Queer Film Settings as Sites of Resistance

Serdar Küçük

The directors of queer films love to imagine alternative spaces, especially abandoned, natural, or fantastical environments, where queer performances and experiences, unbound from the codes and conducts of an oppressive civilization, could be realized and maintained.[1] Both in earlier examples of queer cinema such as *Teorema* (dir. Pier Paolo Pasolini, Italy, 1968) and *I Love You, I Don't* (*Je t'aime, moi non plus*, dir. Serge Gainsbourg, France, 1975), and in later films such as *The Living End* (dir. Gregg Araki, US, 1992), *Desert Hearts* (dir. Donna Deitch, US, 1985), and *Brokeback Mountain* (dir. Ang Lee, US, 2005), subjugated or frustrated queer protagonists, sometimes on the verge of death from AIDS-related illnesses, often find shelter in places outside a heteronormative culture. In this sense, they are reminiscent of the Romantic heroes of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century art and literature such as Lord Byron's moody outcast Childe Harold in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812–18), or Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1818).

Marilyn Butler notes that "the 'Romantic' personality acts out in life his neurotic gloom; he is frustrated and alienated from

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society; in his art he proposes an alternative world as a surrogate."[2] In a similar fashion, a certain strain of queer cinema, which either utilizes a queer version of the journey-to-the-wilderness theme or simply contains romantic or escapist elements within its narrative, often juxtaposes unwelcoming urban settings with natural landscapes, barren fields, deserted highways, disposal sites, or dilapidated constructions. While the imagery of land and soil dominates the scenery, lovemaking on the open ground usually constitutes the climax. In addition to such settings, in films such as *I Love You, I Don't* and *Taxi to the Toilet* (*Taxi zum Klo*, dir. Frank Ripploh, West Germany, 1980), anything that does not respect borders, positions, and rules, including things that Julia Kristeva describes as ambiguous or unhealthy (for example, dirt, litter, and all sorts of bodily wastes) are unflinchingly exhibited.[3] Thus, anything that is rejected or abjected to protect identity, system, and order for the foundation of culture is revived and celebrated.

Apart from a reaction against exclusion from society, what lies beneath these tendencies might be the same thing Butler found in late eighteenth-century art: "a search for purity that often takes the form of a journey into the remote."[4] Butler explains that the settings of poems, plays, paintings, and even novels in the late eighteenth century "evoked a condition of society that was primitive and pre-social. . . . Heroes from simpler worlds visited civilization for the purpose of making adverse comparisons."[5] At first glance, such a motive might seem anti-essentialist: through their search for purity, queer characters eschew sanctioned identities as well as social, cultural, and economic constraints that are imposed on them. But is it really possible to opt out of the overwhelming hierarchies of sex, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, and so on? The final scene of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (dir. John Cameron Mitchell, US, 2001) suggests that it is impossible to be in society while at the same time being one's "pure" self.[6] Although there are also more optimistic endings, this sort of pessimism haunts many of the films made in different time periods and countries. Glamorous stage performances or countryside trysts give way to loneliness and misery. Transgression, love, and passion are terminated in the end with the intrusion of an unbridgeable gap between the char-

acters, like the symbolic image of an unfinished suspension bridge in *Amphetamine* (*An fei ta ming*, dir. Scud, Hong Kong, 2010), which stands for the distance between the two lovers, Daniel and Kafka, who belong to different classes.[7] Like most queer film characters, who are dead, murdered, or split up in the end, the two men can be together only in idyllic scenes or in death.

Amphetamine also facilitates a special use of setting that associates Daniel with the industrial cityscape and Kafka with natural landscapes. As I detail in the following discussions of *Weekend* (dir. Andrew Haigh, UK, 2011), *Stranger by the Lake* (*L'inconnu du lac*, dir. Alain Guiraudie, France, 2013), and *Tropical Malady* (*Sud pralad*, dir. Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Thailand, 2004), which are all gay male narratives from the new millennium, many queer films employ a similar use of setting to associate particular characters with particular places and invite the audience to think critically about how spatial belonging is determined by both class and sexuality, as well as how the need for security plays a major role in the production of space. Likewise, the discussion of *Shortbus* (dir. John Cameron Mitchell, US, 2006) will demonstrate how queer film settings are also meant to be alternatives to an alienating metropolis.

