

MIX Copenhagen at Thirty: Projecting a Triumphant Queer Moment

Randy Malamud

Whether or not 2015 marks a crossing over into the postqueer era, LGBT cinematic traditions are being exuberantly reconfigured in ways that reflect widespread recent human rights victories in many parts of the world and once-unimaginable levels of enlightened acceptance. MIX Copenhagen's thirtieth anniversary film festival in October displayed this sense of a newly empowered and confident queer cultural consciousness. Its films embodied less angst and more unbridled celebration. If queer narratives have tended to deploy a strategy predicated upon confronting presumptive prejudice, many now seem more simply and resplendently straightforward—at least relatively unapologetic, unafraid, and uncomplicated (though how interesting is a film without at least *some* complications?).

I do not mean to claim that queer life as depicted in queer film is suddenly and unilaterally idyllic: for example, it is emphatically not the case that queer-bashing has disappeared. Gay and trans characters were being attacked in films from Kenya (*Stories of Our Lives*, The NEST Collective, 2014), Russia (*Stand*, Jonathan Taieb, 2014), Australia (*Drown*, Dean Francis, 2015), Mexico (*Carmin Tropical*, Rigoberto Pérezcano, 2014), and a German-Lithuanian documentary (*Julia*, J. Jackie Baier, 2013) among others. But as much as such violence remains a terrible staple of LGBT film, still, there are myriad stories where queer characters triumph and flourish without having to endure assaults (physical or social). Some demons—I'd even venture to say many—have been vanquished; secretive, shameful strains are dissipating. Progress resonates, promisingly if not unilaterally.

MIX Copenhagen is one of the world's oldest queer film festivals.¹ (San Francisco's Frameline, at 39, is the oldest, and a handful of others have passed the three-decade mark by now.) Founded in 1986 as the Copenhagen Gay Film Festival, it became the CGLFF (Copenhagen Gay & Lesbian Film Festival), and finally adopted the MIX brand in 2010. Along with this one, three other MIX festivals—in Brazil,

Mexico, and Milan—grew out of a common progenitor, MIX NYC. "All the MIXes are independent festivals that maintain friendly relations with each other and often show work from each other, but are otherwise separate," according to MIX New York's co-founder Jim Hubbard. "They each are very much reflective of their own milieu and culture and therefore very different from each other."²

MIX NYC's milieu is famously edgy, avant-garde, and multimedia. Copenhagen's MIX is tamer: "*hyggelig*" (cozy, intimate) is the word often invoked to describe its Danish temperament. This Nordic metropolis is arguably one of the world's most comfortable queer communities, a place of consummate tolerance and respect for sexual diversities. "Our biggest problem may be that we may become too conservative, too complacent, because we have achieved so many victories," LGBT Denmark chairperson Soren Laursen told me at a party. The festival, run by a passionately dedicated and welcoming (and young) volunteer collective, complements the community's social culture.

MIX staffer Alice Minor, an expat, explained what made Copenhagen so queer-friendly: "I feel so much more relaxed here than in America. People won't bother you here—people respect your personal decisions." She noted, though, that such respect was likely to be stronger for those who model heteronormativity. "It's okay to be gay as long as you assimilate to a respectable, mainstream lifestyle." Indeed, as Europe's immigrant crisis unfolds, Denmark's gay-friendliness risks being coopted and perverted. Scholar Michael Nebling Petersen has argued that "the acceptance of homosexuality in Danish politics and culture comes at the price of other minority groups, like recent immigrants," as right-wing xenophobes pretend to champion LGBT rights as a way of justifying a marginalization of minority cultures who may not embrace those values as forcefully as Danes.³

Still, on balance, the mood in Copenhagen was pretty delightful for this program which is, alongside Pride, one of the country's biggest queer cultural events, according to festival director Stine Michelson. I asked how she would characterize the overall tenor and she responded with a social-media first. "This year we put hashtags in the program," she said. "There

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are lots of #hardship, which has always been part of LGBT culture, and is still there. But #friendship and #love are now more numerous.”

Meanwhile, on the subject of friendship and love, I note that there was less explicit sex and nudity than there might have been—possibly to make the films more accessible to mainstream and non-queer audiences? (A special porn shorts program entitled “This Is How We Do It” emphasized by contrast the relative tameness of the other films.) There was plenty of passion and intimacy, conveying a quiet and subtler sense of eros. Perhaps LGBT films no longer need to confront sexual taboos as self-consciously and literally as they once did; perhaps the online porn explosion has so amply satisfied viewers’ desires for graphic erotica that it allows these filmmakers to be more subdued in their own work (or perhaps they feel they just can’t compete).

