

A Queer Anxiety: Assimilation Politics and Cinematic Hedonics in *Relax . . . It's Just Sex*

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SUMMARY. This essay explores the commodification of queer identities in independent cinema, offering particular attention to P. J. Castellaneta's 1998 film, *Relax . . . It's Just Sex*. Like many contemporary queer independent productions, *Relax* is ensnared in a representational *cinematic hedonics*, aspiring to sustain a traditional gay and lesbian politics and simultaneously produce pleasure for multiple audiences. While *Relax* attempts to position itself as a queer film that resists normative conceptions of sexuality, the feature inadvertently appropriates more essentialized understandings of identity closely aligned to liberation rhetoric. doi:10.1300/J082v52n01_05 [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2006 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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Hollywood has been a consistent source of both liberating messages and constraining archetypes for the queer community. Ellen can come out, but only if she struggles. Will can date, but only if he lives with Grace. John Goodman can be gay, but only if he resides in “Normal” Ohio. Positing such negotiated images has enabled some political progress for quotidian life, but has simultaneously presented new challenges and obstacles. Visibility may be reaching new heights, but so are hate crimes committed against people in the LGBT community.¹ Reflecting on this tenuous conception of progress, *Newsweek* magazine posed a perpetually vexing question for those resisting homophobia and heteronormativity, asking how queers “live in a culture that loves Rupert Everett but kills Barry Winchell?”² (Leland, 2000, p. 49).

The popular implication that gays and lesbians are “just like everyone else” continues to encourage a distorted identification, one in which *only* those individuals who embody the (straight) ideal survive. Recently *Will and Grace* co-creator Max Mutchnick attributed his show’s success to its ability to remain apolitical. “It’s our *lack* of agenda that’s helped make the show a success,” he divulges to *Entertainment Weekly*. “We never sit down and say, ‘Okay, how can we teach the world about gay marriage?’ The minute we start doing that, we fail” (Svetkey, 2000, p. 28). Such editorializing initiated the demise for DeGeneres’ sitcom, being canceled by media executives on the grounds that it was too political and issue oriented for typical viewers. Although gay and lesbian programming is generally regarded as marketable, its livelihood frequently depends on its ability to refrain from explicit social commentary. This aggressive apolitical commodification of sexual identity in mainstream media has often forced LGBT populations to explore alternative mediums for addressing conformist ideologies and representational codification.

Independent films have proven to be a rich source of such resistance. Unlike television or mainstream cinema, independent productions have traditionally been less concerned with studio demands and consumer expectations. Films such as *Parting Glances*, *Go Fish*, *Poison*, *The Incredibly True Adventure of Two Girls in Love*, *Boys Don’t Cry*, *Jeffrey*, and *The Opposite of Sex* have all made attempts (albeit, very different ones) at exploring notions of assimilation, while concurrently attempting to resist it. Independent films have long recognized

the need for visible political representations, while simultaneously developing a self-reflexive attitude that acknowledges the effects essentialized images can have. Characterized by its freedom from rigid economic or aesthetic norms, independent film has positioned itself to engage understandings of sexuality in more diverse manners than mainstream cinema or television.

Despite this sovereignty, independent cinema has not remained wholly free of institutional influence. Shifts in the modes of production and distribution throughout the 1990s has made the term “independent” increasingly difficult to define. Some critics suggest that most “independent” films are more easily classified as “appendages” to major studios than autonomous entities. Nonetheless, Emanuel Levy points out in his text *Cinema of Outsiders*, “There never was a single type of independent film—it’s the multitude of distinctive voices that makes indie cinema the rich collective phenomena it is . . . in the new American cinema ‘independent’ is a sufficiently flexible term to embrace a variety of artistic expression” (1999, p. 6). At its base, the term “independent” has simply implied “work different from the dominant or mainstream” (Hillier, 2001, p. ix).

There is a striking parallel between the definitional debates of independent cinema and those concerning sexual politics. In many regards, the concept of “queer” has functioned similarly to the term “independent.” Like independent film, gay and lesbian identities continue to be increasingly commodified in popular culture. Similarly, rather than embody an easily delimited idea, the word “queer” connotes a number of meanings and understandings. Just as the word “independent” defies classification, “queer” resists definition, as it is often difficult to judge from the label “exactly what someone is referring to, except that it is something non-straight or non-normatively straight” (Doty, 2000, p. 8).

The increased commodification of both independent cinema and LGBT identities raises important questions about the evolvment of queer politics and the cultural representations being addressed in alternative media. While the “new queer cinema” is often defined as employing irony, pastiche, and fragmented subjectivities to defy traditional identity politics, heightened commodification has the potential to further blur these lines, placing queer filmmakers and their audiences in a precarious hegemonic position (Arroyo, 1997, p. 79). As such, this essay does not attempt to simply read independent film through the competing perspectives of “liberation politics” and “queer theory.” Alexander Doty (2000) notes that any text has the potential to be read as queer, depending on the audience viewing it. Rather, this analysis seeks

to understand the kinds of identities being constructed by independent films in a culture where the discursive traits of both queer theory and traditional movement theory exist in a common polity, rarely as easily distinguishable paradigms. Michael Warner has argued that these seemingly divergent camps of critique and action are more intertwined than not, explaining that they “belong not to different epochs, or to different populations, but to different contexts” (2002, p. 213).

