'Better a bad image than no image': interview with Richard Dyer on organizing the UK's first lesbian and gay film season

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Practices in film curation share a rich history with Britain's gay liberation projects. With the 1970s came the proliferation of numerous countercultural collectives mobilizing for lesbian and gay rights. New York's 1969 Stonewall riots had lit the flame of dissent, and its political reverberations were internationally felt.[1] Britain's lesbian and gay activists, emboldened by the work of their North American allies, began to form various revolutionary bodies of their own; the Gay Left Collective (GLC) was a notable product of the unrest. Included among its members – a distinguished cohort featuring Jeffrey Weeks, Derek Cohen, Ron Peck and Simon Watney – was Richard Dyer. A promising doctoral graduate and amateur practitioner in political dissidence, Dyer was known for his deep, critical appreciation for art and culture – for representation – and for the political potential these forums housed. Co-authoring an essay for a GLC bulletin with Cohen in 1980 (the year the Collective dissolved), Dyer wrote that 'while culture cannot, as some cultural workers fondly hope, by itself change the world, as part of a programme of political work it has certain key functions to perform'.[2] It was perhaps this same sentiment that had earlier inspired Dyer to organize the UK's first lesbian and gay film season, entitled 'Images of Homosexuality', which took place at the National Film Theatre (now BFI Southbank) in July 1977. This season's curation, its historical and

1 See Emily K. Hobson, *Lavender and Red: Liberation and Solidarity in the Gay and Lesbian Left* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016); Lucy Robinson, *Gay Men and the Left in Post-War Britain: How the Personal Got Political* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013).

2 Gay Left Collective, *Homosexuality: Power and Politics* (London: Verso, 1980), p. 172.

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academic context, and its political impetus are discussed here in my contextual introduction and in the following interview with Dyer.[3]

An incisive, intimate and lucid writer, Dyer's career as an academic, activist and cultural commentator spans nearly 50 years. Indeed his myriad publications effectively trace the vagaries of Britain's queer political landscape from the late 1970s to the mid 2000s, from its Marxist-inflected appeals to trade unionism, to its Thatcher-induced, proto-neoliberal neutralizations. Dyer's topics are vast and integrative, informed by a multi-pronged appreciation for parallel social movements personified by transnational feminist, black power, anti-war, anti-psychiatry, anarchist and socialist activisms. Originally a member of the Gay Liberation Front (GLF), Dyer's cross-cultural consciousness of other networks of social and political oppression crystallized over the course of the 1970s, leading to his alliance (as the GLF splintered in 1974) with the GLC for its more explicitly socialist alignments.[4] The GLC's multi-faceted objectives are made clear in their introductory statement to *Homosexuality: Power and Politics*: to think structurally through capitalist mechanisms of sexual oppression, and to 'contribute to the making of a socialist current in which sexual politics were central, but which did not ignore wider political relations'.[5] Works by Gramsci, Mao, Marx, Freud and Foucault were seen to philosophically infuse the group's critical bearings, situating their politics firmly within a proto-intersectional frame of subaltern liberation via anti-capitalist critique. The influence of the GLC, along with the threads of these assorted political projects, arguably compose a motif that weaves through all of Dyer's work.

Dyer's academic circumstances are key to understanding the impetus behind his (various) curatorial forays. Receiving his MA from the University of St Andrews in 1968, he was subsequently awarded a PhD grant to study at Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS).[6] It was here that his interest in literature began to be supplanted by a critical fascination with forms of popular (or 'mass') entertainment. Stuart Hall, then acting director of the CCCS and Dyer's doctoral supervisor, can be partly accredited with this conversion.[7] During this period, Dyer was also programming for an alternative cinema, Birmingham's Arts Laboratory (Arts Lab), where he was able to experiment with more active and interventionalist forms of film exhibition. Some screenings, for instance, would be prefaced by political notices: prior to a screening of John Schlesinger's *Sunday Bloody Sunday* (1971) Dyer recalls distributing statements of caution advising attendees not to laugh (as they often would) at the infamous kiss between its two leading men, Murray Head and Peter Finch. Analogous to the way Barthes drew attention to the 'situation' of film viewing in 'Leaving the movie theatre', Dyer advanced this thesis by seizing the moment to intercept ambient homophobia, harnessing the power inscribed within these events to address political issues he considered to be of great importance.[8]

Both the CCCS and the Arts Lab were pivotal to the construction of Dyer's curatorial imaginary. As his own descriptions attest, these public

3 This interview was conducted in January 2024. It has been edited for clarity.

4 Glyn Davis and Jaap Kooijman, *The Richard Dyer Reader* (London: British Film Institute, 2023), p. 6.

5 Gay Left Collective, *Homosexuality*, p. 6.

6 Davis and Kooijman, *The Richard Dyer Reader*, p. 3.

7 Ibid.

8 Roland Barthes, 'Leaving the movie theatre', in Phillip Lopate (ed,), *The Art of the Personal Essay* (New York: Anchor Books,1994), pp. 418–21.

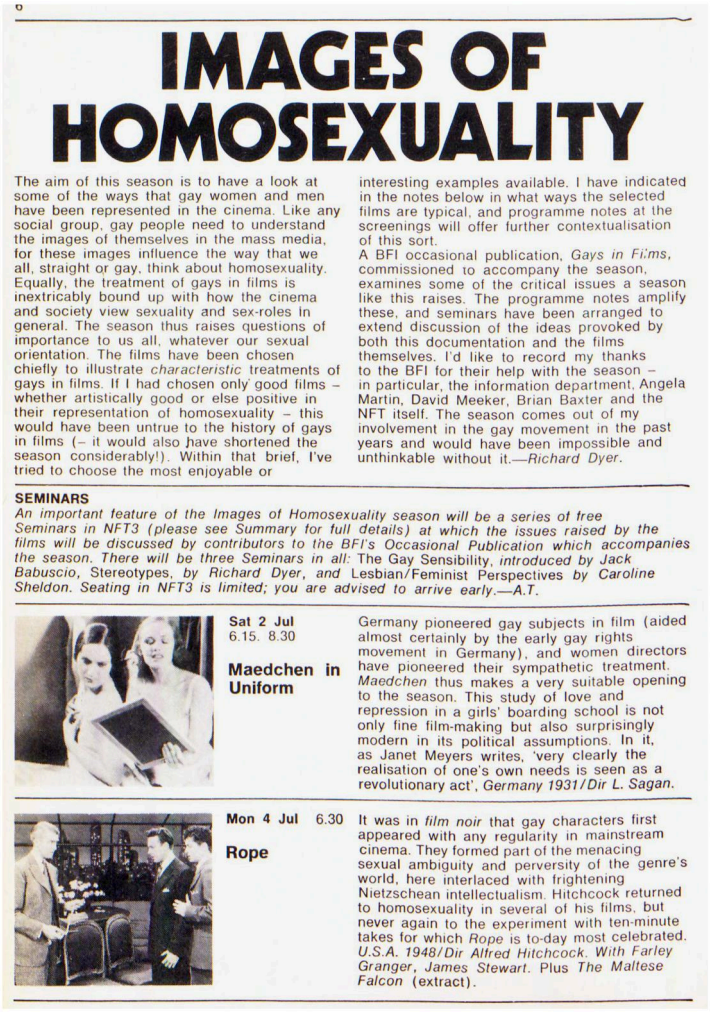
organizations proved to be remarkably amenable to the radical politics of their concomitant countercultural movements. The intellectual influence of the CCCS has been particularly profound; as Graeme Turner notes, the organization became a formidable hub of cultural and media-based theorization, 'exert[ing] an influence far beyond what anyone could have expected'.[9] Hall's formal appointment as director in 1972, a position he held for seven years (11 if including the four preceding years as acting director), brought with it a heightened institutional emphasis on the study of media texts in relation to 'ideology', wherein films and artworks hitherto discarded as hollow objects of the 'mass media' were suddenly thrust into the critical spotlight. They were, moreover, reframed as expressive artefacts of *sub*cultural signification, of particular value to those seeking to investigate the marginal aspects of cultural phenomena through more novel, 'mainstream' outlets. This academic shift was undoubtedly enmeshed in the mechanics of class discrimination: the valorization of literature over films, as David E. James has shown, was bound up in a bourgeois tradition of disciplinary privilege – inaccessibility (through illiteracy, for example) seen as synonymous with academic prestige.[10] It is significant, in this regard, that a key proponent of British cultural studies, Richard Hoggart, a working-class scholar raised, as was Dyer, in Leeds, became the founder of the CCCS. Dyer was entranced by the CCCS's emphasis on textual consumption and cultural democratization, and began to see the potential in curatorial practice as an opportunity for ameliorative, and more accessible, political edification.

