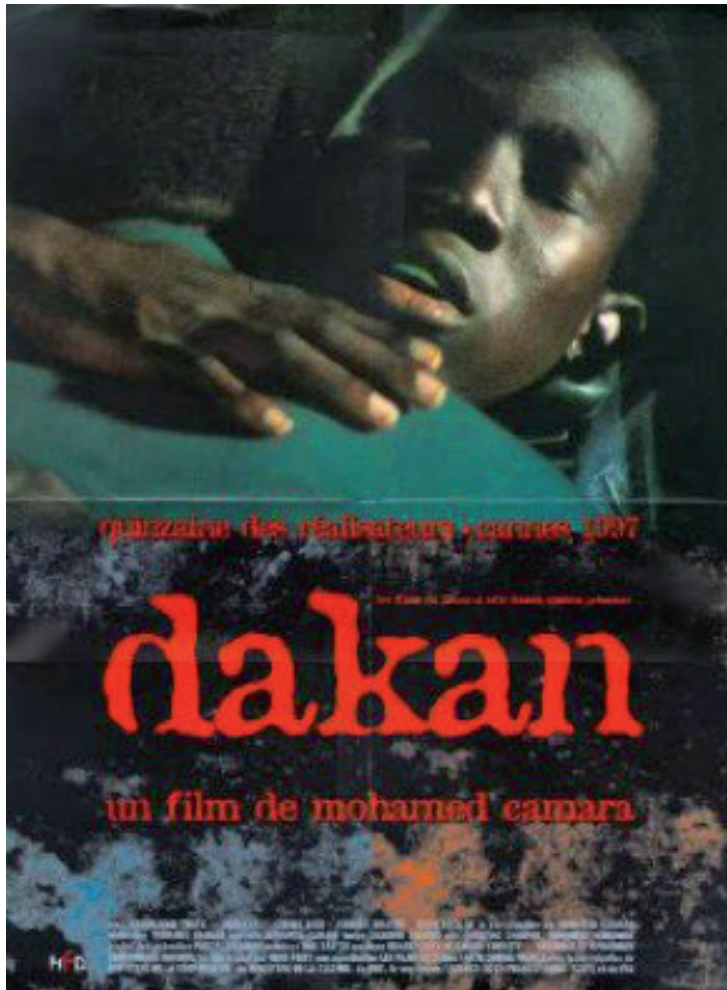


*The worlds of queer cinema:
from aesthetics to activism*



Dakan / Destino, 1997, cartaz.

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ABSTRACT

Why think about queer cinema and world politics together? The scenario is familiar to those who follow LGBT politics: global queer cultures clash with local or regional politics. Violence at pride marches in India, Serbia, and South Africa raises questions about the compatibility of liberalism and cultural relativism, global citizenship and human rights, sexual identity and national sovereignty. At the same time, there has been a burgeoning of queer cinemas around the world, with film production and consumption a significant way that sexual and gender dissidence makes itself visible in various cultures. In this article, we do not merely count new queer cinemas as part of a globalized LGBT culture, but consider how queer cinema makes new worlds. Queer cinema creates different accounts of the world, offering alternatives to capitalist aesthetics and social life. This article takes examples of queer film as style and activism to propose new theories of what it means to be queer in the world.

KEYWORDS: queer; world cinema; activism.



Why think about queer cinema and world politics together? The scenario is familiar to those who follow LGBT politics over the last few years: global queer cultures clash with local or regional politics: violence at pride marches in India, Serbia, and South Africa raises questions about the compatibility of liberalism and cultural relativism, global citizenship and human rights, sexual identity and national sovereignty. Film festivals have been prominent victims of these attacks. Vicious protesters have forced the shut down of film festivals or screenings in locations from Jakarta to Serbia and Ukraine. For instance, in 2014 the historic 1930s Zhovten cinema in Kiev was seriously damaged by fire in what was thought to be an arson attack during the screening of a queer film. At the same time, cinema – conceived broadly – has been seen to expand transnational routes to (apparently) increased queer cultural visibility. From the 1990s onward, there has been a what Barbara Mennel describes as an explosion of queer filmmaking – and we would add queer film consumption—around the world.¹