P. J. Castellaneta’s 1998 indie film, *Relax . . . It’s Just Sex* (hereafter *Relax*) will be the focal point of this analysis. *Relax* elucidates the tensions inherent in examining contemporary independent films that address queer identities from an aesthetic, ethical, and economic perspective. Like many contemporary independent films, *Relax* is trapped between the necessities of duty and pleasure, ensnared in a representational *cine-matic hedonics*. It aspires to sustain traditional gay and lesbian politics and simultaneously wishes to adopt a queer voice that produces pleasure for a multiplicity of audiences. *Relax* recognizes its role as an independent film to transcend the terror that is perpetually in the consciousnesses of queer viewers, as well as produce a product from the “on-going struggle between the extremes of defiance and assimilation, of resistance and complacency” (Griffin, 1992, p. 229).

“NO MORE FILMS ABOUT HOMOSEXUALITY”

At the conclusion of his landmark text, *The Celluloid Closet*, Vito Russo makes an impassioned plea to expand the boundaries of film to present a more eclectic sampling of gay and lesbian identity. He implores his reading audience, “no more films about homosexuality. Instead, more films that explore people who happen to be gay in America and how their lives intersect with the dominant culture” (1987, p. 326). While Russo suggests moving away from the treatment of “homosexuality” as a negative construct, gauging the success of his appeal is elusively difficult. A mainstream film such as *Philadelphia*, for example, purported to represent a “normal” man, who just happened to be gay and HIV positive in a world that isolated people with AIDS. Although the film was well received by popular audiences, queer activists and scholars hardly regarded the production as libratory or progressive. Advocates such as Larry Kramer called it a “heartbreakingly mediocre movie: dishonest, and often legally, medically and politically inaccurate” (1994, p. 1). Critics argued that the film presented distorted views

of life with HIV, gay relationships, and the communities where discrimination is perpetuated.

In response, some scholars have suggested that gay rights advocates misstep in their criticism of the film, resorting to the erroneous claim that there is in fact an “authentic” homosexual identity which can be wholly depicted on screen. James Brookey, for instance, encouraged activists to move “beyond” questions of representation and utilize the discursive insights of queer theory to examine “what rules are being made, and what social relations are being enforced” (1996, p. 40). By scrutinizing the discursive forms reiterated in films such as *Philadelphia*, Brookey argued that questions concerning the economic commodification of identity and traditional notions of the family can be more productively engaged. As part of that project, Brookey also emphasized the need for exploring “resistance discourses” produced by gays and lesbians that challenge normative cultural institutions, citing independent films such as *Go Fish* and *No Skin Off My Ass*.

While such potential existed in the new queer cinema of the early 1990s, the last decade has illustrated a movement towards themes that appeal to diverse audience segments and productions which deemphasize political critique. Characters and scripts are created with the intent of appealing to mass consuming audiences, not necessarily engaging forms of cultural resistance. For example, director Tommy O’Haver says of his protagonist in the film *Billy’s Hollywood Screen Kiss*, “I wanted people to forget that this is a gay man—it could be anyone” (Levy, 1999, p. 491). Even a film such as *Boys Don’t Cry*, which obviously engages in critical cultural critique, appropriates elements of these themes. Director Kimberly Pierce explained on *CNN*, “In the end it’s such a universal story—Brandon’s celebration of individuality and fluidity of gender, and just being yourself—everybody can relate to that, every teenager, every person” (1999). Of course, appeals to universality can be productive in their own right. Judith Butler, whose theories of performativity speak explicitly against codified understandings of identity, has described their potential writing, “the assertion of universality can be proleptic and performative, conjuring a reality that does not yet exist, and holding out the possibility for a convergence of cultural horizons that have not yet met” (1999, p. xvii).

The move towards universality is closely tied to economic concerns faced by independent filmmakers. Some earlier 1990s productions such as *Go Fish* were exceptionally cost effective to create, so studios could afford to ignore large cross-over appeal, as they would still turn a profit from queer audiences (James, 1994). However, as the decade pro-

gressed, the rules for both independent filmmakers and the industry began to shift. In 1996 director Todd Haynes pointed out that increased government cutbacks provided fewer opportunities for grant-funding, forcing indie producers to seek commercial investors (Andrews, 1996). These Hollywood officials were witnessing a blurring of audience segments, as people who would once pay to see a mainstream film were increasingly supporting certain independent productions as well. However, determining whether or not those audiences would appear depended largely on the ability of the studio to market and distribute individual films. Pictures could be edgy and against the norm, but still necessitated justification for theatres to purchase the reels and people to watch them. Because identity politics often failed to appease market considerations, casting and cross-over audience draw became a significant part of developing independent films (Rich, 2001). Economic influence has not only produced “gay films for straight people,” but “straight films for gay people” (Darsey, 1997, p. 186; Macnab, 2001, p. 109).

There is little doubt that queer identities and independent films have been increasingly commodified in recent years. But does this commercialization mean that all hope is lost for queer independent cinema? Certainly, such productions have never spoke with one voice, and several continue appealing to a politics understood to be radical by mainstream audiences. Can independent cinema invoke the contours of queer theory to offer insights about normativity and the deployment of sexuality as a continually developing discourse? Or do themes of universality subvert the potential of queer politics to a utopian vision of liberal tolerance? If queer theory and liberation politics exist in different contexts, as implied by Warner, how do we negotiate these tensions in independent texts that attempt to reach diverse audience segments? This analysis will now turn to the film *Relax*, as it deals explicitly with these issues, attempting to navigate a queer politics within a framework that stresses universality.