Upon completing his doctorate at the CCCS, Dyer accepted his first teaching position at Keele University in 1974, followed in due course by his extended tenure at the University of Warwick from 1979 to 2006.[11] During this time he was involved in various projects with the BFI's education department – which he praised during our discussion for its 'progressive agenda' – attending lectures and advising on programming. It was this connection that enabled him to pitch the idea of a lesbian and gay film season, using his contacts at the BFI to approach film programmer Brian Baxter with the concept: it was warmly received and swiftly approved. Dyer began to assemble the programme, eager to present a corpus that would be internationally diverse in scope, though wary of the institutional and economic limitations that plagued curatorial practices at the time and were no doubt exacerbated in the case of subcultural projects such as this. The result was an engrossing amalgamation of over 30 films that dealt, to varying degrees of nuance and specificity, with themes of lesbian and gay sexuality and subjectivity. With a distinct paucity of 'quality' material to hand, the season relied heavily on oblique and coded representations of sexual deviance. Indeed, it was partly the lack of 'explicit' representation that encouraged Dyer to think more creatively about what it was that determined, specifically in terms of narrative and visuality, the 'gayness' of a film (figures 1– 4 show pages from the programme).

9 Graeme Turner, *British Cultural Studies: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 65.

10 David E. James, 'Introduction: Is there class in this text?', in David E. James and Rick Berg (eds), *The Hidden Foundation: Cinema and the Question of Class* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 1–25.

11 Davis and Koojiman, *The Richard Dyer Reader*, pp. 4–5.



IMAGES OF HOMOSEXUALITY

The aim of this season is to have a look at some of the ways that gay women and men have been represented in the cinema. Like any social group, gay people need to understand the images of themselves in the mass media, for these images influence the way that we all, straight or gay, think about homosexuality. Equally, the treatment of gays in films is inextricably bound up with how the cinema and society view sexuality and sex-roles in general. The season thus raises questions of importance to us all, whatever our sexual orientation. The films have been chosen chiefly to illustrate *characteristic* treatments of gays in films. If I had chosen only good films – whether artistically good or else positive in their representation of homosexuality – this would have been untrue to the history of gays in films (– it would also have shortened the season considerably!). Within that brief, I've tried to choose the most enjoyable or interesting examples available. I have indicated in the notes below in what ways the selected films are typical, and programme notes at the screenings will offer further contextualisation of this sort.

A BFI occasional publication, *Gays in Films*, commissioned to accompany the season, examines some of the critical issues a season like this raises. The programme notes amplify these, and seminars have been arranged to extend discussion of the ideas provoked by both this documentation and the films themselves. I'd like to record my thanks to the BFI for their help with the season – in particular, the information department, Angela Martin, David Meeker, Brian Baxter and the NFT itself. The season comes out of my involvement in the gay movement in the past years and would have been impossible and unthinkable without it.—*Richard Dyer.*

SEMINARS

An important feature of the Images of Homosexuality season will be a series of free Seminars in NFT3 (please see Summary for full details) at which the issues raised by the films will be discussed by contributors to the BFI's Occasional Publication which accompanies the season. There will be three Seminars in all: The Gay Sensibility, *introduced by Jack Babuscio,* Stereotypes, *by Richard Dyer, and* Lesbian/Feminist Perspectives *by Caroline Sheldon. Seating in NFT3 is limited; you are advised to arrive early.—A.T.*

Sat 2 Jul 6.15. 8.30

Maedchen in Uniform

Germany pioneered gay subjects in film (aided almost certainly by the early gay rights movement in Germany), and women directors have pioneered their sympathetic treatment. *Maedchen* thus makes a very suitable opening to the season. This study of love and repression in a girls' boarding school is not only fine film-making but also surprisingly modern in its political assumptions. In it, as Janet Meyers writes, 'very clearly the realisation of one's own needs is seen as a revolutionary act', *Germany 1931/Dir L. Sagan.*

