is a taxidermist selected to also work in the Museum's Hall of Contagion should not go unnoted; he originally approaches the exhibit with the sort of

⁷⁰ Beginning with Laura Mulvey's landmark text "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," much of feminist film theory from 1975 on critiques scopophilic pleasures as inherently supportive of patriarchal regimes of power. According to this theoretical framework, female viewers of Hollywood films are placed in a masochist position, and thus unable to derive the same scopic pleasures of male viewers. However, feminists were not the only scholars who felt that cinema reinforced hegemony, as Marxist film theorists like Jean-Luc Comolli and Jean-Louis Baudry also align the darkened room of the theater with dominant ideology.

categorizing scientific eye one would expect from taxidermy. Over the course of the film, his taxonomic gaze becomes one of appreciation and desire. Burton's transformed gaze changes the type of information he eventually presents and the way he presents it, moving from Zero as the a reckless, irresponsible killer to the "slut who inspired safer sex." However, despite Burton's efforts to clear Zero's name, once the exhibition goes up, the media finds another platform for the original Patient Zero narrative and once again plasters Zero's face everywhere as the sexual serial killer who spread the deadly virus. As Zero learns of his re-energized infamy, he gives up on ever being able to be seen again. On an explicit level, Zero states he no longer believes that Burton can find a way to make visible to others, as were the conditions of Zero agreeing to participate in the exhibition's construction; yet on another level, the inability to be seen that Zero speaks of is the impossibility of the public ever seeing him truly, ever seeing him through the correct lens.

Zero decides to kiss Burton goodbye and disappears by merging with his pixilated image displayed in the Hall of Contagion; as he approaches his image, the screen suddenly fills with the image of a swimming pool and Zero dives in, signifying his return to the watery limbo from whence he came. But despite Zero's decision to jump back into limbo, the film ends with an affirmation of Burton's transformed vision. Here, Burton appears to see Zero with new eyes; he no longer approaches Zero with skepticism and Victorian puritanical judgment. Burton instead approaches Zero's image as love object—a lost love object. When Burton lights Zero's cigarette, the smoke that seeps out of the screen and into the museum sets off the smoke detectors and water spurts from the sprinklers. This final moment echoes Zero's encounter with the microscope and the moment he became visible, and in many ways, Zero is being seen by Burton in the desiring way he hoped would come with visibility. The film's ending posits the possibility for

optical transformation and suggests that the cinematic image may after all be powerful enough to change the way one sees.

Zero's role as the patient hero, a rethinking of the scientist hero, asserts that visibility comes through mechanisms of stardom and personality, and the film cites the biopic's historical uses of star figures, such as Paul Muni's roles in Dieterle's biopics.⁷¹ This use of glamorized stardom re-deploys the type of civic address Elsaesser associates with the Warner Brothers biopic, a mode of address that socializes and integrates individuals into a larger community. Zero's charisma draws in and transforms Sir Francis Burton, but Burton's loving interaction with Zero's image at the film's close suggests that Zero has the ability to similarly charm and seduce the film's audience. Personality, in this case, inscribes a figure's place in history, but it further opens up the possibility for personality to educate the community to create social change. In the case of Greyson's *Zero Patience*, a queer anti-hero comes back to life to change the course of history and open up new ways of living and sustaining life building during an epidemic. *Zero Patience* calls for a reorganization of community around a different figure: one who is not representative of the imagined community, but who can transform the way we view others and ourselves as part of a community. By virtue of becoming a hero, an available figure for emulation, Zero becomes the center of a new community-building project. LaBruce's *Super 8 ½* rejects normative community-building projects by putting dominant culture's waste at the film's center—make no mistake, the film's trash aesthetics are no accident. But while LaBruce's film asks the audience to take up space in an imagined community's margins, *Zero Patience* asks for a transformation of community that rebuilds from the margins. Greyson's film asserts that when

⁷¹ Paul Muni starred as Louis Pasteur in *The Story of Louis Pasteur*, Emile Zola *The Life of Emile Zola* (1937), and Benito Juárez in *Juárez* (1939).

the imagined community fails to account for bodies marked deviant, queers must rely on their ability to imagine a new one. The film's imaginative community has zero patience for scientists who claim to know the answers and it affirms that the possibility for community formation lies in questioning accepted narratives of personhood and life history.

1.7 IMAGINATIVE COMMUNITIES: ALTERITY, AIDS, AND VISIONS FOR A QUEER FUTURE

In many ways these films acts out an earlier version of what Lee Edelman and others would later name the antisocial thesis in queer theory.⁷² Like LaBruce's *Super 8 ½*, Gregg Araki's *The Living End* (1992), and Todd Haynes's *Poison* (1991), Kalin's film explored what happens when culture fails to provide sustenance. These films are not as detached from the social order as a radical antisociality requires, but they foreground their disidentification with the ways in which dominant culture defines bodies and tells personal narratives.⁷³ LaBruce, Araki, Kalin, and Greyson all called for alternatives to positive gay representation, alternatives to the type of homosexual that would capture the hearts and sympathy of mainstream America, and the asked for images of queerness that refuse to annihilate the sexuality, trauma, and specificity of queer subjectivity.

⁷² Lee Edelman most thoroughly puts forth his argument against sociality in his manifesto-like *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004).

⁷³ Disidentification is a term coined by José Muñoz, José Esteban in his 1999 book *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. He describes the process as a flipping of language that he intends "to be descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship" (4).

These filmmakers think through the conditions under which visibility becomes politically effective and productive of desirable, as well as desirous, subject positions. Five years before *Zero Patience*, Greyson created *Urinal* (1988), which, as the title might suggest, performs an investigation into the policing of bathrooms and gay male sex culture. Yet, despite that surface-level correlation, Greyson's director's statement reveals something else; he writes, "The film is centrally concerned with ideas of portraiture and biography, questioning how much we can know of someone from their image or 'life story.'" ⁷⁴ *Urinal* unites Frida Kahlo, Sergei Eisenstein, Yukio Mishima, Langston Hughes, Dorian Gray, Florence Wyle, and Frances Loring, creating a transnational and transtemporal queer team. In much the same way that *Zero Patience* brings Burton into Zero's present, *Urinal* brings a collection of queers from points in history to the present to learn from them and expand possibilities for community and queer relations. But like *Zero Patience*, *Urinal*'s interaction with the past resists projects of gay recovery. In the film's press kit, Greyson remarks, "It was very important to walk a fine line—to acknowledge the pleasure we need in reclaiming lesbian and gay heroes, and at the same time underline the impossibility of the project."⁷⁵ This impossibility of gay and lesbian reclamation foreshadows Heather Love's discussion of queer recovery in *Feeling Backward* (2007) where she describes the affective dimensions of queer turns to the past that may or may not line up with queer political projects. She writes: "Like many demanding lovers, queer critics promise to rescue the past when in fact they dream of being rescued themselves."⁷⁶ She continues to explain that while rescuing queers of the past purports to throw out a lifeline, more often than not, these returns to

⁷⁴ *Urinal* press kit., Box 1, Folder 55, Mix Collection, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University, New York.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 33.

the past simply shore up beliefs about a better gay present. These rescue projects serve to validate gay identity in the present that, through claims to respectability, make gays a part of the nation's imagined community.

Greyson's film rejects the nation's imagined community of the 1980s AIDS crisis present by building a case against its policing of queer sexuality. Moreover, the film selects figures whose sexuality can only be partially understood through whispers and rumors, as well as figures who do not represent a recognizable gay past. Dorian Gray, of course, was never an actual person; however, the character has been read as a version of Oscar Wilde's self. But regardless of Gray's exact ties to reality, the character served as an historical marker of queer desire and a narrative available for queer identification. The film brings Dorian Gray from the pages of literature and the canvas of painting, and positions his character on screen with other queers; in doing so, *Urinal* makes it possible for the spectator to take up an imaginary relationship with Gray and others in such a way that modifies the spectator's real conditions of existence. Instead of recovery projects that seek to shore up a gay identity that fits into the imagined community, Greyson's film reclaims the pleasures of feeling a transient connection to history and learning from queers of the past. The film allows audience members to feel like part of a greater community, see a mirror of their own identity, without the need of being physically close to someone, and as such, this community provides a model for queer social organization through a relation with admirable queers of the past.

These queer figures of the past bring to light ways of being that cannot be seen as viable desiring subject positions in their present moment, demonstrated through their mission to investigate bathhouse culture—a motif that arises repeatedly in Greyson's work because his films understand bathhouses as a communal space of queer sexual practice. The policing of

bathhouses, bathrooms, and other spaces that served gay sex culture contributed to the campy, nostalgic portrayal of the bathhouse in *Zero Patience*. The bathhouse, most importantly provided a space in which to define the queer community as a sexual community, a community united by sexual practices. During the AIDS crisis, the utopic hope for gay sex culture as site a of potential liberation came crashing down.⁷⁷ The crisis confronted queers with the challenge of articulating an identity based on the specificity of sexuality within the context of a safer sex culture haunted by queers' relationship to the virus and mainstream media's equation of queerness with death.

Like the queer biopic, and I would argue that the film is a biopic of sorts; *Urinal* forms an imaginative community—it brings historical figures together to learn from each other and live an openly queer life, which many of them could not have done in their previous existence. And like *Urinal*'s time machine that brings all of these queers together in a garden party set in the film's 1980s present, the queer biopic can, in many ways, serve as a time machine. The biopic brings audiences into contact with exemplary individuals of the past, who they never could encounter in their present moment.

The biopic, as such, calls into question what activist-oriented filmmaking looks like; in other words, counter to beliefs that radical political work can only be done through radical experimental aesthetics, the queer biopic suggests that familiar genre forms are open to queer adaptation. The biopic, moreover, fulfills a queer desire for identification and provides a privileged place for identification because it sutures the spectator into a world filtered through the eyes of an exemplary individual. Telling a life story requires a narrative, however unfamiliar that narrative may be. In contrast to non-narrative experimental films, the biopic offers a

⁷⁷ Here, I am thinking of pre-AIDS crisis writing that figures a sort of utopic sociality achieved through sexual encounter, specifically Samuel R. Delany, in *The Motion of Light in Water* (1988), and Steven Marcus, in *The Other Victorians* (1964).

narrative form through which personhood can be recognized and life-building projects can take place. These lives, however, do not need to be the lives of those figures deemed exemplary by dominant culture, or those gay lives deemed palatable for heterosexual audiences' eyes. John Greyson's and Bruce LaBruce's use of the biopic create unsanitized portraits of the queer body in ways that mainstream media might deem cautionary, rather than emulatory. Their films ask where the queer community can look for emulatory figures, and in doing so, they critique the mechanisms through which individuals are labeled worthy of emulation and admiration. But while *Super 8 ½* rejects commonly understood notions entirely, *Zero Patience* and *Superstar* seek to build a new community around a different form of identification. Patient Zero and Karen Carpenter were both recognizable figures in the national imaginary, though not the imagined community in the case of Zero, but Greyson and Haynes change how audiences come to learn about these figures and their relationship to national identity and values.

In "being with" members of the queer past in films like *Urinal* and *Zero Patience*, the audience to learns to question the silencing of queer desire and sexual practices in the midst of the AIDS crisis. However, the audience learns to question this policing from the film's cross-temporal coalitional action, and, in so doing, the film asserts the utility in looking toward relations with the past as a way to learn more about the present. The HIV virus required a queer survival plan that, in turn, caused queers to change the way they viewed their world and themselves. Queer community, and the uniting of gay, lesbian, and other deviant groups, was a means of survival—survival not only in terms of the political strategies devised to combat a negligent government's treatment of AIDS patients, but also survival in terms of being able to see others like oneself living on. And this notion of "being like oneself," of course, became expanded through the notion of queerness and the possibilities of cinema. The queer film festival

served as a site of material public formation, and with that queer physical location in place, it served as a point of theorization, a point from which to imagine community and individual selves differently.

Seemingly disparate films like *Super 8 ½* and *Zero Patience* are united by their demand for images that challenge limiting notions of belonging, such as representations of the gay and lesbian community that conform to standards of respectability. In light of the early 1990s proliferation of happy coming-out stories and melodramas like *Philadelphia* and *Longtime Companion*, filmmakers like LaBruce and Araki sought to show what mainstream media elided. Gay and lesbian visibility under any circumstances was not enough; they demanded that queer films do more. And more specifically, they invited their viewers to see differently and learn to identify with even the most unsympathetic of queer figures. In making space for audiences to identify with figures left at the margins, the queer biopics of Greyson, Haynes, and LaBruce ask viewers to see bodies and ways of living that positive gay representation rendered invisible. As a result, they make space for audiences to imagine themselves as a part of a different community, a community united by difference.

2.0 MAPPING AND MOVING THE CONTOURS OF THE BODY: PROXIMAL RELATIONS IN THE CINEMA OF TOM KALIN

It might be said that bodies in [queer] artworks are multiply resistant. They resist easy categorization, neat binary terms, and limiting identities. They are bodies that refuse to be visualized under outdated conditions of representation which do not allow for eruptions of fragmentation, whimsy, threat or humor.

--Julia Bryan Wilson and Barbara Hunt⁷⁸

The various permutations of the biopic form circulate around the question of how to define the biopic as a consistent form. They beg the question: what holds these films together as a coherent genre? Biopic scholar George Custen defines the biopic as a film “minimally composed of the life, of the portion of a life, of a real person whose real name is used,” but this definition still leaves a lot of room for interpretation.⁷⁹ The name for the genre itself is short for biographical picture, which instantly conjures the history of literary biography with which the genre intersects. In this way, the “bio” in “biopic” affirms that the film genre is a mode of biography and thus inseparable from literary life-writing. In “In Praise of the Biopic,” Robert Rosenstone claims that the biopic genre cannot be understood outside of literary traditions of the biography, especially considering that many biopics use biographies as their source material; *Young Mr.*

⁷⁸ *Bodies of Resistance*, Box 9, Folder 305, Frank Moore Papers, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University.

⁷⁹ George Custen, *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 5-6.

Lincoln (John Ford, 1939), for instance, was based on Carl Sandburg's 1926 *Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years*, which was an immensely popular comprehensive biography of the 16th President.⁸⁰ In Pam Cook's "History in the Making," she asserts that biography and personal history always inform the biopic, writing: "The relationship between the biography and the film is one of negotiation and transformation, in line with the notion that each version of history relates its story in line with the perspective of the storyteller."⁸¹ And lastly, Laura Marcus, in the "Newness of the 'New Biography,'" declares that there is a relationship between biography and modernity—one that is entirely cinematic in that it focuses on fragmentation, personality over chronology, satire, and irony. According to Marcus, cinema is the structuring principle of writers like Virginia Woolf's biographies; the New Biography is "inflected by the cinematic devices of detail, gesture, and close-up and by cinematic subversions of linear time and chronology."⁸² The rise in scientific knowledge in the national imaginary during the early twentieth century, along with the emergence of novel technologies like the cinema, shifted understandings of individuals' relationship to the world around them, restructuring the way modernist writers told life narratives. Contemporaneously, Freud's biography of DaVinci, *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood* (1910) solidified biographical form as the place to go for an

⁸⁰ Robert A. Rosenstone, "In Praise of the Biopic" in *Lights, Camera, History: Portraying the Past in Film*, ed. by Richard Francaviglia and Jerry Rodnitzky (Arlington, TX: Texas University Press, 2007).

⁸¹ Pam Cook, "History in the Making: Sofia Coppola's *Marie Antoinette* and the New Auteurism," *The Biopic in Contemporary Film Culture*, eds. Brown, Tom, and Belén Vidal (New York: Routledge, 2014), 219.

⁸² Belén Vidal, "Introduction," *The Biopic in Contemporary Film Culture*, eds. Brown, Tom, and Belén Vidal (New York: Routledge, 2014), 9.

investigation into the subject's interiority.⁸³ But even more so, Freud's biography solidified a deeper connection between biographic literature and the biopic film.

The literary biography was well-established as a popular literary form in the nineteenth century, but the rise of Freudian psychoanalysis, with, for instance, its division of the mind into conscious and unconscious parts, shifted the way that biography probed its subject. Biography excavates personal history—in the much the way that psychoanalysis does—to offer an explanation of a subject's life. They both look to personal history as a way to explain what happened—what went wrong, how one came to take on a certain identity, how one developed particular personality traits, or how one rose to power/fame. Psychoanalysis's use of the case study looked to personal history to define subjectivity and to delineate where healthy modes of relating to the world around oneself broke down; personal history, because of the way psychoanalysis uses talk therapy as a sort of will to truth, as a way to access the subject's psychological interior (conscious and unconscious parts of her mind), became a tool for medical diagnosis and clinical therapy.⁸⁴ Biography became a way to satisfy the early twentieth century's burgeoning fascination with learning what lurks inside the body and the mind.

And yet, biographical narrative emerges alongside another boom in life knowledge: the emergence of biology and life sciences. Michel Foucault explains: "Historians want to write histories of biology in the eighteenth century[,] but they do not realize that biology did not exist then, and that this pattern of knowledge that has been familiar to us for a hundred and fifty years

⁸³ Macolm Bowie, "Freud and the Art of Biography," *Mapping Lives: The Uses of Biography*, eds. France, Peter, and William St. Clair, eds. *Mapping Lives: The Uses of Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

⁸⁴ Foucault most fully discusses the notion of will to truth *History of Sexuality, Vol. I*. Knowledge about an individual's sexuality, Foucault argues, reveals some essential truth about the subject. The subject's will to truth becomes a mechanism of power and regulation; will to truth is not recognized as a mechanism of power, which is part of its discursive function.

is not valid for a previous period. And that if biology was unknown, there was a very simple reason for that: life itself did not exist.”⁸⁵ The emergence of biology brought the emergence of life as a thing that could be studied, pointed to as an object for observation. Foucault’s writing on biopolitics extends this observation of life and studies of bodies to describe the way Western culture functions to discipline bodies through discourses of sexuality, health, and identity. The biopic, as the composition of life lived, to borrow from Custer’s definition, implies that the film composes life in a specific way; the film puts life together according to a structure that includes certain details and elides others. The cinematic apparatus, which emerged concurrently with modern biology, then, constructs a life according to narrative principles that inscribe certain ways of living.

Taking this connection even further, the biopic is a visual inscription of a life, and in this way, it is also inseparable from the “bio” in “biology” that suggests the physical human body. The inscription of life in the biopic is by extension, an inscription of life itself. Similar to the notion of biography as life-writing, the biopic is the film inscription of life, of lived bodily experiences, and by extension, an inscription of its subject’s psychic interiority, or at least an investigation into it. The biopic, then, is both an inscription of a life and life itself by way of an individual specimen. When speaking of narrative film, the biopic genre’s desire to capture biocontinuity takes on a double meaning as continuity of the physical body and narrative continuity of biography—the desire to relate the story of a human life by recording a body in continuous motion. Life, in these terms, becomes a study-able object. What this relationship between biological science and biographical cinema entails is that the while we typically think of

⁸⁵ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 129-30.

the filmic apparatus in terms of narrative cinema's immersive potential, the apparatus is equally tied to a rich biopolitical genealogy.

The biopic's biography, phrased yet another way, necessarily involves the regulation of life and bodies by biopolitical forces. The biopic's biopolitical saturation tells us is, in part, why queer filmmakers turned to the genre during the AIDS crisis to re-represent and re-think the queer body. The biopic's depiction of life itself further reveals how the biopic genre has remained an essential way for queer filmmakers to tell stories of queer life. Queer filmmakers' turn to telling life stories during the AIDS crisis cannot exist separately from the biopic's history as a life-building device; and more importantly, this shared genre history helps us better understand the biomedical discourses that coalesced with the rise of New Queer Cinema. The ascendant sexual politics and biopolitical discourses of the AIDS crisis of the 1980s and 1990s re-oriented queers understanding of life; this historical moment revealed how fragile life can be and how frequently efforts to sustain it fail. The AIDS crisis created a moment of rupture that came out of catastrophic loss, and the pain of unconceivable numbers of lives lost to the pandemic created loss, a trauma that could not be readily gotten over. The hurt of this loss that could not be moved on from, in turn, led to a crisis in understanding how to represent queer bodies and lives that could not be returned to an image of wholeness. The AIDS crisis, in this way, created an epistemological shift that changed the way that film as a medium inscribed bodies and made identification with onscreen bodies possible. In other words, films became a sort of mourning text, a text that cannot accurately theorized by traditional models of cinematic identification. The project of re-presenting queer bodies during the AIDS crisis's shattering of queer demanded apparatus theory's ultimate endgame—its reveal and insistence upon lack in order to forestall ideological closures. Tom Kalin's films, *Swoon* (1992) and *Savage Grace*

(2007), do just that. They not only capture the AIDS crisis's shift in queer filmmaking that would soon be named New Queer Cinema, but even more poignantly, his films also mark the way the AIDS crisis forever altered the course of queer life-building.

2.1 DISECTING CRIMINALITY: 1920S VISUAL CULTURE IN *SWOON*

The AIDS crisis created a moment where homosexuality once again became associated with criminality; the HIV virus marked queers with their crime.⁸⁶ Writer and director Tom Kalin's *Swoon* mines history for a time when the AIDS crisis supposed link of queerness to death and crime was a literal one, turning back to the 1924 case of two queer murderers. The film hit the festival circuit in 1992 with critical acclaim and became one of New Queer Cinema's defining works. With this film, Kalin, who worked extensively to design *Gran Fury*'s propagandistic art materials for ACT UP, confronts the linkage of gayness to pathology and criminality, along with depicting the perceived threats it posed to morality, the family, and children. Kalin portrays the events leading up to (and following) the 1924 trial of Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb for the murder of a young boy. In a rejection of the biopic's tradition of moral and ethical representation, *Swoon* upsets genre expectations through its choice to depict the lives of two

⁸⁶ Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips explain the moral underpinnings of this link: "AIDS became a major shame-inflicting weapon—a gift, as it were, sent from God—in homophobic assaults from, principally but by no means only, the Christian right on the homosexual 'lifestyle'" (32). AIDS became a particularly convenient tool for the conservative right due to its "evidentiary" support for morality arguments against homosexuality and its revelatory power to imagine shame-filled gay sex practices—having AIDS reveals the knowledge that "I have been fucked" (33). Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips, *Intimacies* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008).

(anachronistically) queer criminals.⁸⁷ What appears even more controversial about the film is the way in which Kalin depicts the two; instead of villainizing Leopold and Loeb, he presents them in sumptuous, black-and-white cinematography and in framings reminiscent of studio-era glamour (shots in which the frame privileges the two characters throughout the film).⁸⁸ Kalin's camera positions the labels of deviance that 1920s American society used to explain their supposedly linked queerness and criminality, eventually replacing those discourses and their surveillant gaze with a gaze of affection and appreciation. In doing so, Kalin cites Hollywood film style and the industry's history of persona, character, and image construction, techniques that were, in part, perfected in the biopic form. Kalin explains in the director's cut of the film that he surprised himself with how conventional the film ended up being; he sought out to make an experimental film, as the original script manuscript indicates, though, especially after the murder, he found experimental form insufficient for the type of identification with Leopold and Loeb he wanted the spectator to feel. The film begins with an experimental impulse, but after the

⁸⁷ Custen's canonical work on the biopic asserts that biopic subjects are chosen based on their role in the construction of social history and ability to provide moral lessons in a relatable fashion. More current work on the biopic, however, acknowledges the prominence of "warts and all" biopics (a term coined by Dennis Bingham in *Whose Lives are They Anyway: The Biopic as Contemporary Film Genre*), along with the fallen woman biopic (identified by Lucy Fischer in "La Vie en Noir: Woman, Melodrama, and the Biopic." Yet, these types of biopics' choice of subject based on scandal and pathos still differ from something like *Swoon*; artists, singers, and film stars become worthy of audience's sympathy under traditional biopic conventions, but two queer criminals appear outside of the scope of those subjects worthy of audiences' identification. ⁸⁸ In "The fantasies we live by: bad boys in *Swoon* and *The Living End*," Roy Grundmann points out how Kalin's portrayal of the two boys self-consciously counters previous portrayals that cast them as pathological deviants.

brutal murder scene when the spectator has experienced the brutal murder so intimately, the film turns to classical narrative form.⁸⁹

By figuring homosexuality's classification as pathology and criminality, Kalin's film explores the difficulty if not the impossibility of taking up an identity in a world where that identity is legible only in those terms. But while the film conjures the camera's dissecting and normalizing gaze, it "deals in different stakes: it's the history of discourses that is under Kalin's microscope, as he demonstrates how easily mainstream society of the 1920s could unite discrete communities of outsiders (Jews, queers, blacks, murderers) into a commonality of perversion."⁹⁰ The history that the film tells is more one of how to exist as a subject both constituted and torn apart by the discourses of mainstream 1920s society and its medical and legal institutions —the boys' own violent acts are a literalization of the social violence that structures their place in the world. The AIDS crisis confronted queer activists and the whole afflicted community with the issue of how to take up an identity when science and medicine had already inscribed that identity with specific meanings. *Swoon* reveals how the homosexual body was viewed during the AIDS crisis and represented by a surveillant dominant culture was not something new; medical and visual culture had been there before.

Swoon draws on an extensive visual archive, and in the script synopsis, Kalin writes, "Utilizing a fractured narrative and experimental format – involving cinema verite, stylized studio tableaux, and archival footage – **Swoon** responds to myths of the pathological homosexual as articulated in previous films such as Hitchcock's **Rope** and Fleischer's **Compulsion**" (bold in

⁸⁹ In the 2004 director's cut of the film (put out by Strand Releasing) Tom Kalin, cinematographer Ellen Kuras, actor Craig Chester (Nathan Leopold), and producer Christine Vachon reflect on the collaborative process that produced *Swoon*.

⁹⁰ B. Ruby Rich, *New Queer Cinema: The Director's Cut* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 28.

original).⁹¹ *Swoon* mines film history for queer visibility by returning to the story of doomed lovers Leopold and Loeb and in doing so, the film remakes Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948) in such a way that the film exposes the sexuality that Hitchcock's film sought to indirectly convey. In the original script, Kalin had planned for images of *Rope* and *Compulsion* to play on the television in the apartment scene that was originally planned to open *Swoon*.⁹² He explains: "Hitchcock's *Rope* is on: the screen is momentarily filled with ECU of tv screen and the two actors' faces."⁹³ Kalin unfortunately could not get the rights to either film and the only part of this idea that remains in the apartment is the remote on the bed.⁹⁴ But in this same scene, Hitchcock lingers in other ways. Before the camera pulls out to reveal the remote on the bed, Leopold repeats Grace Kelly's character's first lines to Jimmy Stewart's in *Rear Window* (Hitchcock, 1954). Film scholars have frequently talked about *Rear Window*'s voyeurism, reading the film as a meditation on the ethics of spectatorship and the filmic apparatus itself; Kalin's citation of the film, then, carries a double articulation that extends beyond the film's two characters and Hollywood's star system, foregrounding the filmic apparatus as a method of vision used to view and represent Leopold and Loeb. The scene opens with a close-up on Dick's sleeping face chaotically intercut with a dream-montage of archival footage, and as Nathan slowly comes into the frame, he recites a variation of Kelly's memorable lines: "How's your

⁹¹ The *Swoon* script manuscript was sent from Tom Kalin to Dennis Cooper and is included in the Fales Library's Dennis Cooper collection, filed under the correspondence collection. "Swoon manuscript," Box 8, Folder 403, Dennis Cooper Papers, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University.

⁹² The final version of the film opens with a much different scene. Unidentified characters glide across the screen as Richard participates in their reading of *Venus in Furs* (Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, 1870). Nathan eventually approaches and announces to Richard that they are late, and with their exit, the camera pulls out to reveal the scene's backdrop and film crew.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Kalin identifies the remote and the television in this scene as one of the many anachronistic moments in the film that were influenced by Derek Jarman's work.

leg?...Your stomach?...And your love life?" Repeating these well-known lines to formally introduce the two main characters of *Swoon* inscribes the film with a certain cinephilia, and in doing so, builds the text from a place of scopophilia and romance, prompting the viewer to engage in pleasurable looking. But as the film continues, the type of observation that makes voyeurism possible takes on a different connotation; scopophilia butts up against a different type of observation that seeks to dissect and explain the boys' deviant bodies.

This observational, voyeuristic gaze becomes a categorizing one once the boys are on trial for the murder of a little boy. Their ability to murder, according to this mode of viewing, must be related to their sexuality and located in their physiology; the alienists' research into phrenology and other explanations of the boys' supposed deviance root their criminality in their anatomies. Throughout the film's trial, the prosecutor, the boys' lawyer, and witnesses also attempt to locate the boys' deviance in specific behaviors and solve the puzzle that is their sexuality. This observational analysis is taken further once the boys are brought to prison and booked, as a montage of phrenological photos and diagrams appears with a voiceover that attempts to explain Dick's involvement in the murder and his susceptibility to Nathan's influence by locating his Jewishness/psychopathology in his anatomy.⁹⁵ Faces in profile appear and arrows and lines diagram the deviant physiognomic markers that display traits like "feminine nature,"

⁹⁵ The phrenological heads in this scene are actually played by queer activists and filmmakers, including Lauren Zalaznick, Michael Becker, Greg Bordowitz, Andrea Kislan, Todd Haynes, and cast and crew. This inclusion situates the film within AIDS crisis political action and foregrounds the contemporary moment's pathologizing and study of queer bodies. By pointing to individual, exemplary bodies of AIDS action, this moment in the film also asserts the contemporary moment as one in which queers were identified as destructive, antisocial, and a danger to society.

“low sense of self-esteem,” “destructive instinct,” and “antisocial.”⁹⁶ As a science, phrenology asserts that looking at a body’s exterior in a specific way produces knowledge about a body’s interior, and in this way, phrenology exemplifies the messy relationship between 1920s visual culture and life sciences. Moreover, it asserts a scientific belief in looking at the body’s physical features, at the body’s exterior for answers about the bodies supposed deviance contained in the body’s interiority.

Once the case goes to trial, *Swoon* firmly establishes itself within the biopic’s classic trope of the courtroom. Custen explains, “the presence of trials suggests the purpose of the biopic is to offer up a lesson or judgment in the form of a movie.”⁹⁷ Kalin’s film, however, does not offer a moral judgment—though it does offer a lesson on enduring regulatory regimes of developmental health and social fitness. If anything, it offers up a lesson in how to exist in a life both structured and destroyed by violence. The courtroom scene brings the boy’s intimate, private world of crime into the space of the trial, revealing the structures of the normalizing violence that forms their larger world. The prosecutor and expert witnesses discuss the specifics of the boys’ “perversion,” citing Dick’s offer of a sexual encounter in exchange for Nathan’s participation in a crime, as well as the specifics of their sexual practices, such as Nathan’s “penis privileges” and “mouth perversions.” Lance Walhert writes, “During this testimony, Kalin

⁹⁶ Lance Wahlert discusses the film’s use of phrenology and its relationship to homosexuality’s classification as pathology in further detail in “The Burden of Poofs: Criminal Pathology, Clinical Scrutiny, and Homosexual Etiology in Queer Cinema.”

⁹⁷ Custen, *Bio/Pics*, 186. In *Dr. Ehrlich’s Magic Bullet*, for instance, the scientist must prove his compassion, morality, and scientific authority in court time and again, as he faces first a medical board who believes he wastes their financial support, and then a jury after he goes on trial for murder when thirty-eight of his patients die after taking 606, his discovered cure for syphilis. Paul Ehrlich proves his intellectual superiority each time, but his ultimate moral sacrifice comes after he is exonerated, when the physical stresses of the trial take their toll on his body and he dies shortly after 606 is declared to indeed be a “magic bullet.”

provides us with images of Leopold and Loeb kissing, embracing, and undressing one another in a large bed. The camera begins to pull back, and we discover that this bed is situated within the gallery of the courtroom. *Swoon* implies that it is not only the murderous act that is on trial but also the sexual nature of the pair's relationship."⁹⁸ Although the scene does not initially make it clear that the bed falls within in the space of the courtroom, it soon does through its cutting back and forth between shots of the boys embracing in bed and shots of Nathan's psychologist explaining his fantasies and perversions.

The courtroom in this way becomes not only a space of moral judgment about their murder of a young boy but one of microscopic study of their physiologies and psychologies. In Lisa Cartwright's study of medicine's visual history she writes, "Excised from the body, stained, blown up, resolved, pierced by a penetrating light, and perceived by a single squinting eye, the microscopic specimen is apparently stripped of its corporeality, its function, and its history even as it serves as a final proof of the health, pathology, or sexuality of the subject whose body it represents."⁹⁹ In the Leopold and Loeb case, the boys' physiognomy, their sexual practices, their ethnicity is extracted from the case files and enlarged in the space of the courtroom. The film's phrenology montage sequence makes explicit the way in which the boys' physical bodies are on trial. *Swoon* figures the entanglement between visual culture and medicine that Cartwright demonstrates undergirds film history; *Swoon*'s figuration of cinematic looking is inseparable from its figuration of the medical and scientific gazes imposed on and received by the boys' bodies.

⁹⁸ Lance Wahlert, "The Burden of Poofs: Criminal Pathology, Clinical Scrutiny, and Homosexual Etiology in Queer Cinema," *J Med Humanit* 34 (2013): 163.

⁹⁹ Lisa Cartwright, *Screening the Body: Tracing Medicine's Visual Culture*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 83.

2.2 SCREENING LIFE: THE CINÉMATOGRAPHE'S BIOMEDICAL HISTORY

Lisa Cartwright takes seriously the medical origins of cinema, cinema's history as a tool of bodily observation. In *Screening the Body: Tracing Medicine's Visual Culture* Cartwright genealogically traces cinema's shared history with medical science; more specifically, she illuminates the way in which cinematic technologies have been used to record, measure, and categorize bodies for scientific research. Cartwright argues for the regrounding of cinema in a different history that is not based on the observational, spectatorial contexts of apparatus theory; she counters canonical narratives of film history that begin with film's ability to fascinate with the gags and spectacles characteristic of cinema of attraction. Canonical early cinema histories told by scholars like Tom Gunning begin that history with the gag films of the Lumière brothers and the trick films of Georges Méliès.¹⁰⁰ The cinema of attraction, according to Gunning, is characterized by "its ability to *show* something. Contrasted to the voyeuristic aspect of cinema analyzed by Christian Metz, this is an exhibitionist cinema."¹⁰¹ According to this history of the cinema, the spectator's relationship to the image changed as film shifted from a cinema of attraction in 1906-1907 to early attempts at narrative film, but one thing remains the same: cinema was intended for a spectator. In other words, if one follows this history, cinematographic

¹⁰⁰ Tom Gunning popularized the term "cinema of attraction," while crediting André Gaudreault for inventing it, in his 1986 *Wide Angle* essay and was taken up by and elaborated upon by other scholars like Miriam Hansen. Noël Burch's *Life to Those Shadows* (1990) counters classical film histories by discussing what he names cinema's Institutional Mode of Representation. Burch's history in many ways begins the project that Cartwright would take on in *Screening the Body* in that it breaks through the assumption that cinema grew naturally out of a desire to fulfill spectators' shifting interests.

¹⁰¹ Gunning, 64.

In Gunning's notes, he cites Metz's *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema* as the work to which he is referring.

technology was always and only intended to be used for entertainment; its history is rooted solely in visual spectacle designed for theatrical audiences' fascination.

Cartwright immediately counters this historical narrative by opening *Screening the Body* with what at first appears like a convenient anecdote: stumbling upon Auguste Lumière's obituary to discover not an emphasis on his filmmaking career but on his life-long interest in biological science, experimental physiology, and pharmacology. In opening with the obituary of one half of the famous Lumière Brothers who created films like *The Arrival of a Train* (*L'Arrivé d'un train en gare de La Ciotat*, 1895) and *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory* (*La Sortie des ouvriers de l'usine Lumière*, 1895), Cartwright undercuts the misbelief that early filmmakers were solely concerned with using cinema to tell a story. By beginning with these little-known Auguste Lumière facts, she conjures the name associated with the first capture of onscreen movement and sensation, only to show that there is another way to tell this history.¹⁰² Cartwright exposes cinema of attraction film history as only one history of early cinema by revealing that Auguste Lumière's intention was never just to create cinematic spectacle; his interest in cinematic technology was not only in mimetic representation but also in scientific investigation.

This anecdote opens up a rich history of the Cinématographe's role in science that changes the way we might understand cinema as an inscriptive and observational device; the birth of cinema is inseparable from the birth of science's ability to record the human body in motion. Cartwright brings this history to light to position the science film outside of realist and documentary modes of representation, countering commonplace understandings that separate

¹⁰² I am reminded here of the myth of people being afraid of the onscreen train and running out of the aisles of the theater during the first screening of *The Arrival of a Train*. The tale, of course, assumes that cinematic technology was a brand new technology, instead of a continuation of photography and project slide exhibitions.

scientific observation of moving bodies from narrative film. In doing so, she situates the cinema within a larger life-building practice. Cartwright explains this alternate understanding: “I suggest that the scientific analyses of living bodies conducted in laboratories of medicine and science were in fact based in a tradition that broke with the photographic and theatrical conventions that would inform both the documentary and the narrative cinema—a tradition that is linked to laboratory instruments of graphic inscription and measurement.”¹⁰³ Such a conception of cinema’s technical inscription points to its power to dissect, observe, and analyze the body. Cartwright emphasizes that the book’s project lies in “rehistoricizing the cinema as an apparatus that historically has taken place in the emergence of Lumière’s fantasmatic construction of ‘human life’ as a dynamic entity to be tracked, studied, and transformed in the social ‘theater’ of the laboratory.”¹⁰⁴ The laboratory itself becomes a scientific theater, and perhaps the theater becomes a cinematic laboratory.

Film’s ability to capture motion solves medical science’s dilemma of how to best represent human life, with life figured by both physiological movement of the outer body and the life-sustaining workings of the inner body, with blood flowing through a body’s veins becomes a prime symbol of life. The microscope dissects the body, allowing for a close, careful study of its component parts and the photomicrograph fixes what would otherwise be only a fleeting look inside. However, while the photomicrograph and the microscope allow scientists to see what lies beneath the body’s skin, they cannot represent the movement of bodily fluids like blood. They can represent what makes the body’s musculoskeletal form move, but they cannot capture the moving image of blood pumping through the body’s veins. Cinema, on the other hand, can

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 8-9.

represent something like the beating an exposed heart; it can create a visual record like a photograph, but it provides an animation that can be watched time and again in observation of the living body.

This cinematic technology emerged alongside what Cartwright terms the transformation of visibility that came with science's shift to biology and the emergence of "life" as a scientific concern. Cinema, in these terms, builds and inscribes life; it decides its pacing; it shows its continuity; and it has the power to show its discontinuity, or its end. The cinematic apparatus probes the body, moves beneath the surface to capture the life, the circulation of blood and bodily movements that still medical photography could not capture. Film scholars like André Bazin have long discussed photography and cinema as an index of life lived. Because film holds a preservational role in cultural production—its ability to record moving bodies in contrast to the photograph's frozen image—it has always carried an association with life, death, and the memory of those no longer living.¹⁰⁵

In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault traces the origins of biopolitics back to the seventeenth century when power over individual lives was beginning to take the form of power over "life." He describes the two poles of this power:

One of these poles—the first to be formed, it seems—centered on the body as a machine: its disciplining, the optimization of its capabilities, the extortion of its forces, the parallel increase of its usefulness and its docility, its integration into systems of efficient and economic controls, all this was ensured by the procedures of power that characterized the *disciplines: an anatomo-politics of the human*

¹⁰⁵ André Bazin's essay "The Ontology of the Photographic Image" most famously makes this argument, labeling photography's ability to record the dead as part of humanity's mummy complex, our fascination with those no longer living. In contrast, he discusses cinema as change mummified in that it preserves like the photograph, but it can preserve the body in a lively, present state; a body that was once animated becomes re-animated on film and in a form of animation that can be replayed again and again. The camera's ability to mechanically capture animation preserves the movement associated with life force, mummifying a record of life.

body. The second, formed somewhat later, focused on the species body, the body imbued with the mechanics of life and serving as the basis of biological processes: propagation, births and mortality, the level of health, life-expectancy and longevity, with all conditions that can cause these to vary. Their supervision was effected through an entire series of interventions and *regulatory controls: a biopolitics of the population*.¹⁰⁶

As Foucault describes the “body imbued with the mechanics of life,” it is almost impossible to not see science’s desire to capture the body on film as part of a disciplining system. Cartwright places the development of cinematic technologies’ medical use in line with the construction of “life,” and in doing so, she implicitly marks cinema as one of the “diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations” necessary to Foucault’s understanding of biopolitics’ workings.¹⁰⁷ This is also to say that cinematic conventions and the filmic telling of life stories, the mechanisms of onscreen life, shape how we think of the formation of individual lives and bodies. The telling of *a* life itself is a biopolitical project.

Yet, to push the biopolitical project of representing life even further, turning back to the science film’s history reveals the concrete connection undergirding more abstract claims about cinema as a cultural apparatus that shapes and manages the human body. Science’s desire to see inside the living body becomes tied to a project of regulation: “With the transition from the analogic to the digital and from observation to experimentation, we also see a shift in modes of social regulation. The body once rendered innately deviant is now open to ‘corrective’ physiological regulation and transformation.”¹⁰⁸ No longer does science’s camera only study the body, but now the camera can also prescribe treatment to transform the body into a normal one.

¹⁰⁶ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction* (New York, Vintage Books, 1990), 139.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 140.

¹⁰⁸ Cartwright, *Screening the Body*, 36.

Bodies termed deviant, deviating from the norm in terms of physical form or pathology, are subject to Western culture's normalizing gaze via the cinema.

2.3 LIFE OUTSIDE OF THE LABORATORY

Cartwright asserts that movement in the science film extends to the public's attraction to film; she writes, "Popular pleasure in the sight of moving bodies was bound up with the nineteenth-century development of recording instruments and graphic techniques that afforded scientist a degree of control over bodily movement not granted through, for example, the static technique of photography."¹⁰⁹ She cites the Edison *Electrocuting an Elephant* (1903) film as an example of cinema's ability to capture, even control, life displayed for the public's consumption. The elephant's body runs parallel to the hysteric's body in that they are both aligned with nature and that which sciences seeks to explain. The elephant may be an exaggerated symbol of life, but in many ways, its size emphasizes technology's ability to determine life and death, no matter how large or powerful a being—and cinema can capture the process and the precise moment of death. The eyes of the medical community both train and are trained by medical equipment, and this uncontrollable reciprocity comes to shape Western visual culture in important ways, but the screening of films like *Electrocuting an Elephant* do the work of inviting the public into this mode of viewing; they encourage public participation in Western visual culture through the means of fascination. Films like the *Electrocuting an Elephant* were shaped by both cinema's medical history of documenting life itself and conventions of cinema of attraction.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., xii.