RELAX . . . IT'S JUST REPRESENTATION

Loosely based on the 1950 production *La Ronde*, the film follows the lives of ten friends living in Los Angeles who struggle with a series of life altering events. Narrated by various cast members throughout the feature, the story unfolds in a quirky manner by using flashbacks, testimonials, a spoofed hygiene film, and witty dialogue. Despite the playful

tone of the film, the subject matter is consistently serious as characters recount stories of being tested HIV positive or partner infidelity. The otherwise light-hearted production takes a surprising turn when two of the male characters are assaulted by gay bashers after a party. In the midst of the attack, an assailant is overpowered by the group and then raped by one of the queer men. The remainder of the film chronicles how the friends reconcile their romantic problems and the ethical dilemmas that stem from the sexual assault.

In contrast to the seemingly assimilative tone adopted by many indie films, *Relax* positions itself as an oppositional production. It differs from films such as *Get Real* or *Beautiful Thing* by making a self-conscious effort to critique normativity and include a multiplicity of sexualities, endeavoring to break away from a narrative that revolves around a gay white male protagonist. While it does embrace the stock lonely gay male artist typical in many queer films such as *Billy's Hollywood Screen Kiss*, *The Broken Heart's Club*, and *Trick*, it also attempts to incorporate a number of narratives about less visible members of the LGBT community. The story lines include a lesbian love triangle between a beautiful African-American lesbian, her attractive, but unfaithful bisexual Caucasian partner, and a self-proclaimed butch dyke; A Hispanic man who recently discovers he is HIV positive and his new African-American lover who expresses radical skepticism about the link between HIV and AIDS; A vocal "fag hag" who longs to have a baby and eventually miscarries; and a pair of gay Christian gym-queens who act as stand-ins for the embodiment of "normalized" queers. By integrating a diverse sampling of voices from the LGBT community the film strives to identify the manner in which all relationships are somewhat queer and complicate a "view of coalition politics as the sum of separate identity communities, each locked into its own sexual, gender, class, or racial politics" (Seidman, 1993, p. 105).

Filmmakers such as director Bill Condon (*Gods and Monsters*) have publicly endorsed the development of a cinema that adopts such divergent narratives. He points to films like *The Opposite of Sex* as positive examples, explaining that it had "a gay sensibility but it encompassed all different experiences" (Karger, 1994, p. 36). But how those experiences are performed, the representations of gay and lesbian life they depict, and the political/cultural goals they imagine continue to be hotly contested. Delimiting what is "normalized" and what is "marginalized" is a more pressing question than ever before.

Navigating the area between the Scylla of queer politics and the Charybdis of mass commodification can be a difficult task for inde-

pendent filmmakers. To alleviate this tension, films such as *Relax* adopt a conceptual cinematic hedonics to meet both ends. While traditionally understood as a form of illicit gratification, hedonics is concerned most with ethics, a philosophy that ponders the relationship between duty and pleasure (Chesebro, 1997, p. 139). Like several contemporary queer independent films, *Relax* continually dances between these two concepts, which are often more connected than isolated. *Relax* is developed in a manner that stresses the aesthetic and political pleasures traditionally associated with independent film and resisting normative behavior. At the same time, it recognizes the hardships accompanying cultural defiance and the obligation to invoke a political message for its queer audience.

A plethora of scenes, characters, and narrative techniques attempt to position *Relax* as an art house exhibition film that produces pleasures traditionally associated with independent cinema. It is important to remember that films are more often than not a source of enjoyment and fantasy for the audiences viewing them. They are instruments of escape and fancy, mediums that are used to help people simultaneously find and lose themselves. Richard Dyer and Derek Cohen remind us that pleasure is often ignored as an integral portion of the industry. They write, “the pleasure of culture gives us a glimpse of where we are going and helps us to enjoy the struggle of getting there” (2002, p. 16). *Relax* isolates this form of cultural pleasure by defining itself as a production with a political message, employing characteristics traditionally associated with art house cinema. It is constructed in a manner that fragments traditional narrative style, is goaded by realism, and is less concerned with action than with audience reaction (Bordwell, 1999). More than any other feature of the film, *Relax* adopts a hostile stance to that which is “normal,” invoking a political aesthetic that appeals to queer spectators.

Relax immediately attempts to position itself in opposition to the concept of “normal” identities. It opens with a black and white spoof of a 1950s educational hygiene film. A deep voiced narrator explains, “some of you have never seen homosexuals engaged in any sort of positive physical contact. So we would like to take a moment before we start to acclimate you.” The narrator assures viewers that the “lipstick lesbians” and the “gym queens” featured on a revolving platform are nothing to fret. After all, these prototypes strongly resemble the ideals of heterosexual culture. As the two iconic gay men embrace the voice asserts, “Just like two buddies after a ball game.”