More significantly, different types of settings provide a temporary shelter and breakthrough from the persistent threat of homophobia and heteronormativity, which are sometimes aligned with class inequality and racism.[8] Settings in queer cinema often function as safe zones and spaces of refuge for queer-identified characters (fig. 1). The settings often contrast with spaces of sexual repression, including schools, public spaces, and domestic space, together with various other sites of segregation that foster race, gender, and class inequalities. Through these imaginary routes of escape queer characters can express themselves, affirm their identities, and articulate their desires, ambitions, predicaments, or anger against the realities of oppression.

In *Anti-Oedipus*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari assert that escape "does not merely consist in withdrawing from the social, in living on the fringe"; rather, it entails a revolutionary potential.[9] Although these two philosophers do not discuss cinematic spaces, they discuss escape as a form of resistance that is central to the

notion of setting in queer cinema. In their seminal work, Deleuze and Guattari portray an imaginary figure that they refer to as a "schizophrenic personality." The schizophrenic figure knows no boundaries or rules and slips through repressive social and economic structures because it cannot be "oedipalized" and assigned a role in the nuclear family. The queer films in this study target some of these social and economic structures, too. Hence, a parallel is drawn between Deleuze and Guattari's fugitives and queer film characters who try to purge themselves of sexual uniformity, repression, and socioeconomic inequality.

Deleuze and Guattari's approach to schizophrenia is totalizing and at times offensive to people with schizophrenia and autism (which is the very reason they attack psychoanalysis); yet, when reconceived on a purely figurative basis (i.e., schizophrenia as a signifier of fluidity and nature's resistance to uniformity) their theory gives the political leverage that is missing in the Romantic subject. In this interpretation, the notion of escape in queer cinema means more than defeat and passivity. Within the narrative space of queer film settings, "sexuality as desire" is able to "animate a social critique of civilization."[10] It becomes possible, then, to acknowledge a political stance for change behind the escapism and pessimism, as well as utopianism, in queer cinema.

Setting as Breakthrough

The vast majority of queer film settings, including the road in *The Living End* and *My Own Private Idaho* (dir. Gus Van Sant, US, 1991), the rooming house in *Brother to Brother* (dir. Rodney Evans, US, 2004), the salon in *Shortbus*, the bachelor's home in *Weekend*, the woods in *Stranger by the Lake*, and the jungle in *Tropical Malady*, entail an escape from "dominated spaces" of heteronormativity, the nuclear family, racism, and directly or obliquely, of capitalism and an unhuman modernity.[11] As I demonstrate in the following sections, the queer protagonists try to exceed these limits by following "the lines of escape of desire," as Deleuze and Guattari put it in relation to the nomadic nature of schizophrenic personality.[12]

In this context, escape becomes revolutionary, a courageous

decision "to flee rather than live tranquilly and hypocritically in false refuges."[13] For instance, in *The Living End*, the HIV-positive and economically disenfranchised couple's road adventure initiates with a rage against the establishment: "I think this is part of a neo-Nazi Republican definitive solution," Luke (Mike Dytri) declares to Jon (Craig Gilmore) at the breakfast table, "a germ warfare. Genocide. I suddenly realize that we have nothing to lose." Later, the two go on a journey that soon culminates in a fluctuating relationship and a series of crimes, which involve credit card theft and assault on police and gay-bashers.

However, as is usually the case with the "Guattareuzian" breakthrough, the couple can push the limits only to a certain degree.[14] In the final scene, the characters become lethargic following their climactic intercourse that is filled with aggression and suicidal moments. Luke's juvenile anger in the opening scene, in which he writes "fuck the world" on the ruins and dances in the dirt listening to a piece of industrial rock music on his Walkman, now gives way to silence and immobility (fig. 2). The distance of the camera abruptly changes to an extreme long shot, which in

Figure 2. *The Living End* (dir. Gregg Araki, US, 1992), Strand Releasing/Desperate Pictures Ltd.

effect leaves the intertwined bodies of the couple in a tiny, bug-like, almost indiscernable existence in complete isolation and oblivion under the crimson evening sky.[15]