Cartwright gestures toward the connection between the science film's and film's public exhibition by describing the public's fascination with *Electrocuting an Elephant* and other short films that captured the human body out of control, such as the facial-expression short *Kinetoscopic Record of a Sneeze* (Edison/Dickson, 1894). Early cinema of attraction films—Cartwright additionally names *Female Facial Expressions* (1902) and *Photographing a Female Crook* (1904)—attracted audiences with the promise of participating in science's dissecting, control, and even execution of life itself. Tom Gunning writes that the close-up in the cinema of attraction functions differently than it eventually came to in narrative film; instead of the close-up acting as a move toward the subject that offers narrative punctuation, the close-up stands alone. He explains: “Biograph films such as *Photographing a Female Crook* (1904) and *Hooligan in Jail* (1903) consist of a single shot in which the camera is brought close to the main character until they are in midshot. The enlargement is not a device expressive of narrative tension; it is in itself an attraction and the point of the film.”¹¹⁰ The photographed face and the spectator's ability to dissect and analyze the face, to take part in the medical gaze of deciding what is normal, and taking pleasure in the decidedly not normal, is the attraction.

The overlap in Gunning's and Cartwright's discussion of *Photographing a Female Crook*, in part, points to the difficulty in deciding where the spectator's gaze is no longer one of biomedical fascination (fascination with life itself) but instead becomes one of spectatorial fascination (fascination with the image itself). Put another way, the curious thing to parse out in Cartwright's work is how one gets from the type of surveillant, measuring tradition of medical observation to a more traditional mode of cinematic spectatorship and mimetic representation.

¹¹⁰ Tom Gunning, “The Cinema of Attraction: Early Film, Its Spectator, and the Avant-Garde,” *Wide Angle* Vol 8, nos. 3 &4 (1986): 66.

Cartwright gestures toward an overlap between the scientific cinemas and medical imaging that she explores in each chapter, but she stops short of ever exploring a direct relationship between cinema as a tool of observation and cinema as tool cinematic suture.

In Cartwright's discussion of radiology, she begins to mention the spectatorial pleasures associated with looking inside the patient's body. Radiology lights up the patient's bones and allows her inner structure to be seen. Cartwright continues to explain "radiology's apparent move away from distanced, analytical viewing and toward 'unscientific' spectatorial positions blatantly marked by pleasure, desire, voyeurism, or identification" and reminds the reader that "scientific representational conventions are not distinct from those found in cultural movements associated with modernism, and that these separate institutions and contexts share techniques for disciplining, organizing, and generating life."¹¹¹ So, when does biomedical observation become equally tied to cinematic codes of pleasure and identification? Part of the obscuration, I think, comes from the fact that there is not a simple transition from one to the other, nor would a model of transformation quite suffice. The public's fascination with films like *Electrocuting an Elephant* corresponds with scientists' desire to observe the human body in motion; the desire to see and the pleasure in observational looking carry across both modes of viewing. Cartwright's work opens up the possibility for understanding cinematic watching and life sciences as intertwined histories, and I look to the studio-era scientist biopic to illustrate this history more clearly. I read the scientist biopic as a particular exemplar of the relationship between the medical cinema's observation and narrative cinema's immersive qualities.

After the formation of the studio system in the late 1920s, the scientist biopics of the 1930s and 1940s represented a sustained, systemized portrayal of individual scientists and their

¹¹¹ Cartwright, *Screening the Body*, 137.

laboratories that firmly rooted medicine's visual culture in the space of the public cinema. These scientist biopics provided mass culture with images of scientific progress and brought audiences into a particular viewing technique, an alternative mode of inspection—a particular way of inspecting the world around them. Many of the films' interest in optical technologies pointed to the fact that since within cinema “the camera designates the point from which the spectacle is rendered intelligible, the maintenance of the perspectival illusion is assumed to depend upon a smooth meshing of the spectator within that apparatus.”¹¹² *Dr. Ehrlich's Magic Bullet*, for instance, sutures the audience within the gaze of Ehrlich's onscreen microscope, but the filmic apparatus itself was already bound to such scientific ways of seeing.

The studio-era science biopic allows audiences to participate in this inspection, via the indentificatory capabilities of cinema. The films invite spectators into a mode of looking, and once they accept the invitation, the film trains the spectator how to see. The National Board of Review named *The Story of Louis Pasteur* one of the best ten films for children in 1936, but the pedagogical function of William Dieterle's films, namely *The Story of Louis Pasteur* and *Dr. Ehrlich's Magic Bullet* (1940), extends beyond the screening space of the literal classroom, as they position the film spectator to learn both alongside (through the narration) and from the portrayed scientist (from the narrative).¹¹³ As science became increasingly technological and thus alienating to the public, these films provided an accessible way of learning about medicine and science, pulling the audience into a particular way of learning about the world.¹¹⁴ These

¹¹² Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 125.

¹¹³ “Over 300 Boys and Girls Choose Their 10 Best Films of 1936,” Box 20, National Board of Review of Motion Pictures Records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library, New York.

¹¹⁴ Biopics like *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* and *Tennessee Johnson* may have taught children

films use the power of biopic to teach the public about how to view bodies and differentiate between healthy and unhealthy bodies by conveying such knowledge through the life story of a prominent public individual. Put another way, they use biography to teach about biology—a telling of a life to teach people how to look at, say, anatomy. The films draw on two of the most common genres of the time, family melodrama and comedy, but these generic touches only enhance the film’s overall aim of teaching through a particular scientist’s perspective. The audience’s first encounter with Pasteur in *The Story of Louis Pasteur* is actually with Pasteur’s eyes—we look through his eyes to see what he sees in a microscope. By beginning with this point of view shot through the investigator’s eyes, a doubling of optical devices, with the audience seeing through the cinematic apparatus to see through the onscreen microscope, the film foregrounds the laboratory as a privileged space for learning. By accompanying scientists in their research, the scientist biopic demonstrates that the laboratory is a place where these individuals learn how to look for and recognize scientific truth.

Dr. Ehrlich’s Magic Bullet also begins with the scientist’s microscope, finding Dr. Paul Ehrlich in his lab looking at slides of bacilli in an attempt to discover a cure for tuberculosis. The film’s emphasis on Ehrlich’s laboratory practices reveals that “scientists must [...] have

about history and what it takes to become a national leader, but the scientist biopic had an added important function: teaching students about their health. In a letter from the Voluntary Parenthood League dated July 14, 1922, they ask the NBR for their assistance in disseminating knowledge about venereal disease prevention; in the league’s letter, they point to the need for films that support their goals “to preserve health and vitality and to give their children the care and attention necessary for their bodily, their mental, and their moral development, [. . .] conditions of a better and more intelligent citizenry in the future.” Dieterle’s biopics generally received the NBR’s support (his 1937 film *The Life of Emile Zola* was another top pick), but his medical and scientist biopics carried out the work of educating children about their bodies and the type of medical care necessary for maintaining a healthy life.

Unsigned letter from The Voluntary Parenthood League, July 14, 1922, Box 19, National Board of Review of Motion Pictures Records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library, New York.

‘practiced eyes.’”¹¹⁵ As Ehrlich’s vision becomes more acute, so does the audience’s—by seeing through his lens, we learn what to look for and why it is significant. The film’s moments of visual education are exemplified in scenes like his successful isolation of tubercle bacilli through careful staining; full screen shots of the cells on the microscope slide allow the audience to closely inspect the image of the microscopic organism while we rely on Ehrlich’s narration of it for an explanation of what we are looking at on the slide. By teaching the audience to look through the scientist’s microscope and take part in his laboratory work, the spectator learns how to participate in scientific culture. *Dr. Ehrlich’s Magic Bullet* trains the audience to see through optical devices like the microscope alongside Dr. Ehrlich in his laboratory, and in doing so, the film similarly trains the audience to see through the cinematic apparatus in a particular way. As the audience is trained to look at biological materials for certain clues, they are trained to look to the scientist as a teaching figure and learn through the telling of this life.

The scientist biopic solidifies the extension of medical science’s belief that the camera can capture human life and subjectivity and render it as cinematic visual culture; the same apparatus is used to create cinematic codes of representations that inscribe human life stories on screen. In doing so, the scientist biopic also reveals the biopic as a privileged site to explore the ways in which cinema’s immersive qualities are inseparable from its biopolitical genealogy. In other words, strategies of narrative continuity do not exist outside of biopolitical strategies to record bodies. Cinematic technologies’ organization of the body and biology are, in this way, tied to conventions of narrative cinema that structure the story of a life. Both the desire to see inside the body, to study it under a microscope, and biography involve a basic desire to see

¹¹⁵ Hugh T. Crawford, “Visual Knowledge in Medicine and Popular Film,” *Literature and Medicine* 17, no. 1 (1998): 41-42.

beneath the body's surface—they crave interiority. Both take their basis in our desire as humans to know more, to see what initially remains out of view. The scientist biopic literalizes biology and biography's shared construction by demonstrating that the cinematic apparatus's codification of the body described by Cartwright also creates an embodied spectatorial experience that brings audiences into an individual scientist's life story.

2.4 RETHINKING TAXONOMY: *SWOON*'S RADICAL RESTRUCTURING OF VISION

While studio-era scientist biopics encourage pedagogical spectatorship in regards to biology, I return to *Swoon* to demonstrate how Kalin's film troubles scientific study and asks the spectator to take up a different relationship to visual culture. Lauren Berlant interrogates the ways in which readers and scholars treat bionarratives' (life writing's) value as self-evident: "I kept asking people to interrogate how the story of having a 'life' itself coasts on a normative notion of human biocontinuity: what does it mean to have a life, is it always to add up to something? Would it be possible to talk about of biography of gesture, of interruption, of reciprocal coexistences (and not just amongst intimates who know each other)? Shouldn't life writing be a primary laboratory for theorizing 'the event?'"¹¹⁶ The physical laboratories of Dieterle's (and others') scientist biopics reveal the faces behind biomedical discourses that decide what constitutes a healthy or unhealthy body, but these laboratories also expose the means through

¹¹⁶ Jay Prosser, "Life Writing and Intimate Publics: A Conversation with Lauren Berlant," *Biography* Vol. 34, no. 1 (2016): 181.

which those decisions are made.¹¹⁷ The laboratory is, in other words, open to the public; audiences can try their hand at looking through the microscope. In *Swoon*, the alienists' phrenological study of Leopold and Loeb seeks to root their narratives of criminality in biology; the boys' bodies are brought into a forensic laboratory, but the world of the film also becomes a laboratory for something else: the debate and negotiation of the way one looks at biology. The film, in other words, exposes the mechanisms of science in a way that puts those mechanisms into question. Quite possibly, then, there is another way of looking in the world of *Swoon*. Interestingly, it is one of Leopold's optical devices—his horn-rimmed tortoise shell glasses—that provides the case's incriminating evidence. An unusual hinge on Nathan's glasses allows investigators to trace the pair found at the crime scene back to him, suggesting that Nathan's errant, "uncorrected" gaze provides evidence for his criminality. Cartwright's project of tracing the cinema's biomedical history sets up a way of looking at, dissecting, categorizing, pathologizing bodies that Kalin engages with and responds to with *Swoon*. However, the pathologizing gaze placed onto Leopold and Loeb's bodies also creates a desire to gaze in a particular way, which we see shape the world of the film when we are in the spaces that Leopold and Loeb create for themselves. While we get parts of the film like the investigation and trial that focus on the jurors, as well as the media, gazing at the boys, we also get parts of the film that are defined by the boys' own desire to gaze, their scopophilia.

This scopophilia surfaces through Nathan's love of ornithology; his appreciating gaze through the camera at delicate, fragile birds punctuates the film's narrative. In many ways,

¹¹⁷ Dieterle's Warner Bros. biopics are exemplary of others produced during the studio era, but it is also important to acknowledge that the scientist biopic is a generic iteration that appears outside the studio era in films like *Freud* (John Huston, 1962), *Kinsey* (Bill Condon, 2004), and *The Imitation Game* (Morten Tyldum, 2014).

ornithology is the film's guiding force: birds swoop across the screen; Nathan flips through pages of bird photographs; shots cut into close-ups of Nathan's camera lens capturing birds, and so on. These images exist centrally within the narrative, but they resist a narrative justification. Instead, they appear as symptoms of Nathan's desire, symptoms in search of a narrative. Leopold's bird watching moves the impulse to categorize away from deviance and stigma and toward appreciation and a loving impulse to preserve. In the director's cut of the film, Kalin states that his decision to include Nathan's interest in ornithology came out of his fascination with an image of Leopold tenderly exploring a bird's delicate features.¹¹⁸ This depiction of Leopold is at odds with the version of a young man who could participate in the murder of a young boy, and the film foregrounds this conflict in Nathan's nature with an iconic image of two birds. Immediately after the opening credits and after the title glides across the screen, a fade from white displays two dead birds lying on the sidewalk—one white and one black. After a brief sequence of archival images intercut with the boys rolling around in bed, the comparison between the two birds returns in the first scene in which the boys speak. Nathan is dressed in white watching birds while Dick is dressed in black chewing on a leg of chicken as he reminds Nathan to buy the supplies for the murder to come. This moment of alternating blacks and whites exemplifies Kalin's use of visual history in that it quickly sets the spectator up to identify the two characters' nature. The scene reveals Dick to be dark and self-possessed while it reveals a softer Nathan who is content watching delicate birds fly across the sky. The scene closes with Nathan's scopophilic expression of satisfaction when a close-up of his camera's lens is accompanied by his murmur of the sexual innuendo "mmm that's nice."

¹¹⁸ In the director's cut commentary, Kalin discusses why he chose to feature Nathan Leopold's interest in ornithology shortly before the Third Known Nest footage plays. This archival footage shows the real Nathan Leopold discovering the Kirtland Warbler.

It is the tender, thinking, observing part of Nathan that differentiates him from Dick. Dick throws a party on the eve of their kidnapping-turned-murder, and while other partygoers debate the origins of five-card stud, Nathan isolates himself from the group and writes in his journal as he looks through pages of an ornithological text. The camera shifts to the left, though, and the photographs of birds disappear out of the frame to reveal that Nathan is also looking through photographs of historical gay icons like Oscar Wilde, Marcel Proust, and Frederick the Great. As he reads their names out loud, Nathan's admiring gaze suggests a desire to classify, organize, and appreciate, as a means of being close to these gay figures in much the way he collects bird specimens. This scene provides one example of the way in which *Swoon* gives Leopold a space where he can gaze with desire, as the film also shows the social constraints that have conditioned such a gaze.

The bright white of the sheets and clear lighting of the courtroom bed stands out against the dark courtroom, and, with this light, it echoes the early apartment scene where Nathan recites Grace Kelly's *Rear Window* dialogue. Before Nathan utters her lines, images of flying birds float across the screen in between shots of Nathan kissing Dick's sleeping face. These bird images may at first appear to be a nondiegetic insert, but shadows of the birds' bodies fall across Dick's face, making clear that these birds are also somehow part of the bedroom space. The film's citation of *Rear Window* and its suggestion of scopophilia as a form of foreplay, a transmission of intimacy, then, come alongside Nathan's love of ornithology. The bright white sheets of the courtroom bed remind the viewer of Nathan's tenderness and the fact that this murder was a way for him to receive affection from the person he loves. For Nathan Leopold, his camera that lovingly captures images of birds becomes a stand-in for both the appreciating gaze of Kalin's

camera and the scopophilic drive that anchors the film. *Swoon* asserts that articulating sexuality requires a specific mode of looking.

The film's final scene suggests that maybe that mode of looking can be transferred from one body to another, as it closes with the voiceover narration about an eye transplant. The film's closing sequence narrates Nathan Leopold's life after completing his thirty-three-year prison stay; montaged footage is accompanied by voiceover narration discussing subsequent portrayals of the infamous killer in the media, the 1956 novel *Compulsion* and its film adaptation, but the film ends on the post-mortem surgical extraction of Leopold's eyes. Leopold's parole press release footage gives way to archival footage from the Illinois State Penitentiary; in the director's cut, Kalin explains that the footage comes from a time when Leopold volunteered to be part of a Malaria research study and as prisoner's all line up for their physical examination, the camera operator pays special attention to Nathan. As he sits down, the camera moves in, with the final shot of the scene revealing a close-up of Leopold's eyelids being pulled apart, leaving his eye wide open and gazing into the lens. As a voiceover informs the audience that Leopold had willed his eyes to the University of Puerto Rico eye bank and they were successfully transferred to a blind woman, the screen cuts to black with the sound of a startled bird taking flight. The punctuating sound of the bird reminds the spectator of the moments in the film when their gaze is aligned with Leopold, looking through binoculars at birds flying across the sky or scanning the pages of an ornithological text. This ending suggests that Leopold's gaze is mobile. The transplant's literal breaking through the surface of the donor's body suggests a more metaphorical breaking through of the spectator's body, as the film positions the spectator to take up a new mode of vision.

2.5 COMING UNSTITCHED: BEYOND REPARATION

The eye transplant that ends *Swoon*, along with its spectatorial confrontation via the peeled-open eyelid, evokes the film's place in a genre mired in constructions of life and the cinematic apparatus's diagramming of bodies. But this trespassing of the body's boundaries gestures toward another of the biopic genre's concerns: closeness. Biopic film scholars like Thomas Elsaesser and Custen have discussed the biopic's foundation as one of proximity. Elsaesser attributes the biopic's ability to build social history to its ability to provide the audience with a historical encounter; by bringing audiences close to the life of an important historical figure, it makes them feel like they are a part of the process of making history.¹¹⁹ Elsaesser generalizes these claims to all studio-era biopics as he discusses the genre's importance to Classical Hollywood, but he focuses specifically on Dieterle's Warner Bros. biopics because of their remarkable ability to address the spectator as an individual subject while inscribing that individual within a larger social collective. Elsaesser elaborates: "Dieterle's *mise-en-scène* could then be seen as a mode of cinematic address, which has itself a transcending function. The spectator is identifying not only with the main character (humanizing genius) but with his contemporaries that the hero is addressing himself to (removing him from ordinary humanity.)"¹²⁰ The universalizing impulse of this mode of cinematic address teaches each member of the audience how to understand herself as an individual capable of great things as she understands herself to be part of a greater civic community working in the best interest of their nation. The biopic subject's removal from ordinary humanity, in Elsaesser's terms, has to do

¹¹⁹ Thomas Elsaesser, "Film as Social History: The Dieterle/Warner Brothers Bio-pic," *Wide Angle* Vol. 8, no. 2 (1986).

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 155.

with an address to the audience and a certain awareness of the screen that mediates their encounter, but in Custen's work, the removal from ordinary humanity functions more in terms of exceptionality; the biopic subject must be distinct enough—removed—from ordinary citizens such that she inspires admiration and a desire for emulation. The biopic genre selects powerful lives for representation, lives with the power to move us to think about our own identity and mold our lives in emulating ways. By putting a figure like Louis Pasteur or William Ehrlich in a position of hero worship, these films necessarily keep the spectator at a distance; the spectator is allowed into their world to observe a historical moment, but she is never allowed all the way in.

This model of the biopic's proximity stands in contrast to depth models of biography and biology that probe the subject or patient's body for interior information. Probing a subject for a personal history and probing a body for biological information are accepted, normalized ways of coming to know about life, but in the context of cinema and the biopic, when such procedures go too far, get too close, it becomes a dangerous endeavor. In the case of cinema, getting too close puts the subject in danger; they risk their own subjectivity. Psychoanalysis has been so appealing for film theorists because it provides a model for identity acquisition; it provides a way of understanding how one comes to learn about her world and her place in it. In this way, it provides an apt way for understanding how the spectator finds identification with a film's world. The spectator's identification with the biopic subject is often thought of as one of emulation; the biopic provides a sort of hero figure to mimic, but this type of identification requires enough distance for the spectator to make the distinction of self/other. In order to recognize the other as a figure for emulation, the spectator must recognize the biopic subject as distinct, separate from her own entity. The biopic's promise to withhold proximity, in this way, exemplifies a healthy, whole way of relating to the image. This relationship to the biopic subject is close enough to

garner knowledge about how to move through the world, but it is not close enough to threaten the subject's own boundaries of self. As is characteristic of narrative cinema more generally, the spectator can observe and learn from the onscreen biopic subject, but the image does not come close enough to break past the spectator's surface, to shatter their boundaries and flood them with a new way of being.

While the biopic offers a closeness that allows for the spectator to be close enough to learn, but not too-close to put their own subjectivity at risk, post-structuralist theories of ideological ensnarement laud a much greater distance—a distance from the image that allows the spectator to observe the workings of ideology and imagine herself functioning outside of the entire system. Jean-Louis Baudry describes the reality effect as the process by which the spectator locates a self, or finds selfhood, within the world of the film. This locating of the self, or becoming a constituted subject within, the film functions on the level of two forms of identification: the eye's identification with the camera and its second identification with the world of the film and its characters. The spectator's ability to identify with a film in this way presupposes Lacan's mirror stage in order to assure that the spectator is able to return to that sort of imaginary relation. Baudry points out that this return to the imaginary is not a dream: "but it reproduces an impression of reality, it unlocks, releases a cinema effect which is comparable to the impression of reality caused by dream. The entire cinematographic apparatus is activated in order to provoke this simulation: it is indeed a simulation of a condition of the subject, position of the subject, a subject and not reality."¹²¹ The reality effect also conceals the work that goes into making the position of the subject appear natural; it conceals the fact that the reality effect is

¹²¹ Jean-Louis Baudry, "The Apparatus: Metapsychological Approaches to the Impression of Reality in Cinema," in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, ed. Leo Baudry and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 707.

an ideological effect. The reality effect is what allows the spectator to feel like they are part of the biopic subject's world, without seeing the cinematic apparatus's construction of that world. Baudry juxtaposes the reality effect with a "knowledge effect," a term taken from Althusser: the effect brought about by the film revealing its construction and its ideological inner workings. The reality effect mystifies and makes alluring the process of interpellation, while the knowledge effect makes every part of the process of subject formation visible.

The AIDS crisis moment of rupture, of course, came out of extreme loss, and the pain of lives lost created a crisis in understanding how to move on from the unbearable loss created by the pandemic. The AIDS crisis created a wound that could not be healed, concealed, fully stitched over, cannot be moved on from, which led to a crisis of knowledge and how subjectivity is conferred within a film for queers; it left queers with bodies and lives that cannot be rendered whole again. Models of spectatorship that assume something like the reality effect and confer the subject with wholeness cannot appropriately explain this pain and injury. If the subject cannot function outside of ideology, the optimism of Baudry's knowledge effect notwithstanding, there is perhaps the possibility that can the spectator take up a new relationship to the apparatus and thus the image. Instead of taking up a spectatorial position that covers over, sutures up one's fundamental trauma, perhaps there is a way to see from the perspective of that damage. In moving from the place of the damage, the hope is that the spectator can learn to take up a different relationship to the image that allows her to experience her body and subjectivity differently.

Swoon's ending suggests that Kalin's film is what its ending describes: an eye transplant, an opportunity to see like Leopold and Loeb, to see a world defined by undoing instead of seeing *with* the protagonists as in conventional narrative cinema. Instead of keeping the spectator at a

comfortable distance, experiencing an encounter with *Swoon*'s world, the film asks its spectator to feel their injury. The purpose of the film is not one of emulation—it invites the spectator to become just as lost in the film's world as its protagonists. The problem with emulation for the world of Kalin's film is that it implies a sense of wholeness, both in terms of the biopic subject that one is intended to emulate and in terms of the spectator's emulation in which they will experience wholeness via their emulation. In this way, emulating models of spectatorship can endow the subject with reparation, a closing over of their essential lack or trauma. With respect to reparative practices, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes: "The desire of a reparative impulse, on the other hand, is additive and accretive. Its fear, a realistic one, is that the culture surrounding it is inadequate or inimical to its nurture; it wants to assemble and confer plentitude on an object that will then have resources to offer to an inchoate self."¹²² Reparative practices seek to make fractured subjects whole and fill in the gaps in subjectivity that prevent the subject from functioning as a healthy self. But *Swoon* begs the question: Must reparations always be made? Can reparations be made in the context of a culture that is, at best, indifferent to a self's need? Is there, instead, utility in remaining fragmented, and what does Tom Kalin's cinema teach us of those ends?

What Kalin's *Swoon* and his subsequent feature *Savage Grace*, discussed in the following section, show us is what it might be like to live with injury—without fixing it. These texts stake a claim in the space of the too-close; they theorize from a true proximity. These works show us what it looks like to live without repair, to live a damaged life, and what happens when the unbearable is not what must be overcome but what structures a subject's coming into being. In

¹²² Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 149.

what follows, I rethink suture theories to understand film—and the biopic in particular—as a space where one can experience what it might mean to take on a new way of looking, and how that new way of looking may produce a different way of experiencing an embodied relationship with the image.

2.6 CLOSE ENOUGH TO TOUCH: QUEERING APPARATUS THEORY

Apparatus theory, or suture theory in the case of explaining how we are stitched into a film's world and its narration of that world, defines how we find subjectivity in film. It defines how the subject comes to be through cinematic language. While Baudry understood the spectator's successful interpellation as a reality effect, post-structuralist theorists pursued interpellation as the most successful form of suturing. Normative models of spectatorship, as defined by Laura Mulvey, Stephen Heath, Kaja Silverman, and others, turned to Lacanian psychoanalysis to theorize classical cinema's mechanism for creating an identification with onscreen narratives.¹²³ Like Baudry's conception of the apparatus, this identification takes the form of an imaginary relationship in which the apparatus covers over or stitches up a subject's essential lack. Apparatus theory explains how cinema sutures up the subject's lack that begins with the initial trauma of losing proximity to the mother's body—the realization that one is not a part of the mother, but that she is a separate being who can leave and abandon. Christian Metz asserts that

¹²³ Jean-Pierre Oudart first wrote about the concepts of cinema and suture that would influence psychoanalytic film theorists in the mid-1970s. However, Laura Mulvey's 1975 *Screen* essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" is largely considered the founding text for psychoanalytic film studies, but Christian Metz and Stephen Heath soon followed. Stephen Heath's 1977 "Notes on Suture" first applied the psychoanalytic concept of suture, introduced by Jacques-Alain Miller, to film theory.

the spectator's primary identification with the camera makes possible secondary identification where the spectator finds a return to maternal plenitude through her identification with the world of the film.¹²⁴

But if secondary identification is identification with world of the film and, as such, finds an embodied presence there, then this identification is also a relation to other onscreen bodies. Understood in these terms, suture theory explains how we experience embodiment via the cinematic apparatus—how we experience our body within the film's world. But further understood in these terms, apparatus theory defines how we find our proximity to or distance from the image and onscreen bodies. Normative models of spectatorship presume that film confers subjectivity in such a way that the spectator experiences herself stitched over (her lack concealed). The model of spectatorship, relationship to the image that I am proposing, one in which lack is not disavowed, potentially sounds a lot like feminist psychoanalytic theorists' explanations of castration and masochism.¹²⁵ Put another way, the notion of a wound that's unhealable describes a version of castration, an excision that leaves the subject forever lacking. My assertion is that trauma and unbearable are not failed castration complexes, but are instead separate conditions that necessitate specific means of relation. The opening of the subject I am theorizing here may sound similar to feminist theorists' explanations of castration or masochistic spectatorship, and is inevitably related to them, but the model I am discussing is based in an understanding of trauma and mourning, or perhaps, melancholia.

When models of suturing, theories that explain film's immersive potential are paired with

¹²⁴ Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema* (London: MacMillan Press, 1982).

¹²⁵ See Gaylyn Studlar, "Masochism and the Perverse Pleasures of the Cinema," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 9, no. 4 (2009): 267-282.

film's biopolitical dimensions, we get another definition of healthy identification. The camera, as following from its biomedical history, creates defined, bounded bodies. These bodies are individuated beings whose relationship to other bodies presumably does not risk their subjectivity—they respect the distance between their body and the image necessitated by the traditional biopic. These boundaries can be respected while the spectator still finds their plenitude because, according to suture theory, the cinema becomes a fetishistic object that stands in for the thing that was always already absent; absence is disavowed and the fetish forms a sort of scar. But in contrast to the scar, what “if suffering, if damage, if annihilation produces its own pleasure and persistence”?¹²⁶ Can film emerge as a scene of history that is too painful to be moved on from? Instead of covering over unmournable loss with the image, what would a model of suturing that preserves and theorizes from loss look like?

In many ways, Kalin's second feature film follows through with the project started at *Swoon*'s closing. The film makes possible modes of relationality that begin at the too-close, the space where boundaries between bodies, between subject and image dissolve. The story of the Baekeland family—whose extreme wealth and socialite-standing devolved toward dysfunction, incest, and matricide—presents the makings of a truth-is-stranger-than-fiction, ripped-from-the-tabloids thriller, so it is somewhat curious that Barbara Baekeland's 1972 murder did not make it to the big screen until 2007 in Tom Kalin's *Savage Grace*.¹²⁷ Kalin's film portrays Barbara (Julianne Moore), the ultra-glam matriarch with a flair for dramatics, patriarch Brooks (Stephen

¹²⁶ Judith Butler, “Afterword: After Loss, What Then?,” in *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, ed. David L. Eng and David Kazanjian (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 472.

¹²⁷ The media created a frenzy surrounding Tony's murder of Barbara with a kitchen knife in 1972, including psychologists who weighed in with medical diagnoses and investigators who discovered that Tony had previously tried to kill Barbara by pushing her in front of a truck. Tony's schizophrenia and presumed homosexuality, which his mother sought to cure via their incestuous affair, were often cited as a way to explain the murder.

Dillane), the grandson of Leo Baekeland who invented the first commercially usable plastic, and their only child Tony (Eddie Redmayne) in the lush painterly aesthetics characteristic of the filmmaker's work. The film positions itself as a biopic of Barbara, but it unfolds as more of a biopic of Tony's queer childhood and the insidious trauma of his mother's dissatisfaction and intervention into his developing sexuality. *Savage Grace* takes its name from the 1985 book that contains interviews with those close to the Baekelands, retellings of their various escapades and the tragic tale of maternal smothering and neglect. The book also includes state documents supporting the authors' claims of telling a true story, as opposed to the novelized versions of the family's drama that play off its sensationalism. The film's use of the book's title cites its role as source material, but the similarities between the two are few and far between. While the book seeks to explain how such tragedy could occur, the film elides explanatory details like Tony's schizophrenia and his repeated physical attacks on Barbara. The film is not interested in rationalizing trauma so much as it is representing it through images such as Tony's gory paintings best described as still life paintings of human figures drenched in blood.

Kalin's *Savage Grace* begins with the initial trauma of the mother leaving—Freud's interpretation of the child's *fort-da*—as Barbara puts baby Tony down to finish getting ready to leave with Brooks for a social engagement. The opening shots of the film show Barbara in tight framing holding infant Tony up to their bedroom window, their faces touching, and these shots are immediately followed by her holding him and standing directly in front of the bedroom mirror. These series of shots showing Barbara's finger gently outlining the contours of Tony's tiny face, appreciating what she refers to as his angelic form—are haunted by the trauma yet to come. The opening images of the film are overlaid with a voiceover that we later learn to be the adult Tony; he muses that maybe “mommy is not dead at all. Just very, very mysterious.” The

shots of Barbara stroking her infant son's face, then, foretell the ending shots that reveal Tony crouched on the kitchen floor stroking the hair attached to his dead mother's head lying in his lap. The film, in this way, does not shy away from representing what is deemed by dominant culture unbearable to see or even contemplate: incest and matricide.¹²⁸ But more important than the fact that the camera does not cut away when we often expect it to, these unbearable moments in the film do not break with its aesthetics because they *are* the film's aesthetics.

I am thinking of the unbearable in this context as a trauma that cannot be moved on from or gotten over—a loss that cannot be grieved, a wound that cannot be healed. In direct contrast to Freudian screen memory in which the mind fabricates an entirely new memory in order to conceal or patch over a trauma, the unbearable persists—refusing to hide. This conception of the unbearable draws heavily from the distinction between mourning and melancholia, by looking to melancholia as a response to that which what cannot be bore. I extend this refusal to make the claim that in much the same way that melancholia thwarts the normative process of mourning, the unbearable film transforms normative models of identificatory spectatorship. This alternative model of looking involves formal transformations of film that do not seek to seek to cover over the subject's trauma.

Suturing stitches the spectator into a film, but it is a bit more complicated than the adoption of a gaze, as famously theorized by Laura Mulvey; suturing accounts “for the means by which subjects emerge within discourse.”¹²⁹ In the case of cinema, as suturing can also be used alongside something like Althusser's interpellation, it names the set cinematic practices used to

¹²⁸ In my conception of the unbearable, I am drawing heavily from Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman's through working through of the concept in *Sex, or the Unbearable*.

¹²⁹ Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 199-200.

confer subjectivity upon its spectators. The viewer, like Althusser's subject who is hailed by ideology, is reconstructed by and re-merges within filmic discourse through conventions like shot/reverse shot. Shot/reverse shot holds a privilege place in theories of suture "because it demonstrates so lucidly the way in which cinema operates to reduplicate the history of the subject."¹³⁰ The history referred to here is the child's recognition of the self/other in the mirror, which, in the context of film, is thoroughly described by Christian Metz's primary and secondary identification. Primary identification refers to the ego and non-ego differentiation a subject must make in order to understand herself as a subject, the process Lacan describes as the mirror stage. The screen functions to represent the primordial other; the film acts as a mirror. However, Metz distinguishes cinema from the mirror by pointing out that unlike that initial mirror, a film can never project the thing that the mirror reflects: the spectator's body. Rather than the spectator seeing her own body on screen, she always sees the bodies of others, and thereby loses the ego/non-ego, the me/not-me, distinction of the mirror. The mirror makes possible the undifferentiated plentitude found in the cinema; the spectator must first know the mirror's recognition of self in order to know the type of recognition that allows her to lose herself in the film. The desire to lose oneself in the film is a desire to disavow the essential lack, the lack of true relation (Lacan's "there is no sexual relation") at the heart of subjectivity. Put another way, the seeing subject can access the plentitude that the speaking subject gave up to take up a place in language. The speaking subject bears the sacrifices made for a place in the Symbolic order, but a return to film offers the opportunity to have lack concealed, or the self sutured back together. The subject's essential lack is concealed by narrative.

Savage Grace privileges the onscreen gazes exchanged between mother and child

¹³⁰ Ibid., 203.

through shot/reverse shot, the play of mirrors, and the doubling of Tony and Barbara's faces. These elements of the film play out an indescribable number of times in various diegetic locations, but the film's most significant moments—of both mother/child looking and narrative foreshadowing—revolve around the bathtub in their family home. In speaking about his starting place for the film, Tom Kalin references a photo included in the *Savage Grace* book of young Tony in the bathtub. His coy pose, his gaze directly into the camera, and the image's general romanticism become all the more significant when one learns that Barbara was the person on the other side of the camera. Kalin's starting point for the film, then, is this desirous gaze into and returned by the camera; the camera in *Savage Grace*, however, both records the mother/child bond and functions as an apparatus that recreates that very process. In scenes like this one, the film explores what happens to suturing when the spectator is positioned within the mother/child relationship, and what happens when the mother's returned gaze becomes trauma-inflicting.

In Silverman's reading of Hitchcock's *Psycho*, she writes: "The film terrorizes the viewing subject, refusing ever to let it off the hook. That hook is the system of suture, which is held up to our scrutiny even as we find ourselves thoroughly ensnared by it."¹³¹ Suturing refuses to let its spectator go, though, because the spectator refuses to let go of suturing—in Silverman's words, "we want suture so badly that we'll take it any price."¹³² That price in this case is the trauma of the image. But my question is what if we are not sutured into film *in spite of* its traumatic vision, but are instead sutured into trauma itself; in other words, what if instead of disavowing, say *Psycho*'s terrorizing construction to continue to find narrative stitching, a film opens up a world of damage and places the spectator inside—in the case of *Savage Grace*,

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 212.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 212.

suturing them into the Baekeland's collective trauma. The film situates the spectator within Barbara's psychosis after her suicide attempt. The scene opens with Barbara sprawled on the bed surrounded by opened packages of sleeping pills; the camera cuts to close-ups of opened packages of the several types of pills she took, before the scene ends on two lingering close ups of her gauged, bleeding wrist, the razor draped around her wrist framing the wound. Tony is, of course, the one to find her, though we are only told this from his point of view. In voiceover narration, as he writes to Brooks, he states, "taking care of mommy became my inheritance." Such an inheritance unfolds once again around the site of the bathtub when Barbara asks Tony to "do her wrist." Close-ups of Barbara's stitched wrist once again punctuate the scene, as Barbara lifts her wounded wrist out of the water and places it on the white porcelain. The camera lingers over Barbara's bruised and sutured wrist in extreme close up before pulling out slightly to show Tony spreading ointment over the wound, visually echoing Barbara's finger gently caressing baby Tony's face at the film's opening. Scenes like these two demonstrate that *Savage Grace's* depictions of trauma or the unbearable do not break with narrative filming techniques that reconstruct maternal plentitude. Instead, they shape the techniques used throughout the film; the film's aesthetics thrive off of creating plentitude in the unbearable.

The relationship between Barbara and Tony in *Savage Grace* parallels that of Leopold and Loeb in Kalin's earlier film. Throughout *Swoon*, the two characters often occupy the frame together, whether it is a tight shot of dialogue or a dreamy bedroom scene, inviting the spectator to also inhabit the frame and take part in their exchange of gazes, touches, and private conversations. The film's camera lingers over the boys' intertwined bodies inviting the spectator to imagine herself as part of the dyad. As Leopold and Loeb become more submerged in their private world, *Swoon* conveys the power of symbiotic relationships whose intensity can create a

shared madness or collective combustion. In Leopold and Loeb's world, queer desire is largely only legible within the context of annihilation. Queer desire, in other words, emerges despite dominant culture's desire to eradicate it, make it invisible, but when desire emerges under these conditions, it emerges as a compulsion to destroy. The boys act out this destruction in their annihilation of literal life in the form of their murder, but it also emerges in their destruction of the possibility for living a "healthy," productive life within the 1920s world that constituted their desire and subjectivity. But what their compulsion, Hitchcockian pun intended, supports is the impossibility of ever taking up a life-building project in that world.¹³³ Being in relation with another becomes annihilation; annihilation is being too close. *Savage Grace*, at first glance, appears to concern itself with the horrors of the maternal, the traumas of the mother-child relation; however, the mode of relationality it is most concerned is the one that is formed as a result of the unbearability of life itself.

2.7 THE SHATTERED SUBJECT: TOWARD AN AESTHETICS OF IMPERSONALITY

The biopic genre is in many ways defined by proximity, a desire to be close, but unlike conventional biopics that promise proximity only to hold the spectator at a healthy distance, *Savage Grace* works through what happens when proximity becomes too close—so close that boundaries between self and other start to dissolve. This dissolution between self and other, between the spectator and the image, works through a commitment to what Leo Bersani terms

¹³³ I am alluding to Hitchcock's 1959 film *Compulsion*.

“radical sameness,” a concept that he later rethinks alongside Adam Phillips as impersonal narcissism. In Bersani’s “Gay Outlaw,” he outlines a model of radical sameness, or homo-ness, that calls for a dissolution of boundaries between self and other—a complete annihilation of one’s ego in the body’s relation to other bodies. Radical homo-ness works against theories of desire based on fulfilling the lack, meaning it works against modes of relationality in which one seeks a reflective, recognizing difference in one’s object of desire. The subject, then, desires a reflective image of what she already is—incomplete, lacking—ultimately putting forth a model of community that “tolerates psychological difference because of its very indifference to psychological difference.”¹³⁴

Bersani and Adam Phillips build upon radical homo-ness’s lack of differentiation in their book together, *Intimacies*, to work through the political possibilities of losing one’s self and the desire for selfhood in relations that do not require recognition. For Bersani, this work with Phillips, a clinical psychotherapist, differs from his previous readings of film and literature, instead examining a group of gay men in the form of a psychoanalytic case study. One might say that all of Bersani’s work is comprised of case studies—literary, filmic, cultural— but the difference between his past studies and his work with Phillips lies in the observable actions of material bodies. Their readings of impersonality are based on reported sex practices by gay men during the AIDS crisis, and their study seeks to explain a phenomenon, counter-cultural sex practices that inspire horror and fascination. More specifically, the two authors identify impersonal narcissism in action in gay men’s bug-chasing sex practices. These reported practices of bug-chasers (those seeking the HIV virus) and gift-givers (those transmitting the virus)

¹³⁴ Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 150.

exemplify a search for connection and relation in a world where queer bodily contact is rendered abject.

The last chapter of *Intimacies* contains Phillip's re-reading and elaboration of the impersonal narcissism Bersani discusses throughout the text, taking a step back to fully explain what it means to be an impersonal narcissist and why this may actually be a good thing. "On a More Impersonal Note" begins with the observation that psychoanalysis is always concerned with boundary violations: the patient/analyst relationship, self/other, close/too-close, and so on. Moreover, these boundaries become all the more important and their violation all the more threatening when they appear precarious. Defined boundaries are the first thing the baby must learn to move out of the imaginary and narcissistic mother-relation to take up an identity in the Symbolic order. The child must also move on from her attachment to and desire for the mother and transfer that desire to another object. This reluctant transition works through the dilemma that the child will face for the foreseeable future: "The individual tries to, in both senses, fix himself in a definably bounded and accountable self, while the desire that animates him lives by mobility."¹³⁵ Put another way, if the individual's ultimate object of desire is complete selfhood, each time she abandons a stable libidinal position (also a process in Freud's theorization of melancholia) for a new one, she sacrifices selfhood and risks self-shattering. Sex puts the notion of a knowable and assured self in jeopardy, and this is why Bersani's and Phillips's questions place sex's pleasure on the side of *jouissance*, unbearable pleasure.¹³⁶ By being driven to continually risk selfhood for sexuality, Bersani and Phillips think that "we are

¹³⁵ Bersani and Phillips, *Intimacies* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 94.

¹³⁶ Bersani and Phillips privileging of *jouissance* here echoes Edelman's discussion of the sinthomosexual in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. The sinthomosexual has no personal interest in the future, sacrificing the future in favor of pursuing *jouissance*.

invited to ‘resist projects of subjection.’”¹³⁷ But the question is whether or not we choose to follow through on those invitations.

