

Filmographies as Archives: On Richard Dyer's List- Making in *Gays and Film*

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Filmographies as Archives: On Richard Dyer's List-Making in *Gays and Film* (BFI, 1977)

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Towards the end of 2021, I was invited by the editors of *Frames Cinema Journal* to contribute a review of a canonical film studies book about archives – a retrospective revisit (and possible revaluation) of a title of my choosing. Rather than look back at, say, Anthony Slide's *Nitrate Won't Wait* (1992) or Penelope Houston's *Keepers of the Frame* (1994), I proposed a somewhat oblique approach: a brief essay on one book's filmography.¹ Filmographies, a component of so many film studies texts, operate as valuable archives in their own right; these alphabetical lists of titles serve as vital resources for scholars and cinephiles, gateways to lost or forgotten works, repositories of treasures (and horrors) to be plundered. Simultaneously, in their inclusions and exclusions, they reveal judgements being made at the time of their assembly; overtly and covertly, political debates are written through their content.

Richard Dyer's short edited volume *Gays and Film* was first published by the British Film Institute in 1977, to accompany a series of films at the National Film Theatre ("Images of Homosexuality") curated by Dyer.² A still from *Queen Christina* (Mamoulian, 1933) adorned the cover. The film season ran throughout the month of July and was accompanied by seminars on stereotyping (Dyer), "the gay sensibility" (Jack Babuscio), and lesbian feminist perspectives (Caroline Sheldon); texts on these topics by the three contributors were assembled to form the main body of Dyer's book.³ The volume ends with a substantial filmography, assembled by Dyer, that lists hundreds of titles. *Gays and Film* was a significant intervention in film studies; it paved the way for much subsequent debate and theorisation about what a gay and lesbian cinema could – and should – be. The filmography in the volume is a crucial component in this intervention, one of the first major attempts to assemble such a list. A key concern of the book,

and the film season it sat alongside, was positive and negative images: as Sheldon wrote in her contribution, for instance, “Lesbianism is usually shown [in films] as an aberration, an individual psycho-social problem, which may not be the condition of every lesbian in the audience but may help to precipitate a few into believing that it is.”⁴ The authors recognised that stereotypes serve a valuable purpose as mental short-cuts, and that it is possible to read against the grain of individual characters and narratives, to take pleasure in the seemingly pejorative. But as Dyer has acknowledged in interview, he (along with others involved in gay liberation) thought that many of the films screened in the “Images of Homosexuality” season were “the problem”, that they contributed to and helped to perpetuate a harmful representational regime in which queers fare badly.⁵

Dyer described the *Gays and Film* filmography, rather straightforwardly, as “a listing of films which contain representations of gay women and men”.⁶ It served a basic political purpose as a comprehensive audit of depictions of queer people in cinema throughout history, a ledger which did not discriminate between the types of films it featured, or between those offering “positive” and “negative” representations. Dyer recently fondly recalled assembling the list:

I remember very well putting together the filmography for *Gays and Film*, pursuing hints, following up on titles that looked as if they might have had something relevant. I think I skimmed every synopsis in the *Monthly Film Bulletin* as well as checking through books on censorship and on sex in film, and back runs of journals like *Films and Filming* and *Continental Film Review* were a great source. The BFI allowed me to roam their stacks in pursuit of titles. It was really heady.⁷

The brief introduction to the filmography, however, reveals some of the issues that arose in putting it together. First, it necessarily had to be seen as a “live” document, one intended to evolve: “titles are constantly coming to light and new films are being released”.⁸ The printed filmography captured a moment in cataloguing, but had to be understood as processual, molten, subject to future re-shaping. Dyer acknowledged, for instance, the paltry volume of films from

particular parts of the world: “there is probably an enormous number of titles from these areas missing.”⁹ Second, the list includes pornography. In the book’s introduction, Dyer justified this decision:

It is significant that gayness should have emerged most prolifically in that area, and the fact that it has needs to be registered. [...] To have omitted pornography would have been to capitulate both to the questionable distinction between pornography and non-pornography, and to acknowledge the “superiority” of the latter. However, inclusion of pornography in the filmography should not be taken as indicating any easy endorsement of it in terms of some notion of “sexual freedom”.¹⁰

As he acknowledged, the “relation of permissiveness to liberation (two versions of freedom)” is “deeply problematic, and urgently needs exploration.”¹¹ Across the following decade, Dyer would go on to make significant contributions to that exploration.¹² Third, and arguably “most problematic”, Dyer conceded that “it is not always easy to determine whether a character in a film is gay or not”.¹³ In cinema’s early decades, for instance, “it is all done by inference and suggestion, and it is often hard to be sure whether one’s interpretation of a character as gay is really warranted.”¹⁴ In other words, a certain degree of personal evaluation infiltrated the filmography: another viewer might not identify all of the titles included as gay or lesbian.

In a brief essay that appeared in *Cinema Journal* in 2018, Thomas Waugh drew attention to and sang the praises of the filmography, “the most well-thumbed fourteen pages in the book”, identifying it as “the fuel for countless future generations of programmers, researchers, and the obsessive cinephile perverts nourished in the generations underground.”¹⁵ Indeed, Waugh suggested that Dyer’s filmography made possible the first wave of LGBTQ+ film festivals in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Revisiting the list now, more than four decades after its original assembly, it continues to surprise and thrill. Neglected titles are sprinkled throughout, all inviting revisitation – if indeed they can be tracked down. (To offer just three unknown to me: *Busting* [Hyams, 1974], *Charlotte/La jeune fille assassinée* [Vadim, 1974], *Dinah East* [Nash,

1970]). The alphabetical formatting runs disparate works and genres up against each other in delectable clashes: on the third page, for instance, we find *The Christine Jorgensen Story* (Rapper, 1970), *Chumlum* (Rice, 1964), *Cleopatra Jones* (Starett, 1973), and *Clockwork Nympho* (Pécas, 1975) abutting one another. The sheer variety of these titles provides evidence of Dyer's generous and capacious approach to his task. Regarded retrospectively and holistically, perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the filmography is that its construction was deemed feasible: in 1977, the number of lesbian and gay films that had been produced globally was countable, delimited, circumscribable. From a contemporary vantage point of queer media glut, in which keeping a tab on all of the LGBTQ+ films released in one year can seem daunting (if not impossible), this fact alone reveals how far queer forms of cinematic representation have evolved.

Gays and Film was reprinted by the BFI in 1980 with a new cover featuring an image from Jacqueline Audry's *Olivia* (1951); the filmography was lightly refreshed. In 1984 a "revised edition" of the book was produced; its new content included an essay by Andy Medhurst, "Notes on Recent Gay Film Criticism", as well as a "supplement" to Dyer's filmography by Mark Finch, each list of films running to around nineteen pages.¹⁶ For Finch, Dyer's "most problematic" concern – how do we know when a character is gay? – was also pivotal. Finch directed attention to particularly thorny issues for compilers of gay/queer filmographies. How should one deal with films in which "a lesbian... confounds definition by finding 'true' sexual fulfilment with a man", as happens in many "heterosexual-orientated pornographic films" for men?¹⁷ What if a character in a film "goes no further than refusing to comply with the heterosexual expectations"?¹⁸ And how to handle experimental films which, as part of their intellectual project, fundamentally question forms of representation, including depictions of character and sexuality types? Finch went further, suggesting that some films can become gay

through their exhibition contexts: he gave the example that “*Celine et Julie vont en bateau* [Rivette, 1974] is easily perceived as a representation of a lesbian relationship when programmed next to *The Killing of Sister George* [Aldrich, 1968]”.¹⁹ Beyond these concerns, he also raised pragmatic questions about availability: is a film such as *Vingarne* (Stiller, 1916) worth including in a filmography if no copies exist, making it impossible to see?