However, simply to note the growth of queer films is not enough, not least because it runs the risk of viewing queer world cinema from a Eurocentric perspective as a movement that runs from core to periphery. We see this problem in the common discourse of marketing films as the ‘first gay film from...’ each country, as if welcoming peripheral nations into a queer film club that Western critics and film festivals have already joined. Instead of this additive approach, we argue for a specific relationship between queerness and globality, asking how queer films negotiate a specific

¹ Barbara Mennel, *Queer Cinema: Schoolgirls, Vampires and Gay Cowboys* (New York: Wallflower, 2012), xx.

way of being in the world, and how they intersect with shifting ideas of globalization, LGBT politics and world cinema aesthetics.

Yet to put these terms together: queer – world – cinema is to invite trouble. The combination of terms provokes a series of anxieties: there is a fear that any global vision will be homogenizing, neocolonial, will flatten out difference and push for a Eurocentric viewpoint. In researching this project we have encountered these concerns repeatedly, with filmmakers, curators and critics often preferring to let diversity speak for itself. We agree with these anxieties and with the need to pay close attention to diverse modes of filmmaking and cultural voices, yet we think there is something to gain in thinking about the role queer cinema plays in imagining the world, and in enabling different ways of being in the world. Cinema is always involved in worldmaking, and queerness promises to knock conventional epistemologies off balance. Thinking queerness together with cinema thus has a potential to construct what we mean when we say “the world” differently. Queer cinema creates different accounts of the world, offering alternatives to embedded capitalist, nationalist, hetero- and homo-normative maps. It creates new and dissident modes of affection and pleasure as well as new modes of cinematic style.

Cinematic visions of queerness, whether through queer characters and narratives or through representations of queer desire, have the capacity to make the global legible.

In this article, we discuss some of the potential worlds imagined by queer cinema. Our examples come from across the globe, from Guinea to Germany and Bolivia. In selecting such wide-ranging films for discussion, we don't aim to provide an overview or a totalizing vision of queer cinema, but rather to draw out the ability of very disparate models of cinema—from art film to activist videos—to propose theories of what it means to be queer in this world.

Film and global politics

Our first examples are films that deal quite explicitly with the contemporary politics of globality, first in terms of postcoloniality and then in relation to immigration to the global North. Queer cinema frequently intersects issues of sexuality and gender with other axes of difference (such as ethnicity, religion, and nationality) and hierarchies of power in the late capitalist world system. However, instead of seeing such films are merely illustrative of social issues, we consider their aesthetic strategies—in terms of form and style, narrative, genre, and affective regimes—as productive of new modes of queer worldliness.

Dakan/Destiny, directed by Mohamad Camara in 1997 in Guinea, is a gay love story. In the film, Manga and Sori fall in love as high school students but are separated by their families. Manga's mother sends him to a traditional healer to be cured of homosexuality while Sori's father insists he take over the family business and marries. Sori does get married and has a child. Meanwhile, after years with the healer, Manga enters a relationship with Oumou, a white woman he meets through his mother. When the men see each other again in a bar, though, they immediately recognize their mutual desire. Despite their love for their families and apparently genuine relationships with women, Manga and Sori ultimately leave everything behind to be together.

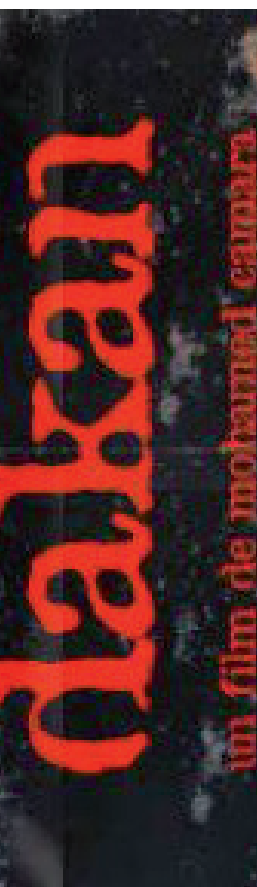
² Alexie Tcheuyap, "African Cinema and Representations of (Homo)Sexuality," in *Body, Sexuality and Gender: Versions and Subversions in African Literatures*, ed. Flora Veit-Wild and Dirk Naguschewski (Amsterdam and Union, NJ: Rodopi, 2005), 143.

