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The fall of the pink curtain

Alliances between nationalists and queers in post-Yugoslavian cinema

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CONCLUSION

My dissertation is situated at the intersection of the so-called Western, Anglo-Saxon queer discourses and their counterparts in Eastern Europe. More specifically, I focus on one geo-political area, which I have called the post-Yugoslavian geographic region, where the issue of sexual minority cannot be separated from religion and nationalism. My object of study, the development of gay and queer discourses in the post-Yugoslavian region, has been constructed through emergent complex geographical, historical, and cultural nodes, which are as multi-layered as the religious and political configurations of the various cultural and national contexts in the region. I have analyzed the concept of gay visibility as understood in the Western perspective and how it transforms when applied to my region of study, paying close attention to the fact that a direct application cannot be undertaken due to the specificities of the region.

During my analysis, I focus on films from the post-Yugoslavian geographic region due to their proliferation during a time of developing discourses on gay and queer visibility. While the films I chose often project heteronormative ideologies, at the same time, they present non-heterosexuals as active constituents. These cinematic portrayals of queers in the post-Yugoslavian region, I assert, can help classify these films as activist artworks or artistic activism in that they present a new kind of visibility of queer bodies that participate in the emergence of a specific queer discourse. The specificity of this discourse lies in the fact that it has not caused counterattacks like those that were seen, for example, in the organization of the first pride parades, which were imported from the West. Whereas Western queer strategies, including pride parades, tend to privilege forms of individual and collective visibility, local politics emerge more subtly in these films.

In a context where governments are not prepared to legislate on behalf of its queer citizens, queer artists are no likely to be afraid that their discourse will be re-appropriated by conservative

forces as is sometimes the case in the West.⁵⁰ Making films is a different kind of politicking. These films deliver (site) specific tactics and contribute to the fight against homophobia on both the cultural and political level. As I have demonstrated throughout this dissertation, the tactics used in the films and the proposals made in the stories are solidly anchored in a context that invites ambivalent, oblique, and sometime self-contradictory practices.

This study of both homophobic and counter-homophobic discourses in local films situates the specific kinds of homophobia, heteronormativity, and queer activism that occurs in the post-Yugoslavian region and thereby allows for an imagining of a de-centralized Western perspective on queer sexuality. My approach involved walking a fine line between global and local queer studies, and to observe the (often failed) dialogues, or at least the interaction between the two. The dialogue between emerging queer discourses in the East and their more established Anglo-Saxon counterparts also needed to be analyzed in the context of a specific historical moment: post-1989 Europe. During this period, Eastern countries were faced not only with a rise of nationalist and religious discourses, but also “an explosion of Western gay and queer discourses” (Kulpa and Mizielinska 2011: 16). The different temporality of the emergence of gay discourses in the East, compared to the Western linear progression – from homophile discourses in the 1950s to queer discourses in the 1990s – can be seen as an “all at once” explosion in countries including: Belarus, Bulgaria, the Baltic countries, the Czech Republic, East-Germany, Hungary, and Poland (Kulpa and Mizielinska 2011: 16-19). Cultural historians such as Kulpa and Mizielinska have noted that the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989 led to what Kuhar and Takács call the fall of the Pink Curtain. Consequently, Eastern countries faced a proliferation of Western gay and queer discourses (Kulpa and Mizielinska 2011: 16-19). The main difference to be noted here is that the countries that constituted former Yugoslavia faced a war in the 1990s and it might be because of this, that ten years elapsed before the same moment occurred in the 2000s. While I do not focus on this delay, the

⁵⁰ For example, the “don’t ask don’t tell” policy and the mechanisms of censorship that made speaking about gay identity contagious (Butler 1997: 133) or even the fact that gay liberation is used as an anti-immigrant rhetoric (Butler 2008: 3).

same contradictory forces and strange coinages occurred then as well. For example, the emergence of local queer cinema on the one hand, and a violent backlash against pride parades, organized attacks from religious nationalists, and the consolidation of religious nationalism on the other.