The nostalgic introduction is designed to resemble a classic text that would be fodder for conventional camp readings. Camp being one of the striking symbols of gay and lesbian film iconography, the movie attempts to establish a “queer” sensibility by mocking that which is usually appropriated as “normal.” The segment is intended to be ironic, as its gray, purified *mise en scene* is immediately followed by an explicit sex scene featuring Vincey (Mitchell Anderson), who is put in the precarious position of deciding whether to swallow the semen of a man whom he has just met. As he ponders this decision, he dreams of a lifetime with the attractive man, envisioning everything from crossing the threshold of their new home to selecting china patterns. He justifies ingesting the fluids, only to have the man shatter his reverie, telling him he shouldn’t swallow, as it is simply not safe. Unlike traditional notions of camp, there is little need for queer viewers to search for a subtext on the screen. The introduction functions as a parody, establishing the premise that dreams of a “normal” life are more fantasy than reality. While the black and white spoof infers that gay and lesbian relationships are normative, the sexual scene suggests otherwise, pointing to the difficult aspects of building gay relations, including common fears about HIV.

In addition, *Relax* struggles to divorce itself from the normative gay white male protagonist central to contemporary films exploring issues of sexual identity (*Billy’s Hollywood Screen Kiss*, *Get Real*, *Jeffrey*, and *The Opposite of Sex*). The cast of *Relax* is self-consciously diversified, both racially and sexually, allowing for multiple identifications to transpire. It endeavors to establish, in Arlene Stein’s words, that there are “many possible configurations of the relationship between desire, practice, and identity—many more so configurations than there are social categories to describe them” (1991, p. 40). By employing these diverse identities, the producers of *Relax* speak to the concerns of activists who argue that filmmakers must temper themselves when creating oppositional works longing to give underrepresented groups voice (Griffin, 1992). As representations are unavoidably constituted for an unknown public, filmmakers must not assume that they speak on behalf of all members of a group, regardless of how cohesive that collective may seem. While attempting to produce texts that resist the dominant culture, presuming an alternate voice that speaks on behalf of an entire people can unintentionally reinforce stereotypes or be equally totalizing.

To reinforce the importance of personal identity, video footage of individual characters offering testimonials of recent events is employed throughout the film. The audience is given first hand accounts of the

problems being grappled with in the narrative. Not only do such scenes help reinforce the aesthetic elements of the traditional art house film by helping break the linear narrative, they also define differences between several of the characters. While film segments speak from an unnamed authority, video shots add an element of authenticity designed to produce a credibility that encourages “us to believe them” (Fiske, 1996, p. 127). The splicing of video footage in the film helps give voice to that which is not easily communicated when dealing with performances that encourage framing a character in a specific manner. The people being video recorded in *Relax* “are trapped in an authenticity that the powerful have the fortune to escape and the misfortune to lose” (Fiske, 1996, p. 127). The testimonials are sad, fearful, and humorous, assigning a level of complexity and humanity to various characters by giving audiences an intimate glimpse into their lives.

Castellaneta used the “experience” of the characters to acknowledge that sexual identities are performed in dissimilar manners, but also utilized “experience” to create a hierarchy of authenticity within the narrative. *Relax* shuns characters who are more traditionally normative in their demeanor while the more developed and prized characters have radical perspectives, are HIV positive, or rape gay bashers. Locating this experience allows the film to explore the needs and interests of people who are seemingly “more queer” than others. In fact, those cast members who are presented as more “heteronormative” are positioned as sites for hostility in the film. Being “normal” is constructed as more dangerous because it reinforces discursive representations that divert attention from the problems “real” gay people confront.

In one segment, for example, the character Javier (Eddie Garcia) tells the group about his experience with a gay couple who scowl at him moments before he discovers he is HIV positive. The pair are described as a “really, really gross Ozzie and Harriet, West Hollywood-type couple that [they] all hate.” The “normal” couple and their nasty glances are taken as a “bad omen” for the test results he receives soon after. The men, having recently discovered that they were HIV negative, race past Javier as he describes how cruel the world can be. But as the duo run off to live their “AIDS free life together” they are conveniently hit by a metro bus that is passing by the clinic. In traditional mainstream films it is commonplace for sexually active or promiscuous people to be met by death as the narrative develops (Clover, 1993). In *Relax*, however, there is a queer reversal of this cinematic trope. The “normal” gay people die, not the person marked by the traditionally stigmatized syndrome.

Perhaps the most conspicuous characters to assume assimilative roles in the film are the Christian couple Dwight and Diego (Gibbs Tolsdorf and Chris Cleveland). The men are a beautiful, buffed, Caucasian couple who never argue and continually express concern for others in the film. They wear polo shirts and khakis, go on spiritual retreats together, and their arguments never exceed trivial questions, such as “who should make breakfast today?” Unlike the other characters in the film, their lives are uncomplicated and trouble free. Even their names, “Dwight” and “Diego,” mark them as being more alike with each other and different from others in the script. They are never apart, are not featured in the video recorded testimonials, and are not developed as individuals like the other cast members. Dwight and Diego are healthy, happy, and extremely hygienic. They signify what Victor D’Lugin would proclaim the top of the “hierarchy of beauty” in gay male culture. He explains that:

The image is muscular and very white and very young and very clean . . . That very cleanliness seems to imply there are certain limits with what one would do with that body. The image is so clean and ultimately so safe and nonthreatening that it doesn’t allow for us to explore our sexuality, to see what the limits of our fantasies might be.” (Mann, 1998, p. 348)

Some critics have labeled this reification of cleanliness “body fascism,” arguing that filmmakers should feature a more diverse sampling of the gay community, rather than appealing to cultural ideals that inscribe normativity. Beautiful, buffed gay men in films are almost never HIV positive or African-American. Invoking such images would impede the mystique of cleanliness that is embodied by figures such as Dwight and Diego (Mann, 1998).

