

THE VIEW FROM HERE
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Cover photograph of *Divine* from *Pink Flamingos* directed by John Waters
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*For my parents
(who probably took me to too many movies)*

and

*for Steve
(who I've probably dragged to too many movies)*

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Introduction

It is difficult enough to be queer, but to be queer in the cinema is almost impossible. Heterosexuals have fucked up the screen so completely that there's hardly room for us to kiss there.

—Derek Jarman, filmmaker

The roots of this book go back to the year I took off from school to travel through Europe; it was in London that I saw my very first John Waters films at the Institute of Contemporary Arts. There were three Waters films in particular—*Pink Flamingos*, *Female Trouble*, and *Desperate Living*—that I can say, without exaggeration, changed my life. Waters' sheer audacity and over-the-top, hyperbolic representations of character and plot were all just so perfectly, shockingly, unapologetically *queer*.

Since then, I have worked extensively for the alternative press (in particular, for the *Montreal Mirror*, a news and entertainment weekly, as a critic, reporter, and editor) and for various mainstream publications, while completing two degrees—in film studies and media studies—at Concordia University in Montreal. *The View from Here* reflects the intersection of my areas of specialization as a journalist and student: queer identity and the cinema.

Looking at the thirty-two interviews in this book (thirty-three if you include the legendary Divine), it is impossible not to be thunderstruck at the evolution of queer-authored cinema over the past fifty years. Finding a common thread to link the filmmakers profiled here at times appeared to be a futile exercise, given the depth and variety of their work. Indeed, *The View from Here* is a tribute to the broad range of films created by gay and lesbian artists: the experimental works of Kenneth Anger, the gritty documentaries of Janis Cole and Holly Dale, the playful formalism of John Greyson, the brash musicals of Bill Condon, the erotic performance art of Annie Sprinkle, and beyond.

Mirror, mirror

One cannot read these interviews without reflecting on the broad and rigorous writing that's been done on the relationship between queers and the big screen. Certainly, I've been influenced by various takes on the subject, such as Vito Russo's plea for positive cinematic images in his 1981 book *The Celluloid Closet*, Richard Dyer's defence of the use of stereotypes, B. Ruby Rich's landmark 1992 essay "The New Queer

Cinema” denouncing the idea that queer directors should necessarily portray “positive” images on screen, and Thomas Waugh’s radical rethinking of pornography.

Russo’s *The Celluloid Closet*, in particular, had a profound impact on how audiences view gays and lesbians in the movies. The book carefully documents the litany of negative gay and lesbian images on film perpetuated by Hollywood studios; Russo punctuates this point with a ghoulish yet insightful *Necrology*: a list of numerous gay and lesbian characters in Hollywood films and the manner in which they die on screen. It is dismaying, to say the least. He summed up his opinion at the end of his book: “Hollywood is too busy trying to make old formulas hit the jackpot again to see the future. Hollywood is yesterday, forever catching up tomorrow with what’s happening today.” Although Russo’s tome was criticized for numerous reasons—his omission of many European directors and his Hollywoodcentricism, in particular (Thomas Waugh described *The Celluloid Closet* as “lite, but essential”)—the book set in motion, in Hollywood and elsewhere, a chain of reactions toward the negative cinematic stereotyping he exposed so well.

Russo died from AIDS-related causes in 1990, and I wish he were still around to see how things have changed, especially the massive independent film movement that would follow *Celluloid’s* publication, encouraged by new institutions like the Sundance Film Festival and Miramax Films. Suddenly, being an outsider potentially became a hugely profitable proposition for filmmakers. As a result, a new breed of queer auteurs started making their own films, on their own terms. Documentary filmmaker Robert Epstein told me that when he and co-director Jeffrey Friedman were putting together their documentary based on Russo’s book, they originally included interviews with these up-and-coming gay and lesbian directors, which unfortunately, due to the sheer size of the project, had to be edited out. In a sense, I feel like this book helps to fill the gap between where Russo left off—a critique of Hollywood from the outside—and where we are now: autonomous creators of our own cinematic universes.

If there is a common thread to these interviews, I would suggest it is the self-consciousness many gay and lesbian filmmakers feel about their work. Given the ongoing debates surrounding gay and lesbian representations on screen, how can queer filmmakers not feel a heavy burden every time they pick up a camera? When I screen their work, I get a sense that, as the filmmakers look upon the world through their

lenses, they are acutely aware that they too are being watched, an affect that B. Ruby Rich refers to as “Homo Pomo.” As John Cameron Mitchell told me, there is a distinct advantage to being both queer and a filmmaker: “You know that things aren’t what they seem. You are aware of surface and then reality because you have to hide something so basic about yourself—about who you’re attracted to. Everything has a surface, and it’s like, ‘What’s really behind there?’ You’re aware of code, you’re aware of camp, which means exaggeration of surface.” This self-consciousness connects many of the filmmakers in the book: it is present in copious Hollywood romantic comedy references made by Ian Iqbal Rashid in *Touch of Pink*, the tabloid reflections of Fenton Bailey and Randy Barbato, the recycling of film culture of Bruce LaBruce, the reflections on voyeurism of Patricia Rozema, and the camp outrageousness of John Waters.