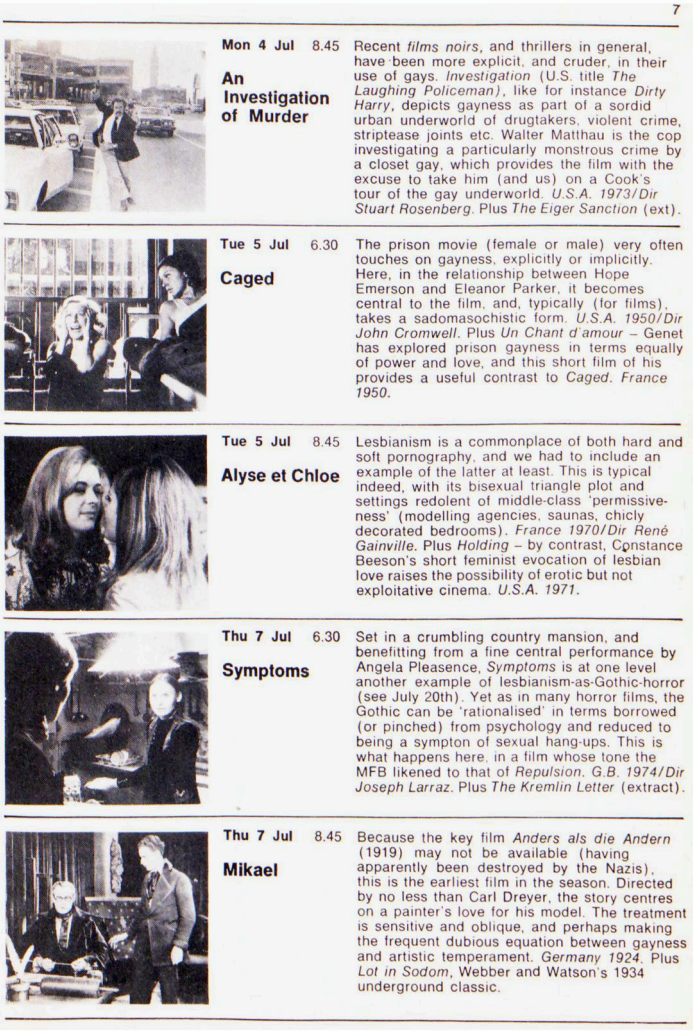
Mon 4 Jul 6.30

Rope

It was in *film noir* that gay characters first appeared with any regularity in mainstream cinema. They formed part of the menacing sexual ambiguity and perversity of the genre's world, here interlaced with frightening Nietzschean intellectualism. Hitchcock returned to homosexuality in several of his films, but never again to the experiment with ten-minute takes for which *Rope* is to-day most celebrated. *U.S.A. 1948/Dir Alfred Hitchcock. With Farley Granger, James Stewart.* Plus *The Maltese Falcon* (extract).

Figs 1–4. Pages from the programme for UK's first lesbian and gay film season, 'Images of Homosexuality', held at National Film Theatre (now BFI Southbank) in July 1977. Images courtesy of the BFI Reuben Library.

Reflecting on the films included, Dyer now displays ambivalence in his personal feelings towards them. Indeed the season featured many notable works that, though now viewed as evocative relics of a bygone sexual epoch, are challenging for their representational politics. Alfred Hitchcock's trailblazing experiment in single-take camerawork, *Rope* (1948), was conspicuous for its representation of the nefarious (if implicit) homosexuality of its two murderous leads (featuring a then-closeted Farley Granger), effectively conflating their sexual nonconformity with criminality. Other installations such as Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* (1972) and Leontine Sagan's cultish *Mädchen in Uniform* (1931) have since faced criticism in relation to the power dynamics they present and the homosexual pathologies they reinforce. Correspondingly, the spectral and schizophrenic themes of *Symptoms* (José Ramón Larraz 1974)



Mon 4 Jul 8.45
An Investigation of Murder
Recent *films noirs*, and thrillers in general, have been more explicit, and cruder, in their use of gays. *Investigation* (U.S. title *The Laughing Policeman*), like for instance *Dirty Harry*, depicts gayness as part of a sordid urban underworld of drugtakers, violent crime, striptease joints etc. Walter Matthau is the cop investigating a particularly monstrous crime by a closet gay, which provides the film with the excuse to take him (and us) on a Cook's tour of the gay underworld. *U.S.A. 1973/Dir Stuart Rosenberg*. Plus *The Eiger Sanction* (ext).

Tue 5 Jul 6.30
Caged
The prison movie (female or male) very often touches on gayness, explicitly or implicitly. Here, in the relationship between Hope Emerson and Eleanor Parker, it becomes central to the film, and, typically (for films), takes a sadomasochistic form. *U.S.A. 1950/Dir John Cromwell*. Plus *Un Chant d'amour* – Genet has explored prison gayness in terms equally of power and love, and this short film of his provides a useful contrast to *Caged*. *France 1950*.

Tue 5 Jul 8.45
Alyse et Chloe
Lesbianism is a commonplace of both hard and soft pornography, and we had to include an example of the latter at least. This is typical indeed, with its bisexual triangle plot and settings redolent of middle-class 'permissiveness' (modelling agencies, saunas, chicly decorated bedrooms). *France 1970/Dir René Gainville*. Plus *Holding* – by contrast, Constance Beeson's short feminist evocation of lesbian love raises the possibility of erotic but not exploitative cinema. *U.S.A. 1971*.

Thu 7 Jul 6.30
Symptoms
Set in a crumbling country mansion, and benefitting from a fine central performance by Angela Pleasence, *Symptoms* is at one level another example of lesbianism-as-Gothic-horror (see July 20th). Yet as in many horror films, the Gothic can be 'rationalised' in terms borrowed (or pinched) from psychology and reduced to being a sympton of sexual hang-ups. This is what happens here, in a film whose tone the MFB likened to that of *Repulsion*. *G.B. 1974/Dir Joseph Larraz*. Plus *The Kremlin Letter* (extract).

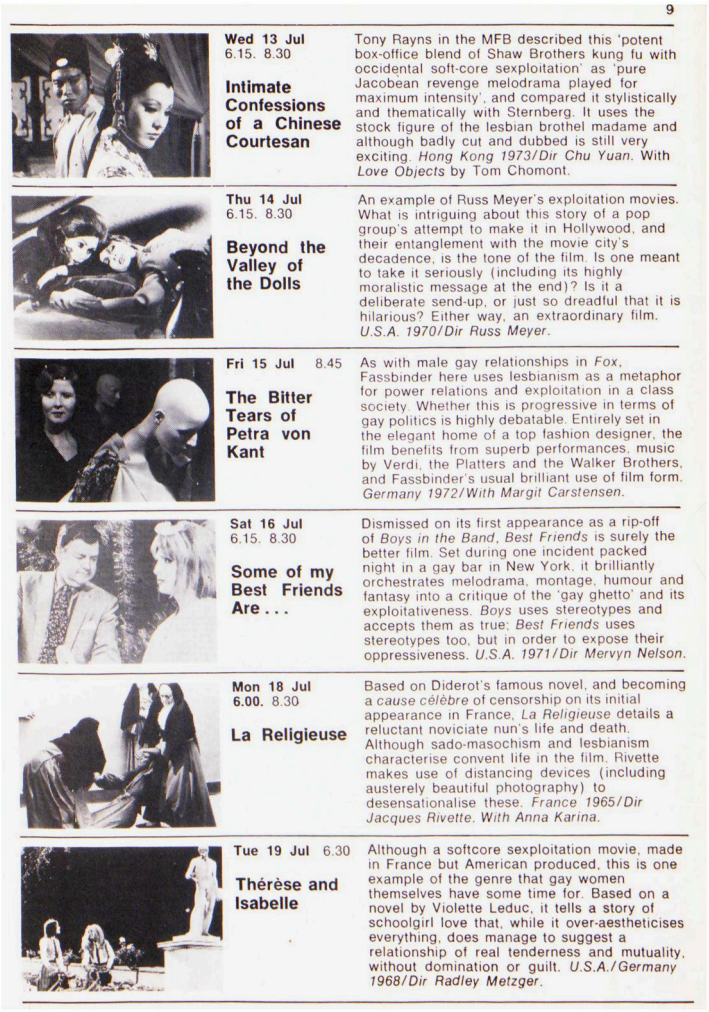
Thu 7 Jul 8.45
Mikael
Because the key film *Anders als die Andern* (1919) may not be available (having apparently been destroyed by the Nazis), this is the earliest film in the season. Directed by no less than Carl Dreyer, the story centres on a painter's love for his model. The treatment is sensitive and oblique, and perhaps making the frequent dubious equation between gayness and artistic temperament. *Germany 1924*. Plus *Lot in Sodom*, Webber and Watson's 1934 underground classic.

