

The Geopolitics of Spectatorship and Screen Identification: What's queer about Italian cinema?

Rey Chow begins *Sentimental Fabulations*, her seminal work on Chinese cinema, by problematizing the lamentation often associated with the type of cultural criticism grounded in identity politics: 'Where is the movie about me?'¹ The apparent simplicity of this question conceals any number of questions about spectatorship and representation. The desire to see sameness on screen can of course be read as a political one as marginalized groups stake claims for the degree and quality of visibility commonly afforded to their more socially dominant peers. Yet Chow is clear that beyond the laudable desire for political fairness lie often more imperious claims which drive spectatorship into the less obviously quantifiable realms of affective attachment. This turn is particularly significant in a medium which has a necessarily complex relationship with the non-filmic world mediated through culturally specific conventions of spectatorship and commercial structures of production and distribution. Self-recognition would appear to require verisimilitude in order to find an adequate level of satisfaction, yet the power of cinema to secure identification in spectators has never really depended on that kind of matching. Not many people really want to watch stars who look like them. Yet beyond this very banal level of projection and identification lie much more involving questions of how selves are constituted and how they operate in any representational mode. The questions I want to start working through here relate to what has come to be called queer spectatorship.² The focus though is on Italy and on how a particular national context might force a re-alignment of debates in Queer Studies which very often forget the specificity of their own geopolitical location and the partiality of their otherwise insightful and politically necessary work of analytical reflexivity.

What I want to suggest is that queer spectatorship complicates and compromises confident assertions of what constitutes national cinema and the idea of the nation drawn from it. I want to place the emphasis of my discussion on spectatorship rather than production for a number of reasons. While it is relatively straightforward to discuss production in national terms, spectators are much less respectful of national boundaries in their patterns of consumption. The hypothetical queer Italian spectator does not limit himself to national products and indeed will probably have a film culture that is self-consciously international in orientation. The hugely informative website Gaycinema.it is a strong indicator that, from the Italian perspective at least, queer culture is not a domestic business. The site gives ample coverage to films of gay interest from across the globe. It also hosts lists of its users' favourite gay films, very few of which are Italian; not very many were produced by Hollywood either. Equally as significant, figures like Pasolini and Visconti who have a certain status on the art-house circuit abroad are all but absent from these classifications even though these

homosexuals are two of the linchpins of conventional Italian film histories. The absence can be interpreted in various ways. It may be simply a reflection of the cultural level of those who have voted in the website's poll; that biography isn't everything and that a director's sexuality in itself has little imprint on his work; or indeed that times have changed and the labour of translation required to make certain work from the past intelligible and important to a contemporary spectator is simply too much. However this selective sample is interpreted, it does show a pattern of preference that goes beyond the nation. It is perhaps intemperate though to see this as an innate preference for the transnational. It is probably more accurate to see it as expressing, amongst many other things, the perceived absence of a gay presence in Italian cinema with adequate spectator appeal. It needs to be said too that nearly all of the films mentioned are about men. The most popular film categorized as 'lesbian' in Gaycinema.it's listings is David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive*. The underrepresentation of women here (reiterated in my short intervention) is a complex issue, explainable in part by the possible demographic of the site's active users. It does however reflect that fact that, even in recent years, mainstream cinema in Italy and elsewhere has given more screen space to gay men rather than lesbians.³

It is possible to argue that queer cinema exists in its most robust form outside commercial circuits of distribution. When Ottavio Mai and Giovanni Minerba started what has become the immensely successful Turin LGBT Film Festival in 1986, one of their main aims was to show films which challenged cinema's tendency to relegate homosexual characters to very minor or stereotypically offensive roles. Such characters were familiar to Italian spectators from the highly regarded comedies, and from the politically committed film-makers of the post-war period who systematically used non-normative sexuality as a metaphor for both German and Italian Fascism. From its inception, the Festival was resolutely international in terms of its programming, aiming to allow the Italian public the chance to see films very rarely distributed in the peninsula. Indeed, relatively few Italian films, especially in the feature length category, are ever shown at Turin, despite the fact that the Festival attracts a significant amount of funding and a truly impressive guest list from Italy and abroad. Yet the festival programme is not limited to the exhibition of contemporary work. Audiences have also had the chance to see films from the queer historical archive, and themed strands dedicated to particular national cinemas, or to stars such as Audrey Hepburn, charged with particular gay appeal. The Festival's full name is 'Da Sodoma a Hollywood: i film che cambiano la vita'. The idea of films which are actually life changing intimates the desire to distinguish between work which more or less reiterates hegemonic commonplaces about sexuality and that which not only challenges the boundaries of the heteronormative, but offers ways of going beyond their limitations, both creatively and practically. This almost impossibly open formulation has the advantage of not limiting the

category of queer cinema to films which appear to be more or less directly about lesbians or gay men. It more especially refutes the superficial realism which bedevils much contemporary Italian film production and which as both an aesthetic and ideological practice seeks to naturalise whatever it chooses to represent on screen. The lure of the natural is particularly damaging when prejudicial stereotypes are read as transcriptions of a pro-filmic reality.