³ See for example Wayne Morgan, "Queering International Human Rights," in *Sexuality in the Legal Arena*, Eds Carl Stychin and Didi Herman (London: The Athlone Press, 2000): 208-225; and Philip Alston and Ryan Goodman, *International Human Rights* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013), 222-227. For a theoretical critique of privacy and gay rights, see David Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 23-56.

Dakan is commonly understood as the first gay film in sub-Saharan Africa, so it fits neatly into those Western ways of conceptualizing queer cinema we alluded to above. Moreover, the narrative fits relatively easily into a Western model of the coming out story, easily legible to international viewers. The film makes an apparent appeal to the so-called 'global gay' neoliberal audience. For these reasons the film has screened widely abroad, especially at LGBT film festivals and in educational settings. Tellingly, the film was screened at the US embassy in Guinea, an event that opens out some of the problems and tensions inherent in appealing to a globalized version of queerness. The US State Department describes itself as "Championing Human Rights through Public Diplomacy" and it substantiates that mission by listing on its website the fact that the Embassy hosted a public screening of the film. A liberal American politics of Human Rights appropriates the film, making it speak in a language that is unsubtle, and harnessing the film to a particular view of US state power that it might not otherwise condone. The Western audiences who view the film in this context might think of African societies as backward or as more homophobic than the United States, even where *Dakan* itself offers a much more radical vision of gay life within postcolonial African societies. By considering the film's textual strategies, we can see how it complicates this Human Rights vision of queer worldliness.

The film starts with an intimate scene of Manga and Sori kissing passionately in a car; their embrace forming a shocking intervention into a semi-public space. Narratively, we intuit that the couple has nowhere to be private and what we are seeing is not a political assertion of public sex but rather a thwarted privacy. Nonetheless, this opening marks the film immediately as a bold visioning of homosexuality, insisting from the start on the importance of publicity. Viewers expecting homosexuality to be indicated in an allusive and coded fashion are visually accosted with cinematic ontology from the beginning: two male actors kissing in the semi-public space of a film set, and two characters who stage gay desire as part of the African everyday. The film's opening thus does several things: it asks us to think about sexuality as a question of public and private spaces, it refuses to be coy in representing gay desire, and it clearly announces queer sex as a public issue in a way that is missing from many African films.

Dakan takes on overtly postcolonial debates around homosexuality in Africa. Conservative voices see homosexuality as a Western imposition and today these debates are finding shape in the international Human Rights battles over sexuality in Uganda and elsewhere. Alexie Tcheuyap writes of "the radical cultural metamorphosis that African societies have experienced since independence: the explosion of sex and its accompanying discourse, its transformation into a public and even political issue."² Thérèse Kuoh-Moukoury argues that African cultures have traditionally understood sex as purely private and not an issue for politics or art, and Tcheuyap sees the rapid overturn of this cultural norm as an epistemic break in postcolonial Africa. *Dakan* exemplifies this shift, making sexuality visible on screen and insisting that homosexuality is not a private vice but a social issue. (Here we see how the film refuses the often-contested liberal claim for queer human rights as dependent on privacy.³) The question of whether or not sexual orientation can be a political topic for a film is thus raised: whereas in the West, gay rights might seem an obvious topic for a 'social problem film,' in the African context *Dakan* could be read as a failure to be



political. Abdoulaye Dukule argues that if sex is not seen as a public issue then it cannot be a good subject for cinema, which has historically been used as “a political and social tool.”⁴ *Dakan* is a challenge to this regime, for it demands to speak and to educate in public in the traditions of African political cinema, and yet it also proposes a queer mode of publicity. The film refuses to place queer lives in opposition to postcolonial politics: it demands to be seen both as postcolonial and as gay.