Fig. 2

ultimately coalesce around its glassy-eyed lesbian lead (a brilliant Angela Pleasence). Conceptually and thematically akin to Roman Polanski's *Repulsion* (1965), the weight of womanhood (or here, lesbianhood) is articulated through the frenzied language of horror, whereby butchery, it tacitly attests, is the inevitable epilogue to one's irrepressible perversions. *Mädchen in Uniform*, it transpires, was unable to be shown on the day, possibly a consequence of the intervention of British censors perturbed by its sapphic whispers, though the precise details remain hazy.

In conjunction with the screenings, the BFI published a short booklet, edited by Dyer, entitled *Gays and Film*,[12] which featured essays by critic Jack Babuscio and filmmaker Caroline Sheldon as well as an analysis of homosexual stereotypes by Dyer. These contributions directly

12 Richard Dyer, *Gays and Film* (London: British Film Institute, 1977). See also Glyn Davis, 'Filmographies as archives: on Richard Dyer's list-making in gays and film', *Frames Cinema Journal*, no. 19 (2022), pp. 308–14.



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Wed 13 Jul 6.15. 8.30

Intimate Confessions of a Chinese Courtesan

Tony Rayns in the MFB described this 'potent box-office blend of Shaw Brothers kung fu with occidental soft-core sexploitation' as 'pure Jacobean revenge melodrama played for maximum intensity', and compared it stylistically and thematically with Sternberg. It uses the stock figure of the lesbian brothel madame and although badly cut and dubbed is still very exciting. *Hong Kong 1973/Dir Chu Yuan.* With *Love Objects* by Tom Chomont.

Thu 14 Jul 6.15. 8.30

Beyond the Valley of the Dolls

An example of Russ Meyer's exploitation movies. What is intriguing about this story of a pop group's attempt to make it in Hollywood, and their entanglement with the movie city's decadence, is the tone of the film. Is one meant to take it seriously (including its highly moralistic message at the end)? Is it a deliberate send-up, or just so dreadful that it is hilarious? Either way, an extraordinary film. *U.S.A. 1970/Dir Russ Meyer.*

Fri 15 Jul 8.45

The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant

As with male gay relationships in *Fox*, Fassbinder here uses lesbianism as a metaphor for power relations and exploitation in a class society. Whether this is progressive in terms of gay politics is highly debatable. Entirely set in the elegant home of a top fashion designer, the film benefits from superb performances, music by Verdi, the Platters and the Walker Brothers, and Fassbinder's usual brilliant use of film form. *Germany 1972/With Margit Carstensen.*

Sat 16 Jul 6.15. 8.30

Some of my Best Friends Are . . .

Dismissed on its first appearance as a rip-off of *Boys in the Band*, *Best Friends* is surely the better film. Set during one incident packed night in a gay bar in New York, it brilliantly orchestrates melodrama, montage, humour and fantasy into a critique of the 'gay ghetto' and its exploitativeness. *Boys* uses stereotypes and accepts them as true; *Best Friends* uses stereotypes too, but in order to expose their oppressiveness. *U.S.A. 1971/Dir Mervyn Nelson.*

Mon 18 Jul **6.00.** 8.30

La Religieuse

Based on Diderot's famous novel, and becoming a *cause célèbre* of censorship on its initial appearance in France, *La Religieuse* details a reluctant noviciate nun's life and death. Although sado-masochism and lesbianism characterise convent life in the film, Rivette makes use of distancing devices (including austerely beautiful photography) to desensationalise these. *France 1965/Dir Jacques Rivette. With Anna Karina.*

Tue 19 Jul 6.30

Thérèse and Isabelle

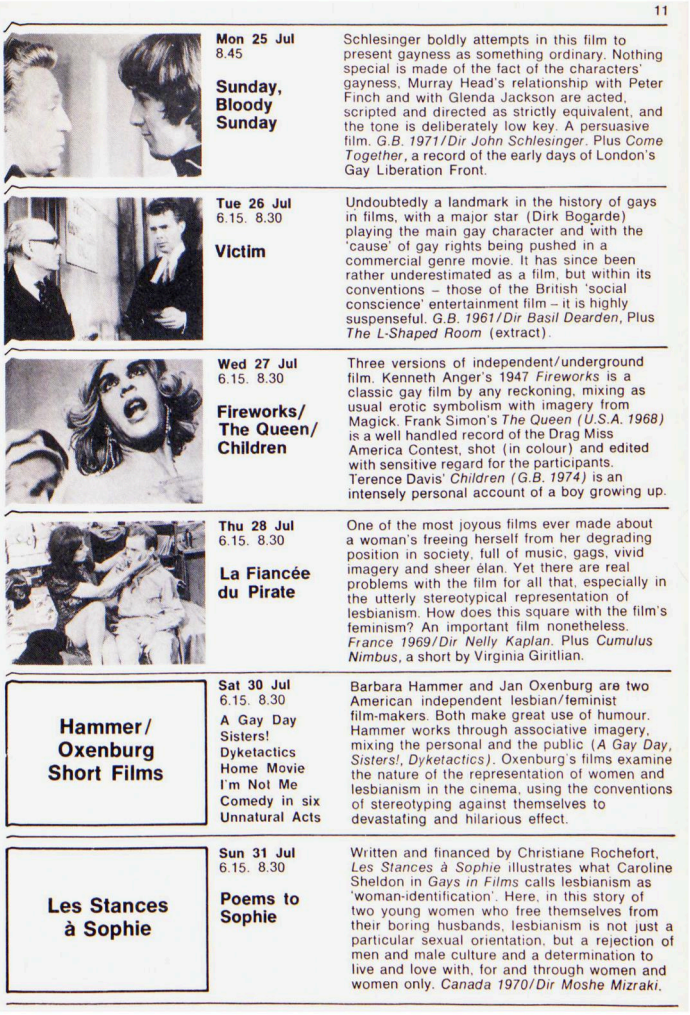
Although a softcore sexploitation movie, made in France but American produced, this is one example of the genre that gay women themselves have some time for. Based on a novel by Violette Leduc, it tells a story of schoolgirl love that, while it over-aestheticises everything, does manage to suggest a relationship of real tenderness and mutuality, without domination or guilt. *U.S.A./Germany 1968/Dir Radley Metzger.*

Fig. 3.

corresponded with the extracurricular events that featured on the 'Images of Homosexuality' agenda, with Babuscio presenting on camp, Sheldon exploring lesbian and feminist cinemas, and Dyer addressing gay stereotypes. Dyer commended BFI programmer Angela Martin for this career-altering opportunity. The booklet's inclusion of a 14-page lesbian and gay filmography, covering everything from arthouse insinuation to the pornographically patent, secured its status as a landmark text for gay cinephilia. Notably the text's release pre-dated Vito Russo's seminal work *The Celluloid Closet*,[13] to which Dyer alludes during our interview. Russo's important research served as a substantial, if essentially extrinsic, expansion of the compilatory work Dyer was undertaking (and developed further in *Now You See It*),[14] helping to destabilize the

13 Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981).