I am not suggesting that the different context forecloses any comparison between what we think of as Western gay discourses and Eastern European ones. Some patterns within queer discourses are perfectly recognizable in the countries included in this study. For example, the fear that homosexuals in the East could infect the population, echoes the forms of paranoia that Sedgwick has analyzed as “homosexual panic,” driven by “intense male homosocial desire as at once the most compulsory and the most prohibited of social bonds” (1990: 187). It is partly for this reason that homosexuals need to be heterosexualized. As in Sedgwick’s analysis, the films represent and denounce a paranoid reading of gays as vectors of conceptual infection. This threat cannot be directly applied to the region since it is not only driven by homosexual desire but by Western, and particularly United States discourses that are seen to infiltrate the East partly thanks to the Eastern queer community. The West exists as a myth in the films and it is treated differently regardless of whether the characters are homophobic or not. Moreover, the West is portrayed simultaneously as the enemy (for homophobes), a dangerous ally (for some gay people), and a refuge. In short, a so-called ambivalent West. Homophobic voices treat the West as the place from which homosexuality emanates. As is often the case, nations accuse strangers – homosexuals – of being agents of destruction that involves disease, invasion, contamination, and violence. In *Take a Deep Breath*, for example, the film shows that the straight characters see the lesbians as mentally ill criminals. Their sexuality is diagnosed and explained as a corrupting influence from the West and the result threatens the heteronormative family.

There is no easy transfer of knowledge between gays, and in spite of globalization, no easy transfer of knowledge from one queer community to another. So-called Western queer theory cannot be transferred without being translated. While particular concepts cannot be simply applied, I am interested in specific concept transformations once they have arrived in the region and the

changes that have occurred. It is also useful to know what has successfully carried over and the reasons why. One concept in particular seems not to have traveled well. “Out and Proud,” a political tactic and normally a rallying cry for gay liberation, turned out to be an impossible liberating move. The visibility at the pride parades in the region, for example, when directly applied incited severe backlashes from homophobes. As I discussed in Chapter 1, this might appear to be similar to other places, in the context of Eastern anti-gay paranoia colliding with violent forms of nationalism that were exacerbated by the issues raised by the war and the emergence of religious nationalism in the 1990s. This kind of visibility was threatening to an endangered masculinity. As I pointed out, the casual flow of homophobic intolerance came from religious and nationalist elites and trickled down to everyday interactions. Strong alliances formed between right-wing parties and religious nationalists were responsible for organized attacks.

Local queer films did not trigger any organized attacks but instead worked to encourage dialogue and provided a reservoir of tactics. The films I analyze are a sort of emerging canon: they exemplify what it means to represent a new paradigm of re-creating new resistance movements and uncovering sometimes dubious tactics. It is in this context that I have chosen to analyze one specific form of resistance to the persistence and reinforcement of homophobia since the 1990s. I have chosen films that depict currently occurring changes, but we cannot really call this progress. It is also important to observe the limits of this evolution.

While the films can be seen as offering narratives of hope and forms of alliance, they also constitute problematic forms of new visibility that result in homophobia. Although the films underline that gays exist, create an audience, and point out that regardless of whether people are happy with that or not, they are there, they cannot be misconstrued as a copy of “we’re here, we’re queer, get used to it” sort of slogans in the West. In fact, as I point out, this is precisely not what is happening. Even as the films offer queer visibility, homophobia is taken for granted as their context, and therefore is represented in the story, also to the point of creating a feeling of ambivalence in the films.

