Festival Review
Animating Queer Visions at the 46th Concordia Film Festival

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The 46th edition of the Concordia Film Festival (CFF) took place from May 2nd to May 5, 2019 at Concordia University in Montreal, Canada. Helmed by film students Siam Obregón and Max Holzberg, the student film festival included a variety of screenings and panels showcasing works made by students both from Concordia and around the world. The events presented by the CFF ranged from workshops held by film industry professionals—such as producer Evren Boisjoli and film animator Torill Kove—to presentations given by Concordia Film Studies students. The festival's core short film screening programs featured a selection of student works from Concordia's Film Production and Film Animation programs, as well as two international screening programs: Open Competition and Visions. Open Competition offered a selection of short films by filmmakers outside of Concordia, while Visions was comprised of films made by queer and queer people of colour from across the world. Festival Co-Director Max Holzberg specifies that "[Visions] has a specialized theme to create space for filmmakers who may not have the platform to share their own stories. It is also an opportunity for LGBTQA+ audience members to view queer cinema, made by emerging filmmakers." Founded in 2016 by animator Catherine Slilaty in collaboration with the Concordia-based feminist art journal *Yiara Magazine*, the CFF's Visions screening was intended to "showcase racialized LGBTQIA creators and content—live action and animated films of any genre," Slilaty explains.

When asked about whether or not having members of LGBTQA+ communities as Festival Directors in recent years has had an impact on the festival's direction, Holzberg gives a positive answer: "It has certainly shaped the CFF both directly and indirectly. In a general way, I know that my perspectives are partially derived from my lived experience as a gay man. Thus, from that I can say that I bring an awareness about how our festival can maintain queer inclusivity." He adds that having a diversified team helps maintain this sense of inclusion: "Ultimately, I think it is only enriching and beneficial to an organization such as the CFF to have its members represent a diversity of gender identities, sexual orientations, ethnic and racial backgrounds, and so on. These perspectives only create more space for people to participate in the festival and have their voices heard, which is the goal of the CFF: a platform for students and emerging filmmakers to share their stories."

Moving Queer Journals

The act of sharing one's own story framed through their particular perspective seems to have been a recurring cinematic method used throughout the festival's films. This journaling approach—one that

can be described as an autobiographical impulse in which filmmakers build a narrative to document their emotions and life experiences—encourages the viewer to borrow the author's point of view on certain themes or particular subjects. A variety of cinematic methods are employed to achieve this approach, such as the use of first-person narration, which relates the inner thoughts and point of view of the character on-screen.

The festival's queer outlets are not limited to Visions, but can be found throughout most, if not all screenings. As Holzberg assures us: "LGBTQA+ films and films of those topics are screened in almost all of the CFF's Concordia-specific programs …Certainly our philosophy as a festival that provides a safe space is known to the Concordia filmmakers, however, we owe credit to the filmmakers who are brave enough to produce their own stories about LGBTQA+ subject matter and submit them to the CFF to be shown to audiences comprised of hundreds of people."

Building a platform in which someone can share their personal stories from queer perspectives allows for alternative forms of storytelling. When asked about what type of platform the festival creates, Slilaty considers that the CFF "provides a platform for emerging queer filmmakers from all around the world, [where] their films can be viewed by a wide audience: from undergraduate students, film festival programmers and industry professionals…. [Visions] is also a free screening, which makes it accessible to an even wider audience." As forms of queer representation remain limited in comparison to more heteronormative narratives in film and media, accessibility is especially important in this context. According to Holzberg, "the film world is lacking in diverse representation. Thus, the festival employs equitable screening practices to create more space for diverse voices to have their work shown, and to empower audience members of diverse backgrounds to feel inspired and enlightened by stories they may not otherwise see." Slilaty echoes this sentiment in her consideration of the censorship around some queer content, as she explains: "Various forms of censorship around the world have and continue to limit or outright ban the presentation of queerness. And if it is present,

often it is required to be shown in a negative light: queer characters must suffer a tragic end, narratively punished for their identity, thus sending the message to the audience that queerness is wrong." Although it is true that some of the films screened at the festival fill the lack of gender and sexual diversity in the media as mentioned by Holzberg, it is questionable that this was the case for all selected films. In spite of the fact that some of the films established a clear queer narrative, others seemed not to follow such a mandate. The following section will discuss a selection of films featured in the 2019 Visions program.