14 Richard Dyer, *Now You See It: Studies on Lesbian and Gay Film* (London: Routledge, 1990).



Mon 25 Jul
8.45

Sunday, Bloody Sunday

Schlesinger boldly attempts in this film to present gayness as something ordinary. Nothing special is made of the fact of the characters' gayness, Murray Head's relationship with Peter Finch and with Glenda Jackson are acted, scripted and directed as strictly equivalent, and the tone is deliberately low key. A persuasive film. *G.B. 1971/Dir John Schlesinger*. Plus *Come Together*, a record of the early days of London's Gay Liberation Front.

Tue 26 Jul
6.15. 8.30

Victim

Undoubtedly a landmark in the history of gays in films, with a major star (Dirk Bogarde) playing the main gay character and with the 'cause' of gay rights being pushed in a commercial genre movie. It has since been rather underestimated as a film, but within its conventions – those of the British 'social conscience' entertainment film – it is highly suspenseful. *G.B. 1961/Dir Basil Dearden*, Plus *The L-Shaped Room* (extract).

Wed 27 Jul
6.15. 8.30

Fireworks/ The Queen/ Children

Three versions of independent/underground film. Kenneth Anger's 1947 *Fireworks* is a classic gay film by any reckoning, mixing as usual erotic symbolism with imagery from Magick. Frank Simon's *The Queen (U.S.A. 1968)* is a well handled record of the Drag Miss America Contest, shot (in colour) and edited with sensitive regard for the participants. Terence Davis' *Children (G.B. 1974)* is an intensely personal account of a boy growing up.

Thu 28 Jul
6.15. 8.30

La Fiancée du Pirate

One of the most joyous films ever made about a woman's freeing herself from her degrading position in society, full of music, gags, vivid imagery and sheer élan. Yet there are real problems with the film for all that, especially in the utterly stereotypical representation of lesbianism. How does this square with the film's feminism? An important film nonetheless. *France 1969/Dir Nelly Kaplan*. Plus *Cumulus Nimbus*, a short by Virginia Giritlian.

Hammer/ Oxenburg Short Films

Sat 30 Jul
6.15. 8.30

A Gay Day
Sisters!
Dyketactics
Home Movie
I'm Not Me
Comedy in six Unnatural Acts

Barbara Hammer and Jan Oxenburg are two American independent lesbian/feminist film-makers. Both make great use of humour. Hammer works through associative imagery, mixing the personal and the public (*A Gay Day, Sisters!, Dyketactics*). Oxenburg's films examine the nature of the representation of women and lesbianism in the cinema, using the conventions of stereotyping against themselves to devastating and hilarious effect.

Les Stances à Sophie

Sun 31 Jul
6.15. 8.30

Poems to Sophie

Written and financed by Christiane Rochefort, *Les Stances à Sophie* illustrates what Caroline Sheldon in *Gays in Films* calls lesbianism as 'woman-identification'. Here, in this story of two young women who free themselves from their boring husbands, lesbianism is not just a particular sexual orientation, but a rejection of men and male culture and a determination to live and love with, for and through women and women only. *Canada 1970/Dir Moshe Mizraki*.

Fig. 4.

hetero- and gender-normative tenets that had suffused our filmic imaginary for so long.

The conflict expressed in Dyer's reflections on the quality of the films, many of which he admits to personally disliking (deploying a repeated, psychoanalytically sourced phrase, 'bad objects') but which he nevertheless felt compelled to exhibit on a grand scale, is germane to understanding the ways in which lesbian and gay cinema became politically operationalized at this time. Indeed the cultural and ideological antecedents of British lesbian and gay film curation of the 1970s can be traced to the Underground movements of the USA, with iconoclasts such as Jack Smith, Gregory Markopoulos, Maya Deren, Storm de Hirsch, Marie Menken, Barbara Hammer, Andy Warhol and Kenneth Anger (as well as his lesser-known but equally beguiling

counterpart Curtis Harrington) instigating politically anarchic episodes through film exhibition as far back as the early 1940s.[15] Raids and censorship trials accompanied many preliminary screenings on this scattered, subterranean circuit; in hindsight they foreshadowed a disturbance of the boundaries between the irreverent fare of North American counterculture and the 'Hollywoodian qualities of finish and clarity'.[16] Dyer himself writes eloquently on the way the incendiary vogues of countercultural oppositionality had originally been stoked by early homophile movements, noting how homosexuality (as a social practice) was 'perceived at various times as a form of instinctual rejection of the narrowness and repressiveness of mainstream US life in general'.[17] As a conduit of heteronormative resistance, Underground cultures proved to be groundbreaking, rearticulating (homo)sexual subjectivity in ways that fundamentally disturbed dominant ideas of sexual selfhood and normative identity.

In Britain, beatnik filmmakers of the 1960s, including Stephen Dwoskin, Jeff Keen, Simon Hartog, Sandra Lahire, Vera Neubauer, Annabel Nicolson and others from the London Filmmakers' Co-op (LFMC), helped to pave the way for a new generation of queer-inflected Underground talent. Contiguous to the development of the LFMC in Britain was an explosion in agit-prop documentary film collectives, distinct for their transient but transgressive modes of exhibition.[18] Duncan Reekie notes how students at Hornsey College of Art in North London displayed particular invention as they protested the elitism of their own institution: 'films would be shown backwards, sideways or freeze-framed at decisive moments. One fine evening a film was projected out onto trees, houses, and inflatable structures.'[19] Though largely dominated by work from North America, Britain's underground culture was rapidly proliferating, with the BFI's own Experimental Film Fund presenting a key source of financial support for these artistically clandestine networks.[20] The Arts Lab itself began to cultivate a rich and experimental curatorial philosophy, marking an intellectual shift towards an almost fetishistic emphasis on the 'material' of film in relation to the filmmaker – the merging of art and subjectivity, or 'one's subjectivity as subject-matter'.[21] This shift gestured to the poststructuralist philosophies that were beginning to take hold in Britain's cultural studies sector; Hall found himself positioned at the centre of this Althusser-led dialectic, deftly noting how 'The countercultures […] operated within cultural fields marked by intense generational and political differences, and a whole range of symbolisms were mobilised to generate new subjectivities'.[22] The vibrancy of Birmingham's curatorial engagements would suggest that the influences weighing on 'Images of Homosexuality' were not exclusively attributable to London's burgeoning countercultural scene.

