

No More Mr. Nice Gay

Sorry, I didn't mean to kill New Queer Cinema. I was young, innocent (well- at the least, more innocent than today) when I made my first feature "FRISK" (Berlinale 1996). I hated the book and I suppose, in hindsight- that's why I jumped at the chance to make the film version. I have a natural instinct to destroy in the name of creativity. Besides, we had a blast shooting a big "fuck you" to the growing political correctness of the 90's, and to the mainstreaming of gay culture going on then. A riot broke out at our screening during the San Francisco Lesbian & Gay Film Festival, the editor of The Advocate magazine said I should be shot, the writer of the book denounced the film and the New York Times declared the film the "ne plus ultra of queercore."

I had arrived in style.

To me, experimental or underground film and queer film were synonymous. When I started making short experimental short films I was inspired by Kenneth Anger, Jack Smith, Andy Warhol, and the Kuchar Brothers (whom I have had the honor of getting to know, having recently acted in one of Mike Kuchar's movies "VORTEX" with one of my frequent actors/co-conspirators Philly.) None of these film makers gave two shits about making it in Hollywood. Their work was about their obsessions, it was personal and more often than not, erotically charged. They were all, at one time or another, accused of being pornographic. As if that was a bad thing, as if Art and Pornography were mutually exclusive.

Pornography is when the viewer masturbates; art is when the artist masturbates. "Why can't we all jerk off together?" is what these filmmakers asked. I concur.

The beginning of New Queer Cinema was an exciting time. We were all angry little art terrorists coming out of ACT-UP and QUEER NATION and ready to take over the world. We weren't politicians- we were artists- so we worked from our guts, our angst and our broken hearts. I was in art school (RISD) a few years behind Todd Haynes (who studied at RISD's sister school Brown University) so I knew of him and his work. Then I went to AFI in Hollywood to study cinematography and worked with Gregg Araki on "TOTALLY F***ED UP". I remember being at the MOMA in NYC when "THE LIVING END" and "SWOON" premiered at the New Directors/New Films festival and thinking wow this is something, something's happening and somehow I am in the midst of it. It was at MOMA that I first met the actor Craig Chester, we became friends and worked together many times. I went to festivals all over the world and met all kinds of interesting filmmakers, there were festivals cropping up all over the place.

After making my first feature I got a lot of positive and negative attention. Even then I was a work-a-holic and had plenty of ideas and scripts ready to go. I had lots of "meetings", lots of "interest" but I am not a used-car salesman; I lack that gene so nothing went anywhere. My creative partner, James Derek Dwyer and I were living in San Francisco, we had very little money, he was working a temp job while I was working at the Nob Hill gay porn theater. (I would announce the live shows and make sure the performer came on stage. There was a script that I was supposed to read. I re-wrote it to

say, "Feel free to whip it out and whack it off but please wipe up after yourself. Enjoy the show!"). It was time to get the hell out of California, as far away from Hollywood as we could get. So we scraped together some cash, bought an extremely cheap Hi-8 video camera and moved to Boston. I got an actress friend of mine, Bonnie Dickenson, to come to Boston from Los Angeles and we shot the movie "LITTLE SHOTS OF HAPPINESS" (which world-premiered at the Berlinale 1997). Bonnie was my first "superstar". James and I started our own production company, www.bangorfilms.com and we set out to make movies our way, shooting in video with no crew and a hand held camera, using only available light whenever possible and using whatever crappy sound I would capture with the camera microphone. We made the movies with no money, no outside funding. We set out to make 10 movies by the year 2000 and to everyone's surprise (including my own) we managed to do it. None of these movies were "gay films" per se, they certainly had a gay sensibility but the subject matter was not gay. I didn't really think about why that was at the time, I certainly wasn't trying to cross over into the mainstream but looking back now I think after making FRISK, I wasn't ready or able to make another gay film until it was something personal, something painfully real. I was ready to do that when I was single again and moved back to NYC in 2001. I bared all (not just my ass but heart and soul) in ANONYMOUS (Berlinale 2004). I decided that if I was going to take shit from people it would be for something personal. After that I delved into my own past, my own demons and made two semi-autobiographical films "VACATIONLAND" (Berlinale 2007) and "BETWEEN SOMETHING & NOTHING". At the same time I made more experimental features like "HOOKS TO THE LEFT" (which was entirely shot with a cell phone camera), "BULLDOG IN THE WHITE HOUSE", and "XX". I am often working on several projects at once, it's just how my brain works and I find that my more experimental films inform my more narrative films and vice versa. I am often accused of being "so prolific" (yes, I say "accused" because usually that's the tone that the word is delivered in) as if that is a bad thing. I can't help it- I honestly have a need to make movies; (my newest feature is "THE BOY WITH THE SUN IN HIS EYES" coming soon!) to me there is nothing more tragic than a filmmaker who wastes his/her time waiting for permission (i.e. money) to make a film.