A second way of addressing global politics is found in recent European films of migration, where forbidden love stories form ways to negotiate the intersections of sexuality with race, ethnicity, and religion. *Unveiled/Fremde Haut* (Maccarrone, 2005) focuses on the queer Muslim, telling the story of an Iranian lesbian’s vulnerable existence as an asylum seeker. The film is set in Germany, and is typical rather than exceptional, illustrating a popular strand of contemporary European LGBT filmmaking. The figure of the non-white queer often becomes a flashpoint in the relationship between liberal Western politics and Islam. There is a habit in European films of representing white people as saviours of non-European queers. And yet, that’s not the whole story. We insist both on cinema’s ability to do more than simply reflect dominant ideological regimes, and on the critical possibilities of queer representation. As with the tensions between queer and postcolonial politics in *Dakan*, in European films like *Unveiled*, the queer becomes not just an symptom of liberalism’s tolerance but a structuring feature of its contradictions.

Unveiled links the queer Muslim to a cinematic discourse on immigration and economic precarity. The film tells the story of Fariba, a lesbian who escapes Iran after being arrested for her sexuality, and in Germany takes on the identity of Siamak, a male refugee who has killed himself in their detention center. Forced to assume a male identity to gain a German visa, Fariba encounters the racism of provincial Germans in her new life as a day laborer in a cabbage-processing plant. She begins a romantic relationship with a white German woman, but after being attacked by the local men when they discover her gender, she is arrested and deported back to Iran. The film is noteworthy first for its title. The original German-language title *Fremde Haut* means ‘foreign skin’ and foregrounds the gender masquerade narrative. The film’s US distributor chose the English-language title of *Unveiled*, shifting focus to Fariba’s religious background and leveraging a colonialist representational history of white male desire to ‘lift the veil’ on Muslim women. The film itself oscillates between these poles, at some moments complicating identities as transitive and relational yet at others reinstating the ethnic queer as an always compromised figure of European tolerance.

A similar discourse of orientalism simmers in a key sequence of the film: Stuttgart is introduced via a montage of Turkish kebab shops, women in headscarves, sex shops, and men kissing. The women in hijab are used to signify Germany’s multicultural diversity, its European tolerance for the apparently opposing signifiers of (Muslim) sexual modesty and (queer) sexual display. This background maps onto the central narrative in which Fariba as a Muslim lesbian figures the stakes of liberalism, the litmus test for Europe’s hospitality to the other. The narrative takes as a given the homophobia of the Iranian state, the unseen threat of the non-European forming the very basis for fashioning an authentic self. The film needs Fariba to be unveiled, her secret self revealed, so that her stripping bare



⁴ Abdoulaye Dukule, “Film Review: *Dakan* by Mohamed Camara,” *African Studies Review* 44/1 (2001): 119.

⁵ Eliza Steinbock, "Contemporary Trans* Cinema: Affective Tendencies, Communities, and Styles" (paper presented at Queer Film Culture: Queer Cinema and Film Festivals conference, Hamburg, 14-15 October, 2014).

⁶ The idea of the semi-public space builds from Ellen Rooney's work on the semi-private sphere. See Ellen Rooney, "A Semiprivate Room," *differences* (2002) 13(1): 128-156.

can enable the spectator's pleasurable outrage. But *Unveiled* reveals more than this problematic structure.

Fariba's appropriation of Siamak's identity (hiding his body in a suitcase) is an unexpectedly melodramatic narrative trope in such an otherwise realist film. In this context, Fariba's presentation as male echoes with Eliza Steinbock's proposal of trans as a conceptual rubric.⁵ For Steinbock, reading cinema from a trans perspective allows us to think gender transitivity alongside the transnational, as well as the trans-genre. Trans brings together several contemporary struggles into alliance. *Unveiled* is not a transgender narrative in the sense that Fariba understands herself as a woman-identified lesbian throughout the story. But the film does juxtapose movement across gendered borders with those across national, regional, sexual, and class ones. Fariba disguises herself as a man in order to gain access to Germany. The transnational and the transgender are interlinked, and gender is a matter of life and death in both national spaces. Thus, although female passengers' removal and replacement of hijab when leaving and entering Iranian airspace proposes an expected Western discourse on repressive Islam, *Unveiled's* most interesting moment comes with Fariba's brave decision to remove her female apparel in the airplane bathroom and return to Iran in the identity of a male political dissident.