On this note, it would be remiss to overlook the season's significance in relation to the development of the (queer) film festival circuit and more geographically expansive engagements in queer curation that were

15 See, for example, Juan A. Suárez, *Bike Boys, Drag Queens and Superstars* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1996); Dyer, *Now You See It*, pp. 109–68.

16 Ibid., p. 109.

17 Ibid., p. 110.

18 Duncan Reekie, 'Not art: an action history of British underground cinema' (PhD thesis: University of Plymouth, 2003).

19 Ibid., p. 212.

20 The National Film Theatre also hosted the International Festival of Independent Avant-Garde Film in 1973, which featured experimental works from Britain, Europe and America, representing something of a curatorial homage to these bygone countercultural trends.

21 Dyer, *Now You See It*, p. 115.

22 Stuart Hall, 'Culture resistance and struggle', in Lawrence Grossberg and Jennifer Daryl Slack (eds), *Cultural Studies 1983* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 193.

occurring in Britain. Indeed this interview with Dyer arose from my own research into the history and politics of 'BFI Flare: London LGBTQIA+ Film Festival' – Dyer's season, as the evidence suggests, is intimately interconnected with the establishment of 'Gay's Own Pictures' (now 'BFI Flare') in 1986. 'Gay's Own Pictures' was jointly organized by Peter Packer, director-programmer at Newcastle's Tyneside Cinema, and Mark Finch, a film programmer and ex-student of Dyer's.[23] Where the Tyneside's day-to-day programming modelled a dynamic, experimental, and at times audacious set of curatorial criteria, in large part due to Packer's obstreperous attitude to contemporary curatorial mores, it was the Tyneside Independent Film Festival that was arguably most impactful in relation to Dyer's season (and to 'BFI Flare'). The festival began in 1969 and was instigated by the Tyneside's director Nina Hibbin; Sheila Whittaker, her successor, was the architect of its popularization, however, taking its programming to more overtly political and polemical places, exploring themes of 'black power, sex and violence, drugs and censorship'.[24] Finch, a regular at the Tyneside festival and programmer with the Piccadilly Arts Festival (PAF), took note of its effects. A dynamic figure who later programmed for San Francisco's 'Frameline', Finch was allegedly inspired by the Tyneside film festival as well as 'Images of Homosexuality' and, unsated by the PAF's non-queer focus, proposed to the BFI, with the assistance of Packer, a season (following Dyer's) of lesbian and gay cinema. To the proposal's advantage, Finch had been working in the BFI's exhibition and distribution division and had existing industry connections. It was, in part, his indefatigable determination that led to the establishment of 'BFI Flare', and as his obituaries emphasize, his extraordinary work that greatly helped to amplify the presence of lesbian and gay people in the mass media.[25] The evidence indicating a causal link between Dyer's season and the establishment of 'BFI Flare' is substantial.[26]

In view of these regional initiatives in radical film programming, we cannot disregard the significance of the BFI as host of this event. An important takeaway from Dyer's recollections was that the bureaucracy of the organization provided something of a protective scaffold for the exhibition of queer work, whereby institutional authority afforded them a considerable degree of political immunity. However, the season did not leave the BFI completely unscathed in relation to another formidable institution, British Parliament, and shortly after 'Images of Homosexuality' opened on 2 July 1977, the question of its content was raised in the House of Lords. One peer expressed concern that 'this is objectionable to the majority of our people', before expanding on his qualms:

> first, that the public look to Ministers to uphold the decencies of life, whereas the promotion of these perverted activities is quite the reverse; secondly, that, as the whole community are forced to finance this activity, we find it doubly objectionable, adding insult to injury,

23 Notably, both had articles published in *Screen*. See Peter Packer, '… At Tyneside Cinema', *Screen*, vol. 25, no. 4/5 (1984), pp. 142–47; Mark Finch, 'Sex and address in "Dynasty"', *Screen*, vol. 27, no. 6 (1986), pp. 24–43.

24 Michael Chaplin, *Come and See: The Beguiling Story of the Tyneside Cinema* (Newcastle: New Writing North, 2011), p. 104.

25 Judith Williamson, 'Talent for opening media minds – Mark Finch: Obituary', *The Guardian*, 26 January 1995, <https://theguardian.newspapers.com/article/the-guardian-mark-finch-obit-by-judith-w/12083192/> accessed 11 July 2024.

26 See Frederik Dhaenens, 'Moderately queer programming at an established LGBTQ film festival: a case study of BFI Flare: London LGBT Film Festival', *Journal of Homosexuality*, vol. 69, no. 5 (2022), pp. 836–56; Leanne Dawson and Skadi Loist, 'Queer/ing film festivals: history, theory, impact', *Studies in European Cinema*, no. 1 (2018), pp. 1–24; Charles Gant, '"Questions were asked in parliament": the story behind LGBT film festival BFI Flare', *ScreenDaily*, 15 March 2016, <https://www.screendaily.com/features/questions-were-asked-in-parliament-the-story-behind-lgbt-film-festival-bfi-flare/5101535.article?adredir=1> accessed 11 July 2024.

when we have to pay for it. Would he please ask the Institute whether it would return to its normal high standards and abjure activities of this kind?[27]

This excerpt does well to underscore not only the trailblazing work of Dyer but also of the BFI in platforming lesbian and gay issues at this emergent stage in their politico-cultural history. To provoke government ministers to parlay the moral conundrums of lesbian and gay representation was to be institutionally operative in bringing the topic into the cultural spotlight, regardless of the pejorative tenor of their remarks. The season should therefore be recognized as a pivotal moment in Britain's history of 'queer' (a tentative designation here given that the term would not have been in circulation at the time) institutional progressivism.