Throughout *Relax*, the idealized couple is sympathetic to cultural institutions that are traditionally viewed as central to the oppression of queer populations. In refuting assertions made by T. C. Carson’s character about AIDS being a conspiracy theory, they employ scientific proof from medical studies to support their claims. Following the segment in which Vincey rapes an attacker, they are the only characters to suggest going to the police and admit that they told their minister about the assault. There is nothing ideologically secure about these characters under the rubric of traditional queer politics. Not only are they completely “normalized,” they support all of the institutions that discursively empower oppression. The church, the law, and medical science

are often regarded as “three parts of a mutually reinforcing system of social control” against gays and lesbians and the couple regularly invoke the credibility of these institutions against other characters in film (Darsey, 1997, p. 176).

Dwight and Diego are depicted in sharp contrast to the character of Vincey who is not in a relationship, perpetually insecure, and less attractive. At two points during the narrative, Vincey projects his anxieties about queer life onto the “normalized” gay men. For example, in one scene Vincey is repairing his car as he ponders single life with the couple. As he works under the hood, he tells his friends, “the world is a much different place for me than it is for people who look like you . . . things come so easily for you guys, you just have no idea.” As he speaks, he inadvertently holds up a pocketknife being used to fix the engine, accidentally pointing it towards the pair. The men cautiously step back as the protagonist pokes fun, saying “would you just relax, I’m just cleaning the crevices. But if you don’t quit annoying me . . .” and proceeds to playfully swing the knife at them. Dwight and Diego are made unexplainably uncomfortable by the action, visibly flinching.

In a second shot shown immediately following this discussion, the cast is leaving a nightclub with Vincey dramatically screeching because he failed to meet anyone. He blames the couple for his displeasure, arguing that he was trapped talking with one of their Christian friends. The group laughs, but Vincey insists that the situation is serious because now he is “horny and depressed” and is “going to have to kill somebody and it just might have to be” Dwight or Diego. The scenes with the Christian couple offer a dark foreshadowing to the centerpiece of the film, where Vincey rapes a gay basher at knifepoint after he is attacked.

While mocking notions of normativity, *Relax* maintains a humorous and light tone throughout the first half of the film. The dinner party where Javier announces he is HIV positive, the revealed affair between Megan (Serena Scott Thomas) and her male second-cousin, and the awkwardness of sex are all approached with an eye towards comedy, not tragedy. However, the tenor of the film drastically shifts when the critique of normativity makes a dramatic turn. As the friends leave the nightclub, Vincey and Javier separate from the pack to urinate in an alley and are assailed by a group of men. When Vincey left the club and announced that he was “horny and depressed,” he was reiterating the desires that have frustrated him for the duration of the film. While his irritation is directed at queer characters throughout the narrative, they acquire new meaning during this segment. *Relax* shifts from parodying

interpolated queers that have been normalized to exemplifying the physical dangers posed by such heteronormativity.

The gay bashers are marked by a number of signs that represent masculinity. They are playing rap music loudly in their car as they approach, reveal baseball bats as weapons, and call the gay men “girls” prior to striking them. One man is dressed in a hockey jersey, and another screams “fore” as he hits Vincey in the stomach with a bat. Most significant, the men threaten to rape Vincey with a dirty beer bottle. As the character begins to struggle, the man in the hockey apparel says, “Baby, you gotta relax or this ain’t gonna be pleasant for you.”

Hearing their calls, Vincey’s and Javier’s friends rush back to the alley and immobilize the assailants. During the confusion, most of the aggressors flee, save the man who attempted to sodomize the gay writer with a bottle. Vincey tackles his nemesis, holds him down at knife point, and rapes him with his friends looking on. The scene is symbolically subverted as Vincey whispers the assailant’s words back to him, saying, “Relax, relax, or this is not going to be pleasant for you at all.” As he continues assaulting his attacker he declares, “Relax, it’s just sex . . . gay boys have learned to relax . . . get pleasure from getting fucked over all the time.” As the man runs away, Vincey mocks him, asking him for a kiss and asserting that the denigrated man is “just like all the others.”

The rape functions, in the words of Judith Butler, as a type of disobedience to discursively interpolating laws. Vincey subverts the disciplining gestures not only to refuse the gay bashers, but to rupture the very laws by which they are operating. Butler explains:

Where the uniformity of the subject is expected, where the behavioral conformity of the subject is commanded, there might be produced the refusal of the law in the form of parodic inhabiting of conformity that subtly calls into question the legitimacy of the command, a repetition of the law into hyperbole, a rearticulation of the law against the authority of the one who delivers it. (1993, p. 122)

The impending rape is both thwarted and reversed, leaving the masculine figure unable to reproduce the queer subject—Vincey is no longer his to be conquered. By mirroring the attacker’s words and quite literally subverting the man’s position, *Relax* appeals to a radical discursive politics, one in which those who have been situated as queer can resist cultural domination. Far from being a private act, this attack occurs in

the presence of a community whose livelihood is compromised daily by the structures the attacker embodies.

Disrupting masculinity through bodily intrusion is traditionally avoided in films by displacing it from the male body and locating it elsewhere in the *mis en scene* (Neale, 1992, p. 284). *Relax* centralizes this taboo, attempting to strip heterosexuality of the discursive power it derives from stigmatizing homosexual practices. If it is true, that “same sex desire provides the disciplinary terms for normalizing heterosexuality in its compulsory formation,” it is important to question how this subversion functions as a mode of queer politics cinematically (Weigman, 1995, p. 99). If heteronormativity recognizes its “phallic potential” in relation to traditionally feminized notions of gay men, does feminizing embodied masculinity aid in the struggle to resist cultural hegemony?

