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Minds, bodies, and hearts: Flare London LGBT Film Festival 2014

Karl Schoonover and Rosalind Galt

LGBTQ film festivals are engaged in a precarious dance. They cannot live without the identity categories that designate both their mission and their audience and yet they cannot live easily with these identities, which are continually expanded, revised, and contested. The growth of public discourse around previously marginalised identities (including but not limited to lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex, polyamorous, asexual, and genderqueer) has rapidly shifted the terrain for queer cinematic representation and cultural politics. As much as film festivals need identity categories, in recent years they seem to be involved in a process of establishing their distance from identitarian models in an attempt to remain relevant to people no longer identifying simply as L, G, B, or even Q. This balancing act has played out visibly in the name of the London Lesbian and Gay Film Festival. After 27 years as one of the world's largest and most international venues for queer film the festival outlived its name and changed it in 2014 to Flare: London LGBT Film Festival.[1]

The festival, organised under the auspices of the British Film Institute (BFI), is one of the oldest of its kind and in a sense the most institutionally grounded: it is tied to a wealthy nation's film institute, renowned not only for its exhibition schedule but for its research library, scholarly activity, and publications. As a result the festival has a history of linking its curatorial practice with educational aims. The film programming is avowedly international and diverse, including cinematic forms from popular features to experimental shorts and activist documentary. The festival regularly includes presentations by researchers and roundtable discussions, and its institutional structures enable outreach efforts such as touring a selection of films around the UK each year and working with LGBT, anti-racist, and feminist organisations to create community links. Despite this strong institutional setting the festival has not always been easy to sustain. As recently as 2011 it was forced to shrink from its normal two-week length to just one week as a result of the British Conservative coalition government's drastic cuts to arts funding.[2]

The 2014 edition of Flare was ten days long – a regrowth that sounds a note of cautious optimism in a funding climate that remains challenging.

Flare's name change takes place in a context of simultaneous cultural privilege and precarity, and the transformation signals some notable fault lines in queer film culture. First is that thorny question of identity, recast in terms of the semiotics of film festival branding. According to the festival programmers' statement the word 'flare' evokes a 'light filled, celebratory' quality, as well as 'the spark of an idea' and 'a beacon'.[3] They also see it as 'inclusive and welcoming' to audiences. Although some qualities evoked by the word flare are fairly positive (the accidental capture of light by a photographic lens exerts a cinephilic charm, and the hint of its homophone 'flair' suggests a retro camp humour), the idea of a visual distress signal launched into the sky is less celebratory. What exactly is London's Flare a beacon for? The visual motifs that accompany the name on festival publicity materials engage the concept in abstract terms. Non-human forms dominate the look of the festival, with images that resemble jellyfish, fractals, or chandeliers. If the concept of flare speaks about queer identities it does so precisely without visualising any of the people who might take on those categories.[4] Even more striking than a previous campaign for the London Lesbian and Gay Film Festival which imagined its diverse audience as colourful zoo animals, Flare creates a sense-perception of a community that is not easily captured in identitarian terms. Ben Roberts in *Sight & Sound* exemplifies a certain anxiety around identity, where he suggests that the festival could be thought of as 'post-gay'.[5] However, Flare signals a desire to embrace precisely this unmooring from earlier modes of gay cultural practice.

Flare's name change has not only signalled a question of LGBTQ identities for scholarly researchers but has also prompted an unusually public debate over self-representation. There had been grumblings over the limiting 'lesbian and gay' moniker for years, and in 2013 the festival embarked on a public consultation about how to change it.[6] If the term 'consultation' implies a contemporary mode of corporate communication, the impetus to engage directly with the audience over the festival's identity equally harks back to an earlier era of queer communitarian action. The BFI commissioned a video which ran before every screening, starring actress T'Nia Miller from Campbell X's 2012 film *Stud Life*, inviting the audience to offer suggestions for a new name. A more low-tech interactive device was the pin board in the BFI lobby with a supply of post-it notes for the public to attach feedback. Suggestions included 'London Queer Film Festival', 'anything but queer', and, splendidly, 'The Dyke Drama Battleground'. The pin board vividly illustrated the range of register in audience response, from witty and tongue-in-cheek to angry denunciations of the festival's exclusions and silences. In a sense, this debate covered familiar territory. The name change could be read as a belated institutional reach for developments in queer culture that are no longer novel or contentious. After all, the idea that 'lesbian and gay' does not cover the breadth of the community is hardly new. This belatedness has brought formations of cultural politics that might not have emerged at an earlier point.