Both of these films reveal the tensions at stake in making LGBT identities visible on cinema's world stage. A more simplistic liberal approach might valorise the films' identitarian impulses, reading both films as offering reassuring tales of Western-style identities as the way to freedom. And yet the films resist and complicate such powerful cultural narratives just as much as they replicate them. *Dakan* associates gays with African cultural tradition as much as with its refusal, and links homophobia with Western economic modernisation. Its formal use of tableaux, pattern and colour resists attempts to understand it as straightforward realism, insisting that viewers think more allegorically about Manga and Sori's sacrifice. *Unveiled* speaks more clearly in a European art cinematic register, suggesting that Fariba's precarious life is akin to those explored by the Dardenne brothers. Europe is far from a utopian for Iranian queers, and the film suggests that its supposed tolerance for queers and Muslims is seriously compromised.

Queer cinema as activism

LGBT political movements have long insisted on publicity as a mode of activism: from Pride marches to anti-homophobic violence actions, to everyday forms of gender expression and even public sex, the street forms a necessary political space for queer representation. What it might mean to be queer – and to perform queerness – on the street varies enormously in different national contexts. But cinema does not merely form a platform through which such struggles can be documented. As both *Dakan* and *Unveiled* insist, public space is contested for queer people and cinema creates spaces that negotiate between public and private. The cinema itself is a semi-public space, in which the spectator experiences intensely private sensations but does so alongside a public audience.⁶ The spaces it creates onscreen are imaginary yet they refer, most often, to real profilmics. *Dakan* and *Unveiled* could easily be considered as activist films, insisting through their fictional worlds that the spectator reconfigure their assumptions about their worlds outside the cinema. Our identifications with Fariba, Manga

and Sori prompt intimacies that we might not expect, across lines of gender, sexual orientation, religion and nation.

We can use these ideas to address more obviously activist films, which use public spaces in quite daring ways to ask audiences to forge new affiliations and to critique existing world views. Here, an important progenitor is Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Comizi d'amore* from 1964. Pasolini interviewed people across Italy about their attitudes to sex and sexuality. Although he was known to be a gay man, he doesn't refer to his own homosexuality in any of these interviews. The conversations he has form a fascinating analysis not only of social attitudes of the period but also of what you can and cannot say or be in public. In one interview shot at a dance hall, Pasolini asks a young woman if she has heard that some boys and girls are different in their sexuality and she shakes her head and says she has never heard of such a thing. He follows up by asking if she's heard of inverts for example and she immediately responds, "Oh yes, I have heard of that." Similarly a young man admits enthusiastically that he once dated a lesbian, but another young woman becomes coy and refuses to tell what sets her apart from other people. Here, Pasolini teases out the limits of what is socially acceptable, but he also radically revises the public space of heteronormativity (the dance hall) by insistently eliciting discussion on homosexuality and sexual perversion. Even where his subjects do not or cannot admit to knowing about such topics, the censorship produced by straight space is temporarily outflanked.

This mode of intervening in supposedly straight public spaces becomes even more daring in the work of *Mujeres Creandos*, a Bolivian group of lesbian feminist and anti-capitalist activists who also make experimental films. In the *Acciones #6* (circa 1995) video, group founders Julieta Paredes and María Galindo interview members of the public in the street about their attitudes to sexuality in a way not dissimilar to Pasolini. Provoking speech about homosexuality in public, they don't condemn the interviewees, giving even the most homophobic reactions a space. However, whereas Pasolini never revealed anything about himself in *Comizi d'amore*, the women of *Mujeres Creandos* go on to stage their own lesbian identities precisely in the precarious space of the street.