A Queer Vision

German documentary film *Luca* (Hannah Schwaiger and Ricarda Funnemann, dirs. 2019) establishes a queer diegesis through its focus on gender performativity and performance. The film presents the act of performance as liberating for its subject Luca, for whom, in their own words, taking to the stage is synonymous with living. More precisely, through the omnipresent first-person narration, Luca explains that dancing allows for a greater connection with the senses: "When you dance you really start to feel, all your senses rise. You smell more, you see more, you feel more, you feel the air flowing around you, it feels like a floating wave." The image supports this narration by intercutting Luca's performances with a variety of shots evoking the senses, such as a close-up of someone's eye, or the wind blowing on trees. The dancer recalls that they were bullied as a child for wearing feminine clothes; this couple with the fact that they were quiet made them a recluse, an outcast. Their interest in art grew at this time, ultimately leading them to adopt stage performance. The stage therefore acts as a safe space in which the protagonist can fully express themself and live the life they aspire. *Luca*'s use of stills and a home video aesthetic give the film a "journalesque" feel. The hand-held camera, cropped frame, and omnipresent first-person narration create a form of intimacy which invites the viewer to enter Luca's personal space. The lo-fi aesthetic recalls 90s family home videos and attempts to recapture a form of play; a form of queer childhood that for many LGBTQA+ people

has been tainted by the pressure of acting straight. *Luca* produces a particular form of nostalgic affect by employing the texture of older video technologies. These aesthetic choices lead us not to take the filmmaker's point of view per se, but the subject's. This effect leaves the viewer feeling as though *Luca* is a self-portrait, until the final credits reveal that the short was not self-directed. Not only does the narration nearly never cease until the film's final act, but almost every shot frames Luca performing; the film is not only about Luca, it *is* Luca.

The stop-motion animated short film, *Chromophobia* (Bassem Ben Brahim, dir. 2019), presented another prominent queer narrative amongst the Visions program. Through its use of uninterrupted transitions from the very beginning, *Chromophobia*'s visual component is constantly modulated, reflecting the theological evolution of the main character. In other words, each action directly affects what is to come. Paper-cut characters and accessories morph within a static painted background, creating a contrast between the film's mobile and immobile layers. The story opens on a grassy field from which a rainbow-hued flower grows, and gives birth to an infant child. The baby grows into a young boy, who is seen wearing makeup and playing with dolls alongside a young girl, though his playtime is quickly interrupted when an angry woman throws him out of the room. Shortly after, the boy grows into a young man, and enters a romantic relationship with another man, until it is cut short when a priest beheads his lover with a sword. Although the earlier rage felt by the woman upon encountering the main character wearing makeup can be seen as foreshadowing the challenges he will have to face later on, the beheading marks a dramatic shift in *Chromophobia* from a seemingly innocent story to a violent and disturbing narrative. The pastel colours, coupled with a tone which somehow manages to remain childish, counteract the violent impact felt by the ruthless beheading on the viewer. These mixed feelings only increase in the next scene, where the young man is taken by the police and electrocuted anally. Here, the up-tempo soundtrack featuring Beethoven's *Symphony No. 7*, along with the extreme close-up on the character's face while he is electrocuted, seem somewhat at odds with the brutality of the violence depicted. It is not clear whether the scene's disjointed portrayal is intentional or not, but the dark comedic aspect provoked through mixing the atrocious act with a close-up of the young man's facial expressions left us questioning the filmmaker's intentions. Did the filmmaker attempt to re-appropriate a former trauma and turn it into a dark comedy, or was the audience's nervous laughter not his intended goal?