In the publicity relating to the launch of Flare the festival showed off an eagerness to be 'transforward'. Ironically, at the same moment there was a significant push-back on the festival's management of trans issues. Whereas activists have long complained that the 'T' in LGBT is too often ignored, it is clear that Flare made a renewed effort to live up to their claim on an expanded field in their new name. The programme came with an insert listing trans events and the various trans organisations that collaborated with the festival, including TransLondon and Gendered Intelligence. Clearly, the festival organisers understand that programming trans-themed films is not enough and are actively reaching out to trans communities to nurture audiences. The festival also had – and not for the first time – a gender-neutral bathroom. Nonetheless, this expansion did not run entirely smoothly. A mistake by a BFI employee outside of the Flare team led to the filmmaker Sam Feder (*Kate Bornstein is a Queer and Pleasant Danger* [2013]) being misgendered in the festival programme. For such an error to occur in publicity for one of the flagship trans-themed films of the festival's new identity was an embarrassment for the festival, causing immediate anger and hurt from Feder and the film's supporters.[7] A social media campaign demanded both an apology and corrective action, which the festival ultimately took. Programmes were stickered with Feder's correct name and an insert printed updated information on the screening.

The significance of this controversy is what it tells us about contemporary tensions among queer festivals, the infrastructures of their sponsoring organisations, and the communities they serve. The prompt for the whole affair may have

been a simple copy editing error, but the response speaks to the nature of social media activism, the increased voice of trans communities, and the ideological consequences of a publically-funded festival's financial limitations. Feder's supporters positioned Flare as a privileged centre of (homonormative British) culture that refused to do the right thing for trans artists and audiences. However, considering only three years earlier the festival had been threatened with complete closure as a result of government austerity measures, the demands of Feder's supporters that Flare pulp and reprint all programmes and publicity materials was probably financially impossible. The stage was thus set for an ugly confrontation. However, Feder worked with Flare to negotiate a response that would both be feasible for the BFI and provide a just removal of the offending text. Where the rapidity of the trans response to the mistake bespeaks a newly-mobilised online activism (that may or may not overlap with the actual festival audience), the ultimate resolution of the controversy perhaps offers an example of the negotiations that have become both necessary and desirable among queer cinema institutions and their audiences.

Another key issue revealed by Flare's programming is the shifting relationship between 'queer cinema' and 'world cinema'. In the last year one might say that queer films have become major players in contemporary world cinema. Two of the festival's biggest films, *Blue is the Warmest Colour* (Kechiche, 2013) and *Stranger by the Lake* (Guiraudie, 2013), already had a significant UK release prior to the festival and indeed had been two of the most publicised films of the year. In the past these films would have premiered at Flare, but now the apparent success of queer cinema suggests that they already had access to art cinema release channels and were buoyed by significant attention from mainstream cultural criticism. Thus, although both films screened at Flare, they did not seem to carry much weight, appearing in the programme under the banner Best of the Year. Of course, both films are French, directed by men, and enjoy a good deal of cultural capital. As such, they may not be entirely representative of the complex landscape of queer filmmaking around the world. While it makes sense for Flare to offer repeat screenings for significant LGBT films, the relative mainstreaming of art films willing to show queers makes it harder to locate more diverse voices in global queer cinema. In this regard Flare's programming of international films offers a productive area of study in which we can draw out how queer film festivals are reimagining their role vis-à-vis world cinema.

Flare 2014 had a strong international component. The festival has long been a champion of LGBT filmmaking from beyond Western Europe and North America. *Dual* / *Dvojina* (Gazvoda, 2013) from Croatia engaged contemporary transnational European identities and *The Passion of Michelangelo* (Larraín, 2013), like many recent films from Chile, took on the country's history of dictatorship in intimate

terms. The Argentine film *Hawaii* (Berger, 2013) divided critical opinion: some viewed it as a languorous essay on desire cleverly fused with a class critique in the mould of Lucretia Martel, whereas others found it overly slow or exploitative. *Lilting* (Hong Khaou, 2013) brought questions of cultural translation to the fore. The shorts programmes offered some of the most varied work in terms of nationality, identity categories, and filmic genres. A programme on QTPOC (queer and trans people of colour) was especially rich, featuring documentaries such as the Brazilian *Garotas de Modas / Fashion Girls* (Siqueira, 2013), about a gay and trans dance troupe. There was also a fascinating and well-attended evening with India-based artist Tejal Shah that expanded the festival's definition of cinema to include contemporary art practices and performance.