Nowadays, filmmakers who spend years getting their movies made, making compromise after compromise to get any distorted version of their original vision on the screen are not artists they are businessmen. Artists stay true to their vision and make their work when they are inspired. They don't think about nonsense like marketability and "who is my audience?". They don't care about money and use whatever resources they can get their hands on. They don't give a shit about critics or cultural theorists or gender politics. Fuck them all. More often than not, that's exactly what they need anyway.

New Queer Cinema could never last long. It occurred at a time when people were starved for queer images on screen and so they were willing to "put up with" more experimental, gritty, dangerous films but as soon as less adventurous filmmakers started making shiny happy films, a New Gay-sploitation Cinema took over. Tepid gay and lesbian festival programmers (and exhibitors and distributors) were quick to pick up these non-threatening, "audience pleasers" so they could sell out their opening nights and keep their boards of directors happy- but what was the cost? Why bother going to a festival when

you can see these shitty movies on the new pay-per-view gay TV channels? By removing the risk and edge from their programming they also removed their purpose. But even more damning, they encouraged filmmakers to make more "commercial", "accessible" work. If there are no riots (heheheh) or at the very least, heated discussions happening at your festival's screenings then you are not doing your job. Stop programming this shit, and risk the edgier, the grittier stuff. It's out there. It isn't going away. Embrace it. The real art films resist professionalism. If you are a filmmaker worried about your livelihood then get a "real" fucking job! Art isn't a profession. Many of my fellow Americans have long ago lost that train of thought. Mistakes are what makes something art. Mistakes are life.

So- we as filmmakers must experiment. We must resist the traditional narrative structure. Resist closure and embrace ambiguity. Embrace and nurture the audience's intelligence. Throw continuity out the window along with all other filmmaking rules. This is where DOGMA '95 got it wrong; you don't throw out old rules and impose new ones, you must throw them all out. The obsession with "technical perfection" has got to stop! We are in danger of becoming mannerists (or just downright geeks.) Go back to nature, back to life. Life is gritty, dirty, full of shit and blood and semen. It is sticky and messy, sometimes bitter sometimes sweet- sometimes all at once. Shoot with whatever means you have available, don't go chasing the latest greatest resolution, the most expensive, state of the art camera, we are not technicians we are artists. Get your hands dirty. Make ugly beautiful and vice versa. At least have the guts to do what you really believe in - and have the guts to actually believe in something. The world has plenty of (film) critics and cynics. Cynicism is boring. Get passionate. Feel something. Then go tell your audience.

This is an unprecedented, exciting time to be a filmmaker. Access to the means of production and post-production has never been so attainable. (Don't be fooled by the gate-keepers who are trying to make this less so by insisting that the only films that are worthy are the ones shot in HiDef, with the latest expensive camera and presented by the latest most-expensive projector, they are trying to beat us back- flip them the bird and flick on your cheapo Flip video camera!) Anyone can go out and make a movie with a cell phone and edit it on a cheap laptop. And as far as distribution goes you can put it on youtube yourself and people around the world can see it instantly. And when a distributor wants to pick up your movie and tells you it needs a new sound mix or soundtrack or that it needs to be re-edited or blah blah tell them to love it or leave it! The essence of the work is intrinsic to the the media if you're doing your job as an artist correctly. When a festival says that you must transfer your movie to that ancient format of 35mm or the newest super-duper digital format ask them why- you'd be surprised at who doesn't have an answer for this question. We must work together as filmmakers to hold these gate-keepers in line.

No more Mr. Nice Gay! Aren't you tired by now of these buff, shiny, happy, pretty pretty gay people in (alleged) comedies about hooking up and being shirtless and oh-so-pretty and oh-so-vacant. No more documentaries about gay marriage and about "how just like everyone else" we are. No more conformity, (whatever that is) and whatever happened to "We're here we're queer get used to it!" Stop pretending that AIDS (or at least the

devastating effects of AIDS) , homophobia (outside and inside the gay culture), violence, rape, oppression, murder, censorship, don't exist. We are outlaws, we are outsiders and we always will be. You don't need a cock just a camera (and it doesn't have to be a big camera but you have to have the balls to face down the status quo.). Pull it out. Stroke it. Dare the audience, the critics, the programmers, etc. to suck it. Create like there is no tomorrow (in this modern world, you never know) and shoot, shoot, shoot!

So if "NEW QUEER CINEMA" is dead what next? Well it is the term that is dead, the filmmakers, old and new are still out there making cinema. Goodbye "NEW" (and while we are at it included "MODERN" and "POST-anything") you were never of much use since you lose your relevance the moment you are uttered. We are not and have never been new, we are a continuance. Cinema and art are our collective conscience. Good riddance "QUEER" you are out of fashion (or are you? who can keep track) We are lesbian, gay, transgender, bi, fags, dykes, freaks, homos, trannies, ass pirates, carpet munchers, funny aunts and uncles and my personal favorite poo packers. No one can agree on a term so how about HUMAN. We are all, for better or worse, human beings. We are humansexuals. The age of labels, of branding is over. We are "CINEMA" pure and simple. We will not be ghettoized, categorized or dismissed. We're here, we are CINEMA, get used to it!

Now please wipe up after yourself.