



## New Queer Cinema

by Daryl Chin

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The term "New Queer Cinema" was coined by B. Ruby Rich in several publications (including the British film journal *Sight & Sound*, as well as the New York weekly *The Village Voice*) to describe the appearance of certain films at Sundance Film Festivals in the early 1990s that evinced a politicized stance towards queer culture.

In 1991, Todd Haynes' *Poison* won Sundance's Grand Jury Prize for Best Film; the next year saw the inclusion of Tom Kalin's *Swoon*, Gregg Araki's *The Living End*, and Christopher Munch's *The Hours and Times*.

These young directors, along with the producers Christine Vachon (who produced *Poison* and *Swoon*) and Andrea Sperling (who produced *The Living End* and *The Hours and Times*), were the vanguard of what seemed to be a movement, though it was never really an organized movement as such.

The term New Queer Cinema would soon be used indiscriminately to denote independent films with gay and lesbian content. Nevertheless, Rich's assessment centered on what she perceived as a commitment to queer culture in those particular films by Haynes, Kalin, Araki, and Munch.

Independent films made on small budgets and often financed by foundation and arts council grants, the New Queer Cinema can be seen as the culmination of several developments in American cinema and American culture.

### The Background

There have always been American movies made outside the commercial studio system; by the 1940s, a very active and coherent experimental film culture developed, with many gay artists, such as Kenneth Anger, Gregory Markopoulos, and Curtis Harrington, among those who created an American avant-garde cinema.

Independent, low-budget films made without commercial studio backing gained notice in the 1950s; often, these films dealt with themes deemed too controversial for mainstream cinema.

By the 1960s, the cinematic avant-garde was called the "underground film." Many gay artists, including Jack Smith, Warren Sonbert, and Andy Warhol, were among the most prominent creators of "underground films." Works such as Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising* (1963) and Andy Warhol's *The Chelsea Girls* (1966) were especially influential in establishing an iconography of homoeroticism that would eventually be replicated in mainstream commercial cinema.

Although homosexual themes had appeared in mainstream commercial films in the 1960s (most notably, *Advise and Consent* [1962], *The Children's Hour* [1962], and, most spectacularly, John Schlesinger's Academy Award-winning *Midnight Cowboy* [1969]), independent gay films made the most impact, especially *The Boys in the Band* (1970) and *A Very Natural Thing* (1973).

During the 1970s, arts funding helped to launch several festivals devoted to gay and lesbian films, which in turn helped cultivate an audience for gay and lesbian films. In the 1980s many of the most adventurous lesbian and gay filmmakers, such as Su Friedrich, Michael Wallin, Peggy Ahwesh, Jack Walsh, and Sheila MacLaughlin, began to experiment with narrative form, a tendency that also characterizes the directors associated with New Queer Cinema.

In addition, the AIDS crisis provoked a large body of activist video productions, exemplified by the work of Gregg Bordowitz, Jean Carlomusto, and Ellen Spiro, among others. The accessibility of video allowed many gay and lesbian artists of color, such as Marlon Riggs, Richard Fung, Michelle Parkerson, Shari Frilot, and Cheryl Dunye, to create work that might not otherwise have found sufficient backing.

All of these artists, and the conditions under which their work was produced, distributed and exhibited, provided the background and set the precedents for the emergence of New Queer Cinema.

### **Immediate Precursors**

Gus Van Sant's *Mala Noche* (1985) and Bill Sherwood's *Parting Glances* (1986) were the most direct precursors of the New Queer Cinema. Both films had only limited releases, but were nevertheless enormously successful critically. In addition, these two films set important examples for the New Queer Cinema in their modest budgets and mixture of funding sources.

The production history of *Parting Glances* is directly connected with the production histories of *Poison* and *Swoon*; Christine Vachon and the late Brian Greenbaum, who co-produced *Poison*, met while both were working on the production of *Parting Glances*.

### **Self-Identified Queer Filmmakers**

The New Queer Cinema may, ultimately, be described in terms of a number of talented filmmakers who self-identified as queer. A number of these individuals were associated with ACT UP and its artistic ancillary, Gran Fury. Taking the self-proclaimed gay aesthetic found in European directors such as Pier Paolo Pasolini, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, and Werner Shroeter during the 1970s, these young Americans shared a post-Stonewall openness to questions of gay politics and identity.

Most tellingly, they assumed a queer audience for their productions, so there was no need to "explain" homosexuality and gay men and lesbians to a presumably straight audience. Thus, they were not concerned with presenting a "politically correct" image of gay men and lesbians; and they even appropriated and reclaimed negative stereotypes.

They also tended to embrace experimental structures and techniques in telling their stories, sometimes necessitated by the exigencies of low budgets but also for ideological and aesthetic reasons. Some films associated with New Queer Cinema, for example, are in black and white, utilize a large number of interior shots, and feature a limited number of actors. Most importantly, however, they unapologetically, and sometimes defiantly, present queer subject matter.

### **The Aggressiveness of New Queer Cinema**

It is, in fact, the aggressiveness with which the core films of New Queer Cinema assert homosexual identity and queer culture that distinguishes them from earlier queer films such as *Parting Glances* and *Mala Noche*.

In *Poison*, for example, the prison sequence includes fairly graphic depictions of intense sexual relationships among inmates confined in an all-male environment. In *The Hours and Times*, the homosexuality of Brian Epstein is foregrounded, placed at the very center of the narrative rather than relegated to the margins. In *Swoon*, the Leopold-Loeb murder case of the 1920s is reinterpreted to explore

the connections between homosexuality, repression, and criminality.

In *The Living End*, the couple-on-the-run genre is redefined by featuring two young HIV-positive men, whose marginality by virtue of their HIV status and queerness is itself the subject; they act out their marginality as aggression toward social norms of all kinds.

These films not only aggressively assert queer identities, but they also demand an acknowledgement of queer culture.

### **The Influence of New Queer Cinema**

Because the term New Queer Cinema is sometimes used indiscriminately to refer to any recent film with gay or lesbian content, it has lost some of its specificity. Still, the broader application of the term is understandable, for the "movement" has been very influential.

Perhaps most crucially, the critical and commercial success of the core films have helped other independent films with gay and lesbian content find theatrical distribution. In relying on foundation and arts council grants for funding, the New Queer Cinema also established a fundraising model that has benefited subsequent gay and lesbian films and filmmakers.

Among those who have benefited from the new openness made possible by New Queer Cinema are Rose Troche, whose lesbian love story *Go Fish* (1994) was produced by Tom Kalin and Christine Vachon; Mary Harron, whose *I Shot Andy Warhol* (1996) was produced by Vachon; Kimberly Peirce, whose *Boys Don't Cry* (1999) was also produced by Vachon; Steve McLean, whose *Postcards from America* (1994), a biographical film about the gay artist and AIDS activist David Wojnarowicz, was produced by Vachon and Tom Kalin; and Nigel Finch, whose *Stonewall* (1995), about the events leading up to the Stonewall riots of 1969, was also produced by Vachon and Kalin.

Certainly the hits of the 2001 Sundance Film Festival, such as the musical *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (directed by John Cameron Mitchell and winner of the Audience Award for Best Film) and the documentary *Southern Comfort* (directed by Kate Davis and winner of the Grand Jury Award for Best Documentary) may also be seen as part of the efflorescence of queer cinema initiated a decade earlier by the New Queer Cinema.

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### **About the Author**

**Daryl Chin** is an artist and writer based in New York City. Associate Editor of *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, he is the author of a monograph on the video artist Shigeko Kubota.