My corpus constantly refers to the homophobic context and underscores that society punishes sexual deviants. As soon as queer people do not act or present themselves as heteronormative, they become victims of violence and may be raped, killed, or imprisoned. In *Fine Dead Girls*, a lesbian couple (Iva and Mare) is constantly surveilled, and a series of events leads to Iva's rape and Mare's murder. In *Take a Deep Breath* another lesbian couple (Saša and Lana) is surveilled and as a result of a misused justice system, Lana is imprisoned. In *Go West*, a story about a gay couple, Kenan is raped and castrated while his partner Milan is killed on the battlefield. Lastly, in *The Parade*, queer activist Mirko is killed in a fight with neo-Nazis at a pride parade. The films push against nationalistic and religious constraints and offer local solutions that may seem counter-intuitive and unproductive to Western viewers accustomed to projections of positive coming-out stories or stories of mainstreaming. That said, it is important to distinguish between the representation of homophobia and homophobia itself.

The films are disturbingly graphic in their description of anti-gay violence. Homophobic violence is present in all the films, sometimes to extreme physical or mental degrees, and sexuality is often inseparable from religious beliefs or ethnic identity. It is impossible to decide whether Kenan, in *Go West*, is raped as a woman, as a gay man, or as a Muslim, but clearly, he is a victim at the intersection between institutionalized sexism, homophobia, and Islamophobia. When the perpetrator castrates him and turns him into a mutilated trans woman, she also kills him symbolically since he has no option but to emigrate to the West. Similarly, the gay couple in *The Parade* is preparing to leave for the West, but before they depart, they organize a pride parade in Belgrade. Based on real-life events, the participants of the parade are attacked by neo-Nazis, who use the slogan "Kill the Faggot" ["Ubi pедера"]. In a bloody fight between the neo-Nazis and the parade participants, queer activist Mirko is killed. The lesbian couples portrayed in the films prove to be just as likely to be targeted as the men. Because the society is a surveillance state, there is no hope that the authorities will help. For example, the lesbian relationship between Saša and Lana in *Take a Deep Breath* brutally ends after Miloš' illegal intervention in which he accuses Lana of

being mentally ill and pulls strings to have her incarcerated. In these films homosexuality is portrayed as an assault against patriarchal norms of sexual expression and a danger to the integrity of family, tradition, religious sentiments, as well as the nation-state. Every homophobic attack is perpetrated in the name of nationalism or religion. And yet, I am not arguing that these films are homophobic, but rather that there is a risk of the audience reading them in that manner. While the representation can be seen as a denunciation, it still alludes to the patriarchal standards that continue to refuse minorities.

Similarly, the denouements of the films propose forms of closure that do not constitute hopeful and unambiguous happy endings. I argue that in so doing, the films are effective because they make us imagine ambivalent tactics, pyrrhic victories, and strange alliances. For example, *Go West* is the portrait of a gay man who decides not to come out but to cross-dress and attempt to pass as a straight woman. His punishment for not passing is so catastrophic that, in the end, escaping to the West is the only realistic possibility. While queer life has been destroyed and rejected, it is shown to exist and therefore cannot be denied. In the end, escape to the liberal West is presented as a solution for survival. A very different but comparable situation occurs in *The Parade*. Here, the gay characters also dream of escaping to the West, in this case Canada. But contrary to what happens in *Go West*, violence is also a means of opposing homophobia. Gay characters fight neo-Nazis while planning their escape. The film suggests that violence is the only way to protect queer lives and this is what makes them victims of homophobia. As one of the characters puts it, “Even a beating is better than the humiliation we endure our whole fucking lives” (Mirko in *The Parade*). Nevertheless, in both cases one of the partners is killed; Milan on the battlefield and Mirko in the fight with the neo-Nazis. In both films, queers are shown to have vulnerable lives that can be exterminated solely because of their gayness. Similarly, the West is also presented as a solution and a place of departure for the lesbian couple in *Take a Deep Breath*, yet with a slight reversal and a one-sided view of the West. The West is both a place Lana moves to and where she comes from, which positions the West as a place where Eastern failures go and

where successful Easterners come from. Since there is an illusion that lesbians do not exist in the East, and lesbianism is pathologized as a mental illness from a nationalist perspective; the logical conclusion is that Lana only became a lesbian once she migrated to the West and became ill. What is problematic with this assumption is the disregarded fact that Lana perhaps had to emigrate to Paris because she was gay. To liberate herself, she needed to emigrate to the West to live openly as a lesbian. This also disregards the fact that Paris is a place where homophobia exists as well.