UTOPIA AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Relax operates under a cinematic hedonics that oscillates between the poles of duty and pleasure. It attempts to resist normativity by satirizing seemingly assimilated characters and subsuming discursive structures that act as oppressive agents against gays and lesbians. However, in adopting a radical politics that endeavors to disrupt the discursive authority ascribed to heteronormativity, *Relax* does not resist a hierarchy that oppresses queer bodies as much as it reinforces the very power structures that it is challenging.

In many ways, the rape scene functions as a mode of pondering the limits of queer sexual politics. Questions that address the degree to which violence is justified against an oppressor, the methods of disabling an attacker, and the ways in which those acts might alter power structures are subjects that receive little attention in a movement that stresses tolerance and multiculturalism. *Relax* creates a space in which these matters can be addressed and potentially challenge what audiences might regard as political possibilities. As a cultural text employing a diverse number of voices, *Relax* presents an opportunity for tackling complex issues that are metaphorically encapsulated by the rape.

Despite the discursive potential presented by this surprising twist, the rape is never explicitly engaged in the film. While a mild tension emerges among those characters established as resisting discursive heteronormativity and those who are portrayed as more assimilative, the

debate surrounding the assault takes place in a single scene. Rather than converse over the complicated issue, Vincey departs from the group, disappearing for an undetermined amount of time to recollect his thoughts. While there are references alluding to the attack, in the end, the characters simply “agree to disagree” over the incident, and do so in Vincey’s absence. Although the assault is the center piece of the film, it is swiftly dismissed.

Discouragingly, the most important function of the rape in the narrative is to empower the film’s white male protagonist. By emasculating his attacker, Vincey releases the sexual frustration that has plagued him throughout the storyline. However, in mirroring the basher’s words, by literally feminizing the man’s body, a disturbing political message unfolds. The assailant is positioned in a fashion similar to that of a person being raped by a man who cannot control his sexual urges. He is crying, being held at knife point, and begging not to be assaulted. But the violence that this man embodies encourages the audience to ponder, “Did he have it coming to him? Did he ask for this?” The public display positions the gay basher’s body to be witnessed as both the essential site of difference and the “translation of castration from the metaphors of the feminine to its literalization” (Weigman, 1995, p. 86). This is not to suggest that the kind of aggression that is inappropriately ascribed to a person who has been sexually assaulted is parallel to the motives of a gay basher. Rather, it is meant to question the degree to which the viewing audience is permitted to justify the means taken to discipline those who inflict violence against queer communities. The rape should provoke ethical discussions that engage the extent to which those who identify as LGBT should “bash back,” as well as the repercussions and benefits that might result. Instead it reinforces traditional norms of patriarchy and violence, disempowering one man at the expense of empowering another. In contrast to theories of sexuality that seek to interrupt essentialized understandings of difference, the violation sustains the very discourses it aspires to disrupt. Kate Millet explains that patriarchy “relies on a form of violence particularly sexual in character and realized most completely in the act of rape” (2000, p. 137). It functions by linking feelings of cruelty with images of sexuality, “the latter often equated both with evil and with power” (Millet, 2000, p. 137).

Rather than subvert patriarchal understandings of sexuality, the competing norms of masculinity featured in the rape scene draw attention to a striking element of the story—none of the men in the movie are marked as traditionally effeminate. While the film continually mocks the ideals of normativity, all of the male characters are arguably more masculine

than not. Despite *Relax's* efforts to depict itself as a sexually diverse film, the effeminate element of queer identity has been subtly lost. Such a move reinforces Nardi's fears that, "the rhetoric about gender in many gay organizations and communities has often been oppositional in its tone and it questions the role of effeminate men, drag queens, and 'fairies' in the political strategies and media images" (2000, p. 5). Even as the movie attempts to subvert ideals, it reinforces them. The film reproduces anxieties held by contemporary queer activists who fear that unmarketable populations are being erased in media culture.

Vincey's absence and sudden reemergence at the film's conclusion as a gay rights advocate also undermines the production's ability to challenge discursive heteronormativity. After disappearing from the group, Vincey suddenly reappears as a guest on a Los Angeles-based local access television program. The host reveals that Vincey has been printing an on-line series that a lot of "queers" have criticized "as being too political, too preachy." While never disclosing that he is sharing a personal story, Vincey admits that a column he published about a gay basher who is raped by his intended victim is "intense." However, much like the film, he says nothing more about the incident. Instead he asserts, "you really have to wonder why politicians get so upset when all that gay people want are the same rights as everybody else, not special rights."

The empowered protagonist embraces liberal notions of equality, never offering a sense of how the rape changed him, apart from the fact that it enabled him to redefine himself as a tough queer ready to participate in the political system. There is no struggle with the rape in the film, no concern with how it has reshaped his desires or sexual identity. While he suggests that our cultural understandings of sex have been distortedly normalized, at the program's end he asserts little more than "some people are meant to be in relationships" and others are not. The means adopted by the producers of *Relax* are often "queer" in their own right, but their ends continually reproduce a liberal model of tolerance that stresses patriarchal forms.