Since 2007, the Venice Film Festival has awarded the Queer Lion to the best film dealing with LGBT themes selected from all those presented at the Festival deemed to be of 'queer interest'. The kind of films shortlisted for this prize give a good indication of the fluidity of a category that goes beyond what is commonly and reassuringly seen as gay. The first trophy went to American director, Ed Radtke's *The Speed of Life* (2007) and since then the Lion has been awarded to a further two films from the USA, and one from Italy, Argentina, and most recently South Korea. To date the prize has attracted a great deal of positive interest and is currently sponsored by the Veneto region and the Ministero per i beni e le attività culturali. Yet the type of film recognized at Venice does not seem to facilitate a very easy mode of audience identification. *The Speed of Life* is about a boy who enters into the world of some film footage he finds. The 2012 winner Jeon Kyu-hwan's *The Weight* has as its main character a hunchback slave involved in an intense relationship with the transsexual son of his captor. Verisimilitude, at least in the sense of the kind of typicality that might favour audience identification, is probably absent here for most people. What is most compelling however is that the film queers normative versions of sexual identity through the prism of disability suggesting that queer is less about the recognition of a putative version of sameness than an exploration of difference and the variety of material and psychosocial forms through which it finds embodiment.

It is worth dwelling on the fact that while the festival circuit has been promoting films which in most cases will have little commercial life, gay characters and plot-lines have steadily been moving into the mainstream of Italian film production. The films in this second broad category have in the main not been authored by gay/queer directors. The commercially successful Ferzan Ozpetek is an exception here. Although Ozpetek's work was presented in a major retrospective at MOMA in 2008, his well-financed products are often criticized for their relatively unchallenging narrative and aesthetic structures which, superficially at least, do little of the work that queer as a contestational category aspires to carry out. I do think that it is possible to read Ozpetek's work in ways that challenge the heteronormative bias of commercial cinema, but from an industrial perspective an interesting element of his work is that it features some of Italy's major male stars such as Stefano Accorsi, Luca Argentero, Pierfrancesco Favino, and even Riccardo Scamarcio in gay roles. The willingness of stars with an established straight persona to assume gay roles suggests a very different economy of male stardom to that

dominant in Hollywood. Indeed, Ozpetek's work is not exceptional in this. Films such as Cristina Comencini's well-worn family melodrama, *Il più bel giorno della mia vita* (2002) casts Luigi Lo Cascio in the role of the tormented gay brother, while Luca Argentero (again) stars alongside Filippo Nigro as a gay couple in the popular comedy *Diverso da chi?* (Umberto Ricci Carteni, 2009). It would be hard to argue that the careers of any of these actors have been damaged by playing gay characters. On the other hand, despite the apparent willingness of straight actors to appear in gay roles, very few Italian actors are openly gay. Filippo Timi is an interesting exception here.

While it is relatively easy to trace the presence of gay plotlines and characters in contemporary Italian cinema in the type of films just mentioned, it is more challenging to know what actually to make of a level of visibility that has become so conventional in terms of production, and arguably consumption. There is little evidence that these commercial products target the gay spectator, even if gay spectators may well derive quite a lot of pleasure from the well-crafted narratives associated with the high production values of these films. On the surface level there is a lot to say about the positive value of such films for Italy's gay population as they indicate powerful changes in the nation's attitude towards homosexuality. The type of gay characters embodied by stars such as Argentero are nevertheless resolutely normal in their degree of physical attractiveness and material integration into the national economy. So if these movies are indeed to be seen as 'about me', the 'me' in question tends to be buff and pretty well-heeled, testing for many, one might suspect, the contours of verisimilitude that middlebrow realism usually aspires to. This kind of realism has characteristically been centred round the Italian family and the new Italian gay cinema reiterates this trend. *Diverso da chi?* is a romantic comedy with a queer (lite) twist. Argentero plays an aspiring gay politician standing on an explicitly pro-gay platform forced to run alongside a very conservative pro-family female rival, divorced as she had been unable to have children. The two have an affair as a result of which Adele (Claudia Gerini) ends up pregnant. The film concludes with the setting up of an unlikely ménage à trois to look after the child, and the comic and wholly unverisimilar reinstatement of family values. In Ozpetek's *Mine vaganti* (2010), the family drama is played out in a slightly different key. The revelation of the homosexuality of both sons (Scamarcio and Alessandro Prezioso) threatens the family pasta business in Puglia as neither wants to take it on. The comic unpicking of the ties between production and reproduction are resolved through the realization that the business might successfully carry on. The future of the business is entrusted to the previously marginalized daughter whose possible value to the enterprise had never been considered. Ultimately neither film has much to say about gay men, but more interestingly offers an indirect commentary on the changed role of woman in Italian society. In both instances

the homosexuality of the male characters if a prism through which to discuss the professional life of women. As such these films are not at all without interest.