The film takes an even more unexpected shift toward its conclusion, when the prison in which the main character is captive turns into an ocean. The young man transforms into a mermaid and must escape a shark. He ends up being killed by the predatory fish off-screen, after which flowers suddenly transform him into an angel who ascends into the sky, beyond a rainbow where an LGBTQA+ pride demonstration takes place.

Although it is important that *Chromophobia* bears witness to homophobic realities lived by LGBTQA+ people around the world, we were ultimately left wondering if the film's execution complements its narrative. It is relevant to mention that this animated film comes from Tunisia, a place where producing queer art may be dangerous in itself since LGBTQA+ people could face jail time due to their sexual orientation, with reports stating that homosexuals have been given up to three-year sentences in prison (Elks 2019; Agence France-Presse 2015). This homophobic reality is reflected in the film's grisly depiction of the torture and death of its queer characters. Among these violent acts, the anal electrocution the main character faces could be linked to forced anal testing that reportedly still occurrs in Tunisia, despite promises made by the authorities to stop the practice (Le Collectif Civil Pour Les Libertés Individuelles 2019). Aesthetically, the film is enjoyable and the transitions between scenes are well crafted, but the discordance between the subject and the mise-en-scène is quite noticeable. In other words, the potentially unintentional nervous laughter provoked by the violence on-screen sits awkwardly with the homophobic violence supposedly denounced by the short film. Nonetheless, the film's final images of a LGBTQA+ demonstration suggest a particular form of queer futurity arching back to the film's

unspoiled initial innocent tone and pastel colour palette.

Up until this point, the Visions films studied feature apparent queer narratives, but others, like *Mariposa* (Carolina Gudiño, dir. 2018) and *Squash* (Maximilian Bungarten, dir. 2019), were not as obvious, leaving us wondering about the motivations behind their selection. *Mariposa* portrays family grief, while *Squash* builds a narrative around two women playing squash while arguing about what appear to be release papers, and ultimately injuring one another in the process. Another short, *Son of a Dancer* (Georges Hazim, dir. 2018), was also hard to relate to queer topics. The film's main character, who embraces his passion for dancing, wears his mother's belly dancing costume in the final scene. It is unclear if the programmers thought this scene could categorize the film as queer or if they selected it without having a queer representation objective in mind. While this review's focus is to look at representation on-screen, questions also arise relating to the absence of queerness in a queer-oriented screening. In this particular context, is the identity proclamation of the director as LGBTQA+ sufficient to gain access to such a venue? When asked if Visions has changed since its inception, Slilaty, who worked on the screening's first three editions, responds that it "definitely has changed and evolved over the years…In its first year, Visions' focus was on the creators themselves being LGBTQA+, and less so on the content of the films. In the following years, the focus shifted towards ensuring queer content as well as the creators, while also prioritizing stories by and about racialized queer individuals."

Visions seems to be going back to this idea of emphasis on the creators' LGBTQA+ identity rather than strictly on queer content itself. However, it is questionable if these films should be screened in Visions if the creators themselves are not queer, although there is no sure way to verify such information. Holzberg explains that Visions' thematic focus has expanded with time. Shifting from a section exclusively showcasing works from LGBTQA+ filmmakers to a selection which includes non-queer people of colour films, making its focus filmmaking by minorities, rather than solely presenting queer films. We can then ask if Visions should let straight people of colour submit films, since the screening was originally thought of as a queer outlet. A good example would be the film *Jay* (Angela Chen and Ayinde Anderson, dirs. 2018), a coming-of-age film about a young black man life at home. As well-made as it is, *Jay* does not seem to include any queer components. These questions are relevant since spaces for queer content and queer creators need to be maintained and nurtured in order to allow LGBTQA+ voices to be heard at festival screenings. Broadening the scope of Visions would dilute the voices the screening series originally sought to amplify. Now that we have amply analyzed the event that is Visions, we will move on to explore a more narrow selection of queer films that stood out through their stylistic approaches.