While the ego may be invited to resist subjection, this resistance is not a project the ego willingly takes up because it risks the knowable, bounded present self. Moving forward to a new sexual relation poses something the ego dreads:

What we call love is our hatred of the future; and it is because other people represent our future as objects of desire, what might happen next to us, we fear them. It is this that makes the ego the most confounding object in the Freudian triumvirate. The ego, for its very survival, has to seek out new (i.e., “other”) objects that it cannot bear because they are new; and it is prohibited by the incest taboo from seeking out the old objects that it desires, and cannot bear because they are forbidden. What the (Freudian) subject wants he must not have, and what he can have he will never quite want. If the ego’s project is (psychic) survival, rage is going to be the order of the day.¹³⁸

The ego’s need to move on causes us to live our lives moving forward but desiring backwards for a time before the ego’s rage. Not surprisingly, then, Bersani and Phillips trace impersonal narcissism’s beginnings in the undifferentiated mother-child relationship. The opposition of sameness and difference plays no role in the reciprocal self-recognition of the mother-child dyad, thus acting out an early model of impersonal relations, relations that require no boundary between self and other. The mother’s impersonal love serves as a precursor to impersonal narcissism; for “when narcissistic desire becomes the medium for recognition rather than the obstacle—as it does in mothering—it is affinity more than difference that is felt.”¹³⁹ Under this model of affinity, difference articulated through self/other binaries acts only as a means of distance-regulation that prevents our earliest pleasure in sameness. This longed for sameness, though, presents our greatest threat. The desire for sameness thwarts “healthy” movement

¹³⁷ Ibid., 95.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 103.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 107.

through the mirror phase. Impersonal narcissism does not establish separation of the self and other, refusing to accept the contours of one's body and respecting its separation from other bodies; impersonal narcissism takes pleasure in a failure to differentiate. Under impersonal narcissism, other bodies are not something to learn from in the traditional sense of being close enough to learn from but far enough away to observe, to differentiate. Instead, other bodies are something to lose oneself in; instead of learning from an observation of bodies, one experiences the possibility of giving up individuality. In contrast to a mode of watching that encourages emulation, the queer biopic encourages opening and merging. In place of learning from the building of the biopic subject's life and taking that learning to mold and modify one's own subjectivity, the queer biopic asks the subject to give up their identity and open their body up to a world of sameness.

The possibility of impersonal narcissism asks us to imagine what it might be like if selfhood was not the object of human relations and to imagine a future based on the collusion of dissolution—a community of shattered-egos. But when the loss of self presents the ego's ultimate fear, how do we go about experiencing impersonal narcissism? Earlier in *Intimacies*, Bersani and Phillips turn to the example of barebacking culture to point to a tangible means of thinking through impersonal possibility and what it would look like to go through an impersonal transformation.¹⁴⁰ Bersani and Phillips ground their thinking in barebacking culture in order to reconceive of the body and the subject as one which is porous and open to receiving the bodily

¹⁴⁰ Chapter Two in *Intimacies* is titled "Shame on You," and it discusses the way the HIV virus literalized the shame of "I have been fucked" on the queer body. The chapter goes on to discuss the AIDS crisis phenomenon of bug chasers, those who wish to be infected, and gift givers, those who offer up the virus. Bersani and Phillips discuss how these sexual practices can help rethink our conceptions of subjectivity and community, such that our individual bodies open up to others past and present.

material of those who came before her. Barebacking presents a vision of community and a regressive model of “unfathomable spirituality.” This spirituality is formed by the subject’s newfound ability to be taken over by an unknowable otherness and live through being taken over by the ghosts of a history they can never know. The body becomes the site of history’s persistence and reproduction: “The barebacking bottom enters into an impersonal intimacy, not only with all those who have pumped their semen into his body, but also with those unknown partners, perhaps now dead, with whom he has never had any physical contact.”¹⁴¹ The reproductive fantasy of the virus conceives of life and living on in different terms.

These fantasies of reproduction are exemplified in one particular act of impersonality. Bersani and Phillips narrate the (possible) passing of the virus with their retelling of a barebacking bottom receiving the semen of various donors via a funnel. This funneling of semen into an individual recipient literalizes the notion of the virus as a giver of contact, of intimacy. The *jouissance* described by Bersani and Phillips functions as something akin to a queer death drive. For Freud, the death drive, *thanatos*, functions in opposition to the life drive, *eros*, which is connected to love, sex, and reproduction. The death drive is driven by anger directed toward oneself, the drive toward self-annihilation. Lacan, however, argues that all drives are somehow bound to the death drive. In Bersani’s and Phillips’s study of reported bug-chasing sex practices, the seeking of *jouissance*, the giving and receiving of the virus provides a means of seeking pleasure in a life that has been rendered unbearable. Put another way, *jouissance* is tied to queer sex, viral regeneration, and ultimately death. If there can exist a drive to life under conditions in which life is made unbearable, that drive takes the form of this queer generationality and lineage

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 53.

received via the transmission of biological matter. The virus, in these terms, is reproductive, or at least productive; it puts queers in contact with a history of queers passed.

Extending this experience of relations with a partner one could never know, I argue that film's ability to pose a too-close proximity between the self (spectator) and other (image) presents another means of enacting impersonal narcissism. Even more effectively, films like *Savage Grace* challenge conventional films' use of the reality effect to construct a civic community of interpellated individuals. The queer biopic that resurrects figures from the past acts out Phillips's concluding assertion that an impersonal future becomes conceivable "if we can believe, to begin with, in an impersonal *past*."¹⁴² The past allows us to see where we have been, and what we could potentially become again. *Swoon* turns back to a time when the discourses reactivated by the AIDS crisis had previously appeared, using the past to reveal the discourses of social fitness and criminality that consolidated on queer bodies in the contemporary moment. The drive back to the past reminded viewers that culture had been where the AIDS crisis was before; biomedical conditioning and regulation of the body certainly is nothing new, but neither is visual culture's participation in that process of regulation. Both *Swoon* and *Savage Grace* take up biomedical cinema's observational gaze to represent lives that are shattered by the conditions of dominant culture through their subjection to a normalizing gaze. Moreover, Kalin's films demonstrate how this return to a mode of observation brings queer life under the microscope, revealing the unbearability of life lived under these conditions. The unbearability of life, in other words, produces a mode of cinematic representation suitable to the devastation of health, life, and body that was the AIDS crisis.

¹⁴² Ibid., 122.

2.8 SUSTAINING LIFE

The biopic from its origins is a life-building practice, but Kalin's films demonstrate that the biopic does not always have to build lives that add up. Sometimes the biopic's lives are fragmented, still grasping for sustenance. In closing, I return to Sedgwick's meditation on reparative reading practices. She writes, "What we can best learn from such practices are, perhaps, the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture—even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them."¹⁴³ Kalin's cinema explores what happens when there are too few cultural resources to sustain life and reparative practices break down. With nothing to take and no available texts to build from, one cannot repair a broken life. In the case of *Swoon*, culture provides little for Leopold and Loeb to take for nourishment. *Swoon*'s camera looks at the bodies of Nathan and Dick in ways that appreciate their bodies, attempting to carve out a space for desire and pleasure in a world that is so often defined by the categorizing gaze of science. But while the camera lovingly lingers over the boys' bodies, the only place where this type of affectionate gaze can occur in Leopold and Loeb's world is in Leopold's bird watching and study. They destroy the object that dominant culture holds most dear—the figure of the child. In annihilating the child, *Swoon* annihilates dominant culture's hope for a better future.¹⁴⁴ Hope, as we understand it, does

¹⁴³ Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 151.

¹⁴⁴ Lee Edelman positions queerness as that which is aligned with the death drive and in opposition to hopes for futurity in his book *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. He reveals and critiques the conservative thinking that propels political rhetoric like "the children are our future." The figure of the Child becomes a rallying point that transcends all others. He writes, the "fascism of the baby's face, which encourages parents, whether gay or straight to join in a rousing chorus of 'Tomorrow Belongs to Me,' suggests that if few can bring up a child without constantly bringing it up—as if the future secured by the Child, the one true access to

not exist in *Swoon*'s world—at least not for Leopold and Loeb. The possibility for learning to be otherwise within Kalin's world comes through an experience of the world that does not ask one to repair their injuries. One can, instead, exist in the space created by trauma, in an alternative way of being with damage.

Swoon and *Savage Grace* demand that we rethink apparatus and suture theory's possibilities for identification. If one cannot function outside of ideology, then maybe we have the possibility for experiencing the body differently within culture—the possibility of experiencing relations to other bodies in ways that expand the self. The knowledge effect endows the filmic apparatus with a sort of revelatory power that grants the spectator the ability to function outside of or at least against ideology, in that one can stand temporarily outside of ideology to see its otherwise concealed workings. But instead of either the reality effect or the knowledge effect, what if there is another effect possible? Post-structuralist models of spectatorship reject this notion, closing down the possibility for the spectator to ever understand herself outside of available discourse. Yet, the queer biopic, I argue, situates its spectator somewhere else—instead of going outside, the spectator is allowed in, inside the image and the under the film's skin. The biopic emerges as a genre concerned with how to build life in ways that sustain being in the world, which can be normative and closed off, but can make room for openings and the porousness that is inherent to subjectivity; in other words, the biopic can expose that wholeness is stitched over and there can be a pleasure and utility in letting ourselves be reopened. Instead of getting farther away from the reality effect, what if one moves in even closer? Kalin's work creates a closer relationship between the biopic figure and the film's

social security, could only be claimed for the other's sake, and never for their own—then that future can only belong to those who purport to *feel* for the other" (75).

spectator; in this case, *Swoon* and *Savage Grace* lead the spectator to take up a closer, more invasive relationship to the image.

The AIDS crisis created a moment of rupture that not only transformed the gay and lesbian communities into a queer community, it created an epistemological shift that changed the way film as a medium inscribes bodies and makes possible relations to onscreen bodies. Looking to cinema's biomedical history helps us understand why film, and the biopic in particular, became a space in which to re-present queer bodies. The AIDS crisis re-oriented queers understanding of life—how fragile life can be and what happens when efforts to sustain life fail. This project of re-presenting queer bodies and life, however, existed inseparably from cinema's immersive potential and these representations demand that we consider how queers related to and located their own bodies within those onscreen images. Film can be used to represent life and living on, but Kalin's films make space to show that reparations cannot always be made; sometimes life stalls out, lurches forward, crawls back. The biopic's power to fascinate is based in our inherent human desire to be close, our desire to try on other lives through our identification with the biopic subject via the apparatus, our desire to *feel* what it might be like to live differently. This mode of living differently is perhaps one that rejects difference. Accordingly, Kalin's cinema invites the spectator to abandon her own boundaried body and give in to an experience of sameness.

3.0 SUSPENDED IN HISTORY: RETHINKING DEREK JARMAN'S LEGACY

in the dim light of dusk
removing articles of clothing
watch those wet bodies on the sheets
watch how they slowly become history
--David Wojnarowicz¹⁴⁵

“History is that time in which those who have no right to occupy the same place can occupy the same image”¹⁴⁶
--Jacques Ranciere

The biopic, at its core, purports to provide an encounter with history.¹⁴⁷ George Custen, in *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* explains, “movie biographies offered the possibility of connecting concretely with a glamorous image of a famous historical person in the guise of a contemporary movie star.”¹⁴⁸ This chapter picks up that claim, and explores the problematic that the former chapters allude to but leave deferred: the biopic’s negotiation of

¹⁴⁵ “History keeps me awake some nights” Box 5, Folder 137, David Wojnarowicz Papers, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University, New York.

¹⁴⁶ Jacques Rancière, *Figures of History* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2014), 13.

¹⁴⁷ Custen’s first chapter “Making History” examines the lengths Hollywood went to in order to ensure that the biopic sold the public “accessible versions of history” (34). From detailed research (and research credits) to the explication of a clear narrative, the Classical Hollywood biopic perfected the genre’s function as a picture of history.

Thomas Elsaesser discusses a similar function of the biopic in “Film as Social History,” stating that the biopic brings the audience into a significant moment in history and makes the audience feel as if they are part of the history-making process.

¹⁴⁸ Custen, 34.

queerness and history. The conventional biopic fascinates through the image of a glamorous figure of the past, allowing the spectator a retrospective gaze into a moment of history they could not live. By bringing the spectator into this moment, the biopic then also brings the spectator into a moment of historical production; she learns about the past through her feeling that she is part of the history-making process.¹⁴⁹ Queer transformations of the biopic continue this mission to educate their spectator, but queer biopics do not create the same distance between the spectator and the film's historical subject that the genre's monumental-history-makers demand. In the previous chapter, I outline the queer biopic's power to suture its spectator into an observational gaze that can disrupt or undo successful subject formation (interpellation), but in this chapter, I explore how the desire to encounter and be in the past is a distinctly queer one. I continue to address how these encounters with history, with queer origins can shift the spectator's subjectivity. Even more so, I understand the AIDS crisis as a moment that calls forth and condenses the melancholia and desire for origins that are inherent to gay identity itself.¹⁵⁰ These desires transcend (or maybe fully utilize) the biopic's power to fascinate; they call for something more than an encounter with history, a touching and being with the past.

The desire for encounter cannot be thought separately from the scopophilic desire to gaze and to see images like one's self. Queer audiences' desire to see images of those like them was and remains, arguably, a driving force behind queer cinema, and queer cinema's turns back to gay and lesbian figures of the past not only provided more of those images, but that more came with access to the lives of those past. However, as scholars like Elizabeth Freeman and Heather

¹⁴⁹ I am drawing of both Custen's and Elsaesser's previously cited texts as I make this claim.

¹⁵⁰ I am referring to Judith Butler's "Melancholy Gender/Refused Identification," and accordingly, I am using the word "gay" here instead of "queer" because of the way Judith Butler formulates her use of Freud around understanding gay identity.

Love have noted, looks back to the past are never simple, never without the baggage afforded by identification, loss, and mourning. Ann Cvetkovich talks about bad feelings or an archive of trauma, and again and again, queerness is positioned as longing, clinging, and nostalgic for a sort of melancholic pain.¹⁵¹ Zachary Small, perhaps, explains the root of this longing, “Queer artists are orphans of a different stripe. They have no conventional genealogy or lineage, no family history or record. Instead, queer people write their own history through dreams, desires, and longings; theirs is a history of things, an archaeology that affirms the existence of queerness in the artifacts of centuries past.”¹⁵² Small describes the alienation and abandonment specific to the experience of living a queer life. Queer artists do not typically see their lives mirrored in the faces of their family lineages or the pages of history; they have had to search for their origins and cling to the past in ways that other artists, whose identities and histories are documented and represented, have not.

This failure of history to provide artifacts of queerness, however, is not history’s only failure; queer life does not necessarily function within the same temporality that shapes the telling of dominant history. It is not lived within the same heteronormative time and family structure; life is not marked by the same rhythms of coupling, reproduction, and futurity.¹⁵³

¹⁵¹ I am referring to Cvetkovich’s books *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (2003) and *Depression: A Public Feeling* (2012), in addition to her edited collection with Janet Staiger and Ann Reynolds *Political Emotions* (2010), which features writing on the topic from scholars like Heather Love, Gayatri Gopinath, Lauren Berlant, and Deborah Gould.

¹⁵² Zachary Small, “How Contemporary Artists Are Evolving the Queer Aesthetic,” *Artsy*, June 15, 2017, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-contemporary-artists-evolving-queer-aesthetic>.

¹⁵³ Throughout this chapter, and the dissertation more broadly, I use the word heteronormative in places where other writers might use heterosexual. Part of this difference has to do with my temporal location as someone who, in many ways, grew up reading queer theory, but more pointedly, I use heteronormative as a way to indicate the ways in which compulsive

Elizabeth Freeman defines this temporal structure as chrononormativity writing, “chrononormativity is a mode of implantation, a technique by which institutional forces come to seem like somatic facts. Schedules, calendars, time zones, and even wristwatches inculcate what the sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel calls ‘hidden rhythms,’ forms of temporal experience that seem natural to those whom they privilege.”¹⁵⁴ According this definition, chrononormativity codifies, or closes down, somatic forces that threaten to dislocate structured temporality; bodily forces become distanced facts. Chrononormativity’s implantation easily aligns with ideological interpellation, but it also suggests the naturalization of familial and generational structures that cannot account for the queer orphan’s experience. For queers whose sexuality and identity often alienate them from their born-into family, they usually must look for family history and a genealogy of those like them elsewhere. Their lack of available emulatory familial figures creates a need to look somewhere else for the relationality, role modeling, and unconditional love (said to be) offered by one’s family. Scholars David L. Eng and Karen Jacobs have both written about how queerness re-orient kinship structures and demands a new process of family-building, but I push this thinking further to argue that queerness also re-orient understandings of genealogy and family history.¹⁵⁵ The classical biopic functions to build national identity, tradition, and a sense of legacy, and in this way, it presents a site of potentiality for queer

heterosexuality acts a regulatory system that may or may not have anything directly to do with sexual practices.

¹⁵⁴ Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham Duke University Press, 2010), 3.

¹⁵⁵ See David L. Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Karen Jacobs, “Retouching Queer Kinship: Sontag, Leibovitz, and the Ends of the Photographic Lens,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 23, no. 1 (2017): 1-29.

historical encounter and legacy formation.¹⁵⁶ Working through a set of cross-generational filmmakers—Matthew Mishory, Derek Jarman, and Ken Russell—this chapter investigates the crisis of history occasioned by queerness—a crisis of understanding one’s relationship to the past, of knowing where one comes from, and of figuring out how one makes sense of her place in the world.

3.1 NEW QUEER CINEMA AND HISTORY

Troubling of and challenges to dominant historical narratives have long been a through line for queer filmmakers, and was part of critics’ impulse to label New Queer Cinema in the early 1990s. And yet, not all of these historical revisions were necessarily motivated by queer filmmakers’ desire to uncover or construct queer legacy, and critics rarely acknowledged those that were. Cinematic re-workings of history initially came under the header of “homo pomo,” a name that explicitly aligns postmodern deconstruction with queer sensibility. Noting a common thread of anachronism, disruption of chronology, and layering of past and present, B. Ruby Rich discussed New Queer Cinema’s early moniker, writing, “In all of [these films], there are traces of appropriation, pastiche, and irony, as well as a reworking of history with social constructionism very much in mind. Definitively breaking with older humanist approaches and the films and tapes that accompanied identity politics, these works are irreverent, energetic, alternatively

¹⁵⁶ The biopic genre from its origins is attached to legacy-building projects of national identity and shared history, which George Custen and Thomas Elsaesser both cover in more detail in *Bio/Pics* and “Film as Social History,” respectively.

minimalist, and excessive.”¹⁵⁷ While the homo pomo label accurately describes queer filmmakers’ shared tendency toward historical revision and irreverent sensibility, in addition to defining a common aesthetics, it does not explain the “why” behind this historical revision. Postmodernism’s distrust of or indifference to history functions alongside the more affective dimensions of history.

But while the homo pomo label lucidly points to the postmodern theory’s influence on queer filmmakers, it also suggests a particular aesthetic. John Greyson’s films, in many ways, exemplify the homo pomo moment. *Zero Patience*’s (1993) functions as an exemplar with its use of music video aesthetics, temporal impossibilities, and tongue-in-cheek humor of numbers like the “Pop a Boner” bathhouse encounter that introduces Sir Richard Francis Burton to modern gay sexual practices. And yet, there seems to be something else driving *Zero Patience*, something that is inseparable from the film’s desire for visibility. Burton’s ability to persist, live on alters the course, and trajectory, of queer history. This shift from deconstructing to clinging to the past takes a more actualized shift in the poetic, even elegiac, depictions of Isaac Julien’s *Looking for Langston* (1989).¹⁵⁸ José Muñoz, referring specifically to one of the film’s closing scenes, writes, “Grief is a precondition to this film. Mourning is never far removed from the ‘life’ in *Looking for Langston*. The scene of mourning and the bar scene that represents the

¹⁵⁷ B. Ruby Rich, *New Queer Cinema: The Director’s Cut* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 18.

¹⁵⁸ *Looking for Langston* returns to the Harlem Renaissance past without a concern for historiographical facts, but with a concern for visualizing the past’s queer cadences, as exemplified in the film’s citation of Robert Mapplethorpe’s photography. Muñoz, in the chapter “Photographies of Mourning: Melancholia and Ambivalence in Van DerZee, Mapplethorpe, and *Looking for Langston*,” reads the film as a decipherment of the past and a meditation of what the queer past might have been. Muñoz goes on to call the film a meditation on an encounter with Hughes: “A meditation like this invites a reader to join the author in a contemplative position. The invitation reads: imagine, remember, flesh out” (58).

transhistorical space of gay life are separated by a winding staircase.”¹⁵⁹ This transhistorical space also brings together the interlocking aspects of gay life that construct and inform each other; death is refigured as part of life—a party could just as easily become a funeral. Unlike Greyson’s *Urinal* (1988), the film does not bring various figures of the past into the same spatiotemporal space, but instead visualizes multiple temporalities at once. In this way, by bringing multiple histories together and putting them into conversation, the film more or less carries out the hope of melancholia: to bring past embodied relations with one’s lost love object into the present, and into the future.

Queer scrambling of time can help to deconstruct grand narratives and thus serve postmodern critique, but it cannot fulfill queers’ desire to be with the past. Formal deconstruction can only get queer cinema so far; Freeman has explained her yearning for the past, “For while queer antiformalism appeals to me on an intellectual level, I find myself emotionally compelled by the not-quite-queer-enough longing for form that turns us backward to prior moments, forward to embarrassing utopias, sideways to forms of being and belonging that seem, on the face of it, completely banal.”¹⁶⁰ The desire for a lineage of sameness or a feeling of being a part of a history of others who navigated how to be in the world makes sense in the context of the late 1980s and early 90s AIDS crisis—in terms of both the overwhelming loss of one’s community and the attack on one’s claim to a place in world—but this desire for sameness seems to suggest more of an ambient queer sensibility. These films capture a desire to inhabit the same temporality as these figures, an effort to be in the same place with them, to feel a relation to these individuals who navigated living a queer life long before them.

¹⁵⁹ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis (University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 73.

¹⁶⁰ Freeman, *Time Binds*, xiii.

Given queers' reconfiguration of kinship structures, the AIDS crisis presented not only a loss of lovers, but also a catastrophic loss of one's chosen family. This accumulation of loss created a pain that could not be comprehended and an absence that could not be filled. Freud defines melancholia as a pathological or failed form of mourning because it does not follow the healthy subject's mourning trajectory, which comes to a fully grieved resolution. Freud specifies, "in some people the same influences produce melancholia instead of mourning and we consequently suspect them of a pathological disposition."¹⁶¹ What appears pathological about melancholia is the way in which the subject refuses to give up the lost object and instead allows them to live on within the subject's own ego. In place of getting over one's lost one, the subject incorporates their love, allowing her to take on new life. But this living on is a suspended one; the loss of a loved one cuts so deeply that time essentially stops and that loss cannot be carried along into the present or future. Melancholia itself disrupts history in that it thwarts a progress narrative; it compels the subject to linger in the past, refusing to give up her lost love object and move forward. Melancholia involves an incorporation of lost ones instead of a moving on, and queer melancholic history extends this to the incorporation of past love objects one may or may not have known. Unlike classical biopics that depict the lives and careers of influential individuals while promoting a particular way of living in the world, the queer biopic depicts a search for life among the ruins of history. Put another way, the queer biopic negotiates how to continue living in a time structured by absence and loss by denying the past as lost. While classical biopics acknowledge individual lives as past, it is, in part, this temporal distance that removes those lives from ordinariness and makes them models for emulation. The queer biopic

¹⁶¹ Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson, (London: Vintage, 2001), 43.

refigures the biopic's possibility through its melancholic relation with the past.

Instead of a postmodern scrambling of time and history, the longing of the queer biopic creates a melancholic transformation of time. Through its suspension of loss, melancholia takes on a different relationship to time, or as Eugenie Brinkema puts it, "melancholia takes an expanded duration, it persists and continues indefinitely adhering to time."¹⁶² As a temporal medium, cinema can manipulate time—it does not have to follow the chronological narrative in Classical Hollywood form, but can instead halt, stagger, look back and linger. The queer biopic takes a genre that is by definition dependent on a chronological narrative and has it adhere to the lifespan of its subject. Cinema's ability to manipulate time further privileges the medium as a site for melancholic relations in that it possesses the ability to experience an encounter endless times; the encounter can be replayed again and again, experienced anew with each repetition. The past, and figures of the past, can thus be adhered to differently. The queer biopic provides an emotional encounter, an encounter with the affects and emotions of the life of another who often lived before the viewer; it offers an encounter that can best be described as an act of melancholia, a longing for proximity to a lost love object whose loss cannot be mourned.¹⁶³ Melancholia involves a certain somatic quality insofar as the lost love object is incorporated into one's person, and if we follow Judith Butler's argument that gender performances are themselves acts of melancholia, a citation of the man/woman he/she never loved, then all inscriptions of gender on the body are melancholic acts.¹⁶⁴ While biographical inscriptions during the AIDS crisis could

¹⁶² Eugenie Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 57.

¹⁶³ I am borrowing from Drew Daniel's *The Melancholy Assemblage*. His work is far more indebted to Deleuzian understandings of melancholia than my own, but I find utility in his explication of melancholia as an encounter with the emotions of another.

¹⁶⁴ Butler, Judith. "Melancholy Gender/Refused Identification." *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997. 132-150.

easily be read as mourning texts, they take on a different relationship to the past and to the cinematic apparatus, such that the queer biopic becomes not a mourning text but a melancholic one.

3.2 RE-PAINTING QUEER HISTORY: *DELPHINIUM'S* LIFE OF YOUNG DEREK

JARMAN

I illustrate queer filmmakers' and audiences' search for and creation of legacy through my reading of Matthew Mishory's encounter with Derek Jarman, inscribed in *Delphinium: A Childhood Portrait of Derek* (2009). Mishory's twelve-minute short film re-constructs an encounter with Jarman that Mishory could have only imagined. Shot on Super 8, the medium that began Jarman's movement away from painting and toward filmmaking, the film lyrically presents young Derek Jarman's artistic and sexual awakening; Mishory imagines the moment when Jarman's apprehended his own queer sensibility. Mishory inscribes the film with the type of personal access to Jarman that the film (and Mishory himself) longs for but can never achieve. Jarman's death preceded Mishory's discovery of his work, so Mishory's identification with the artist is always an identification with an unmet figure of the past. Although Mishory created the film in 2009, it did not receive widespread recognition until 2014 when the British Film Institute used the film as part of their Remembering Derek Jarman series, an event to commemorate Jarman twenty years after his death. The BFI now holds *Delphinium* in its permanent collection, and Mishory's film plays an important role in framing the abundance of Jarman material in the

I more thoroughly outline Butler's positioning of gay identity as a form of melancholia in the introductory chapter.

collection. On the BFI's website, and their Mediatheque at the BFI Southbank location, the Institute uses the film as an introduction to Derek Jarman; after viewing the film in the Mediatheque, links to interviews with Jarman and a comprehensive collection of his films begin to pop up and guide the viewer through Jarman's lifework. Twenty years after Jarman's death, the BFI memorializes his life with a portrait of his childhood, a portrait of his artistic and sexual origin story. The BFI's use of Mishory's film points to the way the film inscribes the filmmaker's personal history, not only by visualizing the childhood Jarman has discussed in interviews and autobiographical writing, but also by sweeping the spectator up into the sensual world of Jarman's artistic vision. In this way, the BFI's remembrance of Jarman simultaneously functions as an insistence on his continued presence; the curated world allows viewers both familiar and unfamiliar with his work to become absorbed in an encounter with a figure from the past whose work still powerfully affects our present.

Mishory's *Delphinium* invents, and in some ways reproduces, an origin story for understanding what it means to negotiate the world as a queer subject, for understanding how to comprehend being queer.¹⁶⁵ The film offers biographical explanations for Derek Jarman's future film work and traces the filmmaker's painterly aesthetics back to his childhood, but in doing so, it tenderly exposes Young Jarman's traumas and theorizes from these painful narratives. Although, Mishory's portrait is less concerned with factually memorializing the Derek Jarman the world would come to know and more concerned with embalming Jarman's retrospective

¹⁶⁵ Mishory once again constructs a speculative queer biography in *Joshua Tree, 1951: A Portrait of James Dean* (2012). The film draws on gossip about James Dean's sexuality to imagine the life of the actor as based on that rumored history. The film's narrative breaks—primarily in the form of dreamlike sequences with Dean wandering and smoking in the desert—thwart the biography's chronology and put into question how a film represents time, and more precisely, lived, embodied time.

queerness and the emergence of a queer sensibility that resurfaces in Mishory's own work. As Mishory attempts to recover Jarman's lost queer childhood, he simultaneously inscribes Jarman's influence on his own filmmaking, as well as his desire to understand the origins of a sensibility he has inherited. The film opens with footage of a man at the window at Jarman's Prospect Cottage, here played by Jarman's muse and long-time partner, Keith Collins.¹⁶⁶ Using Collins in this opening provides the film with a mummification of Jarman's personal history, placing Jarman's lover in the home where he and Jarman spent the latter's final days. *Delphinium* begins with Mishory's search for Jarman at the physical repository of Jarman's adult- and end-of-life memories; from there, the film embalms the Jarman that Mishory imagines. However, the opening voiceover lets the spectator know that film is always "time embalmed in 8mm gauge." This embalming, in other words, is not a stilling or freezing, but a capturing of movements past and present.

Delphinium's longing for proximity to a queer past serves as an extension of the way in which narratives of queerness are inherently retrospective; Nishant Shahani explains, "After coming out, we are expected to turn out to be what we ostensibly always already were. The retrospective explaining in this instance creates a tautological bind where what is known in the present is easily and retroactively confirmed (or essentialized) by what is understood of the past."¹⁶⁷ Shahani's words invite a number of unpackings, but most pertinently, he asserts that coming out narratives, and thus queerness itself, are always intrinsically bound to the past; queerness is existentially retrospective. Following this line of logic, Mishory's film enacts an

¹⁶⁶ Keith Collins was Jarman's partner from 1987-1994, appearing in *The Garden* (1990), *Edward II* (1991), and *Wittgenstein* (1993) and living with Jarman through his final days before his death from AIDS-related complications.

¹⁶⁷ Nishant Shahani, *Queer Retrosexualites: The Politics of Reparative Return* (Lanham: Lehigh University Press, 2012), 2.

understanding of selfhood through the backwards gaze that queerness always implicitly performs. But not only is the act of coming out a retrospection, it is additionally a narrative, a narrative that is often expected to adhere to a certain structure; the structure of a coming out story essentializes an origin story that locates queer sexuality at the beginning and thus binds all understandings of one's sexuality to that past. *Delphinium*, however, refuses to follow the type of narrative structure characteristic of both "born this way" narratives and biopic genre conventions.¹⁶⁸ Mishory gives Jarman a coming out story that disrupts narrative expectations; brief tableaux and anti-narrative visual asides structure the film, like much of Jarman's own work. Mishory visualizes the artist's sexuality in a way that reflects Jarman's own artistic sensibilities, and Mishory paints a portrait of Jarman that honors Jarman's own approach to representing life and personhood.

By resurrecting Jarman's childhood and preserving its legacy, Mishory's film appears to exemplify Heather Love's claim how, "insofar as the losses of the past motivate us and give meaning to our current experience, we are bound to memorialize them."¹⁶⁹ *Delphinium's* introduction of the boarding school, the space where most of the film takes place, comes through a painting titled *School for Boys, Dorset, England, 1957*.¹⁷⁰ The film's first move inside the school, however, is a depiction of young Derek Jarman's bed, enacting a scene he recounted in interviews as one of his most formative, that of being discovered in bed with a schoolmate and brutally punished for it. *Delphinium* stages this punishment with a repeated "this is what you get

¹⁶⁸ Shahani's book was published around the same time that Lady Gaga's "Born This Way" gave retrospective (and essentialist) queer origin stories a catchy shorthand and anthem.

¹⁶⁹ Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 1.

¹⁷⁰ The film does not cite the origins of the painting. It remains unclear who created the painting, or even if the painting is actually a representation of the school Young Jarman attended.

for queering” voiceover, referencing the trauma of the encounter Jarman claims led him to repress all notions of sexual desire. But as soon as the film starts to inscribe that repression, it cuts to a scene with Young Derek and a room of his schoolmates in bed in a masturbatory competition. An older boy at the front of the room commands the boys, repeatedly shouting “first one to come wins.” In the face of the previous scene’s punishment, this one literalizes or extends the homosociality of an all-boys environment.¹⁷¹ The film’s gesture to sexualize the school space serves something like a reparative function, or at least it works as a counter to the childhood that Jarman describes in in interview footage included in both Isaac Julien’s *Derek* (2008) and Jarman’s autobiography, *At Your Own Risk*.¹⁷² The space of the school becomes a space of desire and inspiration. Mishory’s film, then, not only gives Jarman back a queer childhood, but also positions that time period as the beginning of his career as a painter and filmmaker.

In the scene that serves as the short film’s climax and comes to figure one of the central reasons why the film returns to Jarman’s childhood, Young Derek paints the school’s groundskeeper. The groundskeeper scene meditates on Jarman queerly representing personhood: his portraiture imagines the groundskeeper as something in excess of and better than reality. In what first might be read as a straightforward sexual advance, the young artist demands that the keeper take off his clothes, but this requirement comes to take on a much greater significance. Young Jarman tells the keeper that, in those clothes, he looks like a groundskeeper, but explains that in his painting, free from the restrictions of his common clothes, he can become whomever

¹⁷¹ I am referring to Eve Sedgwick’s work in *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985) that looks closely at male same sex social bonds. Sedgwick examines practices of “male bonding” rooted in homophobia in order to position those homosocial ties as not entirely separate from homosexual ones.

¹⁷² The other major film produced on Jarman is *Derek Jarman: Life as Art* (Andy Kimpton-Nye, 2004), which primarily focuses on the recollections of those close to Jarman, including Tilda Swinton and Nigel Terry.

Jarman wishes him to become: “This is my painting, and you can be anything I want you to be, anything at all.” In this case, what Young Derek wishes him to become foreshadows Jarman’s first feature film, *Sebastiane* (1976); the groundskeeper appears in the warm lighting of the film’s homoerotic world and with the punctured wounds of its titular character. The biographical depiction of Jarman here rereads an autobiographical function back into the artist’s film work and locates his (avowedly repressed at the time) desires in his art. Mishory’s film asserts that Jarman’s biographical films about figures such as Saint Sebastian and Ludwig Wittgenstein are not only about queerly retelling the lives of those individuals, but also about retelling the life of Jarman himself.

Delphinium ends with a montage of city spaces, queer couples, and a whirlwind of other images that reflects how Jarman’s work theorizes a sort of ambient queerness—queer affects that capture the experiences of those past and present. Amongst all of these images, one sequence continually reappears and ultimately closes the film: black and white footage of two male lovers in the woods. While this lyrical sequence does fit into the diegetic world Mishory constructs, it is more strikingly a visual citation of *The Clearing* (1993), a seven-minute short film directed by Alexis Bistikas in which Jarman stars. *The Clearing*, filmed only a year before Jarman’s death, is a search through the woods shot from the cruising point of view of an anonymous onlooker. Through steadicam movement, the audience surveys the woods’ occupants along with the onlooker, taking in a single man looking to pick up a stranger, a group of young queers gathered around a leather-clad older man, and a leather-hooded man who slips off his hood to reveal his face. As the onlooker stumbles through the trees, he encounters a young boy dressed in his school uniform and next, a woman and young child spread out across a picnic blanket. The woman tells him that she has been worried about him, and asks him to come and sit, but he

disobeys this command to stop and continues his search. It is only when he reaches the clearing and spots a saxophone player he desires that the film, through shot reverse shot, reveals that Jarman plays the man whose gaze the audience has been following. The film imagines the voyeurism and scopophilic desire inherent to cinematic spectatorship while asserting that the wandering gaze of cruising is a queer gaze, a gaze borne of queer desire. Jarman's character keeps moving despite the woman's demands that he stop wandering; he ignores the command to pause and instead continues moving in the direction of his desire. *Delphinium's* final citation of *The Clearing*, alongside his archaeological dig into Jarman's life, exemplifies Mishory's own search for understanding a (pre-AIDS) sexual subculture he was too young to experience. *Delphinium* cruises the queer past for an erotic encounter one was (temporally) too late to experience. Through recourse to a cinematic capture of Jarman's body, and a cinematic look through Jarman's eyes, Mishory re-asserts film as a medium through which one can experience, feel the queer past.

Delphinium's ending gestures toward what happened when Jarman's artistic vision transferred to cinema. In interviews about his work, Jarman consistently foregrounds his training as a painter. Kate Higginson remarks, "Celebrated as a prominent avant-garde director, Derek Jarman quipped that he preferred to be known as 'a painter who dabbled in another art form, namely cinema'" (77). Despite these glib remarks about his career, he certainly did more than dabble in cinema and his films would become the centerpiece of his queer legacy. And yet, what Jarman's remark points to is the way in which painting always remained at the forefront of his mind, the way in which his films were always also paintings, always also portraits. Jarman painted his subjects on screen, sensually portraying each individual in a manner true to Jarman's own sensibility and the subject's sensed-queerness. In place of fact-based historical biography,

Jarman's portraits represent an erotic encounter with the past, an eros produced by loss and longing. Mishory's film, I argue, asks us to re-read Jarman's work in terms of (auto)biography, portraiture, and queer longings for legacy. Cinematic portraiture produces a formal cinematic inheritance, a form of discovering queer genealogy Mishory inherits from Jarman. I take *Delphinium* as my point of theorization for reading Derek Jarman's work, which has been the subject for queer scholarship and fascination for decades. *Delphinium* demands a reappraisal of those films that have been canonized in both British cinema and culture by film scholars like Michael O'Pray, Colin MacCabe, and Peter Wollen.¹⁷³ I re-orient Jarman's work to position him as the epicenter of a queer genealogy, exploring how Mishory's focus on childhood and queer sensibility helps construct such a genealogy.

Jarman considered himself already a part of a lineage of queer filmmakers. Brian Hoyle writes, "Jarman saw himself as a queer artist following in the footsteps of Jean Cocteau and Pier Paolo Pasolini, and like his forebears, was an inveterate polymath – a notable painter, set-designer, writer, gardener and political activist – who nevertheless remains best remembered for his films."¹⁷⁴ Jarman embodies this queer inheritance with his starring role in Julian Cole's *Ostia* (1987), a reconstruction of the events leading up to Pier Paolo Pasolini's murder. Jarman recreates the legendary filmmaker through the lens of his own artistic vision, reciting lines of

¹⁷³ See Michael O'Pray, "The Art of Films/Films of Art," in *Derek Jarman: A Portrait*, ed. Roger Wollen (London: Thames and Hudson: 1996), 65-76; Colin MacCabe, "A Post-national European Cinema: A Consideration of Derek Jarman's *The Tempest* and *Edward II*," in *Dissolving Views: Key Writings on British Cinema*, ed. Andrew Higson (London: Cassell, 1996), 191-201; Peter Wollen, "The Last New Wave: Modernism in the British Films of the Thatcher Era," in *Fires Were Started: British Cinema and Thatcherism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 35-51.

¹⁷⁴ Brian Hoyle, "Derek Jarman: Radical Traditionalist," *Senses of Cinema*, May 2007, <http://sensesofcinema.com/2007/great-directors/jarman/#b3>.

Tony Peake discusses Jarman's conception of himself as the predecessor of filmmakers like Pasolini more thoroughly in his biography of the filmmakers.

Pasolini's poetry alongside lines of his own. Jarman appeared on screen a number of times throughout his life, but his reenactment of Pasolini acts out Jarman's guiding look back to the past for emulatory queer figures. The film, made contemporaneously with Jarman's *Caravaggio* (1986) and *The Last of England* (1987), articulates Jarman as a filmmaker concerned with understanding his own life and self-construction through his embodiment and cinematic representation of the lives of queers past.

In looking at Jarman's work as the epicenter of queer intergenerational collaboration, I am working to counter canonized modernist readings of Jarman as the visionary artist whose film paintings stood out against the backdrop of early 1990s New Queer Cinema.¹⁷⁵ Readings of Jarman as a singular thinker ultimately separate him from the lineage of filmmakers that shaped his creative vision, while also denying the foundational role of his collaborative work with Ken Russell.¹⁷⁶ Scholars, understandably, tend to engage with Jarman's film at the level of close textual analysis, emphasizing his films' status as art objects (confirmed by his training as a painter) and explicating their relationship to Renaissance art and literature.¹⁷⁷ These readings speak to the visual richness of Jarman's films, but they cannot account for the inherited queer sensibility that informed Jarman's work nor Mishory's inscription of his queer predecessor in *Delphinium*. Jarman's films cannot be thought outside of the queer mentorship that made their production possible nor apart from the queer education they provide. This form of mentorship is

¹⁷⁵ See Peter Wollen, "The Last New Wave: Modernism in the British Films of the Thatcher Era," in *Fires Were Started: British Cinema and Thatcherism*, ed. Lester Friedman (Minneapolis: University Minnesota Press, 1993).

¹⁷⁶ Jarman got his start in the film industry with his work with on the set design for Ken Russell's on *The Devils* (1971) and *Savage Messiah* (1972).

¹⁷⁷ See Ronald Wymer, *Derek Jarman* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005); Jim Ellis, "Queer Period: Derek Jarman's Renaissance," in *Outtakes: Essays on Queer Theory and Film*, ed. Ellis Hanson (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 228-315.

tied to the temporality of cinema itself, in that cinema can make possible encounters with figures that are impossible to (physically) encounter in the present moment. The original BFI version of *Delphinium* includes an interview at the end of the film with an American writer who recounts hearing about Jarman's film during a difficult time in high school and driving hours to the nearest video store that housed Jarman's films.¹⁷⁸ For this young man, Jarman's films provided a mentorship he could not find in his small Midwestern hometown.

3.3 CARAVAGGIO: PAINTING LIFE

Mishory's *Delphinium* posits something of an autobiographical function to Jarman's work, or at least positions his artwork as a way to work through his personal history; in doing so, it performs the meta function of creating a portrait of an artist creating portraits, an artist who would then go on to make cinematic portraits of figures like Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Edward II.¹⁷⁹ In *Caravaggio* (1986), Jarman reanimates the queer desire inscribed in Caravaggio's work and tells the life story imagined through these paintings' production. Caravaggio's portraits become the source material for the film's biographical

¹⁷⁸ The brief interview appeared after the closing of the film, but Mishory later removed this footage because without indicating the speaker, many viewers incorrectly assumed it was Mishory telling his story. Regardless of the fact that the interview is not included in the film's most current cut, I find the story a compelling narrative to cite, and I find it telling that Mishory's first impulse was to include it in *Delphinium*.

¹⁷⁹ In the special features added to the *Wittgenstein* DVD, an interview with Tilda Swinton reveals many of the intimate details of Jarman's production process. She asserts that Jarman's life was always the source material for films like *Caravaggio* and *Wittgenstein*, that those characters are versions of Derek.

retelling, as well as for Jarman's understanding of what it means to be queer in a hostile world becomes the medium of transmission. Jarman performs an on-screen metamorphosis of Caravaggio's actual paintings, but even more so, Jarman re-constructs the artist's life through the production of art, and queerness emerges as a residue, a biographical remainder of his paintings. *Caravaggio* creates a revisionist history of the artist's life by understanding the homoerotic imagery in his painting as autobiographical; Jarman tells Caravaggio's life through the production of his paintings, his selection of models, his mixing of paints and staging of props. The production of paintings like *Boy with Basket of Fruit* (1593-94) and *Amor Victorious* (1602-03) is the axis on which the film turns and the sole determinant of the spectator's access to Caravaggio. Through *Caravaggio's* depiction and recreation of the Baroque artist's paintings, the *tableau vivant*, or living picture, "serves as the medium for a history based on images: it becomes an interface between art and history, film and painting, the present and the past."¹⁸⁰ When queers' history is not recorded in the pages of books, it emerges in the image. Caravaggio's paintings are the medium through which Jarman interfaces with the artist, and it is through Jarman's re-imagining of the artist's work that the spectator gains access to Caravaggio.