Despite the negative portrayals and cinematic destruction of active and non-normative characters, I argue that these films are the beginning of an archive of anti-homophobic stories even if the message is never straightforward. While the films present violence, they also condemn it. *Fine Dead Girls* criticizes Croatian society for its negative approach towards lesbians by exposing homophobia with an excess of violence on the screen, condemning the police for not protecting lesbian victims, presenting the church as self-sabotaging, criticizing nationalist views, and criticizing the connection between violence, nationalism, and religion. All the film can do is teach us to condemn such violence against lesbians as a sort of stupidity, although it is still tolerated in reality and in a public discourse that postulates that lesbians (and gay men) should stay in the closet or, if they do come out, should be violently pushed back into a transparent closet.

Furthermore, the films present the ambivalent idea of leaving versus staying and fighting. Often, the issue is whether it is possible to stay and fight or flee and survive. For example, in *Go West* the only way out is to flee. In *The Parade*, however, a gay couple who dreams of leaving the country decides to stay to fight homophobia locally. The title of *Take a Deep Breath* encourages the characters (and perhaps us viewers) to breathe deeply and find a way to cope with repression. Even if Lana is put in jail and then goes back to Paris, we know that she had left and returned to Belgrade. An even more radical proposal is made in *Fine Dead Girls* which advocates staying in the country and challenging the historical roots and patriarchal system of the region. Also, the films present ambivalent narratives of hope in the fact that the victims of homophobia are worth grieving for, and that therefore their lives matter (Butler 2009). The title *Fine Dead Girls* suggests an

ambivalent reading of the story. One of the main characters is killed off, which some viewers may interpret as a pessimistic *no way out* similar to *Go West*, yet the lesbian couple is presented as grievable subjects, and as spectators we are invited to care. The combination of “fine” and “dead” troubles the homophobic violence of the reference to the expression “the only good gay person is a dead gay person.”

Similarly, in *Take a Deep Breath* we find a whole set of ambivalent tactics that involve representing and fighting the common regional stereotype that lesbians are medically ill. In this film, lesbians are indeed represented as posing a threat and it is not quite clear whether the storyline refutes this claim. The film also turns this stereotype around to show that lesbians are offered a way out of a repressive and diseased heterosexual matrix. It seems that the conflicting and incompatible concepts of lesbians being sick and liberating at the same time, are both cooperating with and challenging heteronormativity.

This may not be much of a consolation for gay people who view these films. It is perhaps the case, that in this moment in time, the intended audience is still violent homophobes who may be asked to consider the consequences of their actions. This hypothesis might help us come to terms with the fact that all the films were directed by straight directors – an admittedly problematic issue. Clearly, straight directors have taken it upon themselves to raise the question of homophobia in the post-Yugoslavian region. As a result, they are putting themselves in a delicate position, one where a dominant person speaks for a minority. The problem of speaking on behalf of a minority is indeed already a long-running debate in academia but has never stopped being addressed (Alcoff 1991; Foucault 1977; Gramsci 1926; Guha 1982-1989; Said 1978; Spivak 1978, 1988). This is often the mark of a subaltern that remains one; even if one refuses to align themselves with the director’s identity and political message. After all, one does not need to be gay to be repulsed by homophobic violence. The problem is that they did not contact or make alliances with existing queer communities who might have played a productive role in the scripting of the films. It is striking to note that none of the films – except to a certain extent *The Parade* – represent a queer community.