Two of the thematic and educational sidebars addressed international issues, one from a film history perspective and the other from contemporary politics. The more academic sidebar was Queer Bollywood, an exploration of LGBT representation and reception practices in popular Hindi cinema. Queer film scholar Rajinder Dudrah gave a lecture on the history of representations of same-sex desire as well as transgender and third sex characters in Hindi cinema, ranging from D.G. Phalke's early milestone *Raja Harishchandra* (1913) to contemporary films such as *Dostana* (Mansukhani, 2008), which stage ambivalent attitudes toward homosexuality. Some of the films Dudrah discussed were screened at the festival. Another sidebar titled LGBT Rights was described in the programme as 'a look at the laws affecting LGBT equality around the world'.[8] This sidebar included documentaries on the lives of queer Jamaicans living at home and abroad (*The Abominable Crime* [Fink, 2013]) and gay people in Cameroon (*Born This Way* [Kadlec and Tullman, 2013]), as well as a roundtable discussion. Here debate focused on human rights, in particular the inheritance of colonial homophobic legal systems in postcolonial nations. In the UK as elsewhere in Europe, LGBT media activism has recently focused on anti-gay laws in various parts of the Global South.

Though there were plenty of international events and films screening at Flare the physical layout of the programme minimised this information. Countries of origin were not listed on the printed catalogue and it was actually quite hard to work out where films came from, unless using the online programme. The calendar highlighted films with subtitles but not their nationalities or languages. Moreover, the organisation of the programme into 'moods' rather than more traditional categories of nationality or genre worked to de-emphasise world cinema as a critical or experiental category. The central categories in the programme were 'minds', 'bodies', and 'hearts' – a corporeal schema that produced a separation of love and romance into one section with community and politics another. This affective taxonomy is clearly in keeping with the programming shift at the London Film Festival (also part of the BFI), which in 2013 organised its programme into

categories such as 'journey', 'dare', and 'debate'. Controversial at the time, the move purported to be more audience-friendly, as it supposedly allowed people to select the kind of film experience they wanted rather than sort their festival experience through more traditional cinephile categories such as director or country of origin. This organisational strategy seemed neither helpful nor enticing, with categories so broad as to be meaningless – but the blurring of previously sharp lines of demarcation has some additional implications for an LGBT festival.

As well as de-privileging world cinema, the logic of moods precludes identitarian categories, breaking up any tribal affiliation and seeking to create audiences across communities. Queer film festivals often work hard to create mixed audiences and Flare, perhaps unsurprisingly, has had varying success. In our experience audiences were often segregated by gender, although the female-dominated audiences for lesbian-themed films were noticeably more multiracial than the largely white gay male audiences for gay-themed films. The gender politics of film authorship were also striking here, with a significant number of films centering on female characters directed by men. *Blue is the Warmest Colour* is the best-known example of this trend, though we could also point to *Dual*, *Soongava: Dance of the Orchids* (Thapa, 2012) and *Reaching for the Moon* (Barreto, 2013). A cynical commentator might wonder if lesbian relationships are the new territory for male directors to conquer, and this concern has certainly been voiced in some responses to *Blue*. It was noteworthy that the female audiences for these films did not seem to mind.

Both Flare's new title and organisation into 'moods' reflects an eagerness to transcend traditional categories of national, gendered, and sexual identity, as well as a desire to figure both queer audiences and world cinema differently. It was notable that, during Q&A sessions, two directors disavowed their films as political – even though the films in question, *The Last Match* (Hens, 2013) and *Dual*, quite clearly engaged significant geopolitical issues around LGBT lives in Cuba and across Europe. This disavowal maps neatly onto the programme's separation of 'hearts' from 'minds', yet neither identity categories nor politics were absent from the life of the festival. Perhaps surprisingly, it was the high school drama *G.B.F.* (Stein, 2013) that most explicitly articulated the contemporary politics of tolerance – albeit from a middle class suburban perspective. World cinema when highlighted in marginal sidebars operated either as a cinephile exploration of national film history or an activist engagement with global geopolitics. In the main body of the programme films intermingled promiscuously. Flare seems to feel no need to prove that it is international, and yet festival audiences might easily stumble upon a Filipino melodrama or an Argentine art film. Perhaps 'world cinema' is losing its weight as an overt signifier of quality and cultural seriousness for queer film

festivals, while at the same time the expectation is that queer cinema is inherently and obviously worldly.

Notes

1. http://www.bfi.org.uk/flare
3. https://whatson.bfi.org.uk/flare/Online/default.asp?BOparam::WScontent::loadArticle::permalink=whatsinaname
4. For an expanded discussion of the visual rhetoric of non-human figures in queer film festival promotions see Karl Schoonover's forthcoming article 'Queer or Human?: LGBT Film Festivals, Human Rights and Global Film Culture'.
5. Roberts 2014.
6. https://whatson.bfi.org.uk/flare/Online/default.asp?BOparam::WScontent::loadArticle::permalink=whatsinaname
7. http://katebornsteinthemovie.com/bfi-flare-mis-genderedmis-named-director-sam-feder/; https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/621261806/kate-bornstein-is-a-queer-and-pleasant-danger/posts/763861
8. https://whatson.bfi.org.uk/flare/Online/default.asp?BOparam::WScontent::loadArticle::permalink=lgbtrights

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