

1992 – THE YEAR QUEER BROKE

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Paul Burston and Colin Richardson (eds), *A Queer Romance – Lesbians, Gay Men and Popular Culture*, Routledge, London 1995; £12.99 paperback. £37.50 cloth.

In the run-up to the London Lesbian and Gay Pride Festival in June of 1992, Britain's *Guardian* newspaper published an article headlined, 'The politics of the new queer'. The tone of the article was simple – picking up on a new trend. Melanie Phillips wrote about queer for *Guardian* readers to digest, 'It's punk, it's anarchic, it's dangerous, it's gesture politics. It's also very confusing.'¹ Who were these queers? And why weren't they happy, for example, that one of Britain's most respected queens, Ian McKellen, had been knighted and had had tea with John Major? What more could they want?

Over the next weeks and months, a variety of media outlets and cultural institutions, including the ICA, *Sight and Sound* magazine and *The Guardian*, as the daily newspaper that includes lesbians and gays more than any other, explored these (seemingly) new ideas. The September 1992 edition of *Sight and Sound* picked up on queer with a twelve page supplement on Queer Cinema² with contributions from Cherry Smyth and B. Ruby Rich, who *The Guardian* noted as 'one of the first to spot the trend'.³ The ICA hosted *The New Queer Cinema Conference* in September of 1992 that featured a talk from film producer Christine Vachon who, again in September of 1992, *The Guardian* called 'American cinema's queen of queer'.⁴

These initial discussions of what queer meant, at least in cinematic terms, defined some of the new players, spokespeople and their interests, but did little to define a history of this new curiosity. Director Dave Markey's 1993 film, *1991 – The Year Punk Broke* went back to 1991, exploring the unparalleled success of a different 'new' phenomenon – grunge – and revealed it as punk's greatest apology, not only because of the popular success of bands like Sonic Youth and Nirvana, but because of a pervasiveness among a certain group of people of the ideas coded in that music. Like that film, *A Queer Romance* goes back – to 1992 – and finds some of the players who helped formulate queer in Britain and allows them a more formal attempt at defining the ways that a new generation of lesbians and gays perceive the world.

The real trouble is that we have rescued a word not allowed to our kind.

Jeannette Winterson⁵

Actor Michael Cashman, a founding member of the lesbian and gay lobby group Stonewall, in the same Melanie Phillips' *Guardian* article, dismissed the

1. *The Guardian*, 23 June 1992, p19.

2. *Sight and Sound*, September 1992.

3. *The Guardian*, 15 September 1992.

4. *Ibid.*

5. Jeannette Winterson, 'The Poetics of Sex' in *Granta 43, Best of Young British Novelists 2*, Granta, London 1993, p318.

6. *The Guardian*, 23
June 1992,

new ideas as he bitched, 'The New Queer politics is a metropolitan phenomenon of media queens.'⁶ And media queens the writers of *A Queer Romance* are. Co-editor Paul Burston is the opinionated, much talked about editor of the gay section of London listings magazine *Time Out*. Likewise Burston's partner in crime, Colin Richardson is the Assistant Editor at *Gay Times*. Both Richardson and Burston are notorious for their public squabbles and fisticuffs with other journalists and writers. The evidence of these squabbles and the alliances formed as a result are apparent in *A Queer Romance*.

7. *The Guardian*, 17
December 1993.

In December of 1993 *The Guardian* ran an article on a new movement within the indie-pop music scene that was getting a lot of attention – queercore – a kind of music that was as important to the gay scene as it was to the music scene.⁷ The article was critical of the lesbian and gay press and in particular *Gay Times* for ignoring queercore. In response Colin Richardson wrote back, 'There's a good article to be written about queercore. Sadly, [*The Guardian's*] was not it.'⁸ Contained within *A Queer Romance* is the article about queercore to which, presumably, Richardson referred. Written by one of queercore's founding dissidents, film-maker Bruce LaBruce, it is an article that is set apart from the remaining contributions to this collection, not because it is any different in quality from the remaining articles, but because of its dissent. Writes LaBruce, 'I don't feel I have a lot in common with a bunch of rich kids with degrees in semiotic theory ... I've never felt comfortable with the new 'queer' movement, never attended a Queer Nation meeting or participated in any marches or protests or actions' (p194).

8. *The Guardian*, 22
December 1993.

So Bruce LaBruce's inclusion in this work was not merely because he is an interesting character with something to say about his fascinating corner of the world or because he fits in with queer ideology, but because of the strange nature of queer theory in Britain at the moment. It is a scene rife with great gossip and some good stories, and the players in this new queer theory, like the characters in some as yet unmade Robert Altman's film, have their histories and their axes to grind. All of this goes to make *A Queer Romance* a trendy, sexy, happening and compelling read. But does it say anything true about the world, or some small section of it?