Instead, they focus on individual fates and represent gay characters as lonely agents fighting against homophobia. The refusal or inability to acknowledge the existence of the minority subject as already politically and culturally engaged is the manifestation of a form of power that the directors could have avoided. Queer communities are not given a voice, and even worse, treated as if they did not even exist. As I demonstrated in Chapter 1, many queer activist initiatives, organizations, and groups have been active in the region for many years.

Does this confirm that the addressed audience does not include gay people? That would be ironically strange. The films make us think of several possibilities for queer activists to embrace them. Besides forms of denunciation and the struggle against homophobia, the films present several fragile and ambivalent forms of alliances. Because the tactics proposed here are themselves homophobic; heteronormative discourses are attacked from what remains an extremely vulnerable position. The films deploy “tactics” that de Certeau would call the “art of the weak” (1984: 35). Several tactics in the films are responses to homophobia, for example, the framing of ambivalent gazes, the queerness of some forms of gendered solidarity, and the creation of alliances and misalliances between straight, gay, queer, nationalist, religious, and governmental discourses.

What is at stake in these films is a rough division between gay and lesbian alliances; whereas lesbian characters are forming alliances with feminine and liberal allies, gay characters are supposed to form solidarity with traditional masculine nationalists. For example, *Fine Dead Girls* offers a secret alliance formed between a lesbian couple and Blaž, the husband of the main perpetrator Olga. He passively resists throughout the film, and only acts when a child is taken away from a heterosexual family. In this regard, this is how I see the relationship between Olga and Blaž: while Olga controls the borders of sexuality and demands that her tenants stay within the limits of heterosexuality, Blaž passively obeys this control until the pressure becomes too high. His response is to exact a rather chaotic and individualized type of justice. When the violence reaches critical mass, he explodes and kills his wife. This is a vendetta rather than justice.

Uncharacteristically for films from this region, *Take a Deep Breath* mainly focuses on

women's relationships. As Baletić writes, there is much greater resistance from society towards male rather than female homosexuality, so it is easier to find alliances between women (Kupres 2004). In the film, such an alliance is found between Saša and her very open-minded mother Lila. But what is also at stake is the fact that a lesbian relationship is the only relationship based on love, while the heterosexual relationships are based on a corruption of love. The director uses this distinction in the plot to build the viewer's empathy for lesbians. They are oppressed and controlled, and thus victims of the nationalist society that operates within a heteronormative framework, and yet they are the only ones capable of loving each other. As such, they represent a way out of this miserable frame. Ultimately, they are the heroes of the story, as they are the only characters to change in a positive way. Thus, they create an alliance with the audience and thereby form alliances with queer viewers.

Alliances between gay characters and nationalists are more difficult to define, as they are often volatile and unexpected. A common connection is the threat to masculinity, and therefore any solidarity between gays and traditional masculine nationalists is rather unthinkable. Nevertheless, the background of these alliances lies in queer cultural history. The alliance between nationalists and gay people thus occurs as a result of a specific historical background: before the fall of the Pink Curtain, nationalists and the queer community in the post-Yugoslavian region were not such strange bedfellows as it might be presumed. During the 1980s they were united against a common enemy – the communist government. Only after the rise of religious nationalism in the region during the 1990s was homosexuality invoked and constructed as a political enemy, a tactic taken up by religious nationalists (Kuhar 2013: 29). Later, when entering the European Union, strong alliances were established between regional and Western anti-gay groups, and between the local queer community and Western pro-gay initiatives.

In the West, the equivalent might be the supposedly unexpected collaboration between, for example, working class communities and gay people, such as the alliance of the Welsh coal miners and queers in the 1980s, and gay veterans marching together with heterosexual veterans at

the 2014 St. Patrick's Day Parade in Boston (Pratt 2014).⁵¹ The difference is that in the West solidarity seems to represent a linear line, while in the post-Yugoslavian region these alliances have different backgrounds according to a different historical context.