Jarman makes an uncredited appearance in the film as a Papal aide in one of the film's final scenes in which the Pope calls upon Caravaggio (Nigel Terry) to inform him that he is willing to overlook his sinful acts of sodomy if he can use his paintbrush to bring "the riffraff" back to the church. Jarman appears peripheral to the scene's sphere of action, an onlooker, but his eavesdropping presence reminds the viewer of his own residual biography and sexuality that always informs his portrayals of figures like Caravaggio, Wittgenstein, and Edward II. For

¹⁸⁰ James Tweedie, "The Suspended Spectacle of History: The Tableau Vivant in Derek Jarman's *Caravaggio*," *Screen* 44, no. 4 (2003): 380.

Jarman, the production of film was never separate from the presentation and living of life. In a 1992 interview, the filmmaker explains:

I can't re-invent film. No one can. But I can disrupt it. I can re-figure it in my mind's image. Queer activists aren't saying we should go live on an island somewhere to be truly queer, nor are they willing to accept the standard idea of a decent life. They're saying an honest world is a fair but shaken one. And I'm saying something similar about film. An honest film, like an honest life, makes just enough sense on the surface to survive in a largely idiotic world, while remaining free and complicated and original underneath.¹⁸¹

If queer life is the source material for Jarman's films, their form follows the equation of honesty he sets up in his figuration of cinema as a mirror of queer life. Queer life cannot exist in a vacuum, and activists and artists cannot (successfully) invent entirely new ways of being in the world. But Jarman suggests that life, and the cinematic medium, can be adapted to fit queer needs. An honest film, and life, does not demand aesthetic perfection; instead, it demands a tenuous intelligibility that comes through the slippages of meaning and surface effects that mystify the gaze of "a largely idiotic world."

Jarman's depiction of Caravaggio further understands the painter's work as both a record of life lived and a means by which to create one's self: the way to access Caravaggio's personal history, according to Jarman's film, is by recourse to his (self-)images. The film depicts *Boy with Basket of Fruit* (1593-94) only to suggest that Caravaggio becomes the boy with a basket of fruit he paints; or perhaps more accurately, an adolescent hustler Caravaggio (Dexter Fletcher) becomes an art object molded in the vision of his art. After a scene in which he declares himself an art object to one of his johns, thus validating his high price tag, voiceover narration explains, "I painted myself as Bacchus and took on his fate." Taking on Bacchus's persona affirms young

¹⁸¹ "The Queer King," Box 9, Folder 550, Dennis Cooper Papers, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University, New York.

Caravaggio's belief that "man's character is his fate." As these lines are uttered, shots of young Caravaggio slumped against a wall drinking wine, his head adorned in an ivy crown, cuts to a shot of him posed for his own painting, and finally, to a shot of the finished painting, *Sick Bacchus* (1593). Man's character, then, might well be the character he creates for himself, and his fate the destiny that character determines. As Caravaggio presents the painting to Cardinal Del Monte (Michael Gough), he explains that he painted the skin green, much to the Cardinal's confusion, because he had been ill the entire summer. Art, in Caravaggio's world, is not art for art's sake, but a medium in which to inscribe or record life. A portrait is no more easily manipulated than one's own persona—that portrait (attempts to) provides direct access to life.

Jarman's restaging of Caravaggio's persona-creation mirrors the filmmaker's own search for queer biography. In *At Your Own Risk* (1992) Jarman explains: "It was very important to find the 'I': *I* feel this, this happened to *me*, *I* did this. I wanted to read that. My obsession with biography is to find these 'I's. ...There's a huge self-censorship because we're terrified of betraying ourselves. We don't want people to know. Looking at historical figures and wondering: were they gay?"¹⁸² Jarman's search for these "I's probes history for experiences that may have been queer. His probing accounts for histories' censorship, both in terms of dominant history's elisions and queers' fearful self-silencing. But Jarman continues on to qualify his question of "were they gay?," discussing how terminology like "gay" comes from a twentieth-century vocabulary and does not necessarily correspond with same-sex desires of the past. The need to recoup and recover these figures as part of an identity category is, after all, something of an historical impossibility. This impossibility becomes figured in Isaac Julien's portrayal of

¹⁸² Derek Jarman, "At Your Own Risk," in *Queer: Documents of Contemporary Art*, ed. David J. Getsy (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016), 48.

Langston Hughes, as the film recovers what Muñoz labels queer cadences; Julien's film picks up on the beats of queerness emoting from Hughes's work and works from there to imagine the life that might have been. Jarman articulates an identification with figures of the past through his use of "we," but he simultaneously expresses obstacles to that identification. Jarman's own "I" is spoken through his discovery of past "I"s.

The film features the painter's creation of his own persona, his "I," but it also demonstrates how Caravaggio's portraits seek to capture their subjects' essence, inscribe their record of life lived. Its emphasis on Caravaggio's relationships with his paintings' models suggests his paintings to be more portraits of those models, more a capturing of their essence than the original painting's historical presentation would suggest. While the film does have a tenuous narrative, "it works more as a series of tableaux" that appear in the films repeated static long shots of figures posed against walls and framed by the spaces they inhabit.¹⁸³ However, by bringing these paintings to the film's world with their process or production, Jarman suggests that these paintings are themselves alive, not dead, not frozen in the way that so many understandings would wish us to believe.¹⁸⁴ The film animates his painterly canvas such that it "becomes more than captured stillness, its players more than forms and shadows; the studio is transformed into a performative space."¹⁸⁵ But in refusing the paintings' stasis, *Caravaggio* also

¹⁸³ Jim Ellis, "Queer Period: Derek Jarman's Renaissance," in *Out Takes: Essays on Queer Theory and Film*, ed. Ellis Hanson (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 306.

¹⁸⁴ André Bazin provides the most canonical comparison of the cinematic image to other media such as photography and portraiture in "The Ontology of the Photographic Image." He positions early portraiture, sculpture, and other memorializations of lives past as an effort to embalm the dead, to preserve them as they were for the future.

¹⁸⁵ Tweedie, "The Suspended Spectacle of History," 385.

refuses the queer history's immobility.¹⁸⁶ Lena (Tilda Swinton), for instance, reveals her pregnancy to Caravaggio as she poses for him as Mary Magdalene. And if Caravaggio is the film's Christ figure, as the ending suggests, Lena is his Mary Magdalene, the pure-again witness to his work, and for whom he ultimately must sacrifice his lover, Ranuccio (Sean Bean).¹⁸⁷

Caravaggio closes with the end of the artist's life, but this marker of life ending comes with another image of the artist's work. As Caravaggio lies on his deathbed at the film's close, he sees flashbacks of himself as a child, dressed as an altar boy with wings; the child comes back to bear witness and reunite Caravaggio with his first love and mentor, Pasqualone.¹⁸⁸ This return to Caravaggio's boyhood, the beginning of his process of learning to be queer, becomes transposed over a live-action reenactment of *The Entombment* (1602-1603). In the painting comprised of posed actors, Caravaggio serves as the Christ figure, and this iconic image marks his death that hangs over the film since the opening. The scene's first shot frames the actors in such a way that they appear to be within the frame of a painting. Following the opening wide shot, however, the scene cuts closer into the posed actors' bodies providing a cinematic inventory of the painting's details, revealing close-ups of Caravaggio/Christ's nailed hands and feet, the faces of his mourners, and the hands of man holding his body. As the camera lingers

¹⁸⁶ Isaac Julien's short film *The Attendant* (1993) explores queer desire within the confines of an English museum devoted to the history of slavery, Wilberforce House. More specifically, it follows the black guards racialized sadomasochistic fantasies with a younger white male visitor. Scenes of the guard's fantasy intercut with scenes inside the confines of the gallery space's walls covered in images of slavery, indicating the history that always, already determines black queer sexuality.

¹⁸⁷ The film again interfaces with Jarman's biography, as it marks the beginning of a lifelong collaborative relationship with his muse, Tilda Swinton. Swinton comes to life in front of Jarman's camera and his films could not exist without her labor in front of and behind the camera.

¹⁸⁸ O'Pray, in *Derek Jarman: Dreams of England*, explains that Pasqualone was likely inspired by Jarman's "stay on the shores of Lake Maggiore" and memory of his own "idyllic first love" (38).

over hands, faces, and feet, it is clear that though the actors' bodies are temporarily suspended, they are not static; their fingers squirm, arms quiver, and fabric sways with the breeze. Caravaggio's painting becomes embodied in the film's final moments; his death is embalmed in this image of his lifeless body amid the quivering hands of his mourners.

The angelic boy Caravaggio, witnessing his future self's Christ-like resurrection, comes back to bear witness to this staging of his own death. Young Caravaggio witnessing the scene of his present self's entombment shatters the logic of (personal) history, and suggests a melancholia in which one's past cannot be resolved, made to make sense at life's conclusion. Melancholia is plagued by a certain circularity, a refusal to move forward—the subject refuses to be picked up with by the winds of progress and follow mourning's set trajectory.¹⁸⁹ This moment produces a reorientation toward that past that takes up space within loss creates a relationship to the past in which its traumas and ruins can be never resolved or superseded, respectively. Andrew Gibson reads melancholia as a necessary corollary for Jacques Rancière's understanding of politics and history. Gibson argues that if politics are rare, Rancière insists, then political moments and history are fraught with intermittency, an intermittency that opposes history's supposed continuity and that produces melancholia. For if politics are characterized by an intermittent moment, then the majority of history is full of failure and waiting. Gibson continues, "Rancière remains immersed in material history, and the thought of intermittency therefore reveals itself to have an intrinsically melancholy dimension; or rather, I would finally argue, its melancholy

¹⁸⁹ Walter Benjamin, and the angel of history in particular, has also been an attractive thinker for many queer writers thinking about the past, including J. Jack Halberstam, David A. Gerstner, Nishant Shahani, and Dianne Chisholm. The backward looking angel serves as figure of disruption, a disruption that comes with the send-up of history in the present moment.

dimension is laid bare by its immersion in material history.”¹⁹⁰ This question of material history, however, takes on a particular valiancy in relation to individuals of the past, a relation, for Rancière, that becomes figured in the tomb.¹⁹¹ Rancière’s chapter on Georg Büchner ends with a meditation on the verses that decorate Büchner’s grave: “An unfinished song lies in this grave/ He has taken with him his most beautiful verses.”¹⁹² History is taken with the dead, and it is up to the historian to dig it back up.

Jarman’s appearance in *Caravaggio* as the eavesdropping Papal aide provides an image of the queer historian waiting melancholically, “hanging until the final leap on the improbability and unpredictability of an encounter.”¹⁹³ Yet, an encounter with history can only come through an encounter with the buried remains of the past. Queer filmmakers thus function as a sort of tomb digger in the way that they go back to the past’s ruins to revive their untold stories and un-lived conversations with queers of a different temporal location. Mishory goes back to wake up the Derek Jarman he could never get to know, which is one of the things that aligns Mishory’s sensibility with Jarman’s. Jarman was not interested in presenting histories he already knew or figures with whom he was familiar; he goes back to historical figures with whom he could never have had direct contact, to uncover the queer possibility that lingers beneath history’s surface. History refuses to be dead, as much as queers refuse to acknowledge history’s death.

¹⁹⁰ Andrew Gibson, “The Unfinished Song: Intermittency and Melancholy in Rancière,” *Jacques Rancière Paragraph* 28, no. 1 (2005): 63.

¹⁹¹ Samuel A. Chambers and Michael O’Rourke “Introduction” to their edited special issue of *Borderlands* discusses the unlikely utility of Rancière’s writing for queer theory. The issue stages queer theory’s encounter with Rancière.

¹⁹² Rancière, *Short Voyages*, 55.

¹⁹³ Jacques Rancière, *Short Voyages to the Land of the People*, trans. James B. Swenson, Stanford: Stanford University, 2003, 5.

Jarman's *Caravaggio* contends that the past was never dead, but was, in fact, just still sleeping—its movement paused, awaiting reawakening. The film's closing recreation of *The Entombment* plays with the illusion of stillness; from far away, the actors appear to be perfectly still, but a closer inspection reveals their bodies' micro-movements. Jarman, then, acts as a sort of queer tomb digger, returning to the past's remains to question whether or not we have learned all we could.¹⁹⁴ He searches for "I"s who were silenced or afraid to speak and recreates how they may have spoken. In giving these "I"s a voice, they are able to counter our previous understandings of the past and throw dominant narratives of history off balance. *Caravaggio* intentionally obscures the film's historicity with anachronistic intrusions like the art critic's typewriter. His portrayal of Caravaggio demonstrates that both melancholia and a portrait of history involve the image of a lost love object suspended in the moment of incorporation. Queer projects of recovery form their own love story; the queer biopic, in these terms, acts as an expression of love for a figure the filmmaker and spectator were never able to know and never able to love. This seemingly ungrievable loss, nevertheless, becomes available for continued relation, as it exists within the portrait's frame, within the film's screen in a suspended state. And as the film's reenactments affirm, this state is suspended but never static, the product of history's losses.

¹⁹⁴ I am alluding to David Gerstner's "Queer Angels of History Take It and Leave It From Behind."

3.4 JARMAN'S PORTRAITS OF QUEER HISTORY

When I was young the absence of the past was a terror.

– Derek Jarman¹⁹⁵

Jarman's 1993 Brechtian masterpiece on the life of Ludwig Wittgenstein could simply be described as tableaux that play with the language and logic of film itself, but the two-dimensional quality of its *mise-en-scène* suggests something else. The arrangements of the film suggests that painting one's subject says less about Jarman's own artistic hand and history as a painter, and more about what it means to make a portrait of a historical figure. In the 1993 press kit for *Wittgenstein*, director asserts, "My film does not portray or betray Ludwig. It is there to open up. It is logic."¹⁹⁶ With its plush, neon-colored furniture, feather-adorned Lady Ottoline (Tilda Swinton), and Martian, Mr. Green, the film's *mise-en-scène*, certainly opens up the possibilities for representing the life of an intellectual; as the film progresses, it opens up the relationship between meaning and life itself—what it means to have a life, to live that life, and what that life means to the surrounding world. Throughout, the film's characters and brightly colored props float against the ever present black backdrop, establishing a sharp contrast to the philosopher's depressive life, darkly colored as it is by death and suicide, in the young Wittgenstein's (Clancy Chassay) opening monologue to the audience.

Because the film itself is a language game, it tells Wittgenstein's life story in the spirit of his linguistic philosophy, but this philosophy is funneled through Jarman's cinematic logic.

¹⁹⁵ Jarman, "At Your Own Risk," 48.

¹⁹⁶ *Wittgenstein* Press Kit, Box 5, Folder 466, Mix Collection, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University, New York.

Wittgenstein (Karl Johnson) is tortured by logic and language; language games become a way to make sense of the way in which meaning is specific to the game in which one is participating. In contrast to traditional portraiture that presents a bounded subject, Jarman's portrait of Wittgenstein is made up of gestures and imagery that often fail to make meaning, or perhaps more accurately that take up space in the slippage of meaning—that place where things almost make sense, but not quite, where a remainder floats and disrupts. The film provides a cinematic logic for lives that do not always add up and for histories that elude us. Colin MacCabe describes the film, "*Wittgenstein* tells the story of a person perpetually ill at ease in his world, from the moneyed Vienna of his youth to the privileged Cambridge of Russell and Keynes. It also tells the story of a philosopher who argued ferociously that you only had one world to live in; there could be no appeal to some criteria by which you could judge this world."¹⁹⁷ *Wittgenstein's* temporality and spatiality directly challenges this notion that the world and one's place in it is immutable. The film's narrative, much like *Caravaggio's*, unfolds as a series of tableaux. Vienna, the school classroom, even the Russian embassy all appear against the same black background, all seeming to function on the same plane. Young Wittgenstein's narration and asides frame the story, but because of the film's spatiality, this "early voice" does not necessarily appear as a flashback; in many ways, the young Wittgenstein's story is layered over and modifies Wittgenstein's adult life story.

Jarman significantly revised Terry Eagleton's script for the film, much to the Eagleton's disappointment, and anger.¹⁹⁸ Jarman's revision of the script turned the emphasis away from

¹⁹⁷ *Wittgenstein*, directed by Derek Jarman (1993; New York: Zeitgeist Films, 2008), DVD.

¹⁹⁸ The dispute over the script and an in-depth analysis of the differences between the two are provided in Michael O'Pray's chapter "Remarks on the Scripts for Derek Jarman's *Wittgenstein*" in the edited collection *Wittgenstein at the Movies: Cinematic Investigations*.

Wittgenstein's academic life, and Eagleton's realist treatment of the philosopher, and recalibrates the film's narration to represent the more tender aspects of the philosopher's life. Jarman's film takes up the position of an outsider attempting to figure out the philosopher's feelings of depression, isolation, and sexual repression. This perspective both performs an identification with Wittgenstein, whose own life baffled him because it could not be explained by logic, and an identification with Jarman, the one tasked with making a portrait of a figure about which he knew very little. This new emphasis on the difficulty of meaning comes most explicitly with the addition of the Martian, a figure who reminds us that any attempt to fully recover the "life" of any person is an investigation into foreign land and continuously filled with barriers to full access and comprehension.

Some of these barriers to comprehension become visualized in its *mise-en-scène*. In her book *Pretty Things*, Rosalind Galt focuses her analysis on Jarman's Super 8 short films to describe how "in these films, color and composition stage an intersection of painterly aesthetics with a cinematic experience of profilmic space."¹⁹⁹ The painterly aesthetic referred to here is based on Jarman's films' connection to and use of surface effects that typically appear in two-dimensional art. The profilmic space, according to Galt, appears to be that of a painting, and yet, it becomes cinematic. In *Wittgenstein*, Jarman develops an excessively colorful, formless aesthetic that, like many of his painting and Super 8 films, emphasizes "the importance of rich, monochromatic color schemes, image layering, and surface effects."²⁰⁰ Taking a closer look at *Wittgenstein*'s emphasis on graphic relations of screen space, many of these effects emerge. Galt roots her analysis in color saturation and formlessness in Jarman's experimental films, and once

¹⁹⁹ Rosalind Galt, *Pretty: Film and the Decorative Image* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 76.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 76.

again, *Wittgenstein* repeats these tropes with amorphous furniture, nauseatingly bright colors, and a lack of clear, formal delineations. The aesthetic that Galt describes involves an opacity that comes with both the dense application of color and a metaphorical elusion of one-to-one meaning. In his introduction to the film, MacCabe explains Jarman's use of such bright colors, stating that the filmmaker's disease had progressed to the point where he was having difficulty distinguishing colors, and "as always, Derek made limitation into possibility."²⁰¹ The possibility here is an aesthetic that mirrors what truly tortured Jarman's Wittgenstein: his failure to master the logic of language, and by extension, the logic of life.

Wittgenstein's ultimate crisis of faith comes when he crosses a street and a group of cyclists gives him a mocking V gesture. He runs to Bertrand and Lady Ottoline, and she informs him that it is a gesture of contempt. Holding up his two fingers in the offending shape, Wittgenstein cries: "What is the logic of this gesture? It doesn't have one!" He decides then to kill himself because he has dedicated his life to philosophy, a hunt for meaning, something that this gesture eludes. As he bemoans the uselessness of his life's pursuits, Lady Ottoline stares back with her face painted in blocks of yellow and blue with Matisse-esque touches; she stands before a solid red canvas with a palette of paint and a brush, but instead of the paint applied to the canvas—in an inversion of painterly logic and an opacity in sympathetic expression—it is applied to her face. She stands in abstract portraiture, functioning as the canvas's subject in another (cinematic) plane. Wittgenstein's spatial separation, as he stands in a separate plane from her painterly body, realizes language's failure to line up with meaning.

²⁰¹ *Wittgenstein* (Special Edition), directed by Derek Jarman (1993; New York, NY: Zeitgeist Films, 2008), DVD.

Jarman released *Blue* shortly after *Wittgenstein* in 1993. *Blue* charts the progression of his disease and loss of sight, as figured by the static blue screen.

This crucial moment in Wittgenstein's biographical retelling conjures Jarman's own personal history as a painter turned filmmaker, a filmmaker who considered himself always a painter first. Jarman's professional life as a painter began with his training at the Slade from 1963-1967 where he worked to refine and combine the aesthetics of minimalism, architectural design, and abstract landscapes that resurfaced throughout his paintings and films in the years that follow.²⁰² His time at Slade gradually immersed Jarman in the gay art world in all its forms, an immersion that became complete when he moved into a warehouse at Upper Ground in London in August 1968. This move "coincided with a fundamental change of artistic career, brought about by a lucky accident which was to lead him to the world of film."²⁰³ While O'Pray attempts to draw a neat dividing line between Jarman the painter and Jarman the filmmaker, with language like "fundamental change," this distinction is something of a false one. Jarman never stopped producing paintings (until his AIDS progressed to the point that he was physically no longer able to paint), alongside his writing of poetry and prose. Jarman's training and practices as a painter resurface in his film work. For instance, his canvas titled *Maternal Nightmare* (1988) serves as an example of one of these later paintings and with its thick application of paint that exposes individual strokes, shattering of the central image and text; the painting looks stunningly similar to the *mise-en-scène* of Jarman's contemporary film, *The Last of England* (1987). Perhaps, Jarman's transition to film is only the addition of a new technology to his artistic vocabulary, and a medium better suited to the representation of life. In *Caravaggio*, the artist expresses his disgust with paintings' inability to capture life, uttering, "All art is against lived experience" and "How can you compare flesh and blood with oil and ground pigment?" Jarman's

²⁰² Michael O'Pray, *Derek Jarman: Dreams of England* (London: British Film Institute, 1996), 40.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 50.

blurring of the boundaries between cinematic and painterly planes in *Caravaggio* and *Wittgenstein* suggests that intermediality offers a more suitable means of expression.

This emphasis on intermediality shifts how queer filmmakers presented encounters with the past, not only transforming an understanding of how film could build connections, but also affecting how queer sensibility aligned with homo pmo, camp, and the like.²⁰⁴ Jarman's cinematic portraits compel us to understand New Queer Cinema as more than a homogenous group of films influenced by postmodern pastiche. While Greyson's and Haynes's postmodern, post-Foucauldian aesthetics transform the biopic in very queer ways, as I discussed in the first chapter, Jarman and Mishory approach the depiction of life from a more affective angle. Like postmodern deconstruction, a portrait does not need to make sense or adhere to the logic of a life story, but unlike pastiche, portraiture is concerned with the affective mechanisms through which we come to understand personhood. A portrait, moreover, implies that there is a painter, someone who is constructing a picture of this person, creating their likeness and, in this case, their cinematic existence. The artist's production comes from an affection toward their subject—an affection that leads one to linger. These portraits are then suspended in time and history for future generations to encounter; they are open to future queer orphans to linger with and learn from, making it possible for queerness to become reborn in each new generation.

²⁰⁴ There is, of course, a reason to position queer cinema's sensibility as a postmodern one, and there are scholars and films that supports these readings, but I argue against using it as the only way to talk about queer cinema.

3.5 EDWARD II'S QUEER REBIRTH

Caravaggio begins with the artist's death, but one could easily miss that it also begins with a meditation on his lifelong friendship and mentorship with Jerusaleme (Spencer Leigh). Despite the proliferation of homoerotic entanglements that Jarman's film brings from Caravaggio's canvas to his onscreen portrayal, this intimate relationship stands as the most significant for Caravaggio as he lies on his deathbed. This relationship punctuates the artist's life story, as told by Jarman, and the film's opening emphasizes this point; as the film shows Caravaggio on his deathbed, it cuts to a flashback revealing the artist purchasing the small child Jerusaleme. Shortly after Caravaggio brings the child home, the camera frames the two seated, in an embrace that evokes Madonna and Child iconography.²⁰⁵ The light streaming in through the window creates a halo of light around their faces, emphasizing the religious iconography and highlighting the sensuality of their relationship. Put another way, the mother-child imagery of this scene evokes the mother-child dyad in which mother and baby communicate outside of language, through a corporeal, sensual language.²⁰⁶ However, their dyad also mirrors the film's dyadic relationship between cinema and painting, suggesting that it is through sensual means of relation that queer legacy comes to life. The film draws on both portraiture and cinema to produce a teaching text, a way of learning about queer genealogy. The intimate mentoring of Jerusaleme by Caravaggio (which parallels Caravaggio's relationship with Pasqualone) serves as a sort a literalization of what queer films like *Caravaggio* can do for children like Mishory who need a model for how to

²⁰⁵ Caravaggio's fraught relationship with the Church structures the film, and as such, this iconography takes on greater meaning in the context of his assigned promotion of Catholicism. Moreover, Jarman plays with the ways in which Caravaggio's work injects Christian iconography with homoerotic desire.

²⁰⁶ I am referencing Julia Kristeva's theorization of the mother-child dyad in her opposition of the semiotic and symbolic order.

live a life with queerness at its center. The children of Jarman's films follow an uneasy trajectory. Jerusaleme is by all accounts an orphan, and even after his adoption, his inability to hear continues to isolate him from the world. And yet, Jarman's films are something of a guidebook for the queer child, for the child who feels isolated from the world around them.²⁰⁷

The biopic is the ideal genre for depicting a coming-of-age story, as the genre is ostensibly about watching an important individual learn to be in the world. The biopic's early use in elementary school classrooms reiterates its utility as a childhood teaching device.²⁰⁸ Marcia Landy, however, explains the biopic's formal preoccupation with childhood by observing, "the biopic often chooses to begin with the childhood of its subject, and the trajectory from childhood to maturity can serve a number of purposes. It can anticipate the destiny that the subject will realize. It can foreshadow the inevitable obstacles that stand in the way of that realization."²⁰⁹ The queer child, though, follows a different trajectory than the conventional biopic figure, a trajectory laden with the insidious traumas of being different. Insidious trauma, defined by Ann Cvetkovich as the everyday traumas that shape queer subjectivity, "puts pressure on conventional forms of documentation, representation, and commemoration, giving rise to new genres of expression, such as testimony, and new forms of monuments, rituals, and performances that can call into being collective witnesses and publics."²¹⁰ Insidious trauma shares the affects of queer melancholia, and further supports the notion that conventional biopic presentation is not

²⁰⁷ My thinking about the queer child is deeply informed by both Ellis Hanson's and Kathryn Bond Stockton's work on the subject.

²⁰⁸ See note 339 in Chapter Five for a more detailed discussion of the biopic's use in public school classrooms.

²⁰⁹ Marcia Landy, *Cinematic Uses of the Past* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 176.

²¹⁰ Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 7.

capable of representing the queer child's self-realization. Young Ludwig's life is structured by his family's coldness and his repeated suicide attempts—he maintains his childhood joy in spite of these conditions, but they manifest in his adult life, where he struggles with his sexuality that resists his understanding.

O'Pray, speaking of Jarman's last fully-realized film, *Wittgenstein* (1993), remarks, "It would seem that there was some need on Jarman's part for the child to peruse and accompany his future life as a man, right to its final moments, as if to make it all of a piece."²¹¹ It is the joyous Young Ludwig who accompanies the viewer up until Wittgenstein's eventual death. The film provides a reconciliation of sorts for the tormented philosopher who feels like an outsider in his own life, in much the same way that Mishory's *Delphinium* provides a reparative function for the adult Jarman who felt alienated from his repressed childhood. Mishory's film confers a continuity to Jarman's life, but the film also further demands an investigation into Jarman's onscreen children. O'Pray locates Jarman's growing interest in children and connections between childhood and adulthood after his HIV-positive diagnosis, but a look into Jarman's other work shows a continued interest in queer childhood, an abiding preoccupation with queer continuity and the ways children learn to be in the world.²¹²

²¹¹ Michael O'Pray, "Remarks on the Scripts for Derek Jarman's *Wittgenstein*," *Wittgenstein at the Movies: Cinematic Investigations*, ed. Béla Szabados and Christina Stojanova (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2011), 39.

While Jarman would go on to produce *Blue* shortly after *Wittgenstein*, many count the latter as his last film, as it was the last one produced with a full cast and film set. Given how reliant Jarman's films were on the collaborative work of the crew in front of and behind the camera, this distinction makes a certain amount of sense.

²¹² O'Pray's "Remarks on the Scripts for Derek Jarman's *Wittgenstein*" mentions that Jarman's growing interest in autobiography begins to become more explicit in his work after his diagnosis, or after *The Last of England*. Dennis Cooper's "The Queer King" also discusses the overlap between Jarman's life and his portrayal of Edward II: "In Jarman's 'improved' version, King Edward is targeted for an intragovernmental coup because of his flagrant homosexuality and is

Jerusalem and Caravaggio's dyad becomes repeated in Jarman's *Edward II* (1991) through the pairing of Edward II and his son, the future Edward III. The film takes an anachronistic, punk-inflected approach to Christopher Marlowe's famous drama. Jarman's approach to the 1594 play by the same name makes Edward II and Gaveston's (Andrew Tiernan) homoerotic relationship explicit.²¹³ Jarman's film re-centers the original play's narrative to place Edward II's queerness at the film's center, and even more strikingly, the film integrates the AIDS crisis and 1991 queer activism into the film's diegetic world. The smear campaign launched against Edward II in the name of his relationship with Gaveston mirrors the mainstream media's and moralistic society's condemnation of gays and lesbians during the AIDS crisis. The film, in one scene, includes a 1991 date on a royal proclamation and the king's army is not so much a military army but a band of queer activist protestors. Preparations for *Edward II*'s production overlapped with Jarman's discovery of his HIV-positive status, and the film not only radicalizes queer identity and biography, but it also suggests the circularity of queer experience itself. In many ways, it is unclear whether the film brings the present moment into Edward II's temporal location or Edward II into Jarman's present, but truthfully, neither of these frameworks seems adequate to describe the film's anachronism. Instead of a simple injection of the present into the past (or vice versa), the film suggests an overlapping and continuation of queerness that becomes visualized and embodied at the film's close.

At the film's end, as Edward II awaits his final fate, a kiss from his would-be assassin cuts to a future Edward seated atop the throne in his jewel-encrusted crown. The child is the future

defended against a mutinous army—represented as riot-gear police officers—by the real-life Outrage.”

²¹³ The Shakespeare Theatre Company's 2007 version of the original play made the sexual relationship with Edward II and Gaveston explicit and much more at the play's center.

Edward III, the child of Edward II and his rejected-turned-vengeful wife Isabella (Tilda Swinton). Edward II's desire for Gaveston serves as the catalyst for both his kingdom's destruction, and Isabella's desire for revenge and ultimate power; yet, the film ends with the revelation that the kingdom's future is queer.²¹⁴ The image of the boy's projected future as king quickly cuts to a shot of the child adorned in his mother's earrings, lipstick, and glittered high heels. He is first simply shown in medium close-up dancing to the music coming through his headphones, but the camera pans down to reveal that the small child is, in fact, dancing on top of the cage imprisoning his mother and her lover/co-conspirator Mortimer. The queerly-aligned child thus overthrows vengeful heterosexuality, and his delight is evidence of his ascension to power. A joyously clapping Edward III fades to the film's last shot; with Edward II's voiceover narrating his uncertainty about whether he will live or die, the camera pans over a frozen army of protestors with T-shirts and signs emblazoned with slogans like "Queer as Fuck" and "Gay Desire Is Not a Crime." This final shot takes a contemporary audience back to 1991, or at least to an Edward-II-inflected 1991, and reminds them of the film's AIDS crisis context. During the epidemic, a time when the imminent death of the director was likely, Jarman's *Edward II* ends with the optimism of a queer renewal figured through the jubilant Edward III.

²¹⁴ Unlike Edelman's critique of futurity in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004), other queer scholars like José Esteban Muñoz, in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009) have used the concept of the future for imagining queer possibility.

3.6 JARMAN AND RUSSELL'S COLLABORATION

Jarman's *Edward III* marks a certain form of futurity, but this futurity is far from dominant culture's hopes and dreams sang in the name of the hypothetical child.²¹⁵ In other words, the queer child ensures the passing of knowledge and sensibility. The child forms a link between generations, and represents a necessary phase that each must go through to become queer. In his own film career's adolescence, Mishory captures Derek Jarman's self-discovery: the birth of the artist who would go on to change the world. What Mishory's film demonstrates, like the ending of *Edward II*, is that although one may be "born this way," one must become queer. And furthermore, the process of queer art-making performs a process of becoming for not only the artist, but for generations to come. The cinematic medium makes intergenerational connection and conversation possible in instances where history, temporality, and death would have otherwise stood in the way. Tilda Swinton, in an interview included in the features of the *Wittgenstein* DVD, explains that she and Jarman never worried about box office numbers or their films finding an audience upon theatrical release. She clarifies that they understood the films' potential for legacy building and as such, the audience would continue to build as the years passed.²¹⁶ The films would find their audience as generations of viewers passed on their knowledge and younger generations sought to discover images of their queer past.

Jarman's own filmmaking career cannot be thought outside of the framework of queer mentorship; he got his start working on set for Ken Russell's films. Jarman's first experience with feature-length (as opposed to Super 8 experimental) film came with his work on the set

²¹⁵ I am referring to Lee Edelman's critique of futurity, a heteronormative impulse to claim the future for the figure of the child, in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004).

²¹⁶ *Wittgenstein*, DVD.

design for Russell's *The Devils* (1971), quickly followed by their second collaboration in *Savage Messiah* (1972).²¹⁷ *Savage Messiah* carries a different color palette, a warmth and unexpected starkness that one does not find in many of Russell's other works, leaving Jarman's signature on the film (a signature that would only later become identifiable from Jarman's own film work). Jarman reflects on these experiences in interview footage included in *Derek*, positioning them as crucial to his development as a filmmaker and to his learning how to go about making a larger film, including how to execute a larger artistic vision while managing a production crew. Beyond the example of technical expertise, Russell's move to recuperate and/or retell the biographies of Tchaikovsky, Wilde, and Valentino resurfaces in Jarman's turn to Caravaggio, Edward II, and Ludwig Wittgenstein.²¹⁸ Jarman's work to reclaim and retell the stories of the past presumed to be past and over, but this work began in his collaboration with Russell. Jarman left his signature on Russell's films, and it was through their mutual interests in taking back queer legacies that Jarman came into his own as a filmmaker. Jarman's films assert that the work of reclamation is never done, even if it means going back some four hundred years, as in the case of *Caravaggio*.

The trick to understanding Jarman's films, according to writer and critic Dennis Cooper, "was to accept the films' strange imbalances and pretensions, lags and lurches, as what naturally

²¹⁷ *Savage Messiah* is a biopic of French sculptor Henri Gaudier-Brzeska and was marked by critics like Robert Phillip Kolker as a departure from Russell's excessive aesthetics. Possibly because Russell worked with Jarman on the film, the colors are much more subdued, the sets more realistic and minimalist, and the plot more coherent. The film, however, retains Russell's emphasis on the Gaudier-Brzeska's work and his efforts to construct a film world that emerges as a result of the biopic subject's work.

Robert Phillip Kolker, "Ken Russell's Biopics: Grandeur and Gaudier," *Film Comment* 9, no. 3 (1973): 42-45.

²¹⁸ Ken Russell's biopic films, prior to New Queer Cinema's homo pmo, represent queerness and the life of an individual in a manner that does not insist on a neat narrative of sexuality, identity, and life trajectory. Russell's *Salome's Last Dance* (1988), with its camp aesthetics and scrambling of Wilde's biography into a garish performance of *Salome*, stands as a clear contemporary to the films of John Greyson and the like.

happens when an artist has had to wrest his material from countless years of heterosexual ownership.”²¹⁹ The wrest that Cooper describes, with its “lags and lurches,” cannot make sense according to chromonormativity and resulting chronological narrative structures characteristic of genres like the biopic. However, this wrestling from heterosexual ownership that Cooper associates with Jarman did not necessarily begin with Jarman’s films, since it notably appears in the works of his predecessor and mentor, Ken Russell. In Russell’s *The Music Lovers* (1970), for instance, Tchaikovsky’s same sex desires (and encounters) of the past constitute a sexual history that must be disavowed or moved on from for the promise of stable heterosexual coupling. And yet, that history can never fully be part of the past since its moments continually pierce through the present’s surface. The threat of his sexuality’s exposure (in scenes such as traumatic consummation of the marriage during the honeymoon) leads to frenetic editing, disorientating camerawork, and flashes of color and light, suggesting the “feminine” sensibility of his music that disrupts, triggers, and moves its listeners. Tchaikovsky’s same-sex desire’s resurfacing disrupts the flow of narrative telos and by extension, monumental history’s telling, but these moments of disruption do more than simply puncture; they position his sexual history as mobile—able to move, to move others through his music, effectively changing heteronormative trajectories.

Queerness lurks and smoulders underneath an image owned by heteronormative dominant culture, threatening to render that image unrecognizable. Jarman’s films use this residual queerness as their starting point to re-present lives that “make just enough sense.” And for whom should Jarman’s films make sense? Cooper talks about the trick of wresting biography and history from heterosexual ownership, but he stops short of what appears to me the real

²¹⁹ “The Queer King,” Dennis Cooper Papers.

question, which is the shift in intended audience that comes with reclamation. Jarman's films no longer need to make sense for mainstream (heterosexual) audiences. He creates a film language that reflects both queer life experience and queers' melancholic identification with figures of the past. Again in Jarman's own words, "an honest film, like an honest life, makes just enough sense on the surface to survive in a largely idiotic world." Jarman's, and other queer filmmakers,' use of the biopic aides in this "making of just enough sense" in that the genre provides a formula or shorthand for the representation of a life; the biopic offers a long-recognized form used to generate life stories that add up according to (heteronormative) hegemonic ways of living and being. But what their use of the biopic demonstrates is the genre's openness for depicting queer lives in a world where certain lives make more sense than others.

3.7 INHERITED SENSIBILITY AND INTERGENERATIONAL CONVERSATION

I end this chapter recognizing its odd development, beginning with Mishory to work through Jarman, only to close with a move backward to Russell. I am working to understand this refiguring of history as a queer approach to historiography, and to understanding and feeling figures of the past differently. Throughout the dissertation, I demonstrate that queer approaches to the past and biographical representation extend out from the AIDS crisis as a specific historical moment. And this approach carries more affective baggage than is captured by the label of "homo pomo" for New Queer Cinema's irreverence. Moreover, I understand this feeling the past as a queer legacy of filmmakers beginning with disparate works of Barbara Hammer and Ken Russell in the 1970s, becoming refined in the New Queer Cinema of the late 80s and early

90s, and continuing with filmmakers like Mishory who reach back to the past in order to bring it to vision differently. The 1970s pre-AIDS-crisis period represented a time of sexual liberation, visions of queer utopia, and a fluidity of community and self-definition.²²⁰ This rather naïve world of sexual freedom would, of course, come crashing down with the dawn of the HIV virus and backlash from the Christian right; and in this way, the 1970s forms an important backdrop for understanding queer looks back during the crisis. This 1970s backdrop further accounts for the transition in queer filmmaking around the time of the AIDS crisis—filmmaking became a political act and film festivals a place for queer publics formation. Queer film festivals represented a form of respite in which to imagine this type of queer public again, as well as a place to queerly return to life histories past.

Queer desires for history were hardly a phenomenon beginning with or specific to the AIDS crisis, but these desires took on a particular affective valance during these years. Mishory's and Jarman's films are created from this desire to go back and awaken a past posed for queer encounter. Lynne Tillman's review of *Caravaggio* reminds readers that it begins with the artist's death.²²¹ She continues, "As Jarman himself puts it, in an interview with *Afterimage*, an English film magazine, 'the past does not exist. It is what we interpret.'" ²²² For Tillman, Jarman's statement about the past's nonexistence indicates that the past is dead and thus open to revision. However, I would counter her reading with two things: first, the film does not begin with Caravaggio's death, but with Caravaggio on his deathbed anticipating the end of his life in

²²⁰ Turns back to the 1970s politics and aesthetics help articulate hope for a better gay future in desperate and bleak political moments, such as our current one. The 1970s articulated a range of expressions—sexual, political, and creative—and created a moment for revolutionary, maybe even utopic, feminist and queer thought.

²²¹ "Review of Derek Jarman's *Caravaggio*," Box 28, Folder 5, Lynne Tillman Papers, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University, New York.

²²² Ibid.

an internal monologue; second, I read Jarman's insistence "the past does not exist" as an insistence that the past is never dead; there is never such a rigid distinction between histories that are gone and dead and a present moment that is alive and breathing. *Caravaggio* exemplifies Jarman's ongoing relationship with a living, breathing "past." In beginning with the painter's impending death, the film frames the story as a look back at the artist's life; each production of Caravaggio's paintings brings his work's queer quivers to the fore. As such, the film neither recoups nor recreates history, but instead, it refigures our relationship to the past; the past becomes something we can re-encounter and get to know anew.

Queer filmmakers' reaches back into the past defy the rules of heteronormative genealogy and temporality; equally so, they defy the normative trajectory of mourning. Queers' desire to allow history to live in the present melancholically incorporates queers of the past into the community of the present. Similarly, portraits of figures like Jarman, Caravaggio, Wittgenstein, and Edward II create a living, breathing cinematic record of their person, and preserve their story for future generations. Their preservation thus provides a tool of education, a means for queers to understand their genealogy and inherited sensibility. Portraiture, by definition, involves a capturing of the *personal*, and the biopic, by film scholars' definition, involves a desire to go back and encounter fascinating figures of the past. Queer filmmakers' cooption of the biopic genre thus allows for the creation of *personal histories* that have the ability to disrupt and challenge monumental, or dominant, history. Queers do not have to accept the world within which they were born and by recourse to the past, they can learn to become something or someone else. Ultimately what Mishory's, Jarman's, and Russell's films tell us is that history is history is a living text open to revision and transformation. And not only is it open to revision, it is through this process of revision that history becomes open to habitation.

4.0 THE PERSONAL IS ARCHIVAL: BARBARA HAMMER AND ELISABETH SUBRIN MINE FEMINIST HISTORY

“[Feminism’s] two figurations of temporality—the obsolescent and the ghost—suggest first of all, that feminism should think radically about configurations of time, resisting (as, indeed, has often been argued before) the chronological and the linear that are blind to the persistence of the past in the present.”²²³

--Laura Mulvey

Throughout the previous chapters, I argue that queer filmmakers’ biopics are tied to the queer body politics of the AIDS crisis moment—a politics rooted in the material experience, regulation, and care of bodies. Yet, this approach to the body as the site for political thought and action did not emerge during the epidemic, but rather, body politics began decades before with second-wave-feminist filmmaking and theory. In this chapter, I look to Elisabeth Subrin’s and Barbara Hammer’s cinematic modes of archiving to demonstrate that while they may be distinctly feminist, they are not separate from the queer politics of the AIDS crisis. In fact, I assert that this mode of filmmaking, one of feminist body politics, represents an important AIDS crisis history that is excluded from dominant historical narratives that focus on New Queer Cinema’s canonical (male) films. And further, Hammer’s approach to representing the personal as political laid the foundation for the queer filmmakers and biopics that would come to define

²²³ Laura Mulvey, “Introduction: 1970s Feminist Film Theory and the Obsolescent Object,” in *Feminisms: Diversity, Difference and Multiplicity in Contemporary Film Cultures*, ed. Laura Mulvey and Anna Backman Rogers (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015), 19.