Relax appears to be a product of both queer politics and more traditional liberation models. Recognizing the flexibility of what is "normal," Castellaneta's film nods to the powers of discursive formations throughout. This is seen most clearly in a scene where Carson's character Buzz, is lecturing the group about the scientific construction of AIDS. Clarifying that AIDS is a "syndrome," not a "disease" he comments, "we carry around dozens of harmless little retroviruses in our system, and HIV is no different, not in its make up . . . the medical com-

munity has lumped them all together and they call it AIDS.” Rather than simply represent AIDS as “a virus,” the production reiterates accounts of the development of AIDS similar to scholars such as Jan Zita Grover, who writes, “In discussions of AIDS, because of distinctions not made—between syndrome and disease, between infections and contagions—there is often a casual slippage from communicable to contagious” (1996, p. 19). However, despite the recognition of individual experience, varying sexual attractions, and resistance to discursive normativity, the manner in which *sexuality* is constructed is problematic throughout the production.

Ironically, sexuality is not depicted as fluid and subject to change in the film. While there are “prototypes” of sexual identity presented, the boundaries of those identities are closely guarded. For example, Lori Petty’s butch character Robyn describes herself as a lesbian who makes “Janet Reno look femme.” Her non-normative personality is continually positioned against the beautiful, blonde, and successful “lipstick lesbian” Megan, who has abandoned her lover Serena (Cynda Williams) for a man. Attempting to win Serena’s affections, Robyn alludes to Megan’s distrustful nature asserting “at least with me you know what you get.” Here, Megan’s bisexuality, or rather her inability to maintain her homosexuality, is directly tied to her deceitful nature. At several points during the narrative Megan is situated as less authentic than other characters because of her straying desires and seemingly normative heterosexual behavior, even if bisexuality is arguably the least normative of the sexualities depicted. Even Megan’s parents complain about her new found sexuality, arguing that they had finally come to terms with her identity as a lesbian and have no idea what to tell their friends at PFLAG. The film simultaneously mocks the normative rituals that have been adopted by some heterosexuals to cope with homosexuality and disciplines bisexual identity. Megan is stigmatized because of her fluid sexuality and refusal to maintain essential qualities that sustain the ideals of authenticity. In the end, *Relax* reinforces this secured form of identity by having Megan break off her relationship with a man and attempt reconciliation with Serena. Alas, such compromising is not permitted. In the end, Robyn wins Serena’s affections.

In this way, *Relax* adopts a conception of sexual identity that is as stable as those models depicted in mainstream cinema. While the feature evokes an anxiety about the dangers of normativity onto the bodies of Dwight and Diego, it seems unconcerned with the effects of totalizing sexuality. This stabilizing of sexual identity is fast becoming a trope in independent films. Jamie Babbit’s independent production, *But I’m a*

Cheerleader tells the story of a teen sent to a reparative therapy camp where gays and lesbians are taught to become straight by performing heterosexuality. Again, however, there is no fluidity of sexual performance at play. All of the characters are staunchly positioned as belonging to one identity group—you are either gay or lesbian, but never crossing the line. Similarly, in the *Opposite of Sex*, a gay man proclaims he is bisexual after sleeping with his partner's sister, but eventually falls in love with a man at the presentation's conclusion.

Indeed, the most "queer" figure in many contemporary films may be the stock heterosexual, or "fag hag." In *Relax*, Jennifer Tilly's character Tara is one of the only heterosexual characters, but is conceived as more stereotypically queer than most of the gays and lesbians. She has strong sexual urges and is constantly seeking the affections of her noncommittal boyfriend. She worries about gay bashing, calls AIDS the biggest tragedy of the 20th century, and invokes Madonna's credibility to prove her point. After longing for a child throughout the film, she becomes pregnant, but decides against sharing the news of her pregnancy with her boyfriend or immediate family, confiding only in her friends. Like Tori Spelling's character in *Trick* or Lisa Kudrow's in *The Opposite of Sex*, Tara is overbearing, loud, annoying, and a source of contention throughout the film.

Despite the appeal of Tara as a "queer" character, however, her role also blurs the line between identity politics and queer performativity. The gloomy narratives surrounding rape and AIDS are eventually replaced by the storyline of Tara's miscarriage. While many interpretations could be made about this sequence, in terms of political struggle, this dramatic conclusion accomplishes numerous goals. First, the death of the baby seeks to subtly reinforce the assimilative tendencies that underlie the film. As opposed to having the stock "homosexual" character depicted as "just like everybody else," Tilly's character embodies the opposite. The death forces a parallel between Tara, one of the only heterosexual characters in the film, and her gay friends that are constantly experiencing pain, suffering, and growth as a result of their sexuality.

This seeming rite of passage into the gay community is problematic for several reasons. At the conclusion of the film Vincey explains that sex leads to many things, both positive and negative, "sometimes life, sometime death." The film produces parallels between heterosexual and homosexual desire, but does so at the expense of trivializing the complex discourses it wishes to critique. The underlying premise of the conclusion is blatantly simple: "we all have sex, see how much we have in common?" While identification is certainly a positive and necessary

tool for survival and communication, this construction of sexual normativity undercuts the film's potential as a radical queer text that addresses convoluted issues.