The women stage a series of interventions in which they touch each other and the crowd which has gathered to watch them. Early on in the action, one of the women announces, "we're going to talk about something that touches us all and touches you too." The politics of touching in public is always precarious for queer people, and here the *Mujeres* link physical touch with emotional resonance. They create a 'bed' in the street out of sheets and pillows, and Paredes and Galindo lie down and get into bed together in the midst of a not-entirely supportive crowd. From this vulnerable position, they say "We are lying down on the ground, in the street, vulnerable to your criticisms...but none of you can deny that this is a brave act...We are lesbians, we love one another, we respect love." This performance of lesbian intimacy in the public square seems astonishingly brave, because it insists on belonging. The lesbian couple refuses to be excluded from the community, demanding to be recognized as part of public life.

In another part of the action, Paredes and Galindo hand out roses to the crowd. The women reach out, giving a rose as a lover might, and for those who accept, the flower produces proximity. The transactions are shown in slow motion, with a musical background, revealing emotional

⁷ Gavin Brown, "Autonomy, Affinity and Play in the Spaces of Radical Queer Activism," in *Geographies of Sexualities: Theory, Practices and Politics*, ed., Kath Browne, Jason Lim and Gavin Brown (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 195-205.

⁸ María Galindo/Mujeres Creando, "Les exiliadas del neoliberalismo." Our translation. See www.mujerescreando.org for a range of their collectively written work. For scholarship on the group, see Nathan Frisch, "Queering Tradition and Modernity in Bolivian Decolonial Activism," (paper presented at Queering Narratives of Modernity conference, Quito, Ecuador, February 18-22, 2004); and Elizabeth P. Monasterios, ed., *No pudieron con nosotras: el desafío del feminismo autónomo de Mujeres Creando* (Pittsburgh: Plural, 2006).

⁹ Qwo-Li Driskill, Chris Finley, Brian Joseph Gilley, and Scott Lauria Morgensen, "The Revolution is for Everyone: Imagining and Emancipatory Future through Queer Indigenous Critical Theories," in *Queer Indigenous Studies: Critical Interventions in Theory, Politics, and Literature*, ed. Driskill et al. (University of Arizona Press, 2011), 217.



reactions from the woman who appears to respond romantically to the older woman who cannot bear to touch it and seems afraid of contamination. Gavin Brown notes the importance for radical queer activists of reappropriating public spaces and the Mujeres combine political action, performance, and filmmaking in the space of the agora.⁷ They are also engaged with the formal qualities of video, using cheap video effects to redouble the visceral qualities of the street action. The garish colors and jagged lines of video effects refuse any normalizing smoothness. They are the formal correlative of painting a messy, bloody-looking red heart, of lying on the ground, of touching rough concrete. Tactility measures the potential for material transformation, and the riskiness of public touching forms both an aesthetic and a political strategy.

Acciones foregrounds a politics in which both identities and anti-identitarian modes of living are overdetermined by multiple sites of struggle. For the Mujeres, lesbian and feminist identities are closely entangled, and both take part equally in the politics of anti-capitalism and indigeneity. Thus, the group created an open house in La Paz which they call "Casa de Indias, putas y lesbianas" and they take on the problem of the universal subject in an article on neoliberalism in which Galindo writes, "We begin by saying that the 'universal subject' does not exist. It isn't the human being, nor is it the individual, but instead it is the white, male, heterosexual, monogamous, Catholic, healthy, investor from the North."⁸ Queer cinema can critique theories of universality while still speaking to and from a very specifically-located world.