New Queer Cinema. Hammer's experimental shorts produced in the midst of the epidemic refigured how the infected body could be represented and the crisis re-visualized. Like Stuart Marshall, John Greyson, and other artists that defined queer activists' response to the AIDS crisis, Hammer engages with medicalized discourses of the body and occupies spaces of medical treatment and evaluation. Her films exemplify the way in which the HIV virus invoked Western culture's preoccupations with life and death, definitions of personhood, and the cinema's enduring entanglement with medical science's observation of the human body. During the crisis, her work became more experimental, less lyrical, and less focused on the body as a site of pleasure and more focused on the body as site of physical vulnerability.²²⁴

As part of the Collective for Living Cinema, Barbara Hammer's work functions within a broader queer assertion that the past is not dead, and films from the cells of history interact with the present moment. Collective for Living Cinema was part of a moment in which filmmakers, activists, and artists were rethinking the purpose of film and their relationship to film history.²²⁵ By repurposing film for the concerns of the present moment, cinema once again became a *living*, breathing organism that invaded the present moment and acted on it; this approach to cinema of the past both predated and later functioned alongside the theoretical impulses and films that

²²⁴ Hammer's interest in the bodies a site of vulnerability and consolidation of medical discourses presents a sort of return to the physical body. Claudia Gorbman's *Jump Cut* piece titled "Barbara Hammer's recent work: Body displaced, body discovered." Gorbman focuses on Hammer's 1980-84s shorts such as *Bent Time*, *Stone Circles*, and *Our Trip* displace the body in favor of light abstraction and meditations on the act of seeing itself. This move toward abstraction breaks away from Hammer's 1970s shorts that worked to reframe or restage the lesbian body through a new aesthetics.

²²⁵ In Tom Gunning's "Looking Backward: Ken Jacobs Presents the Past," included in *10 Years of Living Cinema*, he states that no other filmmaker, though others like Dziga Vertov and Jonas Mekas have tried, have explored the pastness of cinema as pointedly as Ken Jacobs. Gunning's argument is particularly related to the concerns of Hammer's films because he discusses the way in which Jacobs deals with found footage as the source material for his films.

launched New Queer Cinema. Barbara Hammer, as part of the Collective, was one of many filmmakers at the time to look back to film history, to films that could teach something in the present moment.²²⁶ The films spanning the pages *10 Years of Living Cinema*, the catalog for the collective's retrospective exhibition illustrate the collective's concern for both film as a living medium that can be transformed and transform lives on screen.²²⁷ These films are often autobiographical, and many explore concepts of life and what it means to live a life. They deploy found footage in newly thought ways, giving life to obsolescent or forgotten reels of film. The Collective's dual commitment to recording life and archiving unseen footage serves as sort of bridge between Hammer's pre-, during-, and post-AIDS crisis films. More specifically, the body politics of Hammer's AIDS crisis videos do not represent a break from Hammer's early films, but instead mark a political transformation.²²⁸ Hammer's *Sanctus* (1990) screened with the Collective for Living Cinema with the teaser that the film "Premieres with Dr. Watson's X-Rays."²²⁹ *Sanctus* marks the filmmaker's transition from archiving the lives of individual women and lesbian culture in the 1970s to archiving science's construction of life and bodies. Her AIDS crisis cinema evidences, even more so, that Hammer's investigations into individual lives can never exist separately from Western notions of life itself.

²²⁶ In the Collective for Living Cinema Hammer screened work alongside the experimental and avant-garde work of those such as Nan Goldin, Yvonne Rainer, Warren Sonbert, Paul Sharits, and Wayne Wang.

²²⁷ Collective for Living Cinema, *10 Years of Living Cinema* (New York: Collective for Living Cinema, 1982).

²²⁸ Hammer positions these films as a series on her website, with *Sanctus* serving as the exemplifying film.

Barbara Hammer, "Sanctus," Barbara Hammer, accessed August 27, 2017, <http://barbarahammer.com/films/sanctus/>.

²²⁹ Collective for Living Cinema Postcards, Box 33, Folder 1502, Mix Collection, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University, New York.

Sanctus performs the type of archival search that informs and becomes visually figured in Hammer's later films such as *Maya Deren's Sink* (2011), *Nitrate Kisses* (1992), and *Welcome to This House* (2015), and yet, those archival finds are employed for a different objective. Hammer "discovered" Watson's footage of moving X-rays in an unopened container of 35mm film while searching around the George Eastman House.²³⁰ The filmmaker locates history in this previously ignored archive, and the history she tells specifies a different interest in the body than traditional radiography and medical observation. *Sanctus* looks inside of the skeletal system in motion to see deeper into the human body. But the film brings this look inside to the present of AIDS crisis: "Using moving X-rays by James Sibley Watson to underline the fragile body during an age of immune system dysfunctions."²³¹ Hammer describes the film as a conceptual reworking of Watson's original:

Carefully holding the negative roll to the light I saw a human skeleton. I had to get my hands on this film. I learned that Dr. James Sibley Watson had, with his colleagues, invented cineradiography in the 50s. I was able to rework his original film to portray body in need of protection on a polluted planet where immune system disorders and cancer proliferate.²³²

Instead of penetrating the life, the biography, of an individual person, the X-ray footage penetrates the body below its fleshy surface and attempt to reveal a biological truth. The program notes from the 1991 New York Lesbian and Gay Experimental Film Festival (NYLGEFF) for

²³⁰ Hammer describes the process of finding the footage at the George Eastman House in Rochester, NY, and her subsequent process of looking into Watson's personal history, in more detail in her autobiography *Hammer!*. However, while Hammer presents a narrative of discovery, she is obviously not the first to have looked at the material; after all, someone before her must have found the material worth placing in an archive.

²³¹ 1991 Festival Program, Box 3, Folder 233, Mix Collection, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University, New York.

²³² Barbara Hammer, *Hammer!: Making Movies Out of Sex and Life* (New York: The Feminist Press, 2010), 208.

Sanctus read: “The fact that the use of radiation to make the images can both help to cure and to provoke disease gives a double-edged reading to the images and stimulates questions of the medical spectacle.”²³³ In its representation of life, cinema has this same sort of double-edged potential. Cinema makes images of queer bodies visible, but the way in which those bodies are rendered cannot be controlled. Sheer visibility of queers does not ensure politically productive visibility, and the physically vulnerable HIV-positive body also becomes vulnerable to stigmatizing medical and cinematic gazes.

In Ara Osterweil in “A Body Is Not a Metaphor: Barbara Hammer’s X-Ray Vision,” she argues that Hammer be seen as more than a “lesbian filmmaker,” by turning an eye to the way in which Hammer takes up the sick or diseased body in her AIDS crisis films. Osterweil goes on to explain how Hammer’s position as someone not ensnared in the regime of heterosexuality allows her to view dominant culture from a distance, or from the position of an outsider. She writes, “Hammer’s identity as a lesbian feminist activist has enabled her to see the body—and its fraught construction across contradicting regimes of power and pleasure—with a kind of X-ray vision.”²³⁴ However, Osterweil continues to elaborate, “By using the body in all of its stages as her primary artistic tool, Hammer has created a corpus of work that exceeds the fraught category of ‘lesbian filmmaker.’”²³⁵ Essentially, Osterweil argues that Hammer’s cinema performs queer work that exceeds her identity as a lesbian. Understanding Hammer’s work as queer practice illuminates the way in which queerness exceeds admittedly limiting categories like lesbian filmmaker—queerness does work that cannot be described by an identity label. But what this

²³³ Ibid.

²³⁴ Ara Osterweil, “A Body Is Not a Metaphor: Barbara Hammer’s X-Ray Vision,” *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 14, no. 2-3 (2010): 186.

²³⁵ Ibid., 198.

quick dismissal of lesbian identification misses is the strategic reasons why Hammer might claim lesbian as an identity category. The trouble with Osterweil's analysis of Hammer's work is that she views Hammer's claim to lesbian identity as somehow antithetical to the filmmaker's profound explorations of the body in works like *Sanctus* and *A Horse is Not a Metaphor* (2008). *A Horse is Not a Metaphor* reaches across both autobiography and investigations into the body under medical observation to demonstrate that these are not separate preoccupations in Hammer's work, but two practices that intimately inform each other. Hammer interrogates her own life, and the identity category of lesbian, in much the same way that she interrogates Western understandings of the body.

Hammer's critique of something as overdetermined (and scientifically coded) as medicalized bodies positions her as part of a larger queer response to the AIDS crisis. Hammer's AIDS crisis media appeared alongside those filmmakers who defined New Queer Cinema, such as John Greyson and Todd Haynes, at queer film festivals like MIX NYC. Her first film in the series, *Snow Job: The Media Hysteria of AIDS* (1986), tackles the media's AIDS discourses early on in the crisis, flashing phrases like "Deadly Virus of Hate," "AIDS tattoo," and "Identify all the carriers." Hammer gathers an archive of AIDS media, and then refigures it in such a way that its true intentions are revealed: the bombardment of panic signifiers mirrors the very hysteria Hammer seeks to expose. The accumulation of hate, death, and prejudice exposes the truth that lurks beneath such headlines. A year after *Sanctus*, Hammer created *Vital Signs* (1991), a film that "employs images and text to intervene in the Western constructions of death."²³⁶ *Vital Signs* exemplifies the mutually informing modalities of Hammer's filmmaking process. The program

²³⁶ 1991 Program Notes, Mix Collection, Box 3, Folder 315, Mix Collection, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University, New York.

notes from the 1992 NYLGEFF note: “Hammer personally interacts and relates with a skeleton as scenes from Resnais’ HIROSHIMA MON AMOUR, and text from Foucault’s BIRTH OF A CLINIC, are intercut with a hospital Intensive Care Unit.”²³⁷ In doing so, the film demonstrates how Hammer positions her interests in (auto)biography and the medicalized body as intertwined with Western modes of representation, philosophical writing, and film history.

Hammer’s films, from her AIDS crisis experimental shorts to her feature-length biographies, frequently foreground her identity as a lesbian, but what they enact is queer practice. The X-ray vision Osterweil attaches to Hammer’s work may well be described as an ability to see through dominant narratives of life, history, and life histories. *Sanctus* probes the body, along with cinema’s implication in medical science’s long history of doing just that, but Hammer’s investigation into how we see the body does not exist separately from her investigation into biographical history. *Sanctus*’s X-ray vision into the subject, its looking past the woman’s flesh to her skeletal system, in many ways also mocks Western notions of bodily truth through the skeleton’s admiration of her reflection in a compact and lipstick application. Unlike medical cinematic devices that seek to record a truthful picture of the body, Hammer’s film affirms that this look inside the body is just as culturally mediated as any other—caught up in ideologies of gender and voyeuristic ways of seeing.

Just as medical imaging purports to offer biological truth, the biopic purports to offer a truthful investigation into (a) life. The film suggests that sources have been consulted, archives visited, and the images that appear on screen are the result of meticulous research. In doing so, they imply that their archives present a knowable and transparent truth, and that the narrative the film gives the archival materials follows suit. Queer filmmakers’ use of the archive and their re-

²³⁷ Ibid.

presentation of it question this neat narrative of truth. Pointing to the film *The Watermelon Woman* (Cheryl Dunye, 1996) and the video *Not Just Passing Through* (Jean Carlomusto, Dolores Pérez, Catherine Gund, and Polly Thistlethwaite, 1994), Ann Cvetkovich draws attention to how lesbian filmmakers make the archive itself visible. She explains, “One of the ways that documentary film and video expands the lesbian archive is by documenting the archive itself.”²³⁸ While *Not Just Passing Through* documents the real Lesbian Herstory Archives (LHA), *The Watermelon Woman* creates new ones. But what appears even more interesting about Cvetkovich’s piece is that this real/not real distinction does not change how she discusses the two films. One film is clearly a traditional documentary while one is a convincing faux, but their archives appear equally real. And maybe what this tells us is that the archive materials themselves may not be as important as the act of turning back in history to learn from the past, ...even if that past is a made-up one.

In Tom Kalin’s *They are Lost to Vision Altogether* (1989), he claims that queer cinema “finds queer history where it can and invents the rest.”²³⁹ Queer cinema brings to vision memories and experiences that have been omitted from history. It searches through the archive for ignored bits, and when it cannot find archival material to speak to those experiences, they will be recreated in such a way that speaks to their emotional truth. Hammer digs for the truth, sometimes stumbles upon it, and sometimes steals it. This mode of historiography is

²³⁸ Ann Cvetkovich, “In the Archives of Lesbian Feelings and Popular Culture,” *Camera Obscura* 17, no. 1 (2002): 114.

²³⁹ Kalin writes, “*They are lost to vision altogether* acts as erotic retaliation on legislation such as the Supreme Court sodomy ruling—declaring the private bedroom as open target for the State—or the Helms Amendment—the U.S. government’s refusal to fund explicit AIDS prevention information for gay men, lesbians, and IV drug users.”

Tom Kalin, “They are lost to vision altogether,” *Electronic Arts Intermix*, accessed August 30, 2017, <https://www.eai.org/titles/they-are-lost-to-vision-altogether>.

investigative, but it also relies on chance and the uncertainty of an archive's contents. In other words, her method of history making is not prescriptive; her films do not bring a narrative to her "evidence," but instead allow her discoveries to take history in a different direction. Maya Deren's *sink* presents one of the most untraditional of archives, and yet the historical narrative that emerges raises questions about what one can gather from even the most unlikely of materials. If Maya Deren's *sink* can speak to Hammer, what else can speak? Barbara Hammer's and Elisabeth Subrin's films, discussed in the second half of this chapter, work to offer a feminist and queer archive that looks in places previous historiographers have ignored. Together, their films ensure that there will be resources for women and girls of the future who need them, need to feel their history, and they provide resources for further exploration in the films of Maya Deren, the photographs of Francesca Woodman, the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop, and the feminist theory of Shulamith Firestone.

4.1 DEALING WITH LESBIAN ABSENCE

The long-awaited release of *Carol* (2015), Todd Haynes's adaptation of Patricia Highsmith's 1952 novel *The Price of Salt*, sparked innumerable conversations about the current state of queer cinema and queer representation. On its surface, *Carol* easily reads as a period piece about the difficulties of queer desire in the early 1950s, and could appear to easily fall in line with other turns back to the gay past in films like *The Imitation Game* (Morten Tyldum, 2014), *Milk* (Gus Van Sant, 2008), and *Brokeback Mountain* (Ang Lee, 2005). Without question, queer cinema has a thing for the past, and in many ways, it is easy to see why. Historical films perform both acts of recovery, in that they seek to tell a history that dominant narratives occlude, but, to paraphrase

Heather Love, these films also often return to the oppressive gay past to assure the public of progress and brighter queer future.²⁴⁰ And yet, while *Carol* can appear to be placed in a trend of films like *Milk* that turn back to the bad gay past in order to energize efforts like the Human Rights Campaign of the contemporary moment, Haynes's film takes up a much more complicated relationship to history and biography. Haynes oeuvre demonstrates his longtime interest in looking back to the past in order to investigate past social and identity formations that shape the way individuals build a life in their given present.²⁴¹ *Velvet Goldmine* (1998) frames itself as an investigation into the life and death of the glam rock icon Brian Slade, modeled after glam icon David Bowie, who shaped reporter Arthur Stuart's (Christian Bale) childhood self-discovery.²⁴² But before the film turns back to the 1970s, it goes back to the mid-1800s and begins with extra-terrestrials leaving an infant (presumed to be) Oscar Wilde on an unsuspecting family's doorstep. In turning back to Wilde's childhood, *Velvet Goldmine* stages its concern with questions of emulation and the historical passing of queer sensibility, but it also thwarts a search for queer origin. The film's return to the Victorian era suggests that queer genealogy begins in the space of the unknown; queers' past life exists on planet to which we can never access but can only imagine.

With *Carol*, the film's historical project at first appears to be one of telling personal history. Cate Blanchett serves as the enigmatic face of Carol, her face taunting the spectator with

²⁴⁰ Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 31-52.

²⁴¹ Patricia White notes how Haynes goes back to the past repeatedly in his work and "has yet to set a film unambiguously in the present."

Patricia White, "Sketchy Lesbians: Carol as History and Fantasy," *Film Quarterly* 69, no. 2 (2016): 10.

²⁴² Haynes sought to make a David Bowie biopic, but after he could not get the rights, he imagined the character of Brian Slade.

a potential site for identification; the audience longs to be close to Carol, to understand her life, but they hit nothing but barriers to their desired closeness. The film's recourse to the personal is not self-evident. The diegetic world's repressive forces, its sleek interiors of 1950s domesticity and silencing of Carol's desire, mediate our access to the protagonist's life. *Carol's* glossy surfaces and foggy windows affirm that nothing in the film is transparent; each surface cloaks its subject much like Carol's sumptuous wardrobe. But this biographical masking remains true to the film's source material, *The Price of Salt*, and poses the impossibility of ever accessing what it was like to (attempt to) live a lesbian life in 1950s America.

Haynes's film is not the first time a queer filmmaker has borrowed from Patricia Highsmith's writing; Tom Kalin cites Highsmith in his collection of short videos *Third Known Nest*.²⁴³ Her writing appears in a short titled *TWO (Patricia Highsmith)*, as her sentences flash across the screen one word at a time: "It is curious that in the most important periods of one's life, one never keeps a diary/And what a loss, if one intends to keep an honest history at all." In giving the piece the writer's name as a second title, Kalin suggests that the short pays homage to the writer, a point made clearer by the other numbered interludes in the collection named after gay figures, including Derek Jarman, Oscar Wilde, and James Baldwin. For Kalin, the most accurate memorialization of figures such as Highsmith and Wilde comes through a (re)presentation of their work. But more importantly, the selected Highsmith quotations raise questions about how best to tell history—whether it is personal, biographical, or queer. Highsmith's own writing, particularly the *Price of Salt* (1952), has been read as not only

²⁴³ Kalin's *Third Known Nest* provides a portrait of the 1990s AIDS crisis and queer activist era. The collection combines activists shorts like *Nation* (1992) with more lyrical, intimate pieces like *I hung back, held fire, danced, and lied* (1995). Electronic Arts Intermix, "Third Known Nest," accessed August 29, 2017, <https://www.eai.org/titles/third-known-nest>.

autobiographical, but also the most honest account of the author's life; the advent of *Carol* reignited interest in uncovering the unknown details of Highsmith's life.²⁴⁴ If *The Price of Salt* is a masked autobiography, is Haynes's film actually something like a coded biopic for Highsmith herself? So much of the film is about the blurriness of edges and boundaries; one could search for Highsmith's (auto)biography in the text, but could the film ever guarantee any sort of access to the author's life?²⁴⁵

The biopic purports to offer an authentic portrayal of an individual's life lived, but it also offers a portrait of what it means to live authentically. Studio-era biopics typically listed detailed research credits, emphasizing that archives were consulted and the film thus offers access to an accurate picture of personal history.²⁴⁶ But the first assumption here, of course, is that "the archive" provides true access to history and direct access to figures of the past at all; moreover, it assumes that the archive preserves evidence of a life worthy of recovery, and that there are adequate sources from which to learn about them. In the case of Highsmith, her work stands as the most authentic archive for learning about the writer's life. However, this notion of an artist's art as an honest record of her life is not unique to Highsmith, and in fact represents a larger trend in queer activist and artistic work surrounding the AIDS crisis. I continue this project of queer historiography, and its accompanying understanding of the artist's work as an archive of her life, as I take up Barbara Hammer's and Elisabeth Subrin's recordings of individual women's lives.

²⁴⁴ Jill Dawson, "Carol: The Woman Behind Patricia Highsmith's Lesbian Novel," *The Guardian*, May 13 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/may/13/patricia-highsmith-film-adaptation-carol-only-openly-lesbian-novel-cannes-cate-blanchett>.

²⁴⁵ Both Andrew Wilson's *Beautiful Shadow: A Life of Patricia Highsmith* (2004) and Joan Schenkar's *The Talented Miss Highsmith: The Secret Life and Serious Art of Patricia Highsmith* (2009) consider Highsmith's biography in relation to her writing.

²⁴⁶ See George F. Custen, *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992).

Their films evidence a commitment to archiving the personal through the depiction of personal possessions, writing, and photographic/cinematic self-inscription. In the case of artists like Francesca Woodman and Maya Deren, their self-inscriptions become both a means for testifying to their existence and a means through which to explore possibilities for alternative embodiments and expressions of the self. If the biopic selects an archive with which to present an apparently coherent picture of selfhood, Subrin's and Hammer's respective turn to these artist's work questions what a true self looks like and where one might search to find it.

4.2 WHO COUNTS AS "QUEER"?

While Hammer's and Subrin's archiving are no less a search for the queer past as they imagine it than the elegiac work of Derek Jarman and Matthew Mishory, I investigate feminist (women) filmmakers return to the queer archive as part of a broader queer impulse to keep the future safe for queer generations to come. This term "future safe" served as the slogan for the Estate Project for Artists with AIDS in 1992 and was used on all of their pamphlets and promotional material. The slogan came with the image of a hand reaching out to touch and included the words, "Art is a record, both of personal experience and the era in which you live."²⁴⁷ AIDS archiving efforts exemplified in the Estate Project for Artists with AIDS and The Archive Project understood queers' art as a holder of their life experiences and memory. They sought to preserve these remains so that future queers could access their art in order to learn about the past and lives lived in the present. During the AIDS crisis when queer life became increasingly fragile and queer

²⁴⁷ "Future Safe: The Present is the Future," Box 5, Folder 16, Women's Action Coalition Records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library, New York.

bodies increasingly vulnerable, activists “understood [the archive] as urgent and necessary, not only for the memory of individuals, but for the survival of the community itself.”²⁴⁸ With the loss of more and more community members each day, returns to the past to find queer figures were not only acts of reclamation, but also acts of community expansion. Those returns provided a way for queers to locate themselves in a previous temporality, and the preservation of artists’ work in the present ensured that queers could live on in the archive. However, the creation of such a queer archive also demands an interrogation of the term “community itself.” Such a phrasing presumes that who and what makes up the community is both self-evident and uncontested, as if a community is not constructed by choices about whom the archive includes, and whom it excludes. Pushing this construction further, I am interested in how queer archives are both constructed by notions of the queer community, and how they are assumed to possess the ability to preserve life stories in that archive, such that an understanding of community is expanded, or contracted, by the existence of an archive.

As the opening chapters have shown, histories of the AIDS crisis, along with those organizations that sought to define queer community itself, suffer from a white, gay male bias. What I mean is that the term “queer,” whether referring to activism, cinema, or theory, becomes synonymous with a white, urban gay masculinity. Furthermore, the canonization of New Queer Cinema as exemplified by filmmakers like Derek Jarman, Tom Kalin, Gus Van Sant, and Todd Haynes evidences the consolidation of queer as coextensive with white gay masculinity. Activists and artists like Sarah Schulman, Zoe Leonard, Abigail Child, and Jean Carlomusto are

²⁴⁸ Susan Knabe and Wendy Gay Pearson, *Zero Patience* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2001), 89.

all too often left out of dominant histories of queers' response to the AIDS crisis.²⁴⁹ Always one to look toward who is marginalized by definitions of community, Bruce LaBruce spoke out about the tendency of gay male writers and filmmakers to exclude lesbians from their work. He sought to correct this bias in his own films, with central female characters in *Super 8 ½* (1994), *Skin Flick* (1999), *The Raspberry Reich* (2004), and *Otto; or, Up with Dead People* (2008). *Super 8 ½* in many ways renders white gay male sex culture abject, and the divisions between gays and lesbians lead to the film's major conflict. In a letter to Dennis Cooper, dated May 17, 1989, he asks the writer, "I wonder why you don't write about dykes?"²⁵⁰ LaBruce continues to discuss in his letter his own self-consciousness about representing women, but makes clear his self-responsibility to represent the queer community, as opposed to the gay male community. But while LaBruce's addition of a spectrum of female same-sex desires to his work is ostensibly a queer effort, focusing my own project only on filmmakers such as LaBruce might imply that there were not queer feminist filmmakers doing the same type of work at the same time.²⁵¹ In other words, allowing New Queer Cinema and the queer biopic to only be defined by male filmmakers performs the same sort of effacing that "queer" threatens to do; it privileges male labor over female, and it repeats many of the same gendered patterns that queerness purports to reject.

²⁴⁹ Ann Cvetkovich discusses the marginalization of lesbian's activist labor in her chapter "AIDS Activism and Public Feelings: Documenting ACT UP's Lesbians" from *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality and Lesbian Public Cultures* (2003).

²⁵⁰ "Bruce LaBruce Correspondence," Dennis Cooper Papers, Box 16, Folder 259b, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University, New York.

²⁵¹ It is worth mentioning that not all queer male filmmakers only represent men's life stories. I begin the chapter with Todd Haynes, in part, because of his interest in returning to the past to tell specifically feminine stories, like those of *Superstar* and *Carol*.

As an organizing principle, queerness divorces itself from the divisive identity politics that define(d) the gay and lesbian community. “Queer,” in theory, acts to disrupt easily defined identities and boundaries between groups of people in order to create a community based on difference, and for this reason, my project is thoroughly invested in language and theories of queerness. However, I am also aware of the problems that emerge when queer theory is put into practice; by practicing what queer theory preaches, material gendered problems can emerge with the elimination of identity politics. Instead of including lesbians (or woman-identified queers) within anti-assimilationist political practice, the term queer can too often efface their involvement in radical community formation. Historical re-incorporation gives the queer community a sense of origins, a larger sample of those like them, an exemplary set of queer idols who led lives of trauma, struggle, and triumph. And yet, the set of figures that becomes incorporated into the queer community does not always reflect the diversity and alterity that the term queer suggests. Put another way, the queer archive demands that we question who creates the archive and how they create it—who gets to choose which lives to preserve, and how do they choose to preserve them? New Queer Cinema’s biopics by filmmakers like Isaac Julien and John Greyson do create an important archive for exploration, but gay male filmmaker’s predominance in this archive demands that we also look toward what their archive elides. Accordingly, I turn to Barbara Hammer and Elisabeth Subrin as female filmmakers who present individual women’s stories in a strategically essentializing fashion.²⁵² I argue that this essentializing act performs the crucial political work of remedying women’s and lesbians’ exclusions from AIDS crisis narratives and broader queer histories.

²⁵² Hammer and Subrin represent only two of the many female filmmakers who helped shaped New Queer Cinema, including Sadie Benning, Pratibha Pramar, Ellen Spiro, and Maria Maggenti.

My recourse to Haynes's *Carol* presented something of a bait and switch, setting up the possibility to delve into the filmmaker's other biopics like *Velvet Goldmine* (1998) and *I'm Not There* (2007), but I am instead interested in the questions *Carol* poses about lesbian history and feminist biography.²⁵³ *Carol* figures the conditions under which lesbian biography could emerge during 1950s post-war America, and the form through which artists like Highsmith could speak. In Patricia White's "Sketchy Lesbians" piece on the film, she acknowledges the film's retrospective fantasy, pointing to the way in which "authentic" lesbian representation was an impossibility. In its place, lesbian desire emerged in masked archetypes that became legible only to the knowing eye. White locates references to these sketchy lesbian figures in Haynes's film, identifying an inventory of parallels: "Like Manuela in *Madchen in Uniform* (Leontine Sagan, 1931), Therese lacks a mother, while Carol recalls the elegant older women and silky vampires of European art films like *Les Biches* (Claude Chabrol, 1968) and *Daughters of Darkness* (Harry Kümel, 1971)."²⁵⁴ Trying to locate truth and transparency in *Carol* is a fruitless task; the history that the film tells is one in which lesbian sexuality had to be cloaked behind sketchy figures of desire. *Carol*, in many ways, represents the history of conditions of a particular social class that contributed to (presumed) lesbians' absence from history. And in doing so, it represents the necessity for queer filmmakers to return to the past in order to re-present it differently. But before Haynes's *Carol*, experimental filmmakers Barbara Hammer and Elisabeth Subrin did just that.

²⁵³ I read *Velvet Goldmine* as the David Bowie biopic that Haynes sought out to make, but for which he was unable to clear the rights. Despite Haynes's inability to explicitly name Bowie, the film follows investigative conventions of the biopic film and tells the story of superstar's rise to fame (or infamy).

²⁵⁴ White, "Sketchy Lesbians," 14.

4.3 LOCATING LESBIAN GHOSTS: BARBARA HAMMER'S STRATEGIES OF ESSENTIALISM AND POLITICS OF NAMING

Barbara Hammer and Elisabeth Subrin represent a history of feminist and queer filmmaking, beginning with second wave feminism and continuing through the present day, but more than that, both filmmakers seek to tell stories of the feminist history that came before them. Hammer's and Subrin's work not only recover feminist histories, but they also perform a reparative function in terms of feminist temporality; they trudge through the gullies of feminist history to unite generations of women who need to know one another. For women who did not have a visible history, whether lesbians of the 1970s or feminists of the late 1990s, Hammer and Subrin show women that they did not "appear from vapor."²⁵⁵ Both filmmakers, likewise, articulate a queer desire for the archive: a need for the archaeological remains of a queer past. These remains provide evidence of queer life lived and bring the past into existence; they act as a testament to lives whose desires and politics may have been silenced, but very much so existed. Their films demonstrate that archives can be inhabited, explored, and used to tell elided (her)stories of the feminist (or not-so-feminist) past. Yet, in both filmmakers' work, archives not only provide evidence of life lived, their films function as indexes of the bodies of historical figures. Through their representations of Elizabeth Bishop, Maya Deren, Shulamith Firestone, and Francesca Woodman, they approach the artist's oeuvre as an index of the artist's own body, an archiving of their person. These archives, then, offer information about the past, but they also offer a way to interact with feminist figures of the past, to touch the past, or at least a version of it preserved in their work.

²⁵⁵ The full Hammer quotation, from which this phrase is extracted, is included in the following section.

As posed by the Laura Mulvey epigraph that frames the chapter, feminism is haunted by two figures: the ghost and obsolescent. These two figures, whose precarious legacy hangs in limbo, structure a particularly feminist temporality. The ghost sits back awaiting discovery; the obsolescent lingers in the present mourning her antiquity. Both depend upon feminist history for discovery and the insistence of their place in the present moment, their ability to change the course of feminist futures. Barbara Hammer's work frequently gets classified as the latter: an obsolete feminist aesthetic tied to 1970s cultural feminism.²⁵⁶ However, such dismissals of Hammer's films miss much of her work's nuance and strategically politics, politics that influenced much of the queer thought and activism that emerged in the 1990s. While queer theory positions itself in opposition to the identity politics characteristic of 1970s cultural feminism, there remains a sort of political residue of this earlier time. Moreover, there remains a desire to go back to the "bad object" politics of the 1970s for renewed political energy; these seemingly obsolete politics might actually contain more than meets the eye.

Greg Youmans, in "Performing Essentialism," describes the appeal of essentialism, as he speculates why more and more recent queer media work looks back to 1970s feminism:

I believe that essentialism ranks high among the qualities of cultural feminism to which the new queer media work is attracted: the audacity of fabricating a pre- or ahistoric foundation for one's contemporary thoughts and actions; the righteousness of claiming truths at the level of the body; the thrill of magical realms hitherto clocked by rationality and the oppressive world of appearances;

²⁵⁶ Richard Dyer summarizes, and critiques, scholars like Andrea Weiss's denigrating take on Hammer's films in the chapter "Lesbian/Woman: Lesbian Cultural Feminist Film," from his book *Now You See It: Studies on Lesbian and Gay Film* (1990). According to Dyer, Weiss is caught up in the films' supposed recourse to notions of romantic love and femininity, and as such, they do little to break out of patriarchal structures of filmmaking. Dyer complicates her reading, suggesting that the boundaries between patriarchal ideology and Hammer's films may be impermeable and her articulation of lesbian form far more complex than Weiss indicates.

and the presumptuousness of going off to live entirely as one chooses, beyond the range and influence of heteropatriarchal media, culture, and ideology.²⁵⁷

Youmans begins with new queer media's investment in 1970s cultural feminism as an opportunity to look back at Hammer's experimental lesbian shorts to suggest that the 1970s were a far more irreverent, gender nonnormative time than traditional histories tend to suggest.²⁵⁸ He goes on to discuss how critics such as Andrea Weiss have used the charge of essentialism to critique and discredit Hammer's work.²⁵⁹ Essentialism becomes an epithet hurled at Hammer's cinema rather than a descriptor of its political efforts. Youmans importantly deconstructs the supposed division between performativity and essentialism through his reading of Hammer's films; he counters scholarly beliefs that performativity always aligns with postmodern, anti-identity, post-the-birth-of-queer work, and essentialism always aligns with a naïve, sincere belief in women's shared experience. By exposing the irony, performance, and humor of works like those included in Hammer's *Lesbian Humor* (1989), he demonstrates the way in which her films *perform* essentialism.²⁶⁰ Films like *Superdyke* (1975) have no investment in claiming truths or speaking to any sort of universal women's experience. *Menses* (1974), by taking women's menstruation as its focus, does center on a universal woman's bodily experience, but the film unfolds as over-the-top camp that flaunts, only to mock, society's discomfort with women's

²⁵⁷ Greg Youmans, "Performing Essentialism: Reassessing Barbara Hammer's Films of the 1970s," *Camera Obscura* 27, no.3 (2012): 104.

²⁵⁸ Youmans also attributes this return to Hammer's work in films like Liz Rosenfeld's *Untitled (Dkyetactics Revisted)* (2005) to be part of a larger queer return to notions of utopia, in works such as José Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia* (2009).

²⁵⁹ Richard Deyer addresses Andrea Weiss's critiques of Hammer's work found in works like *Vampires and Violets: Lesbians in Film* (1992) and *Jump Cut* article "Women I Love, Double Strength: Lesbian Cinema and Romantic Love" (1981).

²⁶⁰ Hammer's *Lesbian Humor: Collection of Short Films* (1980-87) followed her earlier trilogy of short films titled *Lesbian Sexuality: The Films of Barbara Hammer* (1974-1978), which create an aesthetic of lesbian desire and sexuality.

bodies. Viewed in this way, Hammer's claiming of categories like woman and lesbian were always and already strategic gestures. And in this way, those gestures understand that there is no inherent reason why a woman must present a woman's story and a lesbian present a lesbian's; instead, her films take seriously that it is feminism's work to recover the stories of women. Recovering women's history and bringing it to vision is women filmmakers' labor, women filmmakers who are themselves too often forgotten in film history.

While Hammer's 1970s shorts could be said to fit into their contemporary projects of lesbian separatism, the effect of her political naming and representation of specific women is not an act of separation, but an act of inclusion. Returning to the past to bring spectral figures to vision not only argues for their inclusion in history, but also for their inclusion in the present moment. Hammer asserts that lesbian culture cannot exist without a lesbian history, and this history must be told through the naming of individual women. She states in an interview with The Activist Life Oral History Project that "Unless we, you know, are able to name and find and celebrate the diverse lesbians that have lived in our culture and others, either as lesbians or under some other kind of name, or way of being" the existence of lesbian desire remains open to contestation and erasure.²⁶¹ Mulvey's feminist ghost finds its mate in the apparitional lesbian.²⁶²

²⁶¹ Hammer's interview is part of the Activist Life Oral History Project housed in Smith College's Women's History Archives. The interview's abstract reads: "In this oral history, Hammer describes where she got her passion for film and where some of her inspiration has come from. She tells the story of her coming out in the 1970s, and describes the environment of the time, specifically in terms of how it influenced her films. She discusses the themes of lesbian invisibility, recapturing lesbian history, and the politics of naming. She connects her film to her activism and talks a little about what she hopes to see happen in the future." Anna Promey-Fallot, "Barbara Hammer," Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, November 30, 2008, <https://www.smith.edu/libraries/libs/ssc/activist/transcripts/Hammer.pdf>.

²⁶² The named figure of the apparitional lesbian first appears in Terry Castle's *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (1993). Patricia White, in *Uninvited:*

Both of these figures could be equated with the absence of history more broadly, but each speaks to the specificity of their omission, the conditions under which lesbian desire or feminist ideologies become effaced and the effects of this effacement. And really, what both of these figures speak to is the omission of specific women. The ghostly threat of feminism and lesbianism linger, but their threat is mitigated by the absence of individual faces embodying it. Going back to give these faces a name and a story represents, for Hammer, essential feminist labor; she states, “Otherwise, it’s as if we invented ourselves out of vapor, you know, in 1970, and it’s not true at all, so that history should be celebrated and those foremothers should be claimed and named.”²⁶³ Hammer’s films’ politics of naming return to the past to give credit to the individual women who dared to lead braver lives for the women, like Hammer, who would follow.

In an interview with Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, Hammer discusses this desire, and work, to recover lives of individual lesbians through the case of writer Willa Cather (1873-1947). She explains:

It wasn't easy. Everything at the Cather foundation was “under covers,” but I found a sympathetic person there who pointed me in the direction of some articles she Xeroxed for me, and a host of archival photographs that included the ones I eventually purchased for use in the film. I had a thick biography of Willa Cather by James Woodress, yet I could not find “lesbian” in the index. This was the initial impetus that eventually became the beginning of *Nitrate Kisses*. After Sharon O’Brien published her biography on Cather, I felt better. I attended a lecture Sharon O’Brien gave at the New York Historical Society. When I asked her about her courage in writing of Cather’s hidden sexual preference, she gave the frank answer that she had no intention of doing so and was going to continue the tradition of secrecy until she talked with William Curtin, who absolutely knew

Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability (1998), also explores the apparitional lesbian, but, here, in the history of Hollywood cinema.

²⁶³ Promey-Fallot, “Barbara Hammer,” Sophia Smith Collection.

Cather was gay from firsthand knowledge and who encouraged her to publish the lesbian facts.²⁶⁴

What was under covers, of course, was Cather's spectral sexuality. Sharon O'Brien treaded lightly until she knew "the facts," which for her come from an oral account, whispers of history. But these whispers confirm what Hammer had already gathered through gossip and suspicion, questioning whether one needs a firsthand whisper to prove the story that other traces of history are already telling. Hammer also talks with Foster about her desire to "out" figures of the past, to give a name to their sexuality and recuperate these women as lesbians. I read this act of political recuperation as an ultimately strategic one; as opposed to acknowledging these women as women with same sex desires or practices existing on some spectrum of sexuality, Hammer names them as foremothers of the present-day lesbian community. She strategically essentializes these histories to validate claims for lesbian identity in the present. This political naming recalls the queer acts of recovery Heather Love describes in *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* and suggests that politics of naming are not necessarily just a feminist or lesbian project, but a queer one as well. Hammer's investment in creating a visual history of those faces unseen in the pages of dominant history or seeks to see them differently, suggesting that maybe queer history is best told through personal histories.²⁶⁵

²⁶⁴ Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, "Barbara Hammer, An Interview: Re/constructing Lesbian Auto/Biographies in Tender Fictions and Nitrate Kisses," *Post Script* 16, no. 3 (Summer 1997).

²⁶⁵ Jean Bessette, in her dissertation "Composing Historical Activism," positions Hammer's films as working toward a particular mode of historical telling, a queer historiography. She writes, "Because Hammer composed with memory—the recollection of the past in a present moment and circumstance—the use of multimodal nonlinearity allows her to represent her present *reconfigurations* of the past" (151).

Jean Bessette, "Composing Historical Activism: Anecdotes, Archives, and Multimodality in Rhetorics of Lesbian History" (PhD diss., University of Pittsburgh, 2013).

4.4 WELCOME TO THIS HOUSE AND THE QUESTION OF DOCUMENTARY

Barbara Hammer's career began with films depicting the lives of specific women, with *Barbara Ward Will Never Die* (1968) and *Jane Brakhage* (1975), before she shifted her focus to the lesbian shorts that would define her 1970s filmmaking. Her most recent work returns to these beginnings and focuses on Maya Deren, in *Maya Deren's Sink* (2011), and Elizabeth Bishop, in *Welcome to This House* (2015). In both of these films, Hammer's camera and her lyrical sensibility exist alongside the words and images of the artists whose lives she represents. In *Welcome to This House: A Film on Elizabeth Bishop*, Hammer's visual interpretations of Bishop's poetry bring the narrator's readings of Bishop's poems to life. Wheeler Winston Dixon affirms that the filmmaker uses this effortless mixing of "the past, the present, the imaginary, and the real to invoke the inner life of Elizabeth Bishop."²⁶⁶ *Welcome to This House*, like many of Hammer's other works, is not classified as a fiction film, but as a feature-length documentary. The film reveals the most realized form of Hammer's longtime search into the life of poet Elizabeth Bishop. The project began with the Guggenheim Fellowship Hammer received in 2013 to make *Waking Up Together*, which showcased her preliminary work on Bishop. Hammer transforms her careful archival investigation into a lyrical presentation of Bishop's poetry and biography in *Welcome to This House*. Wheeler Winston Dixon's introduction to Hammer's film emphasizes the way in which the film breaks with documentary conventions:

Barbara Hammer's *Welcome to This House: A Film on Elizabeth Bishop* (2015) is that rarity among documentary films – rather than the usual succession of talking heads, shot in a utilitarian fashion, as befits its subject the film is a primarily poetic project, which *inhabits* the world of Bishop and her poetry, entranced by the beauty of life in all its forms. As the film's press materials note, '*Welcome to*

²⁶⁶ Wheeler Winston Dixon, "Being Elizabeth Bishop: Barbara Hammer's New Documentary on an American Poet," *Senses of Cinema* 76 (September 2015).

This House is a feature documentary film on the homes and loves of poet Elizabeth Bishop (1911–1979), about life in the shadows, and the anxiety of art making without full self-disclosure, filmed in Bishop's 'best loved homes' in the US, Canada, and Brazil.²⁶⁷

Dixon astutely points out that Hammer's film is less about Bishop than it is about what it meant to *be* Bishop, what it means to discover one's voice and self as an artist. As Dixon emphasizes in the above quotation, Hammer inhabits Bishop's world and poetry, but Dixon does not make explicit that this world of Bishop's work is one created by Hammer. The materials of Bishop's work and the sequential journey through her former homes provide a structure for the film, but the insertion of Hammer's imagery, photographic transpositions, and lyrical editing disrupt any sort of structural rigidity. And yet, while Hammer may defamiliarize the talking heads structure with the film's other aesthetic gestures, she still uses this documentary device. The film's talking heads often narrate the photographs that flash across the screen, putting a narrative to these still images, and at times, their voices exist alongside the narrator's reading of Bishop's poetry. The film's mixing of source materials from Bishop's life and Hammer's aesthetic sensibility beg the questions: Is this film only a documentary? Is it not more of a biopic whose research credits become visualized in the diegetic world of the film? Is there any use in fighting to distinguish the differences between the biopic and biographical documentary?