Obvious to anyone regularly browsing through the more urbane book shops, the last few years has seen an explosion in titles explaining the lesbian and gay bent on the world. Some of the material is less than well thought out, as though publishers had rushed to print to cash in quickly. The recently published book *Queer Noises*, written by John Gill (Cassell, London 1995), presents a rather silly look at lesbians and gays in popular music. Despite the disclaimer on the jacket to the contrary, the entire book is dedicated to outing lesbians and gays involved in the music industry. *Queer Noises* amounts to not much and leaves you thinking, 'who cares?' *A Queer Romance* is thankfully concerned with the more legitimate and interesting question of the ways that lesbians and gay men engage with popular culture despite the fact that acknowledging a lesbian or gay spectator in most film and television is rare.

'Reading mainstream films subversively, lesbians have constructed heroines

who do not officially belong to them, not only by disrupting the authority of the heterosexual male gaze, but also by appropriating the heterosexual woman as a homosexual object,' writes *A Queer Romance* contributor Cherry Smyth (p123). In this most succinct explanation of why lesbians bother to pay the price of a cinema ticket, Cherry Smyth also sums up the project central to this collection. In revealing the existence of a queer gaze most of the contributors use film and television and the framework set out in Laura Mulvey's essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema',⁹ to show how a variety of readings and positions are available to lesbian and gay spectators, allowing them the opportunity to take pleasure in works that don't speak directly to them. The question remains about whether a queer gaze will suffice to do what the contributors to *A Queer Romance* seem to want it to do – unify lesbians and gays in an approach to looking at the world.

On the one hand these writers want to avoid dictating how the world is read by lesbians or gays, to show that it is possible, for example, that many lesbians enjoy Hollywood cinema, maintaining that there is plurality among a group of people who were once imagined homogeneous. On the other hand there is the desire to formulate a shared reading of popular culture by lesbian or gay spectators. As Cherry Smyth writes (p125):

As we feel freer to be ourselves, the useful organising fiction of the past – that a person's politics could be determined by his or her sexual orientation (or some other salient feature of identity) – no longer serves. We need a new way of thinking about identity, or at least a new application, one that preserves the promise of sexual liberation. It isn't enough to become parallel to straights – we want to obliterate such dichotomies altogether.

So if sexual orientation can't explain a person's politics, why then, according to another of this collection's contributors, Steven Drukman, can it explain why gay men prefer George Michael to Iron Maiden? Or do they? Steven Drukman wants to define how a generalised gay man can watch MTV, which doesn't specifically speak to him, and still enjoy it. In so doing Drukman makes the same assumptions about gay men that the old school gay scene has made – they like Madonna, they don't like heavy metal. Why is it necessary to define out of existence the possibility that there are lesbians and gay men who position themselves as spectators in all sorts of ways to enjoy all sorts of artistic works?

Here is a passage from Drukman's piece:

Although the antics of the [heavy metal] band members are often replete with stroking guitars and inventive uses for the microphone, [heavy metal] videos are not the ideal sit of application for the gay gaze. The reason may lie in the bands' uses of their 'to-be-looked-at-ness'. More often than not, the performers work to subvert the spectator's pleasure, usually through

9. Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' in *Visual and Other Pleasures*, Macmillan, Basingstoke 1989.

methods of visual distraction. Often this involves constant cutaways to adoring (usually female) fans in the 'audience', allowing for a shift in gaze to diffuse the one-on-one relationship of MTV spectator and spectacle... (p191)

If it is possible to use this argument to show why gay men don't like these videos, how can he explain how heterosexual women can enjoy them or are they, too, excluded from enjoying these videos? Drukman uses a very limited number of examples to prove this point and has missed a variety of heavy metal, punk and noise music videos that do court the kind of gaze for which he argues. Among those readily memorable are Van Halen's *Pretty Woman*, in which singer David Lee Roth – dressed as Napoleon – makes advances to a man in drag. There are also the videos of Metallica and Soundgarden, which are often as homoerotic as Drukman claims George Michael's videos are. It is increasingly evident that a large number of lesbians and gay men do enjoy all sorts. There are gay men and lesbians who like heavy metal or whatever – but they don't talk about it while on the dance floor at *Heaven*.¹⁰

10. 'Heaven' is a (mostly) gay London nightclub owned by Richard Branson.

In the light of this, it is perhaps Bruce LaBruce's writing that, despite lacking an explicit intellectual framework, is the most challenging and exciting. Writes LaBruce, 'I've never been able to surrender my mind to prefabricated dogma, or reduce my politics to a slogan, or even situate myself in a fixed position on the political spectrum. No, I'm not "queer," and I don't know why they had to go and ruin a perfectly good word, either' (p194).

Preferring to remain the perpetual voice of disagreement, LaBruce is in the privileged position of never having to produce limiting ideas on anything – continually looking for a new way of looking, merely for the sake of looking. LaBruce's writing is part of a larger picture of his career, '... when [I] find any kind of foothold into being legitimised or institutionalised [I] drop it and turn on it and move on to something else.'¹¹ This is either very irresponsible or a license to continually enjoy the world as you come in contact with it. To borrow a line from *The Guardian* back in 1992, 'It's punk, it's anarchic, it's dangerous, it's gesture politics. It's also very confusing.' If that's queer, then count me in.

11. 'The bitched is back', an interview with Bruce LaBruce *Gay Times*, January 1995.