In *Hidden Away* (*A escondidas*, 2014), for instance, a must-see Spanish coming-of-age story about two Bilboa teenagers, Mikel Rueda achieves a scintillating eroticism that packs a blast of sensual arousal in the film’s lone quick kiss. Without a great deal of bother, Rafa and Ibrahim (a Moroccan immigrant facing deportation) embrace their natural passions for each other despite significant cultural barriers, and equally heedless of the brashly horny straight adolescent socialization that consumes most of their friends.

There’s a confidence afoot that filmmakers can just get on with the business of telling the stories they’ve come to tell, as Rueda does. Shonali Bose’s *Margarita, With A Straw* (*Choone Chali Aasman*, 2014) depicts an Indian teenager with cerebral palsy who relocates (not easily) from Delhi to NYU, where she falls in love with a blind Pakistani woman, briefly switches teams and tries straight sex once to ensure that she’s not missing anything, and then deals with the fallout as she settles into a queer identity. No problem, no hyper-melodrama, even—and this is impressively pulled off—as her cancer-stricken mother begrudgingly comes to terms with her daughter’s sexuality on her deathbed, with the cameras rolling. It won the festival’s Lili Award for best feature.

In Diederik Ebbinge’s *Matterhorn* (2013), the film I most enjoyed, Fred is a stodgy rural Dutch man whose family is mysteriously absent. He takes in Theo, a homeless wanderer with cognitive disabilities, and despite initial disinclinations, comes to care for him as if he were a relative—enduring and eventually overcoming the community’s derision when Theo starts appearing in public wearing the dress of Fred’s dead wife. The couple celebrate their mutual compassion in a “marriage” of an ultimately nonsexual kind, enabling Fred a second chance at the family life he ruined the first time around. Every scene is unlikely and unexpected.

Both *Margarita* and *Matterhorn* embody the unfettered and keenly original imagination inspiring queer film. In these films and several others I saw, it wasn’t clear for the first half-hour or even hour exactly why they were playing here, or in what way they were queer films. (In the final scene of *Matterhorn* Fred’s gay son appears, poignantly resolving the lingering uncertainty about the film’s queerness and enabling Fred’s atonement.) This gradual and even incidental queerness seems to be part of the latest movement.

There were many captivating films drawing on unlikely themes. Mark Herzog’s *Lady Valor: The Kristin Beck Story* (2014) is the coming-out story of a transgendered former US Navy Seal. The earlier-mentioned *Stories of Our Lives*, a mélange of simple human narratives from a queer Kenyan troupe, flows with an incredibly quiet, eloquent grace that contrasts powerfully with the brashly ubiquitous homophobia of the filmmakers’ world—and with its being banned in Kenya. *Falling Angels* (*Som Engle Vi Falder*, 2014, written by, directed by, and starring Maria Winther Olsen) is a moving Juliet-and-Juliet story of forbidden love filmed in the astoundingly isolated natural wilds of the North Atlantic Faroe Islands. Seemingly so far from the axis of queer culture, the Faroe people are nevertheless taking part in this moment, too—though not in great numbers, which is why Olsen says she had to handle so many functions in her groundbreaking short film.⁴

It has been an amazing year in much of the world: Ireland’s resounding affirmation of marriage equality, the US Supreme Court’s *Obergefell* decision, and Caitlyn Jenner’s transformative celebration all herald the quickly moving progress and quickly increasing mainstream acceptance of gender and sexual diversity. Although some societies are doubling down on their homophobic repressions, the latest cohort of LGBT films flows forth in a counter-*zeitgeist* of dizzying momentum that will surely be noted alongside Stonewall and ACT UP as a landmark moment of liberation: this revolution is being televised—and filmed, and tweeted.

In the film world, changing labels indicate the new temperament. The London Lesbian and Gay Film Festival is now called BFI Flare because focus groups, especially younger audiences, resisted specific sexual-identity markers as positivist and reductionist.⁵ At Queer Lisboa Film Festival, too, organizers have eliminated gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender labels, according to programmer Ana David, because queer stories now transcend such clear-cut themes, and taxonomies marginalize such identities as intersexuality, gender fluidity, and asexuality.⁶ In the United States, GLAAD recently retired its annual Network Responsibility Index (NRI) report, which tracked LGBT representation on television and advocated for fuller inclusion.⁷



Germán Alcarazu (right) as Rafa and Adil Koukouh as Ibrahim in *Hidden Away* revel in the consuming ecstasy of their first love.