The political impetus of this momentous lesbian and gay film season, as Dyer's account indicates, was to create a platform for queer cinematic representation and to be active in setting aside concerns for what would then be deemed 'quality' material: 'better a bad image than no image', as Dyer states during our discussion. Irrespective of the 'quality' of the representation in question, 'Images of Homosexuality' gestures to the activism that accompanied – and was perhaps built into – such events. Indeed, the dearth of 'quality' queer representation, as Dyer adjudged, evidently did not deter him and others from using these spaces as a means to explore, and maybe attempt to cement, a canonical notion of a lesbian and gay cinema: a traceable lineage of queer visual culture. A contemporary review of the season by playwright Paul Hallam and filmmaker Ron Peck (director of *Nighthawks* [1978], a production, incidentally, for which Dyer had been approached for the lead role)[28] gestures to how its inherently transgressive themes could be read as a utopian rearticulation of sexual normalcy. As they state: 'In varying degrees, a consenus [*sic*] notion of what is usually understood by "normality" is present, even if present-through-being-absent; in all of the films, sometimes re-enforced, sometimes questioned, and sometimes rejected for a new notion of normality'.[29]

Indeed one might contend that curatorial moments such as this season were organized to address what audiences and academics might then have understood as the *problems with* queer representation, problems that are arguably endemic to post-war British 'queer' cinema.[30] This reading corresponds with the sentimentalism that Dyer subsequentially conveyed when reflecting on the films as they stand today. As queer representation in the media and popular culture has grown exponentially (with the early 1990s becoming a pivotal moment for queer film exhibition and curation),[31] there is now an abundance of works that function, cumulatively, to offset the nefariousness, pathology, monstrosity, tragedy and fatality that plagued themes and characters of British post-war queer cinema.[32] A deep dissatisfaction with the inadequacies that besieged representations of queer people arguably

27 'British Film Institute: Grant Aid', *UK Parliament – Hansard*, vol. 385, 7 July 1997, <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Lords/1977-07-07/debates/ebb133bf-b956-44f7-bf02-9a7de860a206/BritishFilmInstituteGrantAid> accessed 11 July 2024.

28 Davis and Koojiman, *The Richard Dyer Reader*, p. 6.

29 Paul Hallam and Ron Peck, 'Images of Homosexuality: notes on the National Film Theatre season of gay films, July 1977', *Gay Left*, no. 5 (1977), p. 20.

30 Dyer, *Now You See It*.

31 B. Ruby Rich, 'New queer cinema', *Sight and Sound*, vol. 2, no. 5 (1992), pp. 30–35.

32 See Russo, *The Celluloid Closet*; Dyer, *Now You See It*.

represents the fulcrum of Dyer's curatorial initiative: it is a sentiment that still resonates today.

Markedly, Dyer's recollections in our interview were peppered with outbreaks of laughter. A token of his avuncular spirit and openness to self-reflection, no doubt; but these seemed also to mark a melancholic feeling of lost fervour. It was as though the idea of intervening in this way today, by harnessing the revolutionary messages inscribed within these images, might now feel futile – or worse, quaint. Politically, the functionality of queer programming has undoubtedly shifted. A corollary of the muddled status of queer cinema in the neoliberal era, perhaps; Stuart James Richards's work has underscored the threat that neoliberal economies of individualism and corporate deregulation pose to the 'socially progressive' stance of the modern queer film festival circuit.[33] More pertinent, however, is what this reveals in relation to the circumstantial and thus ever-adaptable agents and apparatuses of queer activism. Evanescent as any one instance of film (or other) curation may be, queer people are indebted to the cultural and curatorial dimensions of early political work that is epitomized by 'Images of Homosexuality'. These images, when compiled and positioned in active juxtaposition, in fresh political dialogue, became a momentary beacon of utopian possibility: a chance to imagine other ways of living. The cultural and political significance of Richard Dyer's curatorial work, however ephemeral such chances may have been, should not be forgotten.

33 Stuart James Richards, *The Queer Film Festival: Popcorn and Politics* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 12.

Joss Morfitt (JM): 'Images of Homosexuality', the lesbian and gay film season you curated for the BFI in July 1977, was supposedly the first in the UK dedicated to this kind of representation. Could you describe the circumstances of the season's organization?

Richard Dyer (RD): I was involved with Gay Liberation in Birmingham, and I was also studying at the Cultural Studies Centre, so the issue of representation in general terms was absolutely part of what I was studying. Well, that was part of what we were thinking about. And there had been a lot of work on images of women, and images of black people, there had been also a little bit on native Americans, and so on. So partly it seemed logical to me to think 'images of lesbians and gay men', which of course is the term I would have used at the time. I then ended up talking to Angela Martin and Brian Baxter at the BFI about a lesbian and gay season, who thought it was a really good idea. They were supportive right from the word go.

As part of Gay Liberation in Birmingham there was also an alternative cinema, the Arts Lab, and we used to put on films there and have a discussion about how happy we were with the representation. *The Boys in the Band* [William Friedkin, 1970], *The Killing of Sister George* [Robert Aldrich, 1968] those kinds of films, and other less well-known films, *Loving Couples* [Jack Smight, 1980], *The Sergeant* [John Flynn,

1968], that sort of thing. I had already been doing all of that, which was very much an overlap of my work in cultural studies and being in Gay Liberation. But not only this, in Birmingham we used to leaflet gay films. When *Sunday Bloody Sunday* [John Schlesinger, 1971] was shown, audience members used to laugh or say 'ooh!' at the early kiss. We leafletted it saying, 'if you laugh you are part of the problem of the oppression of gay people' [laughs]. So, there was that sense of finding ways of intervening about representation. In terms of community, there was a sense of coming together and discussing, and it did have quite a warm feeling. It was a politics of criticism rather than a politics of celebration.

JM: How did you go about curating 'Images of Homosexuality'?

RD: Well, it was about getting a representative cross-section of what we knew about in terms of lesbian and gay representation, because even Vito Russo's book [*The Celluloid Closet*] hadn't come out by then, and in terms of Hollywood, Vito knew more than anyone. But I was friendly with the film critic of *Gay News*, Jack Babuscio, and he'd done all these columns as well, so I had something to draw on. In fact Jack and I had at one point thought we would write a book, a sort of history of lesbian and gay film, but we never did that in the end. Basically, it was showing a selection of what we knew about, tempered by, obviously, what we could get, and also I was very concerned that I wanted it to be half lesbian and half gay. At the time it was very much seen in those terms. I don't think I even thought about trans [cinema], even though trans people did come to Gay Liberation, but it was always sort of an alliance, it always felt like their agenda was different. We wanted the right to love people of the same sex, they wanted, variously, to dress as, become or be accepted as being people of the opposite sex. It would be hard indeed to think there was such a thing as 'trans films' at the time. But nonetheless it wasn't like I wasn't open to all of that, it's just that at the time it felt like the point was to focus on homosexuality and same-sex desire.

At the time, it was more difficult to build up the lesbian programme because there was less available, apart from pornography. There was lots of lesbianism in straight pornography, but we obviously weren't particularly keen to show that, though we did show one film, *Alyse et Chloé* [René Gainville, 1970], which was more or less soft porn but had nonetheless been shown in cinemas so it wasn't a problem. So a wide range of things, from commercial hits like *The Killing of Sister George*, right through to films like Jean Genet's *Un chant d'amour* [1950] and *Different from the Others* [Richard Oswald, 1919].[34] We did show one or two underground films. It was the first time Barbara Hammer was shown in Britain, I think. We also had some problems with films that didn't have a censorship certificate, and although the BFI was a club which did protect what it could show, nonetheless there were still problems. I think we had one film seized at customs, that sort of thing. So, there was still that sense of it being risky or whatever. One thing we

34 On consolidation of the season's brochure, I noticed that *Sister George* did not feature. Following up, Dyer suggested that either he misremembered, and the film had never been part of the programme, or it was cancelled for unspecified reasons – indeed, at the time this may have been to Dyer's preference, labelling it 'one of the worst representations ever'.

didn't manage to show was – was it *Girls in Uniform*? Though I can't think why we wouldn't have been able to show that.