The recruitment of homophobic nationalists into LGBTI rights activists in *The Parade* is historically accurate in the context – however, both queer community and homophobic nationalists among the spectators may have had their certainties troubled by the representation of this collaboration. This common homophobic front comes at a price: the heteronormative framework constantly tries to argue for the superhero position of the male macho who inferiorizes the queer by feminizing them. Yet the presence of nationalism alongside queer communities establishes new possibilities: queer subjects are seen to play an active role within their society. Just as problematic is the issue of cross-generational solidarities or incompatibilities, and perhaps even more so, since the region has a rapidly changing political history that is expanding the gap between generations. Portraying an alliance between the father figure and the gay figure in *Go West* constitutes a *détournement* of a constant conflict between male-dominated society and the queer community. The film suggests that for an alliance between straight men and the queer community to exist, it is necessary to question the dictates of religion and government. This alliance, however, is shown to be extremely fragile, schizoid, and self-destructive. While most of the stories show that queer subjects are violently destroyed, here the father cannot survive his own homophobia. His perceived feeling of self-contradiction, fed by the deep homophobic roots of his society, leads him to commit suicide. One form of queerness is therefore also eliminated: the symbolic killing of the older generation seems to be a high price to pay for the development of new communities.

As a final word, I will add that one of the hopes that I entertain is art's ability to transcend the political message of the creator. The director's or storyteller's agency can be productively betrayed or complemented by the artwork itself: the message that the film is meant to send cannot

⁵¹ Yet the comparison is not obvious. There are lingering stereotypes about working-class people being homophobic, about the military and the police being anti-gay. It is not that the situation described in the films is implausible in the West, but an Eastern European context changes the formulation of the stereotype.

be controlled once the film is released. Films, from this perspective, operate not so differently from images that W.J.T. Mitchell analyses. In his book *What Do Pictures Want?* (2005) he suggests:

Images are active players in the game of establishing and changing values. They are capable of introducing new values into the world and thus of threatening old ones. For better or for worse, human beings establish their collective, historical identity by creating around them a second nature composed of images, which do not merely reflect the values consciously intended by their makers, but radiate new forms of value formed in the collective, political unconscious of their beholders.

(105)

Like Mitchell's images, these films can be said to do something. The very fact that they address queer topics represents a breakthrough in post-Yugoslavian mainstream cinema. For queer activists in the region (and the rest of the world) the films interrogate and denounce local forms of homophobia and suggest forms of resistance to these particular manifestations of violence. Their very existence constitutes a form of activism, as they implicitly question homophobic views and seek to dismantle rigid views on sexuality and gender identities in general, and particularly minority sexual preferences. As I have demonstrated, by adopting ways of storytelling that assist viewers to imagine new situations and new alliances between groups or individuals – for example between veteran Limun and queer activist Radmilo in *The Parade*, between the husband of the perpetrator Olga and the lesbian couple in *Fine Dead Girls*, between the father Ljubo and his gay son in *Go West*, and between the wife of the corrupt homophobic judge and her lesbian daughter in *Take a Deep Breath* – film directors offer a social and political critique and act as indirect activists or activists.

The overall aim of this dissertation was to analyze the role of cinema in countering homophobic practices in the post-Yugoslavian geographic region. For this reason, I looked at art and activism jointly, and analyzed activist actions that challenge homophobia and evoke change through the use of art. My study reveals that beyond Western queer strategies – which were obviously problematic when transferred to the region – activism is one way of approaching and challenging homophobia in the region. This perspective helped me explore queer cultural history and how art is used to challenge homophobia in the post-Yugoslavian geographic region. The films I analyzed provide a solid foundation for illustrating how homophobia can be turned around and used as activist practices. I expect this research to contribute to debates on queer theory by adding an under-explored local dimension, while analyzing activist strategies in the non-Western world. An inclusion of queer discourses from the post-Yugoslavian geographic region will allow a more historically and culturally accurate view of homophobia, while providing another argument for decolonizing non-Western queer discourses.