As indignities and battles subside, a “newer queer cinema” arises.⁸ Perhaps my attunement to “newer” strains is simply a tautology, an inevitability, or market force: everything is always getting newer. But this year’s novelty strikes me as especially energized, and varied, an ambitious eruption of so many stories that had been walled

up and a shearing away of cautious anxieties in the light of a transformed social consciousness. It is no longer acceptable in mainstream polite society to hate, to deny, to mock, or even to flinch from whatever identity or narrative a queer film has to offer. And the resulting films bear the mark of this new spirit, predicated on a foundation that



In *Matterhorn*, Theo (René van 't Hof) stars as a mentally impaired homeless man in need of a family.

includes the reasonable expectation of widespread social decency.⁹

At the risk of indulging in “presentism”—the narcissistic belief that never before has any generation been so insightfully enlightened as this generation at this very moment—I would argue that this is a time when queer productions are able to tell stories, recount history, establish perspectives, and celebrate pioneers, in a spirit of newly unencumbered openness. The dramatic ironies and tragedies (Harvey Milk’s inevitable death in *City Hall*, Brandon Teena’s in the heartland, Andrew Beckett’s in Philadelphia) that colored so many earlier films are now mitigated, and an earlier fatalistic proclivity softened. It’s not just that today’s queer characters prosper more easily than those of the past, though often they do; it’s that the playing field is so much closer to level that there’s no longer a sense of foreboding as the audience waits for the lesions, or the heartbreak, or the family rejection.

Speaking of family: back in the late twentieth century, British filmmaker Isaac Julien stated that family was “the great unspoken subject in queer culture, the site of trauma that no one has talked about.”¹⁰ Well they’re talking about

it now, and they can’t stop. Besides *Matterhorn* and *Margarita, With a Straw*, there’s Paul Weitz’s endearingly funny *Grandma* (2015), where Lily Tomlin presents a case study of lesbian relationships from flings to LTRs to bereavement to children to ex-husbands; festival favorite Sebastián Silva’s quirky 2015 *Nasty Baby* about an MMF trio of friends planning to create a mixed family; Maya Newell’s Australian documentary *Gayby Baby* (2015) about diverse queer parental structures (tagline: “There’s more than one way to make a family”); Josh Kim’s 2015 Korean brother-buddy film *How to Win at Checkers (Every Time)*; Susanna Fogel’s queer-lite *Life Partners* (2014) about how a pair of straight/lesbian bffs cope when one marries; and even, sadly, Stephen Belber’s unspectacular *Match* (2014), which squanders Patrick Stewart’s talents in the role of a bisexual dance teacher sought out by a man looking for his father. All these films richly address the absence highlighted by Julien only a generation ago.

The engaging complexities of these family issues present a valuable sounding board. Queer scholar Jack Halberstam, one of the most outspoken critics of traditional family structures, suggests in Russell Sheaffer’s 2014 *Masculinity/Femininity* that



Queer Kenyans face constant and unmitigated homophobic assaults in *Stories of Our Lives*.

since marriage is clearly pretty dysfunctional, the last thing anyone should do is invite more people to partake of it; instead, the queer revolution should spur everyone, queer or not, to conceptualize more equitable and innovative social and legal models for relationships of intimacy. Halberstam's wisdom is persuasive, and yet so is the life story of Richard Adams and Tony Sullivan in Thomas Miller's 2014 *Limited Partnership* (which won the festival's documentary award). Richard and Tony were married when a courageous rogue county clerk signed off on their ceremony in 1975. The US federal government spent the next four decades obstructing the legality of their relationship, which was especially unsettling because Tony was Australian and constantly risked deportation with an unrecognized marriage. As an INS letter explained: "You have failed to establish that a bona fide marital relationship can exist between two faggots." Even after Richard's death in 2012, Tony continues trying to legitimize their marriage.

This "newer queer cinema" may ramble broadly beyond its initial remit. David Thorpe's fascinating autobiographical

documentary *Do I Sound Gay?* (2014) starts with what seems a narrow focus on gay male speech patterns, but goes on to weave a complexly introspective portrait of gay identity and acceptance over the course of the previous generation. When he appeared in person in Copenhagen for his screening, he revealed, "I *do* sound gay," and indeed he did. He explained that he began this project when he was in his 40s, living alone after a breakup, "not the most confident person, not that happy with myself, trying to figure out: what's wrong with me? Is it my voice?" Listening to a group of gay men chattering on the train out to Fire Island, he thought, "We sound like a bunch of braying ninnies. Is that who I am?"

Anxieties about sounding campy and effeminate led him to visit a speech therapist and an acting coach who specialized in de-gaying. As he parses his own voice, Thorpe also revisits such popular cultural figures as Paul Lynde, Charles Nelson Reilly, Truman Capote, Liberace, and a host of sinister gay-sounding Disney villains. David Sedaris, too, speaks gayly in this film. Describing speech therapy he had as a child



David Thorpe asks, *Do I Sound Gay?*

to remediate his lisp, Sedaris recalls, “Everyone in speech class was gay. It was like Future Homosexuals of America.”