The emergence of what might be considered a new gay stereotype to replace that of the effeminate Nazi is thought-provoking, but it doesn't really lie within the ambit of a queer cinema with radical pretensions. I would suggest that if we want to talk about an Italian queer cinema at all we need to shift our focus away from the straightforwardly gay to look at films in which sexuality and other forms of relationality are articulated in more recondite ways. Italian films about migration have very often queered their ostensibly straight subjects. Migrants are rarely figured as reproductive heterosexuals and their relationships with Italians usually end catastrophically. Laura Muscardin's *Billo il Grande Dakhaar* (2007) is a notable exception here, although like Comencini's *Bianco e nero* (2008) the comic genre projects the happy ending into the realm of the not-very-likely at all. As a result migrants are never granted the typicality required to make them national subjects. A more productive variant is Carmine Amoroso's *Cover Boy* (2008) centred on the intense relationship between the jobless Italian, Michele, and the Romanian, Ioan whose material success is a negative mirror of his friend's abjection. The film ends with Michele's suicide, followed however by a visual postscript in which they both drive back to Romania to set up a restaurant together on the Danube. The happy ending here is resolutely fictional, yet owes much of its affective charge to the knowledge of its impossibility. Subjective camera work from the perspective of Michele, notably in a scene in which his gaze lingers on the naked body of his friend in the shower, invites the assumption that he at least is gay. Yet *Cover Boy* asks more complex questions. To understand the relationship between Michele and Ioan as a homosexual one invokes a transparency that the film resists. The two men are entangled by material needs and by histories of migration and marginalization which do indeed make them 'diversi'; different to themselves as well as to each other. Unlike the rainbow-tinted optimism of *Diverso da chi?* which playfully intimates that sexuality can be subject to unexpected, albeit wholly predictable reversals, *Cover Boy* points to configurations of desire, but more enduringly, of allegiance which are not exhausted by sex, but which are not properly separable from it either. The film's ending, which in different ways shows queers vanishing, intimates that queer subjects do not sit easily within Italy's borders, cinematographic or geopolitical.

Gaycinema.it's most popular film by some clear margin is Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* (2005). Based on the short story by Annie Proulx, the Taiwanese director's film was shown first at Venice in 2005 and went on to receive significant critical acclaim and international box-office success well beyond any gay or queer niche market.⁴ To all effects a Hollywood blockbuster albeit with a transnational twist, the film is the subject of Rey Chow's postscript to *Sentimental*

Fabulations. While resisting the temptation to claim Ang Lee's most successful film for Chinese cinema, she does make a strong case that its compelling affective power has strong affinities with the sentimental narrative mode she identifies as characteristic of contemporary Chinese cinema. Her focus in the book is not on films which exhibit the kind of alienating aesthetic strategies which are appealing to the Western art house audience. Instead she looks at relatively mainstream films which draw on what she defines as the 'sentimental' to work through narratives which visualise a changing nation.⁵ The films she discusses are films about accommodation to social demands rather than resistance to them. Chow resists the overt conservatism of these films and argues that their plots represent compromise or acquiescence as powerful affective events. She refuses to see these films as having a purely conservative charge for what they narrativise is compromise or acquiescence as a significant affective event. Chow understands the sentimental as a mode of articulation which is to do with emotional endurance and resilience, always in situations of entanglement. The idea of entanglement, the fraught and over-wrought energies which bind people yet also keep them apart, is a constant trope in Chow's work. Without wishing to appropriate it or traduce its theoretical specificities, I would like to use it to suggest it as one possible way of linking gay and queer as elements in a continuum of affect. *Cover Boy* can be seen as deeply conservative in that its conclusion eliminates both Michele and Ioan from the national landscape. Its ending however is not redemptive, but dramatizes in sentimental mode how wronged the two men had been – just like in *Brokeback Mountain*. The entanglements of both films queer the Italian spectator through an exploration of modes of affective relationality beyond those offered in the safer space of national cinema. To return to Chow's critique of identity-based criticism, these are not films about a putative 'me', but affective texts which extend the spectator's horizon of expectation and structure of feeling beyond borders.

¹ Rey Chow, *Sentimental Fabulations, Contemporary Chinese Cinema: Attachment in the Age of Global Visibility* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), p. 1.

² I have no space to work through the definitions of the term 'queer' here or to consider the very significant issues involved in its translation out of the Anglophone context. I do want to insist that 'queer' is not synonymous with 'gay' or 'homosexual' even though it is commonly used in this way. I prefer to use 'queer' to reference sexual identities and practices which are not readily subsumed by familiar binary categories (gay/straight, male/female). Queer recognises the transversal and intersectional energies of sexualities as they converge in and conflict with other modes of social definition, not always happily, but mostly productively.

³ Although now slightly dated, the essays in Tamsin Wilton (ed.), *Immortal, Invisible: Lesbians and the Moving Image* (London: Routledge, 1995) give a good account of lesbian-centred film production and representation in a range of screen media.

⁴ The Italian title is *I segreti di Brokeback Mountain*.

⁵ Chow's concept of the sentimental is too complex to do justice to here. One thought-provoking aspect relevant to my brief discussion is her association of the sentimental with anachronism, and the persistence of traces of the (local) past in the passage towards what she calls 'global visibility'. This perception invites reflection on how residual traces of any national cinema inhabit the universalizing impulses of some versions of queer theory.