Documentary's power to fascinate, partly, comes from its claim to authenticity. The documentary attests to evidence or proof, and biographical documentary serves as a testament to life lived. Documentary and the biopic share many traits insofar as they fascinate their spectator through a claim to truthful representation; they purport to provide access to a figure that is only mediated by the film screen, a screen that, if suturing does its job, will dissolve. According to

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

Custen, “truth value is a distinctive feature of the biopic.”²⁶⁸ Truth value is what ensures audiences’ feelings that they are, in fact, experiencing an encounter with history, occupying the same terrain as a monumental figure. Custen elaborates on this value, explaining the genre’s construction:

Unlike the fictive discourse out of which the rest of Hollywood’s canon is acknowledged to have been fabricated, biopics’ putative connection to accuracy and truth makes them unique. At the outset, each member of the category is defined as being a true story. This assertion (rather than implication) of the truth status of the stories that follow this claim— asserted in their introductory titles, in their research credits, in their myriad controlled and spontaneous publicity discourses and materials—suggests perhaps a more powerful type of invention yet.²⁶⁹

The truth function of the biopic disavows its own fictive construction. The biopic’s carefully crafted structure and investigation into personal histories actively work to create the appearance of transparency, of truth. The distinction between scholars’ definition of the two genres involves *how much* truth they claim. And yet, the significant theoretical and aesthetic overlap in the biographical documentary and the biopic suggest that maybe they are different expressions of the same generic mode.²⁷⁰ Trinh T. Minh-ha’s description of the documentary is relevant here: “Powerful living stories, infinite authentic situations. There are no retakes. The stage is thus no more and no less than life itself.”²⁷¹ She equates documentary, or really, the aesthetics of documentary, with a direct access to stories of life itself; this direct access, however, is always

²⁶⁸Custen, *Bio/Pics*, 60.

²⁶⁹ George F. Custen, “Mechanical Life in the Age of Human Reproduction: American Biopics, 1961-1980,” *Biography* 23, no. 1 (2000): 139.

²⁷⁰ I am extrapolating Ben Singer’s understanding of melodrama as mode in *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and Its Contexts* (2001) to understand the biopic and documentary as generic modes. Augustín Zarzosa reevaluates Singer’s approach to melodrama in *Refiguring Melodrama in Film and Television: Captive Affects, Elastic Sufferings, Vicarious Objects* (2013).

²⁷¹ Trinh T. Minh-ha, “Documentary Is/Not a Name,” *October* 52 (Spring 1990): 79.

the *appearance* of direct access.

Barbara Hammer's approach to the archive acknowledges that it too only ever offers the appearance of direct access. In her autobiography she describes, "With respect for the partially known, the unknown, and the never to be known, the archivist must gingerly embrace the remains and construct what must ultimately be considered fictive stories from the past."²⁷² No matter where one looks for source material, every narrative one gives those documents carries an amount of fiction. Every biography is based in a foundation of fiction; every cinematic biography is, by this line of reasoning, always a biopic. *Welcome to This House*, arguably, presents Hammer's most conventional work insofar as it follows a semi-chronological, but certainly narrative, trajectory. Following biopic conventions, the film starts at the beginning of Bishop's story, her birth, and ends with her death. However, before the film returns to Bishop's beginnings, it opens with writer Marie-Claire Blais explaining that Bishop's work should be more widely known; the covers of Bishop's books flash across the screen, letting the viewer know from the outset that this film presents a space in which to learn about someone to whom history has not been kind.

The film centers on Bishop's search for a home, a place where she could find peace and a place where her soul could rest, but in the end, it suggests that perhaps Bishop's orphan childhood would always determine her fate. The loss of Bishop's parents at a young age left her without a stable home. Hammer's film adopts this nomadic existence and journeys to Bishop's various homes, beginning in the Great Village, Nova Scotia (1915). A childhood photo of Bishop is layered over the moving image of a little girl playing in the flowers, but this movement of

²⁷² Barbara Hammer, *Hammer!/: Making Movies Out of Sex and Life* (New York: The Feminist Press, 2010), 263.

childhood play is intercut with footage of the camera panning over a typewriter's keys. This juxtaposition conveys the playful childhood that Bishop quickly gave up for a life built in words. In one of the film's most chilling moments, a child version of Bishop repeatedly writes her name (with a number of creative spellings) and meditates on the notion of being an "I." A voiceover reads: "You are an I. You are an Elizabeth. You are one of them. Why should you be one too?" In many ways, these four lines act as the film's refrain as it circles around Bishop's search for existence and evidence of her belonging.

The film includes a "genuine" Bishop archive of photographs taken of or by Bishop in the places she inhabited, as well as her paintings, letters, and notebooks. Hammer uses these archives as a stepping-stone for recreating the sensation of being with Bishop in her homes. The archive and the voices of those close to Bishop are where Hammer's depiction of the poet's life begins. Hammer's interjections share just as much truth as the film's inclusion of Bishop's poetry, and the film treats Bishop's poetry with the same amount of seriousness as the talking heads' words. The film rejects easy distinctions between truth and suspicion, between documentary and fiction; instead, the film deals with layers of truths. The insertion of Hammer's images and extradiegetic sounds affectively punctuate the film, and these inclusions help the viewer identify with the *feelings* of these spaces. They capture the emotional truth of Bishop's homes and encourage the viewer to feel themselves in the spaces of Bishop's past. Moreover, the film utilizes transpositions of the past and present, layering items from Bishop's archive over the one that Hammer's camera creates. For instance, in depicting Bishop's Brazil home, where she lived with Lota de Macedo Soares from 1951-1969, the camera's fluid movement through the home is punctuated by frozen moments where still photographs merge with and momentarily take the place of the film's moving image. The contrast of the black and white photographs and

the color film stock remind the viewer of their pastness, but Hammer's moving camera merges them with the present to breathe new life into potentially forgotten photographs.

Throughout the film, the camera lingers and pans up, down, across photographs in an effort to move in toward and pause on a close-up of Bishop's face. These moments convey a desire to both see into Bishop's eyes and learn what it might be like to see through her eyes, and see into the moments of her life that remain unrepresented in the archive or in Hammer's film. The closest access to Bishop comes through her poetry and written letters. The confessional letters reveal details of love, betrayal, and inner struggle, but her poetry reveals Bishop's desire that otherwise goes unspoken. Bishop's poetry, in many ways, provides the most immediate access to a record of her lesbian relationships and her sexuality. The home may act as a holder of memories, but it is through poetry that her desire could be expressed. Hammer reanimates this desire that could so often not be (openly) expressed in Bishop's life by pairing readings of her poetry with erotic imagery reminiscent of the lesbian aesthetic the filmmaker perfected in *Dyketactics* (1974) and *Multiple Orgasm* (1976). These images of flowers unfolding and rain falling paired with images of the female form suggest an openness and fluidity that appeared in poems like Bishop's "Vague Poem."

Ultimately, what the film suggests is the impossibility of a life-building project under the conditions that dictated Bishop's life. The poet lived a life in the shadows, but those shadows offered a protective shroud from a judgmental world. A home promises shelter and protection, but as Bishop's poetry reminds the viewer, "the art of losing isn't hard to master," and all too frequently this loss was the loss of a home and the life built there. The film's penultimate shot reveals Bishop's tombstone engraved with the words: "All the untidy activity continues, awful but cheerful." *Welcome to This House* does not seek to offer an easy solution to Bishop's untidy

history, but it does offer the viewer a chance to get to know the awful but cheerful life of Elizabeth Bishop.

4.5 *MAYA DEREN'S SINK: SWIRLING AROUND THE DRAIN OF FEMINIST HISTORY*

Barbara Hammer's love affair with Maya Deren's films is revealed in her essay "Me and Maya Deren;" it is in watching Maya Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943) that Hammer came to realize her desire to pursue filmmaking.²⁷³ That desire to pursue filmmaking is, in many ways, a desire to preserve the lives of women, as well as their desires that dominant history has elided.²⁷⁴ Hammer describes seeing *Meshes of the Afternoon* for the first time in a film history course, and notes that it was the only film the class saw made by a woman: "I knew there was a feminine and feminist—a womanist sensibility on the screen, and I researched her later in life and found out she was bisexual, so I was picking up more than that, but I knew there was a blank screen in terms of lesbian cinema."²⁷⁵ Hammer saw that blank screen as an opportunity. And with that opportunity seen, Hammer seized it, taking Maya Deren as her guide. In a 1996 MIX NYC panel organized by Hammer, and titled "Hammertime: Are You My Mentor?," she explains the importance of mentorship and how she acquired her own mentor: "Many of the members of the

²⁷³ Barbara Hammer, "Maya Deren and Me," in *Maya Deren and the American Avant-Garde*, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

²⁷⁴ Hammer's *Lover Other: The Story of Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore* (2006) uses archival footage, photos, and readings from a "found Cahun script" to tell the story of two lesbian artist step-sisters whose worked to resist the confines of a normative life and their Nazi-occupied Jersey Isle.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

community in the early seventies are now mentors to women and men who are making moving image work. I did not find my own mentor until I saw the films of Maya Deren...All of the works in this program are made by makers who have had a mentor, dead or alive!”²⁷⁶ She asserts that in looking for mentorship, filmmakers do not have to limit themselves to those who are living because cinema makes temporally-incongruent mentorship possible. Cinema allows dead filmmakers to mentor the next generation, to create an intergenerational conversation like that between Derek Jarman and Matthew Mishory.²⁷⁷ By returning to Deren’s films and the spaces of their production as a means of biographical retelling in *Maya Deren’s Sink*, Hammer re-asserts Deren’s films as an archive; her films attest to the way she lived as an artist and as a woman, and provide a means of finding a mentor in the historical afterlife. By exploring her own relationship to Deren and her desire to inhabit Deren’s once-occupied spaces, Hammer provides the possibility for spectators to also take up space in Deren’s afterlife and learn from the images Deren left behind.

This belief in the power of the artist’s work to affect change and communicate with the living after the artist’s death serves as the primary rationale behind queer art archival initiatives taken up during the AIDS crisis. The Estate Project for Artists with AIDS began in 1991 as a project of the Alliance for the Arts in New York City and grew into a permanent project directed

²⁷⁶ MIX NYC Program Guide 1996, Box 10, Folder 889, Mix Collection, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University, New York.

²⁷⁷ More recently, Hammer’s *Generations* (2010) film made with queer filmmaker Joey Carducci discusses the role of mentoring and the passing on of personal experimental film to a new generation of makers (Note: The film credits Gina Carducci as Barbara Hammer’s co-director. I use Joey here as an act of respect and trans recognition). Additionally, Hammer recently announced her creation of a grant to provide resources for a future generation(s) of lesbian experimental filmmakers.

Justin Moran, “Queer Cinema Pioneer Barbara Hammer Announces Lesbian Filmmaking Grant,” Out, July 7, 2017, <https://www.out.com/movies/2017/7/07/queer-cinema-pioneer-barbara-hammer-announces-lesbian-filmmaking-grant>.

by Patrick Moore.²⁷⁸ A few years later, David Hirsch and Frank Moore launched The Archive Project, which would later become known as Visual AIDS—a digital repository for artists with AIDS work and a resource for global artistic work about AIDS in production and exhibition (exponentially expanding the number of people who could to access these artists’ work).²⁷⁹ In a time when institutions were neglecting queer bodies’ needs, queer activists sought to create their own institutions that could record the AIDS crisis and other queer histories that do not appear in dominant historical narratives.²⁸⁰ Ann Cvetkovich explains how the queer archive makes claim to queer existence in the face of dominant institutions’ ignoring (at best) and effacing (at worst) of gay, lesbian, and other non-normative lives. She writes, “Gay and lesbian archives address the traumatic loss of history that has accompanied sexual life and the formation of sexual publics, and they assert the role of memory and affect in compensating for institutional neglect.”²⁸¹ Archiving not only represented a way to work through grief and loss, but it also provided a way to extend the life and legacy of queer artists. The archive, as a holder of memory and experience, positions queer art as an index of the artist’s body, as evidence of their touch, their artistic hand. As I have asserted in previous chapters, the AIDS crisis forever changed how queer culture approaches acts of preservation, memorialization, and knowledge of how to live under the threat

²⁷⁸ Patrick Moore served as the Estate Project for Artist with AIDS founder and director from 1991-2001.

²⁷⁹ The Archive Project was originally created in 1994 and renamed the Frank Moore Archive in 2002 to honor his vision of and contribution to the preservation of artists with HIV/AIDS. The Visual AIDS Artist Registry re-launched the archive in 2012 after spending years digitizing the archive’s artwork. The registry continues to add work and curates a number of exhibitions, both online and in physical gallery spaces.

²⁸⁰ Ann Cvetkovich presents an extended study of these ideas in her book *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (2003).

²⁸¹ Cvetkovich, “In the Archives,” 110.

of utter annihilation. However, the act of preservation is only one part of the queer archive's puzzle. Its second piece comes later with future queers' discovery of these materials.

Recalling Tom Kalin's *TWO*, Highsmith's words express the trouble of an "honest history": "It is curious that in the most important periods of one's life, one never keeps a diary...And what a loss, if one intends to keep an honest history at all..." Queer artists' work often visualizes intimate (sexual) desires they could not act upon because of lives lived in silence, exclusion, and the threat of violence. The art-making process provides artists with a means through which to experience their desire, but even more pointedly, preserving these works records a history of queer desire that could not otherwise be expressed. Their art serves as a sort of diary, an honest history that brings to vision what they could not articulate. Frank Moore, whose vision drove The Archive Project, wrote, "The capacity to dream, to imagine—so central to how we define ourselves as human—is at the heart of The Archive Project. Many artists with AIDS die twice: first when illness forces them to discontinue the creative activity which has defined their life and given it meaning; second when their biological functions cease."²⁸² In Moore's configuration of the artist's life, art is a carrier of the artist's life force, and it allows the artist to continue on when biological life has ended.²⁸³ The death of artistic production is no less

²⁸² "Arts' Communities, AIDS' Communities, realizing The Archive Project" (1996, Visual AIDS for the Arts), Box XII.3, Folder 71.A, David Wojnarowicz Papers, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University, New York.

²⁸³ Frank Moore was a New York artist who primarily worked in painting and drawing. He learned of his HIV-positive status in 1985 and immediately began to address issues surrounding AIDS, bioethics, health care, and the queer community. He was one of Visual AIDS's founding members and was key to launching the AIDS awareness Red Ribbon Project. He died of AIDS-related complications in 2002, but his work remains in the galleries of the Whitney, MoMA, and the Albright-Knox Gallery and the archives of the Fales Library of New York University and the New York Public Library.

Visual AIDS, "Frank Moore," accessed August 30, 2017, <https://www.visualaids.org/artists/detail/frank-moore>.

significant than their physical death because the artistic body (of work) can continue to reach out and touch its viewers.

The artist's work as evidence of their touch, as a holder of their life experiences positions the artist's work as an index of their body. A journey into the archive thus promises an interaction with artists and makes queer intergenerational conversation possible. Frank Moore elaborates: "We knew that there were stories here that needed to be preserved and retold—not about 'victims' but about the universes these artists inhabited; not about their illness, but about its irrelevance to their deepest life-affirming gift."²⁸⁴ Their life-affirming gift can continue to affirm and changes lives with the work of archival projects like the Estate Project. But what he also elaborates here is that their art creates a resource for learning about the life they *lived*, not the disease that killed them. Through the preservation of their art, they are able to tell stories, creating something of a shared, oral history.

As I move into Hammer's picturing of Maya Deren's legacy in *Maya Deren's Sink*, I am specifically concerned with the question of how archives and investigations into the past themselves emerge on screen as questions of authenticity and relationality.²⁸⁵ The film ghosts Maya Deren: it conjures her presence and rejects her death. The film begins with a search for Deren through an encounter with her sink; images of Deren from her films bend across the sink and swirl around the drain, as a voiceover describes how Hammer eventually encountered it. Hammer stumbled upon Deren's sink while she was working in the Anthology Film Archives,

²⁸⁴ "Arts' Communities, AIDS' Communities, realizing The Archive Project" (1996, Visual AIDS for the Arts), David Wojnarowicz Papers.

²⁸⁵ Lucy Fischer thoroughly documents Maya Deren's afterlife in internet circulation, explaining how new generations of women have taken up Deren's legacy and reshaped her images according to their own artistic vision.

Lucy Fischer, "Afterlife and Afterimage: Maya Deren in 'Transfigured Time,' *Camera Obscura* 28, no. 3 (2013).

which holds a fair number of Deren's films and related documents; they take care of Deren's legacy, in the film's terms. In this way, the film records the experience of being in the archives, looking for something but not necessarily knowing what that thing will be, and what becomes possible when you find it.

Maya Deren's Sink once again solidifies Hammer's mining of the past; she searches in the archives we have available, even if those archives are as mundane as a sink. But as the film evidences, Deren's sink provides a gateway to the production of something else. Sarah Keller describes how the film uses "film fragments in which reality is embedded, as well as material objects (like the sink) in which a more tangible reality asserts itself within imaginative terrain (what was it like for Deren to use this sink?)."²⁸⁶ Hammer begins with this material anchor of the sink to assert a particular mode or reality in the spaces in which Deren created her work; and through this presence of the artist in her home spaces, the film re-accesses Deren's presence through her films. Finding that sink in the Anthology Film Archives leads Hammer back to the spaces where Deren lived and created her films.²⁸⁷ Hammer explores the domestic spaces pictured in *Meshes of the Afternoon* and *The Private Life of a Cat* (1944), and gathers information from these holders of Deren's ghost. The film's firsthand recollections of Deren's life are provided by narrators whose faces, or even just parts of their faces, appear within frames on the walls of Deren's homes. Their encounters with Deren do not exist separately from the film world Hammer creates, and this depiction of walls that talk falls in line with Deren's lifelong

²⁸⁶ Sarah Keller, *Maya Deren: Incomplete Control*, New York: Columbia University Press (2014), 245.

²⁸⁷ See Theresa L. Geller, "Each Film was Built as a Chamber and Became a Corridor': Maya Deren's Film Aesthetics as Feminist Praxis," in *There She Goes: Feminist Filmmaking and Beyond*, ed. Corrin Columpar and Sophie Mayer (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2009), 79-91.

rendering the home uncanny, as seen in Deren's falling up the staircase in *Meshes of the Afternoon* and entry into and out of a dinner party via a beach portal in *At Land* (1946).

Hammer transposes images of Deren, taken from her films, over her recordings of Deren's home spaces in the present. Hammer's transpositions of Deren's cinema over her these walls, doors, and staircases in their present state assert Deren's own insistence that film is a medium of both time and space.²⁸⁸ With *Maya Deren's Sink*, Hammer layers images of the past and present, but this layering of images creates a layering of Maya Deren's camera over Hammer's camera. The mentoring filmmaker's camera intermingles with her mentee's, and this multiplicity of temporalities allows their images to touch, recalling Deren's description of an anagram: "All of the elements of an anagram are related simultaneously. Consequently nothing is first and nothing is last; nothing is future and nothing is past; nothing is old and nothing is new."²⁸⁹ The past is not privileged over the present, and the film resists mythologizing Deren's legacy in such a way. The film does not return to the past for a lingering gaze back, but instead, the film permanently inserts the past into the present, arguing for its continued presence through the past's continued replay.

Hammer's use of transposition is further encompassed in her vision of a haptic cinema. She describes wanting to create a unique spectatorial relationship to her films: "I wanted to build an experiential art so that people could go inside the screen in the sense that they would feel with their body what they were seeing with their eyes."²⁹⁰ Hammer uses the words kinesthetic, haptic, and a cinema of touch to articulate what she means, but the limited language we have to describe

²⁸⁸ These words are a paraphrasing of a Deren quotation that the narrator reads in the film.

²⁸⁹ Maya Deren, *An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form and Film* (Yonkers: Alicat Book Shop Press, 1946).

²⁹⁰ Promey-Fallot, "Barbara Hammer," Sophia Smith Collection.

the experience of going inside the screen all seems inadequate to what she intends to create. Her films themselves most fully evidence these goals, as they create a sensory experience that allows the spectator to feel her way through the life of someone like Maya Deren. Through this haptic cinema, the spectator disavows the image's pastness and allows the image to affect her present.

4.6 ELISABETH SUBRIN'S FEMINIST TRANSPOSITIONS

Barbara Hammer asserts a sort of mastery over her subjects, and then renders them anew in her lyrical vision. Elisabeth Subrin, by contrast, selects her subjects and then “subjects them to rigorous biographical needling, devising a whole new approach to documentary in the process.”²⁹¹ This needling of biography, however, is more than a simple detailing of the lives of her subjects; her films dig into biographical construction (and the biopic genre) itself. Subrin does not necessarily recover unknown feminist figures, but she instead recovers a new archive from which to learn about them. And once this archive is established, her films ask: How was this archive constructed and who constructed it? And if we understand their biographical and archival construction, can we trust this archive? Where does truth lie and who gets to tell it? Subrin questions accepted historical representations of figures like Shulamith Firestone and Francesca Woodman, and asks what would happen if one looked for representation elsewhere. All of her films play with documentary filmmaking conventions and emerge as something more like “formalist experiments in documentary wrappers.”²⁹² Once the documentary's claim to truth is in question, so is everything else; Subrin's experimentation is the result of pushing at the limits

²⁹¹ Nicole Armour, “Disappearing Acts,” *Film Comment* 36, no.6 (2000): 55.

²⁹² *Ibid.*, 56.

of documentary and biopic representation. Subrin's films reveal that both the documentary and the biopic are an *aesthetics* of realism, not a mirror held up to reality, and the two genre modes both slide along an axis of reality.

Subrin's first film, *Swallow* (1995), begins the search that carries over all of her films: a search into the feminist past for better ways to be in the world as a woman, and if one cannot make/find better ways, then to settle on a way to survive in the world one is dealt. *Swallow* (1995) demonstrates the filmmaker's fascination with women's bodies, gender, and past female figures who have been cast aside by dominant history, individual women and their collective concerns that have been expelled from dominant culture's field of vision.²⁹³ Shortly after the film's 1995 release, in the midst of the era's riot grrrl feminism, Amanda Berry writes, "Subrin's video *Swallow* is a dreamy yet hard-edged meditation on growing up queer (not to mention alone, depressive, anorexic, and confused) in the feminist 1970s. Subrin turns a critical eye on the relationship between the video's protagonist and her supportive mother, who nonetheless cannot solve the contradictory messages of feminism and suburbanism."²⁹⁴ *Swallow* explores the contradictions of the feminist movement in Subrin's post-feminist moment, suggesting that the film goes back to the 1970s not with the hopes for an encounter with a better feminist past, but for a lesson in how to deal with the contradictory discourses that shape femininity. She looks back even further in the case of her next film, *Shulie* (1997), and explores one of radical feminism's most visible figures, to reveal a young woman fraught with the contradictions of her

²⁹³ Unlike *Shulie* and *The Fancy*, *Swallow* does not deal with one biographical figure (I would not define it as a biopic), but instead deals with the position of girl, any given girl, in post-industrial, postmodern, post-everything American culture. As its title hints, the film deals heavily with the topic of eating disorders and how girls come to understand their bodies in a culture that has alienated them from them.

²⁹⁴ March & April 1995 *GiRL* magazine "Fast & Forward: Your Queer Movie Video Guide," Mix Collection, Box 9, Folder 773

world.²⁹⁵ These films, *Shulie* and *Swallow*, undertake an investigation into the past in order to rethink what it means to be and exist as a woman in a world full of double-binds and things that refuse to make sense.

Subrin started work on the *Shulie* (1997) project when she stumbled upon the 1967 original film—a virtually unknown 16mm documentary of a young female art student shot by four male graduate students in Chicago as part of their “Now” series that sought to speak as voices of their generation. Their portrait of twenty-two-year-old Shulamith Firestone portrays her struggle with her identity as a female artist, and predates the feminist theory that would become her legacy.²⁹⁶ Despite the fact that 1967 places the documentary squarely in the years of second wave feminism, the film captures only the very beginnings of Firestone’s feminist consciousness. Subrin re-shot the documentary on Super 8 film, and then transferred it to video, a medium conversion that reflects the film’s temporal and cultural conversion from a 1967 art school project to a 1997 queer filmmaker’s video. In *Shulie*, Subrin takes viewers back to one of radical feminism’s central figures to learn about her person through a new perspective—a pre-feminist one.

Subrin’s *Shulie*, which from this point on will be the only version discussed, recreates each scene of the 1967 film, often using many of the same Chicago locations. The intertitle that opens from the film reads, “No matter how many levels of consciousness one reaches, the

²⁹⁵ Subrin refuses to exclude some of the film’s more cringe-worthy moments that evidence the racism inherent to its historical context and the contradictions of radical feminism. As *Shulie* talks about her work place, she makes several derogatory comments about the fact that she works in a “Negro”-dominated workplace. Her disdain for her job at the post office (along with a not-insignificant amount of prejudice) leads her to say things like, “If you meet a Negro, and you want a subject of conversation, the first thing you ask them is how long did you work at the post office?”

²⁹⁶ Firestone would go on to write *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (1970) and become one of the defining figures of 1970s radical feminism.

problem goes deeper,” which comes from Firestone’s 1970 *The Dialectic of Sex*. The film, in a sense, starts with the future by quoting work produced three years after *Shulie*’s timeline. This opening functions as a meditation on the film’s contemporary re-enactment and the possibilities afforded by an identification with a bygone era of feminism—an identification “filtered through thirty years of history by an actress [Kim Soss] who had inherited both the gains produced by feminist activism and the psychic trauma that in part defines our generation: of change promised but not yet delivered.”²⁹⁷ Subrin positions herself as part of feminist legacy deferred, explaining that she made the film out of her yearning to inhabit Firestone’s reality, to feel her way through a pre-1968 moment with the hopes of understanding the political and social stickiness of that era. The director inscribes *Shulie* as a “‘fake,’ recognized as performed from an ‘original,’ [creating] the effect of viewing two films and two time periods at once: a doubling, a haunting, a generational negotiation.”²⁹⁸ The film, then, never becomes totally legible as a documentary, a postmodern remake (since the scenes are historically situated in 1967), or an entirely fictional narrative; it continually floats in the in-between, occupying the gaps that temporally separate us, as spectators, from Firestone.

Shulie is met with a plethora of disapproving gazes from the (male) art community throughout the film; her work does not conform to standards of “good” work and her conceptual framework is lost on her critics. *Shulie* frequently meditates on her existential difficulties with the community, her generation, and the purpose of producing art. She questions her value as an artist, and the value of an education at an elite institution like SAIC. Freeman quips that instead

²⁹⁷ Elisabeth Subrin, “Trashing *Shulie*: Remnants of Some Abandoned Feminist History,” in *F is for Phony: Fake Documentary and Truth’s Undoing*, ed. Alexandra Juhasz and Jesse Lerner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 64.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 63.

of history or conventional biopic, “Subrin delivers a series of throwaway observations and incidents in the life of a depressive, very smart young Jewish female in her final year at the Art Institute.”²⁹⁹ These scene’s accumulation make it hard to read them as throwaways, but if one does read them individually, they say very little about who the person Shulie is in 1967, or the person she would become. In a number of the interview scenes with the film’s subject, the lighting is so low that the viewer can hardly make out the contours of her face, and her affect is so dull, so blunted that it is nearly impossible to find any means of identifying with her. But her dullness and distance (or depression, as Freeman characterizes it) seems to come from her own lack of identification with the film’s present moment. She continually discusses how she does not identify with or relate to her own generation and proclaims, “it’s just not enough for me to live in the now,” and “I want to be a master of time because it’s not enough for me to just live and die.” It is not enough to be tied to the present moment; she is searching for a way to occupy a different sort of embodied temporality.

The film plays with a knowledge that “clearly what a documentary film promised the spectator was a sense of a luminary’s presence—a chance not only to see the dignitary, but to experience him or her at a closer range than quotidian circumstances would ever allow.”³⁰⁰ By invoking a reenactment of the original documentary, *Shulie* too plays with its audience’s reception of Firestone, replacing the original (real) Firestone with a look-alike costumed in an overly artificial wig, an update of her trademark glasses, and contemporary 90s clothing. Subrin creates the sort of distance for which Shulie expresses a desire at many moments in the film.

²⁹⁹ Elizabeth Freeman, “Packing History, Count(er)ing Generations,” *New Literary History* 31, no. 4 (2000): 731.

³⁰⁰ Lucy Fischer, “*Marlene*: Modernity, Mortality, and the Biopic,” *Biography* 23, no. 1 (2000): 195.

During one of the final scenes, Shulie states that she fears the temptation of “becoming too feminine” because it brings the danger of “becoming too physical.”³⁰¹ As she wanders alongside the water, snapping photographs of the surrounding nature, she waxes in voiceover interview about the lack meaning in life; she voices her concerns about becoming just another person who lives and dies, leaving the world without a trace. Her solution to this dilemma is to become “a master of time,” which would afford her a fuller part of a more hospitable future. In the voiceover narration to this scene, Shulie claims that she believes she can make her mark by creating beauty with every brushstroke she paints and every word she writes, but the material outcome of her artwork, as evidenced in the film’s critique scene, has less to do with objective beauty and more to do with a resistance to being present for an unwanted desirous (male) gaze. Like the female figures in her painting, Shulie, and Subrin’s portrayal of her, holds her audience at a distance and refuses them the sort of proximity they expect to find in female embodiment.

Shulie ultimately finds an embodiment in Subrin’s film that may suit her liking. She becomes a figuration of time that finds new life in Kim Soss’s body; her life is taken up by a future generation of women who find relevance and importance in her work. The film ends on a dedication to Shulie that reads, “For Shulamith Firestone, who has endured.” At the 1997 time of *Shulie*’s production, Firestone was still living, but five years later, she died alone in East Village studio apartment at the age of 67.³⁰² Susan Faludi’s description of Firestone’s memorial service paints it as something of a “radical-feminist revival,” but as Faludi continues to describe Kate

³⁰¹ The film offers another glimpse into this fear of becoming too physical in her art critique with a group of male professors at SAIC. Her female nude paintings lack the form and realistic embodiment that her professors deem characteristic of good art, but her paintings display this concern over the female body’s risk of becoming too embodied.

³⁰² Susan Faludi, “Death of a Revolutionary,” *The New Yorker*, April 15, 2013, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/04/15/death-of-a-revolutionary>.

Millet's melancholic reading of Firestone's work and Jo Freeman's personal recollections, the event sounds more like a much-delayed memorial service for radical feminism. The memorial service acts as a time to mourn the writer's death, but it also provides a platform in which to take stock of all that has been lost. B. Ruby Rich briefly mentions Subrin's *Shulie* in her 1998 book *Chick Flicks*, writing, "Subrin has created a document within a document: she makes us feel what used to be, makes us remember again what we actually never knew, and then makes us realize all over again how much we've lost."³⁰³ Rich points out the danger in losing memories that are not archived, or in the case of the original *Shulie*, left untouched in the archive. *Shulie* reminds us not to forget to keep looking for new ways to encounter history, uncovered materials that can change existing historical narratives. Subrin's film digs back into the archive to reshoot the 1967 *Shulie* through a feminist lens, and in doing so, preserves Firestone's legacy for a new feminist generation. *Shulie* feared being forgotten, disappearing, but Subrin's film assures *Shulie*'s ghost that through her film, she does, in fact, endure. Subrin's final dedication acknowledges her subject's desire to defeat time and assures her that, in some way, she has.

4.7 LEAVING BEHIND A FEMINIST-QUEER LEGACY

"For if one history is lost, all of us are less rich than before."³⁰⁴

--Barbara Hammer

Subrin's 1997 historical and cultural location as part a group of queer, feminist experimental

³⁰³ B. Ruby Rich, *Chick Flicks* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 384.

³⁰⁴ Foster, "Barbara Hammer."

filmmakers fuses with Shulie's 1967 location in the Chicago art.³⁰⁵ The film's two temporalities transpose emerging 1990s queer thought that seeks to question history, subjectivity, and identity over one of second wave feminism's most iconic faces. Elizabeth Freeman explains that in *Shulie* "a queer vision of embodiment intersects with some feminist concerns about generationality, continuity, and historicity."³⁰⁶ In much the same way that Firestone's work, as *Shulie* suggests, set the stage for future work on cybernetics, it worked through many of the concerns that queer studies would explore twenty-some years later.³⁰⁷ Subrin refuses to render Shulamith Firestone obsolete; her thinking, her spirit remains crucial for understanding feminist thought today. Subrin's queer-feminist approach to her subject suggests just as much about the mixing of temporalities in the film as the 1967 and 1997 production dates. I read the film's approach to embodiment not as a separate intersecting vision (like Freeman), but as the key orchestrator of the audience's encounter with Shulie, and Francesca Woodman in *The Fancy* (2000). The two films do not provide a straightforward encounter with history, but demand that the spectator take up a certain residence in the film and navigate its locations, unconventional narrative, and evocation of its subject.

The Fancy and *Shulie* work within the sphere of the biopic and the documentary to offer a

³⁰⁵ Subrin's work came slightly after the rise of New Queer Cinema in the late 1980s and early 1990s, but it still fits into that milieu of work by experimental filmmakers like Sadie Benning and Todd Haynes. Benning worked extensively with Subrin on her films, from the sound editing to the 35mm slides in the "History" section of *The Fancy*. In many ways, Subrin's work fits an intermediary text between more classical queer experimentation, as evidenced by her involvement with MIX NYC, and the riot grrl aesthetics of the 1990s. Subrin's work also preceded the next wave of more conventional (commercial) filmmakers like Jamie Babbit, whose Shulamith character in *Itty Bitty Titty Committee* (2007) makes this connection all the more apparent.

³⁰⁶ Freeman, "Packing History," 729.

³⁰⁷ Donna Haraway's work on cybernetics/cyborg feminism forms the foundation for such thought, but more recently, scholars like Rosi Braidotti have worked toward a theorization of posthuman feminism.

counter-cinema that produces a queer-feminist heritage—a heritage for future generations of women who could not speak, and women whose words once spoken were not incorporated into “the community.” These films obsession with the individual and investment in their personal history may at first glance seem like a highly normative gesture that works in tandem with projects of essentializing notions of women’s community. And yet, the formal qualities of Subrin’s work disrupt any such simplistic readings. In her film’s, there is something awkward, something off, something a little uncomfortable, a something that speaks to a lack of fitting into one’s community, or one’s world. *Shulie* tells a history about what it is like to be a woman, a lesbian, and/or a feminist, conveying the affects and traumas of such an existence. A 1995 MIX NYC festival panel curated by Subrin featured her film *Swallow* and other shorts. The program’s description: “Navigating personal identities that are speculative, multiple, contradictory, these all-girl queer shorts examine loneliness and the dysfunction of difference in strikingly hybrid forms.”³⁰⁸ At this point in the MIX NYC Festival, the programming had begun to move away from the immediacy of the AIDS crisis and toward meditations on intimacy and specific identity formations under the umbrella term queer. The loneliness and dysfunction that the panel description is concerned with seems, in this case, a particularly girly one—“the dysfunctionality of difference” may in fact be a dysfunction of sexual difference. This MIX panel articulates the girl that hangs over all of Subrin’s work, a girl alienated from the discourses of second wave feminism and in need of an education from women of the past.

³⁰⁸ 1995 Program Listings, Box 8, Folder 725, Mix Collection, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University, New York.

As I mention after the panel description, 1995 was a year of uncertainty for MIX NYC. The festival celebrated “100 years of cinema” with a retrospective on Todd Haynes and a look at queer cinema before the birth of New Queer Cinema. This celebration, however, came alongside panels like “Scorched Terrain: AIDS and the Contemporary Landscape,” a panel curated by Jim Hubbard that examines AIDS remains from the perspective of “some hapless survivors.”

Mulvey's figuration of the obsolescent feminist, as exemplified by 1970s feminism, encompasses the belief that there are past feminists whose experiences are no longer relevant to our present moment, and whose ideologies are antiquated things of an angry feminist past. Shulamith Firestone exemplifies the separatist radical feminism of a bygone era, but instead of allowing Firestone to be seen as a feminist relic, Subrin demonstrates the pleasures that can come with identifications with the feminist past. The film provides girls of a post-feminist era with the sort of healing that comes through the recovery of a feminist moment they were not able to live. Richard Dyer reminds us that history and heritage is not the same thing: "History is a discipline of enquiry into the past; heritage is an attitude toward the legacy of the past."³⁰⁹ Heritage carries a greater affective charge because it both creates and relies on our ability to feel a closeness to past generations that construct both familial and national identities. Elisa Giaccardi elaborates, "It is about making sense of our memories and developing a sense of identity through shared and repeated interactions with the tangible remains and lived traces of a common past."³¹⁰ In order to create a feminist heritage, the feminist past must be felt and identifications must be made with faces of the past. The queer nostalgia for 1970s cultural feminism that Youmans describes, as discussed at the beginning of the chapter, comes from a longing for the affective charge of that historical moment. The danger of an umbrella term like queer is that it risks losing the specificity of sexual identity and the pleasures that can come with an identification of "those like me." *Shulie* seeks to recoup some of that nostalgia, but reminds us, through Firestone's more

³⁰⁹ Richard Dyer, "Nice Young Men Who Sell Antiques: Gay Men in Heritage Cinema," in *Film/Literature/Heritage: A Sight and Sound Reader*, ed. Ginette Vincendeau (London: British Film Institute, 2001), 44.

Dyer, as I take up toward the end of the chapter, is dealing specifically with differentiating the heritage film from rote historical representation.

³¹⁰ Elisa Giaccardi, *Heritage and Social Media: Understanding Heritage in a Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 1.

contradictory moments, that feminism has never been perfect.

4.8 **SEARCHING FOR TRUTH: SUBRIN'S INVESTIGATION INTO THE CENSORED PAST**

The Fancy takes up the questions of how the woman artist learns who she is and how she subsists in a world that provides her with little material for sustenance. Subrin's performs an investigation into Francesca Woodman's life, but it does not search for answers; the film searches for something amongst Woodman's personal archives, some bit of remains that was not previously preserved, because, in the end, these remains present our only access to the past. While *Shulie* questions whether or not we need to see the "real" Shulie to get an adequate picture of her life, *The Fancy* asks whether or not we need any sort of direct representation of the film's biographical subject to understand and learn from her life. Moreover, the history that *The Fancy* tells via voiceover narration involves recourse to the existing (real) archives, but the visual representation of those archives comes through one that Subrin invents. The film tells us that in instances where our archive is tampered with and/or censored, it is our feminist duty to create a new one.

The Fancy begins with an empty room and the sound of static, recreating the cracked walls with layers of plaster and paint slowly falling away that often appear in Woodman's photographs. One voiceover later reveals these "environments of elegant decay" were the type of spaces Francesca preferred, but in these initial moments, the viewer is given no information to help her figure out where she is and why she is here. As the camera moves around the seemingly empty rooms, a background noise that sounds like someone moving around the room and

tinkering with a device alerts the viewer, hinting that the rooms may not be empty after all. The off-screen sounds hint at the possibility of Francesca's unseen presence; imaginably the noises come from Francesca adjusting a camera lens, setting up a tripod, clicking a camera. Over the course of its thirty-six-minute running time, the film hints at Francesca's presence but refuses to conjure her image or a direct representation of her work.³¹¹ Unlike Hammer in *Maya Deren's Sink*, Subrin does not return to the filmmaker's (real) former dwellings; instead, Subrin imagines and recreates the spaces Woodman occupies in her photographs. Through the process of recreating these rooms, walls, and sounds, Subrin inserts herself into Woodman's personal past and too takes up residence there.

As the film moves through Francesca's "Photo Locations 1971-1981," the narrator continues to provide a timeline of Francesca's life and work, but the camera only shows decay, an aging fireplace, and a white wall with a superimposed black frame (a nod to a framing repeatedly used in Francesca's work). The emptiness of the spaces creates the sense of Francesca's presence that haunts the film, but it also echoes the way in which "from the very beginning, Francesca Woodman places herself in the strange world of an anti-picture."³¹² Sollers uses the term anti-picture to refer to the anti-picturesque spaces that she selects for her work, but "anti-picture" also describes Francesca's simultaneous appearance and disappearance in her work, the way her body merged with spaces, became transparent, and sometimes disappeared. But possibly, what it also points to is the way in which Woodman avoided conventions of portraiture and representations of the female body. Her images appear anti to what we expect of

³¹¹ I frequently refer to Francesca Woodman as Francesca throughout this section to communicate the intimacy and familiarity Subrin's portrayal creates, a gesture I take from the filmmaker's approach to her subject.

³¹² Philippe Sollers, "The Sorceress," in *Francesca Woodman* (New York: Scalo Publishers, 1988), 10.

a picture; her body appears fluid and transforming; her body thwarts a sexualizing (male) gaze.³¹³ More specifically, her photographs thwart a sexualizing gaze that reduces woman's body to object and thus delimits the possibilities for that body.

The Fancy's narrator informs the audience that Francesca sought to portray the woman's body as icon of desire. But while Woodman does feature other women's bodies in her work, her primary occupation appears to be understanding and representing her own body as icon of desire(s). This iconography of Woodman's body is created through her own understandings of women's desire and through the lens of her own gaze. In this way, Francesca's body resists traditional modes of portraiture and containment in conventional modes of representation. Peggy Phelan explains: "central to Woodman's photographic self-portraits is a refusal to be still. Woodman's insistence on exposing this resistance within a medium dedicated to arresting stillness lends her photographs a dramatic force that spills over the frame of the image."³¹⁴ This refusal to be still is also a refusal to become an object of a sexualizing gaze. In becoming an object, one can also become a possession. Francesca's body, instead, becomes primary site for her own artistic objectives, and her body becomes the tool through which she communicates with the world.

The film's "Enactments 1974-1981" section ends with what Nicole Armour rightly describes as the film's most haunting voiceover, in which the narrator describes a story that

³¹³ I am, of course, referencing Laura Mulvey's foundational concept developed in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975). The male gaze and its accompanying women's looked-at-ness informed much of second wave feminist film theory and political action. Despite the datedness of these concepts, something Mulvey discusses in her "Introduction" to *Feminisms*, they remain crucial tenets of screen theory and feminist art production.

³¹⁴ Peggy Phelan, "Francesca Woodman's Photography: Death and the Image One More Time," *Signs* 27, no. 4 (2002): 985.