Thorpe finally comes to terms with how he sounds and who he is, but only after a deeply conducted examination of his childhood, his family life, his coming out and the subsequent reformulation of his identity, as well as a macroscopic examination of masculinity, heterosexuality, misogyny, aggression, authority, and hegemony in American culture.

“We were persecuted for sounding gay,” Dan Savage says. Indeed, along with the many films about queer-bashing at MIX Copenhagen, Thorpe’s film includes one especially searing clip of a 15-year-old boy being beaten by a classmate as everyone else looks on, and one even films the assault.¹¹ *Do I Sound Gay?* moved audience members with its incisive deconstruction of anti-gay prejudices alongside Thorpe’s embrace of gay identity. His film, like so many in the festival, left audiences feeling confident that each new story is a concrete step forward, a candle brightly lit against the darkness. But still, scenes of violence remain, making it doubtful that it will ever be possible to report, in future Copenhagen programs, that this trope has finally become an anachronism.

I was surprised Tom Hooper’s *The Danish Girl* (2015) wasn’t showing—it’s about the world’s first transgender person, Lili Elbe, namesake of the festival’s award. Michelson

said its release timing didn’t work out, but she expects MIX will present programming to accompany its premiere.

The MIX operation is, indeed, a year-round presence. Their “*Skolefilm*” program organizes free screenings of LGBT youth films in schools, with speakers and workshops. The city’s impressive annual documentary festival, CPH: DOX, includes a MIX-sponsored unit. On World AIDS Day MIX showed the HIV Story Project’s *Desert Migration* (2015), a film about living with AIDS and life after AIDS. Throughout the year they invite directors for Q+A sessions at premieres: a few weeks after the festival, I would have loved to see Parvez Sharma discussing the Hajj pilgrimage he surreptitiously filmed on an iPhone for *A Sinner in Mecca* (2015). And MIX takes its show on the road across the country with offshoots in Aarhus, Odense, and Aalborg. As rewarding as the festival itself is, it’s even more impressive how it has established a constant and extensive presence for queer film throughout Danish society.

Despite the indignities of travel and the exhaustion of marathon viewing, I don’t think I’ve ever left a film festival so keenly aware of why one travels, and of how important it is to watch films. In this year of incredible progress for LGBT rights, MIX Copenhagen’s inspiring anniversary program was worth the trip, as it celebrated the cinematic community’s vital

documentation, examination, and advancement of these recent triumphs.

Notes

1. See www.mixcopenhagen.dk/en for the program and other information about the festival's organization and events.
2. Email communication with author, September 9, 2015.
3. Alix Feldman, "Research: Gay-friendly Denmark, Not Tolerant to Others," *University Post*, April 22, 2013, universitypost.dk/article/research-gay-friendly-denmark-not-tolerant-others.
4. Statement by Maria Winther Olsen, Q+A session, October 4, 2015.
5. Mark Brown, "London Lesbian and Gay Film Festival Becomes BFI Flare," *Guardian*, February 19, 2014, www.theguardian.com/film/2014/feb/19/bfi-flare-london-lesbian-gay-film-festival-rename.
6. Alice Minor, "Would a Festival by Any Other Name Feel as Queer?" *Murmur*, October 4, 2015, <http://murmur.dk/articles/would-a-festival-by-any-other-name-feel-as-queer.381.html>.
7. Sarah Kate Ellis, "GLAAD President: It's Time to Retire Annual LGBT TV Report," *Variety*, September 3, 2015, <http://variety.com/2015/tv/news/lgbt-characters-on-tv-empire-scandal-orange-is-the-new-black-1201584066/>. GLAAD has decided that the numbers of LGBT television characters are sufficiently increasing, though their announcement notes that "the roles themselves often remain narrowly defined," so the push for better representation continues even as the bean-counting ends.
8. My unoriginal phrase points to B. Ruby Rich, whose 1992 article, "New Queer Cinema" (*Sight & Sound* 2.5), began examining and anatomizing this genre, the evolution of which she has continued tracking as recently as *New Queer Cinema: The Director's Cut* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).
9. It is astounding to revisit the anatomy of cinematic queerness that Vito Russo described in his landmark *The Celluloid Closet* (New York: Harper, 1981), which described essentialized gay characters as sissies, outlaws, antisocial anarchists, predatory monsters, unnatural aliens, and/or otherwise vaguely sinister, lonely, shy outsiders; and never as heroes. The queer character has come a long way.
10. Quoted in Rich, *New Queer Cinema*, 44.
11. See Laura Hibbard, "Teen Speaks Out after Vicious Beating for Being Gay," *Huffington Post*, November 15, 2011, www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/11/15/teen-speaks-out-after-vic_n_1095874.html.