Finch’s supplementary filmography is as rich and surprising as Dyer’s original list. It expands the scope of Dyer’s filmography by including films made for television (a field of production and circulation not covered by Dyer). It plugs gaps and adds titles produced during the years between the editions of *Gays and Film*. Across the 1980s and 1990s, Finch would go on to make significant contributions to LGBTQ+ film culture through his activities as a journalist, critic and (most notably) festival programmer. He took his own life in 1995, jumping from the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco. In the second edition of *Now You See It: Studies in Lesbian and Gay Film*, Dyer eulogised Finch:

Mark was a brilliant scholar and a terrific cultural journalist [...] He was a wonderfully imaginative programmer, who kept his eye on history but was also responsive to the most experimental film and video, who ensured that the voice of the most marginalised was heard and that there was equal space for lesbians and gay men, all the while remembering it was all about enjoyment. I still don’t quite believe he’s not around anymore.²⁰

Finch’s contribution to *Gays and Film* concludes, humbly, with an acknowledgement of the impossibility of producing a definitive list, his supplement “illustrative of the seeming endlessness of work initiated by Richard Dyer.”²¹ Taken in tandem, however, Dyer and Finch’s filmographies persist as vital archival sources for all historians and theorists of queer cinema.

Notes

¹ Anthony Slide, *Nitrate Won't Wait: A History of Film Preservation in the United States* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 1992); Penelope Houston, *Keepers of the Frame: The Film Archives* (London: BFI, 1994).

² Richard Dyer, ed., *Gays and Film* (London: BFI, 1977).

³ I have written in more detail elsewhere about 'Images of Homosexuality' and *Gays and Film*, and in particular about the influence of the former on the filmmakers Paul Hallam and Ron Peck: see Glyn Davis, "'A Panorama of Gay Life": *Nighthawks* and British Queer Cinema of the 1970s', in Ronald Gregg and Amy Villarejo, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Queer Cinema* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), pp.435-458.

⁴ Caroline Sheldon, 'Lesbians and film: some thoughts', in Dyer, ed., *Gays and Film*, p.5.

⁵ See, for instance, José Arroyo, 'In conversation with Richard Dyer at Flatpack', *First Impressions: Notes on Film and Culture*, 4 May 2019, <https://notesonfilm1.com/2019/05/04/in-conversation-with-richard-dyer-at-flatpack/>. Dyer has reiterated this perspective in other interviews.

⁶ Dyer, 'Filmography', in Dyer, ed., *Gays and Film*, p.58.

⁷ Personal communication by email with the author, 28 January 2022. For more on *Films and Filming* and its significance for gay male audiences, see Justin Bengry, 'Films and Filming: The Making of a Queer Marketplace in Pre-decriminalization Britain', in Brian Lewis, ed., *British Queer History: New Approaches and Perspectives* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), pp.244-266.

⁸ Dyer, 'Filmography', op. cit., p.58.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Dyer, 'Introduction', in Dyer, ed., *Gays and Film*, p.2.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² See, for example, Richard Dyer, 'Male Gay Porn: Coming to Terms', *Jump Cut*, No.30, March 1985, pp.27-29.

¹³ Dyer, 'Filmography', op. cit., p.58.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Thomas Waugh, 'To Dye[r] For', *Cinema Journal*, Vol 57 No 2 (Winter), 2018, p.153.

¹⁶ It is worth noting that, between the 1980 reprint and the 1984 revised edition, the first edition of Vito Russo's *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies* was published (New York: Harper and Row, 1981). Russo's book included its own influential filmography. Medhurst's essay in the revised edition of *Gays and Film* discusses Russo's contribution to gay film history.

¹⁷ Mark Finch, 'Supplement to Filmography', in Richard Dyer, ed., *Gays and Film*, revised edition (New York: Zoetrope, 1984), p.89.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Richard Dyer, *Now You See It: Studies in Lesbian and Gay Film*, second edition (London: Routledge, 2002), p.7.

²¹ Finch, 'Supplement', op. cit., p.110.

Author Biography

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