The A in LGBTQA+ and Safe Spaces

In our search for LGBTQA+ representation across the four day long festival, we encountered an unexpected surprise with Élodie Roy's short animated film *Something Else* (2019). While many queer films are charged with sexual desire between same-sex characters, and it is through sexual encounters that the protagonists are usually empowered and made visible. Roy takes a new spin on this paradigm, shifting it 180 degrees by putting into motion the A (for asexuality), that is commonly left out from the queer community's acronym, living somewhere in the space of the "+" (a minority within a minority). *Something Else* strives to represent asexuality not as a lack (of sexuality), but as the title of the film suggests; something else.

Entirely without dialogue, the film begins with the main character sitting in a movie theatre gazing at the screen—or in a way, through the screen, and back at us. A form of silent dialogue is automatically engaged between the viewers and the character. Not only does the audience gaze at her, but she gazes at us, inviting the viewers to look *with*, rather than *at* her. The girl's attention is suddenly distracted by the sound of two people kissing. The couple eventually invade her personal space, inciting her to leave the theatre as the movie continues to play. The outside scene adopts a colour palette reminiscent of the asexuality pride flag with its black, grey, white, and purple stripes, which acts as a signifier

for those in the know. As the character exits the theatre she pulls out her smartphone, and puts her earphones on. On the phone's interface various song titles which parallel the crude and invasive comments asexuals receive on a daily basis appear, such as: "I'll make you love it," "Getting laid will fix that," "Do you even masturbate?," and "You're too hot to not have sex." Clicking on the song title "Something Else," the character moves through the city losing herself in the music, in the hopes of finding shelter against a hypersexualized (and hypersexualizing) world. The cityscape is filled with suggestive ads, such as a giant billboard promoting mint chewing gum, which turns from a close-up of the product to a photograph of a half-naked smiling man, holding the product just above his crotch. Sexual acts abound in the metropolis, rendered visible in the form of a shoe which seems to fall from a window, a sock floating in the wind, a belt stuck in a tree as its branches move, or a car bouncing up and down with a bra stuck in its door. Though pieces of clothing are found scattered around public and semi-private spaces, there is no one in sight but the lone protagonist. The film shifts to an almost horror-like genre as the protagonist enters her apartment complex, her silhouette now filled with a bright red as she comes face-to-face with an orgy of faceless people having intercourse in the stairwell. A feeling of anxiety increases as she moves up the staircase. The moaning intensifies and the slowly growing bodies turn into unrecognizable shapes melting into each other, threatening to swallow her whole. Until this point, the film has shown the character as someone who is not necessarily attracted to the idea of sex, but when she finally succeeds in entering her apartment, a more nuanced articulation of asexuality is illustrated. The colder hues of the city are traded for a more monochrome palette of oranges, as she is welcomed by what seems to be her female lover. The short closes with both women embracing each other and drinking tea, a gesture that introduces another form of non-sexual intimacy, something else. In this brief moment, the viewer is presented with a multidimensional way of thinking about identity. Like the colour schemes which separate the locales traversed throughout the film, sexual orientation, and sexual attraction are

two different identity spheres inhabiting one person. Therefore, the asexual character can also be a lesbian (or bisexual), and engage in a romantic relationship with or without necessarily engaging in sexual activities.