The video plays out this critique in its opening scene, in which an indigenous woman stands on the roof of a city building and talks about what it means to belong to a community of women. As she talks, she wrings out a cloth, setting up a feminist haptics of women's labor, working by hand, squeezing the material around her fingers. As she describes the feeling of realizing that she could like other women, she pours water over her body and brushes out her long black hair. Sensuality is attached to lesbian awakening and to feminist consciousness. She describes traditional heterosexual marriage as a prison for women and asserts that she was not born to stay at home like a prison. The roof stages a space of freedom, in which feminine tasks are transformed from domestic labor into self-care. The work of Mujeres Creando speaks to the importance of feminism to our understanding of queer belonging and it also illustrates the necessary intersectionality of queer cinema's new registers. As Qwo-Li Driskill, Chris Finley, Brian Joseph Gilley, and Scott Lauria Morgensen write in a North American context, "settler colonialism is the historical, institutional, and discursive root of heteronormative binary sex/gender systems on stolen land... to interrogate heteronormativity *is* to critique colonial power, which then necessarily intersects the work of decolonization pursued by queer Indigenous people."⁹ For the Mujeres, feminist and queer critique can leverage colonial gender discourse (one that remains stubbornly dominant in Evo Morales' Leftist Bolivia), and lesbian desire moreover revises subjectivities long engrained in class and racial terms. Their work illustrates how queer proximities open up aesthetic reinscriptions of subject/object relations that have the capacity to embody a resistant geopolitics of worldliness.

We see this activist impulse in many modes of filmmaking, from popular genre films through to video art. The desire to resignify the street as a queer space is strongly articulated in the Serbian film *Parade* (Dragojević,

2011), an incredibly popular film in its home country which nonetheless took on the controversial topic of violence against Pride marches in Belgrade. One crucial scene was shot at the actual 2010 Pride parade, and the sense of threat in this semi-documentary sequence is palpable. Director Srdan Dragojević notes wryly that the scene was shot during “the first ‘successful’ Pride in the history of Serbia. The only success was that the participants stayed alive.”¹⁰ In the fiction of the film, the protagonist does not stay alive but is killed during a Pride march at which he stands up bravely for a better vision of Serbia. This engagement with violently contested public spaces around Pride parades echoes the experimental video work of Croatian artist Igor Grubic, whose installation *East Side Story* reworks these same violent assaults at Pride marches in Belgrade and Zagreb. He juxtaposes video news footage of the attacks on one screen with another screen showing a group of dancers re-tracing gestures and movements from these events in the streets of Zagreb.

These films are radically different in form and style, but both insist on two things: the politics of public space and cinema’s aesthetic potential to intervene in it. *Parade* combines broad comedy, ethnic and sexual stereotypes, and the generic conventions of the road movie and the melodrama to construct popular identification with a gay couple. Indeed, the film ends by calling for a change in national identity, insisting that anti-Roma racism, right-wing nationalism, and the forms of rampant post-socialist capitalism endemic in the former Yugoslavia intersect with issues of gay rights. As with the *Mujeres*, global queer politics is represented as necessarily intersectional. By contrast to this direct address to an audience, *East Side Story*’s dancers might seem meaningless to the passers-by or even to the spectator transfixed by the shocking scenes of violence on the news video, unsure how to read the more controlled and abstracted bodies on the right. As Dejan Sretenovic has argued, the piece uses choreographed bodies to evoke the corporeal expressivity of queer sex as well as the physicality of violence and, by contrast the neutrality of the passers by.¹¹ Social positions with regard to homosexuality are figured in these bodies, a series of intersecting vectors that can only be thought through both image tracks in combination. And, as with the Pride march itself, these vectors require us to think carefully about modes of publicity.

What’s so curious and consequential about queer global film culture is the persistence of cinema as an effective means of participating in the world. In this moment when many take for granted skyping and tweeting globally, or an idea of the world’s instant digital interconnectivity, why is this old medium still understood as a key means of connecting to global politics, and of experiencing the category of the universally human? Unlike our sense of how contemporary social media played a foundational role in the Arab Spring, queer politics seems to thrive on cinema and its institutional spaces of actual and virtual social engagement. As the aesthetics and politics of these diverse examples suggest, cinema remains crucial to how gender and sexuality can circulate globally.



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¹⁰ Srdjan Dragojević, “Srdjan Dragojević’s *Parade Number Ones in Home Territories*,” Press release F&ME (4 December 2011), “http://fame.uk.com/news/Srdjan_Dragojevics_Parade_The_Parade_Number_One_in_Home_Territories/

¹¹ Dejan Sretenović, “The Figuration of Resistance” in *East Side Story* catalogue (Belgrade: Salon of the Museum of Contemporary Art, 2008), 5.