Francesca's father told her: "a dragonfly would sew a girl's lips together if she ever lied."³¹⁵ As the camera pans over Francesca's possessions, the female narrator describes each photo of the 1980 *Girl with Weed* triptych, ending with this tale of lips sewn shut. In the set of three images, a dragonfly appears in the middle photograph, delicately resting on a box of soap. Like the rest of Woodman's photographs, the film only describes these images, but it lets the viewer know that the dragonfly sits in between the face of an androgynous figure—whose face's contours look so smooth that it appears to be a marble statue—and the titular image of a nude girl holding up a weed that is as large as her body. Given the evocative nature of these two other images, it is specially striking that Woodman would place the dainty little dragonfly at the triptych's center. However, taking into account the fact that the Woodman family is in control of the Francesca's estate, the film suggests that perchance it was not the dragonfly who sewed Francesca's lips shut, but instead—the teller of that very tale.

Shortly before the narrator relates the tale Francesca's father told her, the *Girl with Weed* triptych description is accompanied by the camera's continued panning across the archive of the artist's (supposed) possessions, and among pinned butterflies, scraps of wallpaper, and high-heeled shoes sits a book titled *The Family of Man* (Carl Sandburg, 1955). Sandburg's book presents a collectible version of Edward Steichen's 1955-curated exhibition at New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), an international endeavor consisting of 503 images by photographers from 69 nations.³¹⁶ In *On Photography*, Susan Sontag expresses her disdain for

³¹⁵ Armour, "Disappearing Acts," 55.

³¹⁶ *The Family of Man* exhibition was first on display at MoMA in 1955, but would then go on to tour the world for eight years. Artists included in the exhibition included (amongst many others): Jerry Cooke (USA), R. Diament (USSR), Nora Dumas (France), Leopold Fisher (Austria), Hideo Haga (Japan), and David Moore (Australia).

Steichen's depiction of, what she describes as, a 1950s consoling and distracting sentimental humanism.³¹⁷ Steichen's exhibition shored up visions of the imagined American community, and according to Sontag, "the last sigh of the Whitmanesque erotic embrace of the nation, but universalized and stripped of all demands, was heard in the 'The Family of Man' exhibit."³¹⁸ The film's inclusion of this curated collection of sentimental portraits stands in sharp contrast to Francesca's own use of portraiture. In other words, the film positions Woodman against an ideologically normative method of making meaning and recording personhood. The artist's portrayal of the female body resists (gendered) conventions of portraiture that contain the body, and in its place allows the female body to push beyond the photograph's frame and challenge its viewer's understandings of what the body can be and do.

The Fancy's narration of Francesca's lips sewn shut is particularly striking given that Subrin provides the voiceover. Subrin's transposition of this tale over the images of Woodman's triptych leads to a different interpretation of them, and thus produces a different understanding of their history. The film begins with the question of how much of Francesca's work the public has seen, and more importantly, not seen. In between the opening and the first full section of the film, the scene cuts to black and a voiceover address the public exhibition of Francesca's work; the disembodied voice specifies that roughly 500 images are thought to exist, but the public has only seen 107 of them, and that a number of images included in that count have been printed multiple times.³¹⁹ Something about Francesca's work must have demanded their censorship, but

Celia Hartmann, "Edward Steichen Archive: The 55th Anniversary of *The Family of Man*," last modified November 17, 2010, https://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2010/11/17/edward-steichen-archive-the-55th-anniversary-of-the-family-of-man/.

³¹⁷ See Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin Books, 1977).

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 31.

³¹⁹ Ted Loos, following the release of *The Woodmans*, provides updated statistics on the

we can only ever speculate what that something may be. Subrin's film hints at the control of Francesca's art collection and censorship of her work again and again. The film numbers five parts, but only includes four: Part "3. Education" skips directly to part "5. History." The film does not address this omission, but the narrator's reminders of Francesca's archive's missing pieces does hint that there is likely more to the story than Subrin can convey. These absences with no name rest at the center of Subrin's film, and *The Fancy* works to fill in those absences and unanswered questions by creating an archive of Francesca's life. *The Fancy*'s creation of an archive inspired by Woodman's photographs begs the question, is the archive of Francesca's possessions that Subrin invents any less telling than an incomplete or censored one? Put another way, the film questions whether or not we can trust a censored archive and suggests that one inspired by the artist's work provides just as much, if not more, access to Francesca's life. Subrin's creation of a personal archive for Francesca begins to sketch out some of those biographical holes, but the film does not purport to offer any sort of mastery of Woodman's biography.

4.9 THE FANCY'S CREATION OF A TRUTHFUL ARCHIVE

The Fancy's perpetual return to Francesca's faux personal archive—the collection of Victorian-inspired lace slips, rolls of film, sketchbooks, costume jewelry, pressed flowers, a typewriter, and many items that the film implies belonged to Francesca—functions as the film's *mise-en-abyme*.

number of published/unpublished photos that comprise the Francesca Woodman archive. In The New York Times piece, "Sharing a Guarded Legacy" (2011), he writes that there are 800 photographs in her estate, 176 of which have been exhibited. To put these numbers into a more concise statistic, this would mean that only 22% of her work has been seen by the public.

As Subrin's camera searches for significance in a most quotidian archive, the camera scans over these objects again and again as if doing so will reveal some sort of truth. But the film's denial of any sort of revelatory moment suggests that maybe such truth only resides in the gaps, "in between all regimes of truth."³²⁰ Instead of asking the obvious questions, like why the artist ended her own life, Subrin looks to the minor moments, and the moments that seek to tell the life that Woodman lived.³²¹ She asserts: "If we are to create histories that recognize difference, we also need to preserve moments that don't look like history with a capital H. We need to record and analyze minor, awkward, multiply coded, and irreducible representations."³²² As Subrin's films record these moments, they also produce filmic objects that do not look like history with a capital H; they leave behind something a little more complicated, a little awkward and uncomfortable for future generations of feminism.

Subrin's refusal to show either Francesca's body or a direct representation of her work, which was likely an issue of copyright, prompts the viewer to search for the photographs the film describes. In this way, *The Fancy* sets the spectator up for another future encounter with

³²⁰ Minh-ha, "Documentary Is/Not," 76.

³²¹ Scott Willis, director of *The Woodmans* (2010), claims that his documentary work on Francesca Woodman is about finding answers to his questions about where the art comes from. Like a more traditional documentary, Willis's film relies on the "talking heads" style of filmmaking in that Woodman's parents and other trusted sources close to Francesca tell their truth, narrating their experiences with the artist in an attempt to explain her life and her art. Or, according to Subrin's Film Comment review of the film: "Willis defaults to a bland, chronological account of Francesca's life, narrated by a small protective circle of friends, while a melancholic score anticipates her inevitable ending" (17). The *Woodmans* team received unprecedented access to the Woodman's estate and collection of Francesca's work—access that comes with the guiding hand of her parents whose voices structure the documentary. The *Woodmans* begins with video footage of Francesca behind a semi-transparent sheet of paper writing her name in big scroll letters, but as she starts to tear through the paper and emerge, her father's documentary voiceover begins. Her family's concern with her "reputation" throughout the film produces some curious moments, but as Subrin notes, "a work about a suicide with parents as primary source material, will always be problematic at best" (17).

³²² Subrin, "Trashing *Shulie*," 65.

Francesca, this time through the world of her photographs. And in the case that the spectator is already familiar with Woodman's work, the film prepares her to return to the artist's work as recording of Woodman's body—her experiences, her thoughts, and her feelings. Moreover, in place of conventional, corporeal, biopic representation, the film only provides the viewer with access to spaces Francesca (according to the film's world) inhabited. *The Fancy* may not look like a typical biopic, but it *is* one. Francesca's body is not available for the spectator's identification, but the world in which she lived is. Richard Dyer explains how cinema that looks back to the past can simply be a vehicle for investigating history, but it can also be driven by an impulse "towards appreciating the things of the past and telling stories of what it is like to live among them."³²³ In the case of *The Fancy*, the film's emphasis on the Francesca's dwellings invites its spectator to take up uneasy residence in the film, to experience Francesca's life alongside her ghostly presence.

Each room encourages the spectator to explore, to search for traces of Francesca in each disintegrating space. The empty spaces invite the viewer to become an investigator, to make sense of these rooms, to imagine how the artist inhabited them. To re-imagine how her body inhabited these spaces, how they merged with walls, defying not only rules of time and space, but also defying the unspoken rules for how a woman's body is expected to interact with the home. In photographs like the House series shot in Providence, RI (1975-1976), Woodman plays with the photograph's exposure to blur her own image almost to the point of erasure. In House #3, only her leg is distinguishable while the rest of her body becomes one with the wall and window behind her. But in telling Francesca's story through these locations, the film also figures something of a difference between Subrin's and Hammer's work. While much of

³²³ Dyer, "Nice Young Men," 44.

Hammer's work deals in making the body visible, whether it is the lesbian body or Deren's body recorded in film, Subrin's *The Fancy* deals more with making an archive of the body visible. In *The Fancy*, the spectator only interacts with Francesca's haunting, and the film invites her to follow Francesca's ghosts and take up residence in her world, to feel her presence without needing to identify with a direct representation of her body.

Subrin's creation of Francesca Woodman's world invites the spectator to take up residence in the film, but it is also an invitation for them to develop a closeness to Francesca. Art historian Abigail Solomon-Godeau writes, "The work she produced is a living testimonial, a valuable request to other women. Alienated from language, from culture, from image, from body—the woman artist nonetheless manages to speak."³²⁴ The women of Francesca's photography, including Francesca herself, do not speak; they only address the viewer through bodily language, a language created within the space of Woodman's photographic world. In many of her photographs, Francesca's body resembles that of the hysterical women photographed by doctors like Jean-Martin Charcot in the Victorian late 19th Century. These hysterical women find a language of the body outside of patriarchal, symbolic language.³²⁵ In Woodman's artwork, her body doesn't need culture and its accompanying language or images of femininity in order to speak. Woodman reclaims the hysteric's bodily language via her self-portraiture in which her body floats, contorts, and plays with the duration of exposure, taking up physically impossible relationships to the spaces it occupies. Woodman's body merges with

³²⁴ Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, Institutions, and Practices* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 255.

³²⁵ I am referencing psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's conception of language and the symbolic order in which one must give up the mother's language of the body and identify with the Law of the Father in order to become a speaking subject. See Elizabeth Grosz, *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction*, New York: Routledge, 1990.

these spaces, passes through walls, and defies laws of time and space.

In the film's penultimate sequence, a voiceover reads Philippe Sollers's words about the artist: "I don't like Francesca Woodman, I admire her. She bears witness to a time where experience and the stakes of the game were intense, dangerous, intoxicating. What is there today? AIDS, unemployment, Monica Lewinsky, Hillary, the Oscars ...Farewell, refined sorceress! We will see your work again one day, in another cycle of history."³²⁶ His remarks fall somewhere between Woodman's 1981 death and *The Fancy's* 2000 production. Sollers's words might also help us to appreciate the paradigm of too early, too late that plagues much of feminist film criticism, and to see how questions of feminist generation break down in the sorceress Woodman.³²⁷ Woodman misses the moment of the AIDS crisis—she is too early; the film's production misses the crisis moment by about eight years—it is too late. Francesca's identification with and clinging to the Victorian era, both in terms of her styling and conjuring of hysterical women, already places her as a too-late figure. And yet, Sollers's call for Woodman "today" indicates that possibly she was, in fact, too early. Sollers's "today," with the exception of Monica Lewinsky, does not look any different than today's today. And from today he goes on to suggest that her work will resurface "in another cycle of history." In much the same way that Shulie is simultaneously feminism's obsolescent figure and too early for her generation, Woodman becomes a sorceress of time, unsuitable to the temporality into which she was born. Perhaps. But perhaps, Sollers's, as well as Solomon-Godeau's, positioning of Woodman as a sorceress of time illuminates a queer *desire* for Woodman's endurance, a desire to be close to emulatory figures of the past and insist on their living on.

³²⁶ Sollers, "The Sorceress," 13.

³²⁷ See Kaja Silverman, "Too Early/Too Late: Subjectivity and the Primal Scene in Henry James," *Novel 21* (1988): 147-73.

Solomon-Godeau insists that Woodman provides a living text for future women to hold onto, to use as a pedagogical resource. This sense of feminist pedagogy, or mentorship, in many ways, works against some critics reading of Woodman's work as simply aesthetic beauty or a romanticizing of her suicide.³²⁸ Moreover, Subrin's *The Fancy* counters contemporary exhibitions of Woodman's work that treat her photographs as a sort of transcendent legacy, meaning they emphasize the ethereal quality of her work, glorifying the work's beauty in a way that, in turn, diminishes the material life lived by their creator.³²⁹ In the film's "Education" section, a poster on the classroom wall slips in a clue for the informed viewer that places Woodman within a lineage of female artists. The camera glides in and out of various classrooms before stopping to focus on one wall adorned with a Nan Goldin poster, more specifically an *I'll Be Your Mirror* exhibition (1999) poster.³³⁰ Goldin was one of Woodman's contemporaries, and the two artists lived and worked in New York at the same time, although it is doubtful that the two ever met.³³¹ The choice to include a poster for *I'll Be Your Mirror* connects Goldin and Woodman through the film's citation of Woodman's words "a woman is a mirror/a woman is a mirror for a man". These verses are taken from Woodman's photograph *A Woman; A Mirror; A Woman is a Mirror for a Man, Providence Rhode Island, 1975-1978*, and the photograph reflects

³²⁸ This sort of romanticizing or glorification of women's tragedy evokes Shakespeare's Ophelia and the number of representations of the character that followed, particularly the Pre-Raphaelite painters'.

³²⁹ I am thinking particularly of Moderna Museet's *On Being an Angel* exhibition (2015).

³³⁰ Goldin's work would begin the project of documenting those around her dying during the AIDS crisis and curated exhibitions such as "Witnesses." I discuss Goldin's work in more detail in the next chapter.

³³¹ While Woodman and Goldin produced work at the same time, some art critics have positioned Woodman as a sort of predecessor of Goldin, as well as a significant influence on Goldin's work. See Rachel Cooke, "Searching for the real Francesca Woodman," *The Guardian*, August 30, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/aug/31/searching-for-the-real-francesca-woodman>.

how a man constructs his identity through the image of a woman shaped as his object of desire. Woodman's words predate Goldin's exhibition by some twenty years, but they demonstrate the artist's dual understanding of how we come to see ourselves through the image of another.

Yet, this question of mirroring begs the question of who the artist is mirroring for, and what it is that they are mirroring. Like Woodman's images, Goldin's photography contains intensely personal subject matter and uses her own body as subject, alongside the bodies of those closest to her.³³² For both artists, their own body and life experiences make up their photograph's content, but in staging their bodies, they also become canvases on which others can project their own experiences. More pointedly, the fact that *The Fancy* places the *I'll Be Your Mirror* poster in the classroom implies a pedagogical function to Goldin's and Woodman's work; through the access viewers gain to Goldin and Woodman, their photographs become materials that can affect and educate their viewers. The artists' photographs allow the viewer to experience a world outside of their own, crawling in through the window of the photographer's lens to take up residency in a different world. But of equal importance, by placing the Goldin poster in the film's *mise-en-scène*, *The Fancy* aligns Woodman's work with transgression and positions her within a specific history of woman photographers who dared to represent what dominant culture seeks to censor. Goldin's portrays much of what dominant culture would prefer to disavow: sexual transgression, people living with HIV/AIDS, and the effects of domestic violence. The film's nod toward transgression and censorship once again begs the question of what images

³³² Other artists such as Cindy Sherman, Lynn Hershman Leeson, and Hannah Wilke worked contemporaneously to Woodman and were also developing photography that staged a styling of the self as feminist statement. Cindy Sherman has commented on their status as contemporaries, as well as the differences between their photography. See Artsy Editors, "Through the Lens of: Francesca Woodman," last modified April 7, 2013, <https://www.artsy.net/article/editorial-through-the-lens-of-francesca-woodman>.

remain unseen in Woodman's censored archive.

Through the film's placement of Goldin's *I'll Be Your Mirror* exhibition poster, along with the bodies of other women who populate the film, reenacting Woodman's photographs, *The Fancy* moves Francesca away from a (male) legacy of artwork like *The Family of Man* and positions her in line within a feminist lineage. *The Fancy* takes Woodman's suicide as a given, and in favor of focusing on that sensationalized story, they look toward what Woodman's life left behind. Solomon-Godeau lovingly describes Woodman as a bearer of gifts for women, who cannot tell their own stories, women whose lips too were sewn shut.³³³ Woodman leaves behind a unique gift; she leaves behind the inheritance of a guidebook for inhabiting a world in which one exists but is not seen, speaks but is not heard. The photographer's self-portraits provide a testimony to her existence and remind women that through art, through self-inscription they too can be seen. Even more pointedly, Woodman leaves a means through which women can become real, to themselves and others. In the "Enactments" section of Subrin's film, a variety of bodies pose in emulation of Woodman's images; these women act out Woodman's photographs as the narrator describes them, embodying the artist's work and making their own bodies seen. Woodman's, and other female artists', bodily inscription and self-preservation act as a direct challenge to the figures of the feminist ghost, the apparitional lesbian, and all other women's absence from history.

³³³ Rachel Syme, in "Selfie: The revolutionary potential of your own face, in seven chapters," discusses Francesca Woodman as one of the female artists to use self-inscription, selfie photography, as a revolutionary way to be seen prior to the smart phone's invention. Woodman's work was also included in the Tate's *Performing for the Camera* exhibition in 2016.

5.0 LOOKING THROUGH INFECTED EYES: LIVING WITH AIDS IN THE QUEER PRESENT

A lot of people seem to think that art or photography is about the way things look, or the surface of things. That's not what it's about for me. It's really about relationships and feelings. . . . It's not about a style or a look or a setup. It's about emotional obsession and empathy.

– Nan Goldin

Stuart Marshall's *Bright Eyes* (1987) begins with headlines of the press's coverage of Kenny Ramsaur's HIV progression before turning to Western traditions of portraiture, discourses of sexology, and the long history that structured the way in which the nation viewed HIV-infected bodies. The media's sensationalizing of bodies like Ramsaur's is further evidence of a desire to point to a real body that could serve as the face of the virus, as with the Patient Zero narrative. Marshall makes Ramsaur's case part of the film's larger project to read AIDS representation "in relation to the archive of nineteenth-century medical photography, which as founded on the medium's purported capacity for picturing the truth of deviance."³³⁴ *Bright Eyes* demonstrates that the moralizing discourses that defined normal versus deviant, healthy versus infected bodies that would come to define the years of the AIDS epidemic were an afterlife of nineteenth-century medical, visual cultures. Fear-generating media coverage evoked simultaneously abject and pathetic queer body that could be pointed to as a threat to the nation and a specter of death.

³³⁴ Roger Hallas, "Queer AIDS Media and the Question of the Archive," *GLQ* 16, no.3 (2010): 433.

Queer filmmakers' turn to the biopic, as I demonstrate in previous chapters, intertwines with long histories of medicine, education, and notions of personhood. But while the queer biopic cannot be thought outside of the biopic genre's history, it also cannot be thought outside of other media representations and queer interventions taking place during the years before, during, and after the AIDS crisis. In this chapter, I assert that queer biographical representation both engaged with and countered images of HIV-positive bodies established in both mainstream media coverage and People With AIDS (PWA) portraiture.³³⁵ As images of queer infected bodies filled the nation's newspapers, televisions, and museums, a clear picture of what it means to live with AIDS congealed in the national imaginary. These images structured ideas about whose bodies could count as members of the public—which bodies upheld the nation's imagined community, and which bodies represented a danger to it. Both the biopic and PWA photography determined public reception by engaging with scophophilic desires, voyeuristic fascination, and Western culture's obsession with the individual.³³⁶

However, the photograph that was said to have changed the face of the AIDS crisis was one that replaced the face of queer threat with another of queer humanity.³³⁷ Therese Frare's photo of David Kirby surrounded by his family (1990) sought to humanize the face of the crisis,

³³⁵ Throughout the chapter, I am using PWA as an abbreviation for People With AIDS because of its more universal usage in scholarship from the AIDS crisis years. However, I want to acknowledge that many queer activists rightly made the argument for using PWLA to signify Person Living With AIDS, a person who is not defined solely by the virus but happens to be living a life that includes the virus. Their addition of the L (living) works to counter associations of queer, HIV-infected bodies as ones awaiting imminent death.

³³⁶ As I discuss in the second chapter, the biopic comes out of a larger tradition of literary biography and investigations into the individual in forms such as the Freudian case study.

³³⁷ Ben Cosgrove, "The Photo That Changed the Face of AIDS," *Time*, November 25, 2014.

<http://time.com/3503000/behind-the-picture-the-photo-that-changed-the-face-of-aids/>. Therese Frare's photo of David Kirby was published in *LIFE*, and later colorized in a controversial Benneton advertisement.

demonstrating that bodies who were cast as threat to the nation's children were also someone's child. And yet, like the very photographs Frare's image supposedly countered, it too fascinates audiences through the spectacle of a body marked other—a body that is so obviously not healthy. PWA photography created a vocabulary or sort of guidebook for identifying the HIV-positive body—an iconography made up of skeletal bodies, Kaposi sarcoma lesions, and vacant stares. Kaposi sarcoma, in this iconography, becomes a physical marker of the virus—an inscription of its presence on the body's exterior. The bodily marker speaks the virus and reveals what the naked eye cannot see: that the virus resides in any given body. Beyond bodily markers, AIDS portraits by artists like Billy Howard and Rosalind Soloman demonstrate a consistent aesthetics of PWA photography. The portraits were almost exclusively shot on black-and-white film that communicates their somber tone; often their subjects are shown alone at home, in bed, or perhaps with a loved one.³³⁸ These photographs' pathos relied on their subjects' vulnerability and status as passive victim; their bodies are simply vehicles through which assumptions and sometimes myths about the virus as a destructive, deadly threat to the nation's vulnerable bodies are clearly affirmed.

These two modes of portraiture—queer threat and queer humanity—once again echo the two types of queer subjectivity regularly available in mainstream media: promiscuous menace and pathetic victim. In doing so, PWA photography consolidates many of the issues at stake in AIDS crisis representation of queer bodies, issues that come down to questions of who is represented, who is representing, and how are they represented. Portraiture, like the biopic, raises the questions of what it means to present a person, and thus, what it means to present

³³⁸ I am referring to Billy Howard's "Epitaphs for the Living" exhibition (2017) and *Epitaphs for the Living: Words and Images in the Time of AIDS* book (1989), and Rosalind Solomon's "Portraits in the Time of AIDS" exhibition (1988).

personhood. But, undoubtedly, they both also raise the question of what it means to represent a compelling picture of personhood. In the case of PWA portraiture, to be compelling is to be a fascinating face for AIDS. If the biopic provides a face for success, salacious fascination, and/or star persona, PWA portraits explicitly only point to that face as a face of the virus. The question of fascinating (or not), however, first points to a question of audience—who is the photography intended for, and what is its intended purpose? On the surface, PWA photography purports to offer information and education: but the type of education those different images offer remains a bit murkier.

The biopic, both in terms of its genre construction and its appearance as teaching material in public schools, positions its audience to view the film as educational, a model for emulation. The biopic positions the audience to learn from an individual by capturing their attention, making them want to know more, and thus encouraging them to identify with that individual, to align themselves with their onscreen experiences.³³⁹ But while the biopic uses particular faces to teach audiences something new, PWA media coverage taught us that these faces do not always

³³⁹ Public schools in the 1930s and 1940s often used films recommended by the National Board of Review (NBR), following the popular belief at the time that children are at formative stage and can be directly shaped by what they see on screen, both positively and negatively. Correspondence between the NBR and organizations like the New York Child Welfare Committee and the National Juvenile Motion Picture Board presume this belief to claim that certain films can be used to uplift the nation; more specifically, showing children particular kinds of films and film subjects in the absence of others can mold children's senses of self—what is morally right and wrong and what it means to be a leader—to help build a better social future. The NBR often championed biographical films as the best suited to accomplishing this task because public figures with memorable *personalities* appeared to stick with children and thus have a more lasting impact and better educational outcome. Letter to Charles F. Powlison (New York Child Welfare Committee), November 9th, 1910, Box 19, National Board of Review of Motion Pictures Records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library, New York. Letter to Judge Ben Lindsey (Juvenile Court, Denver, CO), June 22, 1914, Box 19, National Board of Review of Motion Pictures Records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library, New York.

teach people to see something new; instead, those faces often only serve as evidence for what is already believed to be true. In these cases, the media's coverage of individual life stories serves to support the scare tactics and statistics audiences have previously heard; an individual body provides an anchor for those numbers and the threats AIDS posed to the nation's health and safety. As queer activists sought to counter stigmatizing scare tactics, recourse to the personal, to individual faces, represented a possibility for cultural change. Put another way, if individual bodies reinforced accepted national beliefs, then individual bodies also held the power to shift or reorient those beliefs. Queer artists and activists were fighting back against a whole host of fear-generating images, but the representational conventions of those images also presented the space for queer activist possibility. In taking control of those mechanisms of identification, queer artists possessed the ability to show something new—to represent what it means to live inside an infected body from a new perspective.

5.1 WHO GETS TO REPRESENT INFECTED BODIES?

Nicholas Nixon's ethnographic photographic study "People with AIDS" represents the most iconic and controversial PWA imagery.³⁴⁰ The series appeared in Nixon's 1988 exhibition titled "Nicholas Nixon: Pictures of People" in New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), and was later published in the standalone book *People with AIDS* (1991). I make the distinction between the two because the original exhibition placed his burgeoning portrait series of people with AIDS

³⁴⁰ Andy Grundberg, "Photography View; Nicholas Nixon Seeks a Path to the Heart," *The New York Times*, September 11, 1988, <http://www.nytimes.com/1988/09/11/arts/photography-view-nicholas-nixon-seeks-a-path-to-the-heart.html?pagewanted=all>.

alongside his other series that featured portraits of people outdoors, photographs of his wife and her sisters, and nude studies of his wife and children, while the book made his pictures of people with AIDS a product that could be consumed.³⁴¹ Stripped from the gallery walls and the context of Nixon's other work, the othering nature of the work becomes magnified. The MoMA press release for the exhibition asserts that Nixon's images of PWA "draw us to the person as an individual, not an anonymous victim."³⁴² And while these words intend to endorse Nixon's exhibition, they remind us that although Nixon's subjects are (maybe) not anonymous victims, they are still victims. Bethany Ogdon, in "Through the Image," dismisses this claim to individuality, writing, "The rigid equation that Nixon's PWA project proposed, AIDS=death, transformed his photographic subjects from distinct and distinguishable social beings into interchangeable examples of that equation. In Nicholas Nixon's photographs of PWAs, human bodies seem to function merely as screens on which the 'truth' of AIDS (death) is made to materialize."³⁴³ The interchangeability of their bodies mirrors the proliferation of media images that portray queer bodies as dangerous at worst and pathetic at best.³⁴⁴ Nixon's equation of his subjects with death further renders their bodies docile and vulnerable to the public's gaze and consumption.

³⁴¹ *Nicholas Nixon: Pictures of People* Fact Sheet, June 1988, MoMA, accessed August 6, 2017, https://www.moma.org/documents/moma_press-release_327513.pdf.

³⁴² *Nicholas Nixon: Pictures of People* Press Release, August 1988, MoMA, accessed August 6, 2017, https://www.moma.org/documents/moma_press-release_327512.pdf.

³⁴³ Bethany Ogdon, "Through the Image: Nicholas Nixon's 'People with AIDS,'" *Discourse* 23, no.3, (Fall 2001): 76.

³⁴⁴ While scholars such as Douglas Crimp and Paula Triechler have written about these two images—national threat and pathetic victim—in AIDS crisis media, Simon Watney's *Policing Desire: Pornography, AIDS, and the Media* (1997) provides the most thorough analysis of film and television's portrayal of the infected queer body.

Douglas Crimp reiterates the danger of Nixon's exhibition: "Not only do journalism's (and art's) images create false stereotypes of people with AIDS, they depend upon already existing false stereotypes about the groups most significantly affected by AIDS."³⁴⁵ What Crimp identifies as false stereotypes, Ogdon points to as the AIDS crisis's "truths," and yet, their intended conclusions are the same. Each face of a PWA provides further proof of an infected queer body on the precipice of death, with the ability to spread that death sentence to others. Elevating Nixon's photographs to the status of art further reinforces those stereotypical representations as truthful representations of queers living with AIDS, and all queers by extension, creating a visual shorthand for identifying infected bodies. But if Nixon's portraits only legitimize the claims of PWA media representation, what would a truthful AIDS portrait look like? Or rather, what would a positive or politically productive portrait look like? Crimp does not necessarily seek to prescribe new rules for PWA representation, but he does look to work that deconstructs and/or significantly breaks with the codes repeated in Nixon's images. Crimp turns to the video *Danny* (Stashu, Kybartas 1987) as a counter to the perpetuated images of sick, dying victims in Nixon's photos. The video shows a man with sexuality, desire, friends, a life, and a virus. *Danny* presents the life of man living with HIV who is not made pathetic by the virus and whose life did not end at the moment of diagnosis. Crimp mentions *Bright Eyes*'s critique of Kenny Ramsaur's in order to demonstrate the archetypal PWA representation the video works against. *Danny* refuses the media's recognizable dichotomy between the sexually voracious, young gay man who infects and the withering body infected with AIDS. In doing so,

³⁴⁵ Douglas Crimp, "Portraits of People with AIDS," in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, et. al (New York: Routledge, 1992), 126.

it crucially articulates a way to represent what it means to live with HIV without reducing that person to the virus.

Interestingly, the examples Crimp points to are all moving images, which raise further questions about the relationship between something like a cinematic biopic and photographic portrait. More specifically, if the biopic is built on a premise of fascination, identification, and emulation, can we apply these same principles to PWA photography? Both forms invite audiences to inspect and learn from the face of an individual figure, but while cinema may ask us to see through another person's eyes, portraiture asks us to see *into* their eyes.³⁴⁶ Throughout film history, the actor's face has served as the privileged site of identification; the close-up in classical Hollywood cinema serves to build empathy and suture the spectator into the protagonist's gaze. The portrait freezes that moment of identification, and although the portrait cannot construct film's world or narrative of personhood, it creates an iconic image. Frare's photo transformed the face of the AIDS crisis because her representation of David Kirby gave the AIDS crisis a new face that the nation could point to, reproduce, and widely circulate.

Critiques of Nixon's photography tap into an assumption that portraiture intends to represent a person—a person living a life, and a person with subjectivity. After all, "pity is not solidarity."³⁴⁷ Pity is not identification. At best it is sympathy, not empathy; at best, viewers feel something about the portrait's subject instead of feeling *with* them. Nixon employed the fascination associated with displays of individual faces, but his subjects lack the interiority necessary for these faces to educate; by separating his subjects' bodies from their embodied subjectivity, he, in essence, separated them from their ability to affect their viewer, relegating

³⁴⁶ Gilles Deleuze and Béla Balázs have most canonically written about the power of the face, or faciality, in the context of film scholarship.

³⁴⁷ Crimp, "Portraits of People with AIDS," 126.

PWAs to a metaphorical or visual quarantine that much of the nation wished was a reality. Nixon's images reinforced an othering paradigm in which members of the heterosexual community (and other privileged communities) could act as voyeurs, gazing upon the vulnerable, infected bodies of the queer other. Jennifer Doyle, in *Hold it Against Me*, writes, "Art about AIDS constantly navigates these different pressures to represent the specificity of what being HIV-positive and having AIDS means, but also to refuse [the pressure] to reduce a person to the story of a virus and a disease, not only because such reductions are dehumanizing but because they risk mirroring the phobic equation of homosexual desire with disease."³⁴⁸ Doyle's words summarize art about AIDS as an attempt to give a humanizing face to the virus without making that face the virus. In other words, politically and affectively productive art demonstrates what it means to live AIDS without reducing that representation to mainstream media's need for "humanizing" images—a sort of AIDS porn that makes its viewers feel as if they have done their civic duty by seeing the virus, without needing to confront the material conditions that shape PWAs' world.

Doyle points to David Wojnarowicz as an artist who used his body and voice to elicit anything but pity; his art about the crisis intended to (and did) elicit extreme reactions from audiences and conservative critics. Wojnarowicz's film, photography, painting, and performance art recorded what he deemed to be an authentic history, one that gave a voice to individuals stigmatized, and thus marginalized, by state-supported society.³⁴⁹ With the advent of the AIDS crisis and his own diagnosis, his art became increasingly politicized and unafraid to directly

³⁴⁸ Jennifer Doyle, *Hold It Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 133.

³⁴⁹ Visual AIDS, "David Wojnarowicz," accessed August, 30, 2017, <https://www.visualaids.org/artists/detail/david-wojnarowicz>.

indict the US government's and medical community's response to the crisis. Doyle also alludes to the way in which artists like David Wojnarowicz used their work to express anger, the grief of loved ones left behind, and other difficult emotions that did not fit into a neat narrative. Instead of inspiring simple pity or even understanding, his work challenged viewers with his anger. His work made his viewers feel the difficulty and impossibility of existing in the world as a queer, HIV-positive person—the impossibility of being seen as a person worthy of love and possessing a life worth living. The image most commonly used to represent Wojnarowicz is an untitled self-portrait created with Rosa von Praunheim and Phil Zwickler for the film *Silence = Death* (Rosa von Praunheim, 1990). In the film still, Wojnarowicz's lips are sewn shut, the string still threaded through the needle that sits in the right side of the frame, blood dripping down his lips and chin. In images such as this self-portrait, Wojnarowicz confronted his viewers with a face that refused victimhood and taunted them with what state-supported institutions would have preferred: his silence.³⁵⁰

5.2 NAN GOLDIN'S QUEER WORLD

Wojnarowicz's art challenged its audiences with the perspective of someone whose world suddenly became restructured by the AIDS crisis—both in terms of his own positive diagnosis and the loss of those closest to him. His multimedia works that addressed both governmental neglect and what it meant to be queer in America existed alongside his more intimate portraits of

³⁵⁰ See my discussion of the NEA's funding repeal in the next section.

former lover and longtime friend Peter Hujar.³⁵¹ Similarly, Wojnarowicz's friend and longtime-collaborator Nan Goldin's photography recorded the progression of the virus through her community. Goldin's PWA portraits were rarely identified as such, which likely stems from the fact that these photographs took place within the same world as the rest of Goldin's oeuvre. Her images of friends and loved ones with AIDS existed alongside and amongst her photographs of other faces of the East Village art world and party scene; in Goldin's images, AIDS became part of a bigger world and a broader life narrative. Goldin repeatedly presented a curated and stylized version of her life in slide show form, *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, for the Collective for Living Cinema.³⁵² Her live slide-show presentations were in and of themselves a living archive—they changed as Goldin's life and those in it changed over the early-to-mid 1980s. In 1986 *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* premiered at the Berlin Film Festival, with the slide show set to a soundtrack curated by Goldin.³⁵³ With its premiere at the Festival, this personal archive, designed for public consumption, moved from intimate screenings in the East Village to an international platform, open to bigger and more diverse audiences. The audience appeal of Goldin's experimental, kitschy work came from knowing that these photographs were of actual people, and a ticket to the show's screening represented something like a ticket into Goldin's

³⁵¹ Peter Hujar was also a predominant photographer in the East Village art scene and served as Wojnarowicz's mentor. Hujar was best known for his black and white portraits of figures such as Kiki Smith, David Wojnarowicz, Andy Warhol, and Divine. See The Peter Hujar Archive, "Images," accessed August 25, 2017, http://peterhujararchive.com/images_tags/portraits/.

³⁵² See Ed Halter, "Collective Memory," *The Village Voice*, March 27, 2007, <https://www.villagevoice.com/2007/03/27/collective-memory/>.

³⁵³ MoMA's recent exhibition of *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* showcased Goldin's photographs in their many forms—on the walls of the gallery (which can be taken as a moment for stand alone contemplation, or viewed as a collection), the book (Aperture 1986), and the theater room presentation of the "film." It also included promotional material from screenings at Collective for Living Cinema, OP Screening Room, Slides at the Pyramid, Inroads, The Bowery Project, and more.

world of sex, passion, dreams, and glamor. Her images offered access to a world that was off-limits or taboo for most. And yet, as the AIDS crisis began to hit Goldin's community, her portraits of friends who were HIV-positive did not change. Her PWA portraits were never separated from images of the people who loved and cared for the portraits' subjects. Even in 2017's Art AIDS America exhibition catalogue, Goldin's *The Arm*, a close-up shot of an AIDS patient's tiny arm resting on a hospital bed, is shown in a series of images, *The Plague* [1986-2001 (printed 2007), grid of 16 prints]. True to the photographer's world, *The Arm* rests amongst other scenes of her life: parties, sex, art, and death.³⁵⁴

Goldin's *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* in its many forms—still photographs, slide shows, and book—provided a record of not only her life, but also her life of observing and recording the lives of others. Her curated exhibition “Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing” (1989) addressed the AIDS crisis's loss from the perspective of bearing witness. Goldin described, “The tone of the exhibition has become less theoretical and more personal, from a show about AIDS to an issue to more of a collective memorial.”³⁵⁵ The “issue” Goldin spoke of is the National Endowment for the Arts's (NEA) refusal to fund the exhibition because Wojnarowicz's “Post Cards from America” essay included in the catalogue criticized right-wing politicians, namely Senator Jesse Helms. Because of this, Calvin Reid described the exhibition as a “morbid dance between the unnecessarily stigmatized community of AIDS sufferers and the often hostile forces

³⁵⁴ Jonathan David Katz and Rock Hushka, *Art AIDS America* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015), 243.

³⁵⁵ “Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing” was held in New York's Artists Space and featured the work artists including Peter Hugar, David Wojnarowicz, Kiki Smith, and David Armstrong. Artists Space, “Witness: Against Our Vanishing November 16, 1989 – January 6, 1990,” accessed August 23, 2017, <http://artistspace.org/exhibitions/witnesses-against-our-vanishing-3>.

entrusted with combatting the disease.”³⁵⁶ Moreover, the NEA’s defunding demonstrated the way in which queer artists’ politically charged portrayals of their own community were always under the policing eye of those entrusted with the nation state.

“Witnesses” provided the space for Goldin and other artists to express their loss, and the exhibition continued Goldin’s ongoing impulse to bear witness and preserve emotional encounters. The artist traces her fascination with photography back to her sister’s suicide; at a young age, her response to her sister’s death was to start taking photos so that she would never lose someone again. Documenting her friends’ HIV-positive bodies comes from the same impulse, an impulse to never lose one’s memory of a loved one. Goldin connects the two, stating, “[my sister’s] death completely changed my life. I’m constantly looking for the intimacy I had with her, in my life and in my work. And I think about the deaths of my friends. My sister’s death is more abstract to me, more symbolic. Their deaths are real, and that’s left behind this immense legacy. That’s why I photograph. I miss so many people so badly.”³⁵⁷ Her photography presents a way to remember people and cope with loss in such a way that makes memories not a haunting reminder of their death, but a history of their life lived.

Nan Goldin’s provocation about photography that epigraphically frames this chapter argues that art is not about how things look, but how they make us feel. She makes the claim that photography is not about what things look like but about “relationships and feelings,” the “emotional obsession and empathy” that it creates. But Goldin does not specify whom these feelings and emotional obsession are between; photography, in Goldin’s terms, is defined by

³⁵⁶ Calvin Reid, *Art in America* (April 1990), Box 8, Folder 36, Lynne Tillman Papers, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University.

³⁵⁷ Review of Goldin in *Spin* (1996), Box 9, Folder 610, Dennis Cooper Papers, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University.

relationality, but she does not specify whom photography puts in relation. This relationality could refer to the emotional obsession the photographer has with their subject, but it could also refer to the emotional obsession inspired in the photograph's viewer. Most importantly, it does not exclude the possibility for both, nor the possibility of relation between the images themselves. Her images allow the viewer into her reality reoriented by the AIDS crisis, a reality in which death became woven into the fabric of life. As such, her portraits allow the viewer to take up her position as a witness—an observer and feeler of immense loss.

5.3 KIA LABELIJA'S BODY IN CRISIS: INVOKING QUEER HISTORY VIA SELF- INSCRIPTION

This perspective of bearing witness becomes refigured through Kia LaBeija's camera lens. Visual artist and AIDS activist Kia LaBeija's name alone calls forth a history of searching for identity, belonging, and self re-imagining. Her name pays homage to the Iconic House of LaBieja, one of the most prominent homes of Harlem's queer ball culture, made famous in Jenny Livingston's *Paris is Burning* (1990). LaBeija rose to internet fame for her stunning voguing performance on the streets of Bogotá as the star of Pillar Point's "Dove" music video. The video begins with a slow reveal of LaBeija's body through alternating cuts, beginning with her feet and cutting as she receives a phone call to a shot that reveals her thighs, and finally to a close-up of her face. From there, the camera tracks her body's movement out of domestic privacy and into the public, onto the streets of Bogotá. Director and editor Jacob Krupnick's editing follows and highlights LaBeija's movement and guides the viewer's access to her; her dancing across the city is peppered with interludes of close-up shots that allow LaBeija a chance to "give face," a term

coined in ballroom culture. One observer of Harlem's ball culture comments, "Through giving face and refusing to flinch, they embody that timeless, unspoken command of ballroom walkers throughout history, expressed by those who've been ignored everywhere else but on the runway: *Look. At Me.*"³⁵⁸ By demanding to be seen, LaBeija's body becomes something of a public spectacle, but this spectacle is so wholly divorced from the AIDS crisis media spectacle that painted PWAs as monsters, murders, and a threat to the nation's families and way of life.³⁵⁹ Her body becomes part of the public; passersby turn to look at her while she floats across the streets. The video's climax comes with its reveal of a previously concealed figure—the dove's (LaBeija's) pursuer. The moment is punctuated by the figure's "surprise reveal": it is not a man, as the androgynous clothing and spectatorial expectations may have suggested, but a woman.

The dove and her pursuer come to meet in a passionate dance, and the scene's reciprocation of desire is underscored by the fact that the other woman is actually LaBeija's real-life lover, Taina Larot. But what the "Dove" video does not explicitly tell us is that Kia LaBeija is living with HIV. But would knowing that LaBeija is HIV-positive change the way audiences receive the video? In other words, do we need to know that we are seeing a person living with HIV for the video to fully affect its audience, and what does knowing this information change? By knowing LaBeija's personal and activist history, this dance becomes not only a representation of lesbian desire, but also a representation of a PWA as both the object of and holder of desire. And there is, of course, a way in which the evocative nature of LaBeija's performance makes a viewer want to learn more about her, and their interest could spark a chain of curiosity in which

³⁵⁸ Steven Thrasher, "Paris is 'Still' Burning," *Out*, May 22, 2011, <https://www.out.com/entertainment/2011/11/15/bronx-drag-ball-scene-continues-thrive>.

³⁵⁹ Stuart Marshall's *Bright Eyes* visualizes the media's spectacularization of the queer body; the video begins with the unhealthy body as spectacle and traces the medical and visual history that created the media's fascination.

one learns about her art, her activism, and the queer (AIDS) history her body represents. But at the same time, one does not need to dig that deep to see that history. It is already marked on LaBeija's body. From her voguing movements and gestures to the way she is styled, her body already signals her as part of queer black milieu.