JM: Yes, because it's relatively tame, isn't it?

RD: It is relatively tame, and it may just have been there wasn't a good enough print, though, you know, those things would come into consideration. But I'm almost certain it was *Girls in Uniform* because Ben Brewster, who was a leading figure in film studies, an editor for *Screen* magazine and then working at the University of Canterbury, came from the States to see it and he was disappointed. He'd come all this way to see what was then a rare film, and instead we showed *Different from the Others*, but that was a bit of a coup. We didn't even know about that until we started programming, so that was a positive thing. And we showed a bit of *Pandora's Box* [Georg Wilhelm Pabst, 1929], and he said 'well, you know, we've all seen *Pandora's Box*', which was fair enough. But I don't know the reason why we couldn't show *Girls in Uniform*, maybe it was just one of those technical things. The title sounds pornographic, and that is why it is that title, because Carl Froelich thought it sounded naughty.[35] So maybe the British censors hadn't passed it, or it didn't get through in time.

JM: The season was something of a commercial hit, and even had parliamentary repercussions. How was it received? Did you view it as a success?

RD: There were questions raised in the House of Lords about public money being spent on this sort of promotional event. I'm not sure they used the word 'promotional' because this was pre-Clause 28, but nonetheless public money should not be spent on this sort of thing. There was still great disapproval of homosexuality. I always thought it was ironic because 90% of the films we showed we thought were awful, oppressive films, but we were studying them. Basically, these were not 'positive images', which was so much what we were then calling for: a pair of murderers, a cruel stereotypically butch lesbian who ends up alone and miserable and so on, almost all lesbians and gay men were presented as nasty or unhappy. So where some films have now been re-embraced, at the time they were just awful. And they were right that it was a Gay Liberation project, and so were right to have concerns about public money.

JM: Do you think the season was organized in part to reframe preconceived ideas of lesbian and gay representation? Was there, for instance, a desire to draw attention to the problems with representation?

RD: Oh absolutely, that was the point, yes. I certainly don't think of it as a festival because the overarching impulse of a festival is celebratory, and [this] certainly wasn't that. It wasn't even a 'look at all these wonderful films that lesbians and gay have made in the past', partly because we didn't know about them, we didn't know about Dorothy

35 Froelich, as Dyer notes in *Now You See It*, was a well-established (and somewhat domineering) director who supervised *Mädchen*'s production (pp. 42–62). It is alleged that Froelich rejected the source material's original title, *Gestern und Heute* (Yesterday and Today), defending the alteration with the remark: 'We want to get back the money we're investing, we'll call it *Girls in Uniform* – then they'll think, there'll be girls in uniform playing about and showing their legs' (p. 44).

Arzner or whoever. And we would never have shown Arzner anyway because they're not explicitly lesbian or gay. I remember going to see *Rope*, and at the time a whole group of Hitchcock films, including *Rear Window* [1954] and *Vertigo* [1963] as well as *Rope* had not been shown in the UK for years because of some rights dispute, and hearing someone saying on the way out 'well what did that have to do with homosexuality?', because of course, there's nothing explicit in it. Though now looking at it you think, how could you not think it had something to do with that?

There was also the book on Ron Peck's *Nighthawks* by Glyn Davis and there was a quotation about Ron saying how important the season was to him. It was interesting because Ron had written a review of the season for the *Gay Left*, and they said they had found the season 'inspirational', whereas I think I probably thought, 'oh these awful, oppressive films', even though some, like *Rope*, are very good films of course. Perhaps I just underestimated the hunger for there to be images at all. Whereas some thought, with films like *Sister George* – and I keep coming back to that as I've always thought of it as one of the absolute bad objects of all time – better a bad image than no image. At least it meant we existed.

And subsequently I've personally come to appreciate these films. They are more complex, more daring than I thought they were at the time. I've also seen how later generations of lesbians and gay men have embraced them, appropriated them, and put them in historical context.

JM: What was the thinking behind staging it at the National Film Theatre?

RD: I think one of the reasons I've done a lot of things was because I was always very naive. I think I thought, it's the 'National Film Theatre' [laughs], why not? I just thought this is an important thing, and they have the resources. We also put on three discussion events, one was on camp, which Jack Babuscio led, one was on lesbian cinema, which was run by Caroline Sheldon, and then the third one must have been about stereotyping. The three seminars were based on the three main chapters of the booklet *Gays and Film* [1977], and they were held at the NFT. I also saw it as part of the education department at the BFI, which was incredible at the time. It did fantastic activities, very much with a progressive agenda. *The Daily Mail* would hate it [laughs]. I really just saw it as an extension of what the BFI were doing anyway. It wasn't a Gay Liberation space, it was a general space, but nor was it a sex space. It was a community space.

JM: Tyneside film festival in Newcastle, overseen by Peter Packer in the 1980s, supposedly also influenced the season and played a part in his and Mark Finch's decision to launch 'Gay's Own Pictures' in 1986. What was the connection there?

RD: I remember going to the Tyneside festival a couple of times with Mark, but I don't know if Mark had any formal engagement with Tyneside. I only ever met Peter through going there. I gave a talk there with Jackie Stacey and I seem to remember Barbara Hammer was at one of the festivals, so that must have been the first time Barbara herself was at a British, possibly any European, film festival. Mark, of course, I knew very well. He was the most extraordinary person. Almost all the obituaries of him use the word brilliant, and Judith Williamson's said something like 'he almost seemed to glow': he was almost brilliant in a literal sense. He had everything. He programmed a series of lesbian and gay films on Channel 4 television, and I suspect that's a first. I've never heard of another lesbian and gay film season on TV anywhere in the world that early. And I think the BFI commissioned him to do a publication about coverage of lesbians and gays on television, so he was involved in all those things as well as programming. And then he started 'Gay's Own Pictures' [now 'BFI Flare'].

JM: It occurs to me that there was an element of reclamation underpinning these screenings, which brings us to the question of the season's political impetus. Could you discuss the political motivations of the season? What did it mean for lesbian and gay culture at the time?

RD: Even the act of putting it on at all was political. I suppose it was already the germ of reclamation, though we were not yet quite using that term. But you're right, the logical conclusion is 'let's make these our own'. I suppose I think that representation is a key aspect of how people are treated. So, if gay people were being represented as being sick or dangerous or horrible or whatever, that was something to be fought against. The representation was to be fought against because the representation had consequences.

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