While queerness in animated works has been illustrated through the mutability (and of course animation) of forms, live-action films substantially rely on a play between gesture and posing. Adam Mbowe's *The Difference Between You and I* (2019), and Alexandre Lechaseur Dubé's *Quand la nuit tombera* (2019) interestingly deconstruct movements, while often at times pausing on them, revealing both the artificiality that is cinema, and the constructed nature of gender performance. Mbowe's film (which acts as homage to Jennie Livingston's 1990 film *Paris is Burning*) introduces Chivengi, a Black queer person who practices the art of voguing and other improvisational dance styles (e.g. catwalk, duck walk, spin and dip) which originate from Ballroom culture. In voice-over, the performer briefly explains how queer Black kids are outcast by society, living in an intersectional space threatened by both racism and homophobia. The same discourse echoes in *Paris is Burning*, where queer people of colour organized glamorous (and often campy) Ballroom events in New York City in the late 1980s, where performers would play with gender and social class in a celebration of diversity. What is most interesting about Mbowe's film is how Chivengi's discussion of safe spaces is superimposed with images of Chivengi (sometimes accompanied by others) practicing their craft in various locations that are not always specifically labelled as safe spaces. While the voice acts as conduit from image to image, it is really the gestures, or lack thereof (as they pose in model-like fashion) that dictate the flow of the short, allowing Ballroom mannerisms to travel from an apartment, to the studio, to Concordia University's greenhouse café, and even to Montreal's Sherbrooke metro station. In combining these visual and aural elements, Mbowe succeeds in representing a form of queer gesture embodied by Chivengi, as something that travels through both time and space.

Quand la nuit tombera adopts a different approach to the concept of safe space. As the director

explains, the film is a fairy-tale style reimagining of his process of self-discovery while moving from the countryside to Montreal. Aesthetically, the film borrows from Greek mythology and Renaissance painting, blending both styles in a hybrid fashion. This dual identity is also reflected in the gender-bending (and blending) characters that lurk in the woods (where the entirety of the film is set), representing an alternate community where gender transcendence is common practice, and even celebrated. According to Lechasseur Dubé, the forest is a space which holds both a sense of security and danger simultaneously, the former as seen in the wondrous ways the protagonist stares at its vegetation, and the latter as presented through the figure of the minotaur (Lechasseur Dubé, interview conducted with author, July 2019). The anthropomorphized bull makes an appearance midway through the short film, which prompts the non-binary character to flee the initial place of discovery and to finally blossom amid people who are similar in terms of queerness. As the filmmaker puts it, the minotaur symbolizes brute masculinity, a threat to other forms of masculinity which navigate a various (and variable) spectrum attached to femininity. In sum, *Quand la nuit tombera* proposes the body as safe space, and the coming together of various bodies as a network of combined safe spaces generating a mobile structure against increasing anti-queer sentiments. The film offers queerness as an empowering and transformative essence in its last shot, which puts into play a tableau of all the players posing. The main character is transformed, their face painted in gold, and their head adorned by a crown reminiscent of Renaissance liturgical artworks. The camera travels backwards to reveal the tableau, and eventually the lighting equipment, breaking the fourth wall. This clever move reveals the constructed nature of filmmaking, as well as that of gender; a social construct which the actors in the studio play with and remix, challenging its imaginary frontier traversed, and flipped, leaving the burden of heteronormativity to lose itself behind the backdrop, deep into the forest.

Conclusion

Our focus on queer films shown at the CFF al-

lowed us to notice two common denominators: the use of a "journaling" approach, and the theme of safe spaces. These ideas seem to work in accordance with each other, as journals or diaries are often a secret safe haven to write down one's thoughts and lived experiences. As these selected films testify, there appears to be a growing need from queer filmmakers to capture queerness in all its variations on screen. While the decision to incorporate films that do not represent queer topics into Visions may be debatable, it nevertheless reflects ongoing debates about the nature of queerness, while also questioning the need for queer filmmakers to convey their lens or animation tablets strictly on LGBTQA+ subjects. While we do not necessarily believe that LGBTQA+ identifying students should feel obliged to delve into such themes, we nonetheless think that with the growth of queer representation in the media, most should not shy away from incorporating characters that resemble them. A queer film screening that includes films not portraying an underrepresented sexual minority may risk losing its core purpose, and in turn, be "unqueered." We must not forget that just as queerness is an unstable term, so is our position in the mediascape. Being always threatened, queerness must be always remade, re-represented, re-created, and re-queered.

Students films both reflect the ongoing training of aspiring filmmakers and due to most students' young age a direct reflection of contemporary youth. This last realization attest to the importance of keeping fresh queer representation alive (animated) as its use and meaning fluctuates from generation to generation.

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