Labels

For most of the people I spoke with for *The View from Here*, the idea for the book seemed a no-brainer. Many expressed shock that such a project hadn’t already been done, given the vast amount that has been written about queer theory and cinematic representations of gays and lesbians. But still others seemed to resist the idea of such a book. Some filmmakers declined to be a part of it—some politely (like the Hollywood director who sent me a massive bouquet of flowers to apologize), some not so politely (like the one who hung up the phone on me as I was requesting an interview). Those who didn’t like the idea of the book most frequently stated that they didn’t see the point in being labelled as a gay or lesbian filmmaker. I’ve encountered this argument numerous times over the years, and it was perhaps best articulated by director Joel Schumacher in 2003 on the occasion of the release of his film *Phone Booth*: “I’m a big opponent of labels. African-American judge, Jewish vice-presidential candidate, lesbian congresswoman, transgendered military officer, whatever. I don’t recall anyone referring to Bill Clinton as our Caucasian, heterosexual, WASP, male ex-president. In other words, he’s normal and everyone with a label isn’t.” This struck me as a fascinating perspective, certainly in part because I’ve always thought of Clinton as an icon of heterosexuality (not to mention the fact that many referred to him as the first black president of America, due to his affinity with the African-American community—but that’s another book).

It’s an intriguing argument, but I’m not sure how much sense it

ultimately makes. When people analyze the work of playwright Harold Pinter, for instance, biographical analysis is frequently offered: Pinter grew up in post-World War II Britain when anti-Semitism ran rampant, and as a Jew, suffered at the hands of racist bullies who repeatedly beat and tormented him. Many Pinter biographers, critics, and academics have pointed to these formative experiences as the reason for the heavy strain of anxiety that runs throughout much of Pinter's work. When these points are made, no one would suggest that the label of Jew is irrelevant to this analysis of Pinter's oeuvre. Then why should an analysis of one's sexual orientation be any different? Undermining stereotypes, resisting labels, or at the very least questioning their implications, is crucial, but to deny them is, well, to be in a state of denial. At the same time, I remain sensitive to the artist's right to personal privacy. I have spoken to many film icons who said that, once they'd publicly acknowledged that they are gay, felt like they had a rainbow flag indelibly stamped on their foreheads.

Exclusions

Some readers will note, quite correctly, that there are absences in this list of filmmakers. *The View from Here* reflects certain biases on my part that must be noted: as a critic working for a weekly newspaper, my primary focus has always been feature-length films. While a number of the filmmakers included have made short films, most of the works discussed are feature-length, and only one director, Kenneth Anger, has never made a feature. As well, the book is undeniably North America-centric, with a large number of American and Canadian directors. This again reflects my vantage point as a Montreal-based critic, where my work focuses primarily on films that play in repertory and arthouse cinemas (as well as some multiplexes) in North America.

As I wrote this book, it pained me to know that there is a dearth of filmmakers from developing nations, and that there are too few people of color and too few women represented. The question of gender equity was one that struck me especially hard, and remains an enigma. In many areas of the film business, women have made huge inroads, but the director's chair remains overwhelmingly occupied by men (two female filmmakers included in this book, the team of Janis Cole and Holly Dale, addressed this gender gap specifically in their 1988 documentary film and accompanying book *Calling the Shots*). For some reason, film remains a male-dominated medium, despite the

large presence of female directors now working in television.

There are also interviews that I could not arrange for the book—for example, Todd Haynes filmed his Bob Dylan biopic in Montreal during the summer of 2006, but he was too busy to grant me an interview, despite being in the same city—and despite the huge number of queer directors in the UK, I got but one—the delightful Ian Iqbal Rashid. As for other Brits, Nicholas Hytner declined, Terrence Davies did not reply to my request, and Isaac Julien was in the midst of a film project and didn't have time. All of this being said, I must state that one of my strategies for staying sane as I worked on this project was knowing there would one day be a second volume. Oversights, omissions, and scheduling conflicts can all be rectified, provided huge numbers of queer cinephiles rush out and buy this book, safely ensuring that I can do a sequel.

Stand and Deliver

Finally, at the risk of sounding like a talking float at a gay pride parade, I really want *The View from Here* to stand as a celebration of the work of all the filmmakers included. Years ago, when I interviewed Chris Smith, Britain's first openly-gay Member of Parliament, about his very public coming out, he said that if he'd made one gay person's life better by what he'd done, then that would have made it all worth it. Clearly, each of the films discussed in this book are in their own way brazen, bold acts of defiance, attempts to push the envelope of representation in a world that, in many cases, would rather render us invisible.

From where I stand, the view has never looked better.