Whether or not a viewer knows LaBeija's HIV status, she has already invoked a history of black culture that is inextricably linked to the AIDS crisis history. While "Dove" uses LaBeija's physical body and brings visibility to her queer identity and desire, it is the video's relationship to her own performance, video, and photographic body of work that I find most compelling. Taken a step further, I am interested in the way she uses her body in video and digital photography to tell the history of the AIDS pandemic and to demand that that history been seen as not only part of our past, but also as part of our immediate cultural moment. Working through the medium of self-portraiture, I seek to examine how LaBeija's re-enactments of her own personal history channel past traumas and experiences that belong to bodies other than her own.

LaBeija's identity as a queer black woman living with AIDS is in some ways necessarily bound to figures of the past. In a *Village Voice* profile on the artist, Theodore Kerr writes, "For as long as Kia can remember, she's been seeking cultural representations of anyone who looked like her: a queer woman of color. She felt a spark of kinship when she first saw the drag ball documentary *Paris Is Burning* while in high school."³⁶⁰ Livingston's documentary captures the perils of being black, queer, and (in some cases) trans at the height of the AIDS crisis. The film presents a document of history—both in terms of the AIDS pandemic and what we now

³⁶⁰ Theodore Kerr, "A Families Affair," *The Village Voice*, June 21, 2017, <https://www.villagevoice.com/2017/06/21/a-families-affair/>.

understand to be the beginnings of queer studies/cinema—but for a teenage LaBeija, the film was anything but past. As someone living with the virus, *Paris is Burning* reflected her present. The ballroom culture made famous in Jennie Livingston’s 1990 *Paris is Burning*, a film that also holds an important, if contested, place in the New Queer Cinema canon, explores how the spaces of the ballroom and house allow one to imagine one’s gendered, embodied self differently.³⁶¹ Moreover, the film explains the houses’ formation of a new language to describe such identities, a language built upon the ballroom culture’s disidentification with dominant media and consumer culture.³⁶² Kia LaBeija incorporated, and continues to incorporate, the history Livingston portrays into her own identity by taking on the LaBeija name, while now acting as the Mother of the House of LaBeija. And in this way, she constructs her life in the legacy and incorporation of the lives of those before her.

In the brief interview footage included after LaBeija’s “Ignition” video, she states, “Voguing makes me feel like a real person. It makes me feel like a human being.” She goes on to call voguing a lifeline. The lifeline LaBeija discusses here as a necessarily dual one: it is a lifeline to imagining herself as a person with a life—a person not defined by her HIV status—and a lifeline to the past, to those who lived a life like hers before her. Voguing presents a way to be seen and to feel like a part of a collective, not only in the present moment of performance, but also in the way that dance connects her to the history of ballroom culture. Voguing can reach out to people, touch the audience, move them, but this reach out is implicitly always a simultaneous reach back; in other words, voguing reaches out to new audience with an embodied movement

³⁶¹ Both bell hooks and Judith Butler have critiqued Livingston’s portrayal of the Harlem ballroom culture in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* and “Gender Is Burning: Questions of Appropriation and Subversion,” respectively.

³⁶² See José Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

that can never be divorced from its past. The voguing body in motion represents a means of intergenerational connection that can happen anywhere, allowing for the feeling of being real, being human, and being connected.

5.4 LABELIJA'S PORTRAITS OF SELF-HISTORY

Given just these two examples of LaBeija's work—"Ignition" and "Dove"—it is all too easy to see the movement of voguing as the center of her artistic world. However, LaBeija also captures her personal history and the stylized affect of ballroom culture in her photography. She poses her history, treating her body as a sort of artifact posed in the spaces that hold her memories. Visual AIDS was the first to show her work, and she has gone on to be featured in a number of prestigious exhibitions, namely the traveling Art AIDS America. The transmedia reach of LaBeija's work, in many ways, exemplifies the way in which contemporary artists and directors are working across a variety of media, taking advantage of the opportunities the digital can offer, but there is something else at work in the tension between her body recorded in movement in video and her body captured in static photography. If her voguing in video, creates a lifeline that reaches out, her photography creates a life frozen in a moment of memorialization. LaBeija's work uses different media to tell different (hi)stories; her photography captures the melancholia inherent to the AIDS crisis and the accompanying desire to preserve for the future.

According to her Visual AIDS artist bio: "As a visual artist she stages digital portraits as theatrical and cinematic re-imaginings of non[-]fictional events to spark conversation,

complicating the way we view her subjects and the spaces [they] occupy.”³⁶³ LaBeija stages her own HIV-infected body to visually narrate entangled histories of the AIDS crisis, mourning, and queer identity—histories that take on new life in her body, whether she is dancing across the streets of New York or staring back at us in the photographs of her *24* series. The *24* series is named for her age at that moment in 2014 and the number of years she had spent in the apartment space the work represents. And yet, I also read the *24* title as a double meaning for her age and the cinema’s 24 frames per second.³⁶⁴ The arrangement of the series appears like a series of cinematic images—a series of frames whose narrative does not necessarily hang together, containing a number of ellipses and temporal gaps and drags. And this cinematic quality further emphasizes that her photography and the histories her work mobilizes are, in the end, not static; they are not bound to the limits of a gallery frame or the temporal binds of the past. *24* represents a lifetime of memories, freezing the ecstatic body we see in the “Dove” and “Ignition” videos, and meditating on Kia LaBeija’s life and the history of those who shaped that life. The series presents the memories that LaBeija was never expected to amass. Thanks to the advances in HIV treatment over the years, she was able to live much longer than doctors ever expected, and her photographs represent an archive that attests to her existence and living on.

So much of LaBeija’s work centers on how to portray the body that is infected with but not defined by the HIV virus, and that focus becomes most explicit in *Eleven* (2015), named for the 11th anniversary of her mother’s passing and photographed in the hospital room of the doctor who has been treating LaBeija since she was four years old. In the photograph, LaBeija sits on a

³⁶³ Visual AIDS, “Kia LaBeija,” accessed January 15, 2017, <https://www.visualaids.org/artists/detail/kia-labeija>.

³⁶⁴ I am thinking Laura Mulvey’s play on 24 frames per second in her book *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image*.

hospital bed wearing her red prom dress, as her doctor draws her blood. The vibrancy of her dress and scarlet lipstick stand out against the sterile hospital backdrop, but they cannot fully distract from the reason Kia's life is marked by doctor appointments: her HIV-positive status. Kia's doctor is, after all, drawing her blood, examining her body's health. The virus becomes a sort of given and her stare back into the camera invites the viewer to see her reality. However, while the virus is there in the room, it does not define her body; the virus does not limit the ways in which she can imagine herself and create herself in the world in front of (and outside of) her camera. The virus exists alongside of, and in many ways outside of, her adorned body: her powerful red dress at the center of the frame draws the viewer into LaBeija's stare back into the camera, with the doctor's office and medical equipment fading into the shadowed edges of the frame. They are a part of her story, but they are not her only story to tell. LaBeija's photography brings viewers into her home, her doctor's office, into the spaces that have defined her life. "Showing the private in public changes the narrative of what things mean," Kia explains, "affirming the power in representing one's own story."³⁶⁵

The spirit of LaBeija's mother, who she lost at the age of 14, looms over and convenes with all of her work. Whether her presence is explicitly named and represented, as in the case of *Kia and Mommy* (2014), or whether it melancholically hangs over her photographs' world, as in *The First Ten Years* (2014). *The First Ten Years* literalizes life lived amongst the ruins of life lost. Kia LaBeija describes the photograph: "I took this on the 10th anniversary of my mother's death. I was playing dress-up in my mother's wedding dress, and I had this drawer of her personal belongings; ID, address book, rings. I decided to deal with them, so I took everything in the drawer, threw it to the ground and started to go through it. I captured the moment and added

³⁶⁵ Kerr, "A Families Affair."

it to the series.”³⁶⁶ She sits surrounded by the archives of her mother’s life, allowing them to speak and endowing them with a spiritual, transcendent quality. This quality takes root not in the vibrant, saturated, glossy image I associate with photographs like *Eleven*, but in its use of punctuated chiaroscuro lighting that creates an ethereal glow around LaBeija and her nest of belongings: a bible, high heels, a glittered clutch, crumpled papers. These things surround LaBeija shrouded in her mother’s wedding dress as she clutches a stuffed animal—the work represents a melancholic unwillingness to move forward and go through the stages of life represented by the belongings. In other words, at the time the photograph is taken, it is near time for LaBeija to wear her own wedding dress, if we are moving in the chronology of heteronormative time, but here she sits, stuck in the limbo of adolescence. Ten years after her mother’s death, LaBeija sits later cloaked in her mother’s possessions stuck in adolescence’s perpetual swing between adulthood and childhood.³⁶⁷ Throughout the *24* series, LaBeija invites her viewer into her most personal space—both physically and psychologically; *The First Ten Years* invites its viewer to enter into both the physical space of the artist’s mourning, and into the psychological space of learning how to live on when one’s life and identity is defined by so much loss. LaBeija, like Goldin, opens up the physical space of her private life for her viewer’s cohabitation. In doing so, she exposes the way in which the AIDS crisis media coverage was always an investigation into the private lives, and beds, of queers—always a pathologizing of

³⁶⁶ Amelia Abraham, “Photographing Black, Female, HIV Positive Power,” Refinery29, last modified December 30, 2016, <http://www.refinery29.com/kia-labeija-on-photographing-black-queer-femme-power#slide-5>.

³⁶⁷ Jack Halberstam, Elizabeth Freeman, and Heather Love have all written about how queers experience time in a different way, but Lee Edelman, in *No Future*, most clearly articulates how futurity, the figure of the child, and heteronormative pairing structure our understandings of life and death.

what happened behind closed doors.³⁶⁸ Her photographs reorient the public's relationship to her ordinary life; the ordinariness of her work may, in fact, be what makes it so compelling. LaBeija reveals the virus's presence in literally every corner of her life, but she simultaneously reveals the possibility for creating a life in that space, albeit a life structured by loss that cannot be forgotten.

Mourning Sickness portrays the side effects of HIV medication, but that wordplay brings forth a larger queer history and project of mourning intrinsic to the AIDS crisis. LaBeija talks about the photo's title as being a verbal pun on the morning sickness of medication and the floor where she spent so much time mourning the loss of her mother to AIDS.³⁶⁹ The loss of LaBeija's mother structures the *24* series, and this perpetual hangover of mourning comes to the fore in *Mourning Sickness*. Unlike AIDS crisis artists who were mourning the loss of lovers and friends, LaBeija mourns the loss of a parent. This difference might at first glance appear inconsequential—a loved one is a loved one—but it significantly points to the fact that LaBeija belongs to a new generation. Her mother belongs to the first wave of people infected by the virus, and represents the women of color and mothers who were frequently left out of dominant histories of the crisis. She was active in AIDS political work throughout LaBeija's early life, and while LaBeija learned from her mother how to be an activist and to live life as an HIV-positive black woman, LaBeija's need for mothering was not complete at the age of fourteen. The rest of LaBeija's education about how to live in the world as a queer black woman with HIV came from

³⁶⁸ See Felix Gonzalez-Torres, "Private and Public: Spheres of Influence" in *Queer: Documents of Contemporary Art*, ed. David J. Getsy (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016), 85-90. Gonzalez-Torres traces AIDS politics back to the creation of the private and public spheres as a mechanism of social control.

³⁶⁹ Amelia Abraham, "Photographing Black, Female, HIV Positive Power," Refinery29, last modified December 30, 2016, <http://www.refinery29.com/kia-labeija-on-photographing-black-queer-femme-power#slide-6>.

the housemothers of Harlem's ballrooms. The passing of her mother takes on an almost palimpsestic quality in LaBeija's photographs; LaBeija's life as a member of a new generation living with the virus is structured by a legacy of loss, both in terms of her own mother and the ballroom queers who came before her. Life can be made under these terms, but it cannot be made good.

5.5 CREATING A FACE OF AIDS

The majority of LaBeija's *24* series takes place in her Hell's Kitchen apartment, but New York City, more broadly, as a metropolitan container of the history of lives and bodies lost during the AIDS pandemic hangs over her photographs. LaBeija's *Mimi's Last Dance* acts out a moment from a play inspired by the East Village art scene devastated by the AIDS crisis: *Rent*. She stands posed in a red dress as *Rent*'s Mimi, draped across a balcony, much like the character's fire escape, in front of the city that shapes both *Rent*'s diegetic world and LaBeija's life. In this photograph, she recreates one of the first HIV narratives that she used to understand her own HIV-positive status. Instead of simply knowing that there were others out there living with HIV, she was able to *see* a person with her story. Mimi's character is tied to the origins of the AIDS crisis, and thus also connects LaBeija to a generation of queers living with HIV who paved the way for her life. This moment of queer emulation evokes LaBeija's retelling of her seeing *Paris is Burning* for this first time; in being able to see queer bodies living with HIV, LaBeija was able to see how to build a self and live in a world where her body was marked as other. *Mimi's Last Dance* reinforces the role of witnessing, of seeing in LaBeija's identity own identity formation. Identification, and accompanying emulation, is at the center of spectatorial fascination with

cinema; *Mimi's Last Dance* follows suit, especially in the way that this photograph simulates movement through its sweeping gesture. Here, LaBeija literalizes the way in which cinema can allow one to “try on” the subjectivity of another, seeing through the eyes of someone else. This image, however, captures the positional specificity and *labor* involved in ballroom drag performance. The artist literally fashions her body in the image of *Rent*'s iconic figure, and in doing so, literalizes the labor of building a life in the image of those like her. Film and photography provide a space for queers to find their image reflected back to them; in a world where models of how to live as one's self are not readily available, the cinematic screen and the photographic frame provide a vision of queer emulatory figures.

Kia LaBeija is a face for HIV/AIDS; her work insists that a viewer read her in that way. But unlike Nixon's passive PWA subjects, LaBeija is in control of the type of face she becomes, and in charge of what that face tells her viewer. She makes herself the face of what it means to live with HIV now, while channeling the history of those faces whose histories were perhaps never told. Her representation is self-representation; she decides how she wants to look, what she wants to say about her images, and how the image is framed, edited, and printed. And unlike the representation of PWAs in *Paris is Burning* that allowed her to see HIV-positive bodies that looked like hers, a film created by white filmmaker Jenny Livingston, LaBeija's photography begins with a queer, HIV-positive person of color behind the camera lens. Unlike the ethnographic lens of Livingston's film and Nixon's photography, LaBeija's camera is not one that gazes in. LaBeija's photography does not present a voyeuristic look in from the outside, but a look at living with HIV created by a PWA. Her photographs invite her viewer into her most private spaces on her own terms. Yet, these images do not provide a direct look at LaBeija's life (assuming that such a look is possible), but instead provide an “authenticity” characteristic of the

queer ballroom; LaBeija's images perform the "realness" of ballroom drag performances. Far from a spontaneous snapshot, the artist's home and hospital room are staged and serve as a stylized recreation of a moment of lived experience, acting as a recreation of their supposed original.³⁷⁰ Photographs such as *Eleven* play with viewer's desire for authentic representation, and through their thorough staging, mock the very notion of capturing a knowable, authentic lived experience.

Her photography and video work, in this way, represent an alternative to ethnographic PWA representation, and she claims her own camera as a lens through which to represent bodies marked other. In his critique of Nixon's portraits, Crimp recalls Allan Sekula's words on the politics of representation: "At the heart of fetishistic cultivation and promotion of the artist's humanity is a certain disdain for the 'ordinary' humanity of those who have been photographed. They become the 'other,' exotic creatures, objects of contemplation."³⁷¹ So, according to Sekula, in order for subjects to be elevated from ordinariness within conventional portraiture, they must conform to voyeuristic (fetishistic) expectations. Custen's biopic formulation suggests that any portrayal of an individual must remove the subject from the mass's ordinariness, but while the biopic's removal is an elevation, the removal that Sekula speaks of is a different form of exceptionalism. Instead of the biopic's exceptionalism based in the subject's greatness, Sekula speaks of an exceptionalism based in marginalization. The AIDS portrait does, in fact, remove its subject from mundane existence, but in doing so, it magnifies the distance between the viewer

³⁷⁰ I am thinking here of Judith Butler's discussion of gender performance as simulacra in *Gender Trouble*.

³⁷¹ Crimp, "Portraits of People with AIDS," 125.

Sekula's piece was originally written in 1976, and later reprinted in 1984. I select a portion of Sekula's words that Crimp cites in his piece, with the acknowledgement that I bring my own reading to those words.

and the subject's humanity; it magnifies the us-them dichotomy of AIDS media coverage and gives the viewer a distance from which to gaze.

But not only does Sekula raise questions about the politics of representation, his words also raise questions about the *ethics* of representation: Who is seen? Who is not seen? Who acts the seer and who serves as the one seen? In the case of photographic portraits by Solomon, Howard, and Nixon, even if the depiction of their subjects may differ in important ways, the AIDS victim is seen through the perspective of an outsider looking in. In other words, the person with AIDS is always looked *at*. Viewers may be inspired to look at or look away, but LaBeija's photography and videos make room for something else: a gaze that looks back. In instances like the cuts to close-ups of her face in the "Dove" video or the self-portraiture of *Eleven*, LaBeija looks directly back at the viewer, sometimes in coy ways that court their gaze, sometimes with looks of authority that assert her control. Throughout her work, particularly her *24* series, LaBeija invites the viewer into her world, but her gaze back into the camera reminds the viewer that she also sees them and this look in is on her terms.

5.6 QUEER BODY ARCHIVES: BUILDING A NEW CONSCIOUSNESS

LaBeija's *24* was first exhibited as part of Visual AIDS' gallery show "Ephemera as Evidence" (2014), placing her in a milieu of queer artists who use ephemera or mundane remains as the source material for representing queer life and history. Her interaction with the ephemera of her and her mother's lives re-animates the archive of their personal histories and reorients this ephemera's relationship to the present moment. These archives become both evidence of her private relationship with her mother and her public experience as an HIV-positive, black queer

woman. Even more so, her video and photography work record the history of the community of queers she draws on every time she vogues and photographs her staged self. On the history of voguing LaBeija states:

Voguing is a direct response to the oppression of brown and black queer and trans bodies. This style, [sic] has been a way for this community to express themselves and love themselves for almost 5 decades. In the 1980's, the ballroom community was hit extremely hard by the AIDS epidemic. Many of the legends and Icons of that time are gone. So when we do LSS [Legend Statements and Stars], when we bring them into the room, when we speak their name, we honor them. This dance has been a savior for a lot of people who needed a space to feel like they were beautiful even if they were living with HIV/AIDS, were kicked out of their homes, or were survivors of extreme forms of abuse because of their sexual or gender identity.³⁷²

Each act of voguing is a call back to wake the dead who came before her, those whose names must be spoken.³⁷³ In the ballroom space one can become part of a community built around differences that make each member a star, and that articulation of difference comes in the form of each member's own approach to voguing and self-fashioning. Within a world where HIV/AIDS became something of the norm—unlike the outside world—being HIV-positive did not make one an oddity; the virus was not what made one different. Instead, the ballroom represented a space to come together and express one's queerness, joy, and self-love. LaBeija's photographs follow in this legacy of ballroom culture, as she represents herself living as an

³⁷² BH is Voguing, "Five Questions for Kia LaBeija," last modified February 22, 2016, <http://www.bhisvoguing.com/kia-labeija-english/>.

³⁷³ Kia LaBeija released an official statement about the lack of diversity in the Art AIDS America exhibition, stating that she was honored to be included in an exhibition of its magnitude, but angered to be one of only four black artists in the Tacoma exhibition. In response, she stated, "I dedicate my portrait series in honor of all black and brown womyn living with HIV, living with AIDS, and the memory of those womyn who are not here. I speak your name."

See Kia LaBeija, "Official Statement on 'Art AIDS Americas' lack of black identified artists," Facebook, December 19, 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/KIABENBOW/posts/10205595953203119>.

individual with the virus—an individual whose health is not a marker of difference, but and individual whose self-stylization marks her as different. Following ballroom culture’s history of self-fashioning, Kia LaBeija’s photography and video work take on the task of *self-preservation*; her self-produced images archive her body in the vision of her own creation. What both ballroom culture and her photography provide, then, is a medium for expressing one’s body as a piece of history, as a body and a life structured by a history of loss.

In 2016, the year of House of LaBeija’s 50th anniversary, Kia LaBeija took over as House Mother. The language of mother connotes a caretaking that involves the gendered labor of taking care of the houses “children,” but there is also a caretaking of the house’s legacy that falls in LaBeija’s capable hands. She is the first cisgender woman to act as the House’s Mother, but this is not the only “first” the artist represents. As the face of #undetected, she represents a new era of living with HIV, an era in which one’s body no longer represents a threat. LaBeija is both a vessel of history, a holder of House of LaBeija memories, and the face of the future. She acts as an ambassador for contemporary ballroom culture, traveling to cities like Paris to spread the history of voguing culture. Her role as Mother not only involves teaching the new generation of queers how to dance and pose, but also includes teaching them where voguing came from: the history of its founding community.³⁷⁴ Instead of her body functioning as a transmitter of the HIV virus, her body transmits something else: history and knowledge.

³⁷⁴ She describes the experience of going over to Paris in her Art AIDS America Chicago exhibition interview. She discusses how voguing made it to Paris, as Pepper LaBeija’s wished (as is expressed in *Paris is Burning*), but that their understanding of voguing was entirely divorced from the political and emotional history that shaped the movement. Alphawood Gallery, “Art AIDS America Chicago: Artist Kia Labeija in Conversation with Zach Stafford (17 Feb 2017),” Vimeo, <https://vimeo.com/206321006>.

In the third chapter, I demonstrate how the (queer) biopic creates a space for intergenerational relationality within the space of the cinematic screen (the process of spectatorship) and the process of filmmaking. However, LaBeija's photography and video create a similar space for relationality in both their process of production and viewer reception. More specifically, her voguing performances and photographs' staging put the artist herself in touch with queer predecessors, but viewing her work also puts younger (and possibly future) audiences, who may or may not have an HIV/AIDS consciousness, in contact with the remains of lives past. Additionally, her body reminds us that HIV/AIDS does not belong solely to the past but is very much a part of our present. She refuses to forget the losses of the past and brings them into her reality, creating a duality representative of the AIDS pandemic's temporality.

In taking on and transforming the queer past and her present, LaBeija's body shifts audiences' understandings of AIDS history, and complicates their relationship to AIDS temporality. She literalizes her own exploration of the queer past in photographs like *Mimi's Last Dance*, and thus complicates what counts as a record of the past, as a queer archive. The record that LaBeija produces insists that the queer past must not always be produced in its historical moment of occurrence; instead, encounters can persist and drag, and come to vision years later. She stages and records the remains of her personal history, and in doing so, she creates the possibility for viewers to interface with her past in the present and the future. Roger Hallas, writing about queer scholars' renewed interest in 1970s pre-AIDS gay film, describes how returning to alternative archive materials, like queer cinema, reorients our consciousness of the present:

It offers the opportunity to contemplate our own complicated historical difference with the more recent past of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s and 1990s—to consider the historical condition of an afterward—without resorting to a mythologizing discourse of 'the end of AIDS.' The question of the archive is thus in the end not

whether it succeeds in preserving the past from oblivion but how the past that eventually emerges from it can potentially produce a revelatory historical consciousness of our present.³⁷⁵

The past, in Hallas's formulation, is not something that can be hermetically sealed off and held up for observation; there was not a knowable time before AIDS and there will not be a knowable time after AIDS. The question of the archive, in this case, is a question of how to see the present moment as a corollary of the past. The archive's revelatory potential lies in its ability to connect the present with the past, to put them in dialogue. In Barbara Hammer's *Nitrate Kisses* (1992), a voiceover from the Lesbian Herstory Archives states that the archive exists to create intergenerational connection, to allow lesbians from the 1990s to get to know lesbians from the 1960s.³⁷⁶ It allows third-wave (and beyond) feminists, who suffer from a historical too-lateness, to communicate with and learn from second-wave feminists. The archive, cinematic and otherwise, offers the possibility for an encounter with history that puts the past in conversation with the present. It forms a sort of lifeline in which materials from lives past can change our awareness of the present.

5.7 EPIDEMIOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO QUEER POLITICS

Throughout this chapter, despite my desire to understand AIDS as a pandemic that affects our present world, I cannot help but turn back to the past. I cannot look at LaBeija's work without being reminded of the Harlem ballroom community, Nan Goldin, David Wojnarowicz, Nicholas

³⁷⁵ Hallas, "Queer AIDS Media," 435.

³⁷⁶ Barbara Hammer discusses how Joan Nestle, cofounder of the Lesbian Herstory Archives, influenced her thinking about biography and autobiography in her autobiography, *HAMMER!: Making Movies Out of Sex and Life*.

Nixon, and others who came before her. LaBeija's work makes our AIDS past undeniable—her work forces her viewer to deal with that history as something that affects a new generation of bodies (and continues to threaten future generations). In viewing her work, the AIDS crisis cannot become a dirty secret of the past; government neglect and public homophobia cannot simply be swept under the rug.³⁷⁷ The crisis is here. Her photographs drip with signification, an excess of the trauma, history, and loss that can be resolved or neatly confined. LaBeija alerts viewers to her HIV-positive status; she challenges them to see the virus and acknowledge its reality. Her artwork further asserts that the discourses that formed the government and public response to the AIDS crisis remain with us today. Like the virus itself, we may have stopped talking about those media representations and public responses, but they continue to shape our every present moment.

In the previous chapter, I explore queers' desire to archive the work, and thus lives, of artist's with AIDS, like that of the Estate Project for Artists with AIDS. In doing so, I demonstrate that this impulse to preserve and return to the past is a distinctly queer one that is not confined to the years of the AIDS crisis. And while these acts of preservation do create records of queer life, they are only one part of the equation: queer turns back to this archive, to be politically useful now, must turn back in such a way that seeks to learn from history's remains and incorporates their lessons into the present moment. This mode of looking back resists the urge to mythologize the past as past—as fixed and done—but it also resists the urge to mythologize art as a universal and historically transcendent record. Douglas Crimp, in the Introduction to *Melancholia and Moralism*, addresses why he was “mean” to Elizabeth Taylor by

³⁷⁷ In our current media landscape, films like *Dallas Buyers Club* evoke a certain nostalgia for the past and assure viewers that AIDS belongs to a time passed.

examining her use of *Vita brevis, ars longa* in the context of the star's AIDS crisis fundraising.

He writes:

Still, I continued—and continue—to be troubled by the fact that the art world's most unwavering conviction is the old saw *Vita brevis, ars longa*, or “Art lives on forever,” to use Elizabeth Taylor's words that caused me to be mean. This conviction generally translates into a repudiation of “political art,” politics being far too contingent. “Political art” *doesn't* live on forever; it lives most fully in the moment of its intervention. From my perspective, however—one that I had been elaborating for a decade prior to writing about AIDS—this contingency of political investment is the necessary condition of all art, one of the traditional idealist notions of art, summed up in a maxim like *Vita brevis, ars longa*, work to conceal.³⁷⁸

Crimp's 2002 “Introduction” was written years after the pieces republished in the collection, and while that makes for a decade between its writing and his reported meanness toward Taylor, his commitment to political art remains the same. He ends the chapter with this provocation to understand political art differently, to understand political art as always endowed with something to teach us, but the conditions under which they teach must be interrogated. Crimp begins with the notion that political art, is not as enduring as other assumed-to-be politically neutral art forms, given the idealist assumption that art can live on; and it cannot endure in the same way because it supposedly belongs to a specific historical moment. Unlike “great art,” political art suffers from topicality—its investment in a specific issue, a particular thing it seeks to change. But despite arguing against this notion, Crimp asserts, “‘Political art’ *doesn't* live on forever; it lives most fully in the moment of its intervention.” His point, of course, is that all art lives most fully in its moment of production and *Vita brevis, ars longa*, is always a false construction, but I want to take a moment to fully extend why his dismissal of political art as living on forever is, in fact, an endorsement for political art's import. Political art is important because it lives in its

³⁷⁸ Douglas Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics* (Cambridge, MIT Press, 2002), 25.

moment of intervention and thus acts as a record of intervention; it allows us to re-experience that historical moment. By preserving a record of the past, political art, in Hallas's words, helps create "a revelatory historical consciousness of our present." Historical consciousness helps us to theorize the present moment as one produced by a particular past. Stuart Marshall's *Bright Eyes* returns to nineteenth-century medical representation and Hitler's Germany in a sort of historical consciousness-raising, demonstrating the long history that shaped the public's response to the AIDS crisis.

Jennifer Doyle's writing on David Wojnarowicz stresses that the artist's photography, painting, and writing cannot be understood outside of the moment of the AIDS crisis. In cases like Wojnarowicz's, politics do not simply inform or intersect with an artist's production, but they are what inspires the artist to make art in the first place.³⁷⁹ Doyle elaborates, "We can see that most powerfully in the work of artists like Wojnarowicz, for if art and politics are so incompatible, then we must wonder what would motivate an artist to make so much work in the middle of something as terrifying as the AIDS crisis in the late 1980s and 1990s, when, for an overwhelming majority of people, a diagnosis was a death sentence all but gleefully issued by a homophobic and racist public."³⁸⁰ Art is a product of queer loss and anger. The crisis compelled queer artists to construct art in particular ways, and Wojnarowicz's work began with the body as the site of experience—pain, pleasure, rage—as the site from which to theorize and from which to create. His use of the body as experiential medium understood the body as a record of history, a historical artifact. His silkscreen print *When I Put My Hands on Your Body* (1990) reads,

³⁷⁹ The upcoming summer of 2018 David Wojnarowicz "History Keeps Me Awake at Night" retrospective at the Whitney projects a re-examination and remembrance of the artist's work. Coming on twenty years after the New Museum's 1999 Wojnarowicz retrospective, this exhibition asserts the continued import of the artist's work.

³⁸⁰ Doyle, *Hold It Against Me*, 129.

“When I put my hands on your body on your flesh I feel the history of that body...It makes me weep to feel the history of you of your flesh beneath my hands in a time of so much loss.”³⁸¹ The body holds a history that threatens to be lost in a time of loss, and Wojnarowicz’s visual art and writing produces an index of bodily experience—a record of trauma, illness, and triumph—that holds onto its pain. LaBeija’s work takes seriously this notion of a body’s history, and uses her own body to tell a history of bodies to often left out of history. Her body stands in for a history of people of color, mothers, women, and queers that was never fully documented; her body marks a history of loss and damage, a history itself that remains vulnerable to loss and erasure. LaBeija’s photography understands the PWA body in the context of AIDS history, but she creates a new iconography for queer bodies of color. This iconography draws on her personal history and presents images that remind the viewer of her positive status while never reducing the possibilities for her body to that status.

Kia LaBeija engages with a history of PWA representation and ballroom culture’s survival strategies to create an iconography of the HIV-positive body living now. HIV is no longer a death sentence for a person infected with the virus, and certainly not for their potential partners. As Kia LaBeija’s #undetectable poster evidences, medicine now has the ability to treat the infected body to the point that it is no longer an *infectious* body. In addition to the development of PrEP, these advances in medicine have the power to revolutionize queer sexuality, taking away many of the fears and dangers that come with gay sex.³⁸² However, the delinking of queer sex from death is not necessarily in the interest of our current political system.

³⁸¹ “When I put my hands on your body” (1990), Box 5, Folder 129, David Wojnarowicz Papers, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University.

³⁸² See HIV.gov, “Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis,” accessed August 24, 2017, <https://www.hiv.gov/hiv-basics/hiv-prevention/using-hiv-medication-to-reduce-risk/pre-exposure-prophylaxis>.

PrEP's potential for transforming queer safe(r) sex practices comes in tandem with our current government's redress of national healthcare (the repeal of Affordable Healthcare Act) that understands HIV/AIDS as a preexisting condition. Along with the Republican Party's collective crusade against Planned Parenthood, an institution that provides information about and methods for safe sex, this legislation puts health and sexuality at the center of queer politics once again.³⁸³ History is full of cruel returns, and the same bodies made vulnerable by the AIDS crisis—queer, people of color, women, and/or the poor—are once again threatened by these policies. For queer bodies like LaBeija's, HIV/AIDS is a pre-existing condition. She was born with the virus and into a world structured by it. Yet, HIV/AIDS is a pre-existing condition for all of us. It is a condition with a history, a history of queer bodies, experiences, and media representations. Kia LaBeija's work demands that the histories of those bodies be spoken and reconsidered in our current and continued fight against AIDS.

As I close this final chapter, I assert that the politics and representational practices of the late 1980s and 1990s in relation to HIV/AIDS chart an important (and often ignored) history of interrelated queer political practices, but they also articulate a way to engage with dominant culture in the present. I return to queer biopics produced in those years demonstrate how the praxis of queer filmmaking related to and engaged with film history and genre forms. In this way, I return to the AIDS crisis to understand the inherent openness of media forms like the

³⁸³ In March of 2017 as President Donald Trump began rolling out his plan to repeal the ACA, Visual AIDS posted meme on their Instagram page the reads "TrumpCare: Make HIV AIDS Again." TrumpCare lists HIV/AIDS as one of the many pre-existing conditions that health insurance may not cover.

See Visual AIDS (@visual_aids), "TrumpCare," Instagram, March 11, 2017, https://www.instagram.com/p/BRf716mhKVH/?taken-by=visual_aids.

See Nicole Chavez, "Here's a (partial) list of all the pre-existing conditions the GOP bill may not cover," CNN, last modified May 6, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/05/05/health/preexisting-conditions-list-trnd/index.html>.

biopic and portraiture that are presumed to rigidly and conservatively structure human subjectivity. Queer artists use of these media forms encourage us to find queer possibility in recognizable forms, and thus open up possibilities for political intervention. I return to these texts to understand what we can learn from them to envision new images of personhood and to generate images of solidarity in the present and for the future.

**CODA. WHERE DO QUEERS FIND THEIR ROLE MODELS: QUEER
IDENTIFICATION, GENRE, AND BUILDING A SELF**

Beyond rote formulas. Beyond tokenism. Beyond the people of colour version of ...
Beyond the Third World version of ... Beyond waving the flag of difference to defeat
difference. Beyond stereotypes. Beyond positive images. Beyond monoculture.
Beyond good taste. Beyond production values. Beyond the theatre. Beyond the gallery.
Beyond the avant-garde. Beyond nostalgia. Beyond dogma.
For a cinema of questioning, not easy answers. Imagination, not formulaic narratives.
--Richard Fung³⁸⁴

I have been fascinated by biography for as long as I can remember, by watching lives lived by “real” people. I invested in the film’s connection to reality—the knowledge that I was watching a life truly lived and my (naïve) belief that these events actually occurred. One of my favorite childhood films was *Gia* (Michael Cristofer, 1997), the tragic story of supermodel Gia Carangi (Angelina Jolie) who died of AIDS-related complications in 1986 at 26 years old.³⁸⁵ I am almost certain that this film was the first portrayal of queerness I had ever seen, or it was at least the first one to make an impression. At the end of the day, who can resist identification with a young Jolie. Yet, there was so much about Gia’s story and the film’s distribution that I could never have understood at the time. Her death came at the beginning of the AIDS crisis, and when

³⁸⁴ Richard Fung, “Beyond Domestication,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 19, no. 4 (2013), 572.

³⁸⁵ A documentary on Gia Carangi titled *An American Girl: The Self-Destruction of Gia* (J.J. Martin) was released in 2003. It includes archival footage of Gia, but focuses particularly on the supermodel’s demise.

the film was released over a decade later, it screened at a variety of queer film festivals, including Los Angeles's Outfest.³⁸⁶ Gia Carangi's image provided both a site for lesbian identification and an icon of lesbian desire, but for me, apart from this history, Gia simply provided a story of living in a world that makes one feel lost and alone. I identified with her trauma, with her pain.

Later, as I began to build an academic identity, I found myself using phrases like, "I am interested in the ways that we come to understand ourselves and others as human," or "my research examines media's production of identity." And, yes, while those statements are precisely the truth, in many ways it was not until I was in the midst of this project that I became aware that I have always been interested in that very thing: how to have a life. Or maybe, more accurately, I was fascinated by watching how figures like Gia built a life in a world that I had precociously sensed was so hostile to many. Sometimes I wonder if I am rewriting my own history, but is that not always the case? Narratives of queerness are always retrospective, and telling the story of how one becomes queer is always a story open to revision. So, maybe I am misremembering the specifics, but what I do know is that watching movies like *Gia*, seeing the lives that looked different than those of the people around me gave me the idea that there was another way to live, another way to be.

This project is also driven by my own desire to be with the past, to encounter and get to know a history that I did not live. My own temporal location positions me in specific ways and leads me to tell this story in particular ways. I am, in many ways, shaped by the fact that I was born into a world in which I was reading queer theory as a first-year college student. My look back is perhaps best described as an effort to understand our contemporary queer moment, to

³⁸⁶ The film screened during the 1998 Outfest film festival.

understand how we got here, the history of how we became “queer.” Because of my temporal location, this project also brought up many of my vulnerabilities in regards to writing a history I am too young to have lived through. These vulnerabilities, or more accurately, insecurities, were one of the things that led me to the archive in an effort to understand the affect of this historical moment. My time in the archive, however, demonstrated to me that there is a reason why I am doing this work: the story is bigger and the history is much richer than previous scholars have appreciated.

This dissertation is driven by a simple question: Why were queer filmmakers compelled by the biopic genre? The biopic has often been labeled an inherently conservative one, and I do use that language throughout the dissertation in order to position queer filmmakers’ turn to and appropriation of the biopic within canonical understandings of the genre; I further use it to point to reasons why film critics maybe did not recognize queer films as biopics. In all fairness, scholarship on the biopic does demonstrate very real ways in which the biopic has functioned, or perhaps more accurately, how it was intended to function, in conservative, normalizing ways. Unequivocally, the biopic makes certain lives more visible than others, but what do those lives and the biopic as cinematic formation make possible? By asking what kind of lives the biopic makes possible, I am gesturing toward the potentiality of a genre that so powerfully demands identification with an individual figure. Assuming that studio-era biopics of conventional subjects led to the production of conventional lives assumes that viewers not only identify with films in a uniform way that we can know and predict, but it also assumes that viewers must have consumed films according to their preferred reading.³⁸⁷ The biopic does present a cinematic form

³⁸⁷ I am referencing Stuart Hall’s three modes of reading—preferred reading, negotiated reading, and oppositional reading—outlined in his essay “Encoding, Decoding.” See Stuart Hall,

readily available for identification with a prominent individuality, but the availability of that identification does not discriminate. In other words, the biopic does not dictate who identifies with the life presented onscreen nor does it dictate the type of person that the spectator becomes. The biopic is and perhaps always was available for queer identification; it provides a roadmap for becoming a self, but it does not dictate what that self looks like.

Spectators' relations to cinematic images are often fantasmatic, and the cinematic medium is porous. Biopics of gay historical figures *can* intersect with normalizing political projects, particularly in the case of films such as *Milk* (Gus Van Sant, 2008) and *The Imitation Game* (Morten Tyldum, 2014), but that does not preclude the genre as a whole from functioning in much more nuanced and disruptive ways. I am reminded here of Alexander Doty's approach to queering Classical Hollywood Cinema, a refusal to assume that films exist simply as either straight or gay films—mass culture is always already open to queer reading and reception.³⁸⁸ Doty points to authorship, genre, narrative structure, and star image as particular moments of aporia. The biopic's relationship to melodrama's excess, reliance on the power of star image and likeness, and impulse to tell stories of lives damaged (the fallen woman melodrama, for example), I argue, makes it a porous genre for queer identification. The French double meaning of genre, as genre and gender, has become a mainstay in film genre and gender studies scholarship, but all the same, there is a reason why genre's polysemy is so sexy for scholars. Humans like categories, and scholars love to tell us about how much we like them. And in this way, the queer impulse to take up a genre so classically defined evidences a queer investment in

"Encoding, Decoding," in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Simon During (New York: Routledge, 1999), 507-517.

³⁸⁸ See Alexander Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

genre's taxonomic drive and legibility. For while the biopic could be said to function in much the way that, say, horror does, this genre takes up an interest in categories and definitions of the human and of human life that no other genre can be said to do. The biopic genre may be an overwrought one, but its ubiquity is part of its power.

I identify queer filmmakers' biographical impulse as key to the formation of New Queer Cinema, and I locate this impulse in the context of the AIDS crisis, gesturing toward reasons why the biopic genre became available for queer returns to history, for preservation and memorialization efforts, and for ways to tell the stories of lives lost and damaged. However, I see the attraction of queer filmmakers to the biopic genre as an enduring one, beginning before and moving beyond the AIDS crisis. Recently, *Tom of Finland* (Dome Karukoski, 2017) and *Professor Marston and the Wonder Women* (Angela Robinson, 2017) tell stories of how iconic (sexual) imagery came to be and how that imagery changed the way the world thinks about gender, desire, and sexuality. *Tom of Finland* tells the story of Touko Laaksonen (Pekka Strang), a.k.a. Tom of Finland, the man behind the homoerotic images of exaggerated male anatomy and graphic leather sex that provided queer men across the world with scenes for their desire. The film follows many of the biopic's narrative tropes in the way that it reveals its subject's creative genius, along the way highlighting his struggles and the dual pains and joys of first love. This narrative structure, though, is marked by moments of Touko cruising Nazi soldiers during the war and surreptitiously passing homoerotic art to potential partners, experiences and moments of rupture that drove the artist to create. *Professor Marston and the Wonder Women* similarly uses conventional narrative cinema to tell the story of Harvard psychologist Dr. William Moulton Marston, who with his wife Elizabeth pursues a sexual relationship with the younger Olive Byrne; the two women inspire Marston to create one of America's most recognizable comic

figures: Wonder Woman. The film brings the polyamorous relationship and BDSM sexual practices that shaped the production of *Wonder Woman* comics to the fore with a frankness and matter-of-factness that insists on their centrality to the DC Comic character's world. Robinson's film was released contemporaneously with the blockbuster release of *Wonder Woman* (Patty Jenkins, 2017), the film functioning as a reminder of Wonder Woman's queer history and legacy.

Both films portray how one comes to discover resources from which to learn about sexuality by recounting the stories of the individuals responsible for such resources' discovery and production. These films makes visible subcultural sex practices and alternative ways of articulating desire, and they make them visible in such a way that they appear as legible and intelligible ways to be in the world. I turn to these films to demonstrate the way in which queerness permeates their biopic genre structure; the films' queerness becomes part of a diegetic world represented through conventional narration and genre tropes. The Richard Fung epigraph that opens the coda raises the question of formulaic narratives, in order to, of course, reject narrative formula. Throughout the dissertation, I question whether or not imagination has to be understood in opposition to narrative form, to genre. "A cinema of questioning," for me, means a willingness to challenge and question the purposes or a/effect of cinematic form. It is a cinema that makes us question who we are and who we can be. The biopic happens to provide a cinematic form fit for this mode of questioning.

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