Additionally, the child's death shifts attention away from the tragic gay figures in the picture and allows for a more utopian ending. Traditional films dealing with gay subject matters have long reinforced the notion that gay men and lesbians were self-loathing, suicidal, or destined to die of AIDS. In contemporary queer films, however, we see a new kind of ending. Like productions such as *Longtime Companion* there is an over compensation in many features, a need to have not simply a happy ending, but one that is overtly utopian in its aesthetic and narrative components. Both *Billy's Hollywood Screen Kiss* and *The Broken Hearts Club* end with the entire cast at photo exhibits honoring the protagonist. *The Opposite of Sex* concludes with the characters all jovial and living well. *Relax* also ends on a utopian note, with all of the characters walking along a beach with one another as the sun sets in the background.

In the end, it is difficult to disagree with the film's conclusion. Yes, sex is sometimes good, and sometimes bad. Certainly, community is a wonderful thing. Indeed, gay and straight people can be great friends. Nonetheless, the movie strips all ideological and relational complexities, concluding neatly rather than leaving audiences with any dissonance about sexual hierarchy or power struggles common in independent films. In many regards, normalization had been embraced, not subverted. The film is supposed to be a cross-section of identifications, but "we don't learn much about the characters beyond their sexuality" (Smoron, 1993, p. 33). As such, many issues of striking importance get completely erased. Evidently in Castellaneta's world, interracial relations are without consequence, realizing bisexuality is unproblematic, and religious inclusiveness is easily attained. Jean Baudrillard certainly realized the potential for harm at play here, pointing to the oddities of commodity culture infringing on quotidian life, stressing "an odd paradoxical formula—neither true nor false: but utopian" (1983, p. 50).

The normalizing of racial identities is especially problematic in *Relax*. Despite the film's anxieties concerning ideal representations, it fails to address how being an African-American lesbian or a gay Latino man who is HIV positive varies substantially from being a white, negative, middle-class queer. In many ways, audiences never really escape the gay white man central to this narrative. Following the rape scene, Vincey disappears, but his return remains the focus of the film even as

Tara's child dies, Megan attempts reconciliation with Serena, and Javier comes to terms with the impending threat of AIDS. While the film purports to promote an agenda that deals primarily with people of all kinds and their interpersonal relationships, the film focuses largely on issues that are relatable to white middle-class spectators.

CONCLUSION

Relax asserts itself as a queer film with a defined political agenda, but not in the traditional sense of the word. While it sought to expand the boundaries of queer identity by employing aesthetic and narrative features that subvert heteronormativity, it conceptually and structurally reinforced these concepts in divergent manners. Rather than becoming a nonessentialist text concerned with the performative elements of identity, however, it treats difference on the surface, inevitably feeding feelings of assimilation. This is clearly illustrated in the prose of film critics who proclaim that the movie is “. . . a friendly admonition that the more you look at sexual preference, the less it explains” (Gleiberman, 1999, p. 72). Taking this line of thinking one step further, another writes, “‘*Relax . . . It's Just Sex*’ is a very down-to-earth picture showing homosexual relationships are the same as relationships between men and women” (Chow, 2000, p. 7).

This is not to say that all independent films are doomed to fall prey to the hegemonic regimes of popular culture. The very nature of independent queer cinema still poses possibilities for developing interesting and provocative depictions of queer life. *Relax* itself is a film that exhibited much potential for engaging issues of identity, normativity, and sexual fluidity, but ultimately stopped short of fully embracing these complicated matters. However, productions such as *Lilies* continue to present intriguing possibilities for performance theory, queer theory, and LGBT studies.³ Nonetheless, as queer populations and independent films continue to be commodified by mainstream studios, the line between queer sensibilities and liberation politics will continue to blur.

Films that wish to be picked up by major studios will necessarily appeal to mass audiences, making critical analyses of industry politics more pressing than ever before. For example, the copies of *Relax* carried by *Blockbuster Video* carefully edit out two important segments of the film: the explicit sex scene featuring Mitchell Anderson which opens the production and several portions of the violent rape. The very political statements being promoted during both portions of the film

have literally been sanitized for consumption by popular audiences who need not deal with gay sex, be it humorous or disturbing. Although critics such as Rich (2001) argue that queer cinema can no longer exist due to contemporary structures of commodity culture, activists would be wise to follow the lead of Stuart Hall who encourages us to remember that identity is not an already accomplished historical fact that the new cinematic discourses represent, it is “a ‘production,’ which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation” (1996, p. 210).

Several years have passed since Russo exclaimed that “homosexuals are powerless by virtue of their unwillingness to be publicly identified” (1987, p. 251). The problem today, however, is not so much a question of becoming more visible, but determining what to do now that we are more visible than ever before. As the line continues to blur between queer theory and LGBT studies, between duty and pleasure, and between normativity and marginalization, queer activists must be more aware than ever of the discourses that subtly and explicitly shape their lives.

NOTES

1. According to FBI statistics posted on the Human Rights Campaign web site as of November 15, 2003. The HRC reports that crimes “committed in 2002 due to bias against the victim’s perceived sexual orientation represent 16.7 percent of reported hate crime incidents—the highest level in the 12 years” since the FBI began collecting these statistics.

2. A Pfc. in the military, beaten to death in his bunk at Fort Campbell, Kentucky in July of 1999.

3. While films such as *Lilies* play with conceptions of performance and performativity in interesting ways, I chose not to focus on it extensively because of space constraints and because it was not as widely circulated as *Relax*. Nonetheless, *Lilies* is an interesting feature that deserves detailed analysis. While it shares characteristics of assimilation and resistance as described in this essay, it also does creative work with issues of class, religion, race, and gender.

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