In many queer films such as *The Living End*, *My Own Private Idaho*, *Stranger by the Lake*, and *Weekend*, the escape is terminated before reaching an ultimate "deterritorialization" or emancipation from social and economic pressures, as Deleuze and Guattari describe in the case of a medically treated schizophrenic: the escapee "strikes the wall, rebounds off it, and falls back into the most miserably arranged territorialities of the modern world."[16] At the end of these films, the characters are left desperate and immobile. In contrast, in rare examples such as *The Watermelon Woman* (dir. Cheryl Dunye, US, 1996), *Brother to Brother*, and *Shortbus*, the breakthrough is maintained in the prospect of hope and futurity, or sometimes in magic and fantasy as in *Tropical Malady*. These kinds of films propel a logic that is more congruent with José Esteban Muñoz's definitive remark in *Cruising Utopia*: "Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world."[17] The approach here, however, differs from Muñoz's notion of "critical utopianism" (7). Building on Ernst Bloch's ideas in *The Principle of Hope* (1959), Muñoz argues for a form of utopianism that seeks a "radically democratic potentiality" in "the quotidian": for example, in commodities such as a bottle of Coke shared by two gay lovers in Frank O'Hara's poem "Having a Coke with You" (6–7). Instead, the objective here is to shed light on an alternative utopianism in queer cinema—one that imagines spaces completely against and/or outside the commodity space. Yet, like any other utopia, it carries the potential of working toward social change by making a critique of the present.

The film discussions in the following sections point to two different directions in queer cinema; both locate a transnational countercultural stance in various uses of setting. The discussions of *Shortbus* and *Tropical Malady* feature a utopianism that defies social and/or economic boundaries by means of a transgressive setting. In contrast, the discussions of *Weekend* and *Stranger by the Lake* examine the pessimist/realist trend, which reflects the social

and economic ties that bind the queer characters to a single space of refuge. This article asserts that a social critique of civilization undergirds both directions.

Urban Spaces and Queer Utopias

What is at stake with setting in queer cinema first lies with the filmmakers' preference for an alternative space over urban queer spaces. In reality, as many writers and theorists would agree, queer spaces are predominantly urban. Michael Sibalis notes, for instance, that "urbanization is a precondition to emergence of a significant gay culture."[18] Moreover, as Jenny Livingston's *Paris Is Burning* (US, 1990) and many queer writings indicate, there are significant ties between queer subcultures and various aspects of urban mass culture such as high fashion and the entertainment industry. In Dennis Altman's words, queer folk "pioneered the values and behaviour that have become the norm in modern consumer society."[19] And, queer subcultures, in turn, take advantage of the exquisite cruising grounds provided by the modern city: cafés, bars, discos, public baths, toilets, and shopping areas become, as Dianne Chisholm writes in *Queer Constellations*, ideal places for loitering and "casual contact without financial tariff, conjugal responsibility, or bourgeois propriety."[20]

In queer city writings, urban queer spaces are sometimes elevated to a mythic/utopic status and become sites of subversion where the queer flaneur transgresses economic, social, and racial boundaries. Such idealizations regard such spaces as a temporary fissure in the hegemonic space, or to borrow Henri Lefebvre's terminology, urban queer spaces become, in theory, "appropriated spaces" of the subjugated minorities that contest and subvert the dominated space of commodities, of social/economic norms and hierarchies, and of state power.[21] But if urbanity is so intrinsic to queer subcultures, and if urban queer spaces are such effective sites of subversion, why do many filmmakers need to design alternative spaces? Following Altman's examples, Chisholm argues that "the narrative of the gay urban life confuses the production of social space with the reproduction of capitalist dream space."[22] Through

the commercialization of desire, and the hierarchies of age and beauty in the ostensibly liberating space of gay bathhouses and anonymous encounters, queer cruisers in a way appear to be losing their subjectivities and transforming into objects of fetish.[23]

Thus it is possible to contend that a certain branch of queer cinema rejects the queer subcultures' parasitic relation to the commodity space and defies the commodification of desire and the detachment of sex from passion.[24] While some queer films such as *Urbania* (dir. Jon Shear, US, 2000) seek the disintegration and subversion of urban spaces by taking on a serious critical stance, others make a parody of them as is the case with Frank's hilarious adventures in public toilets in *Taxi to the Toilet*. While some films reconstruct or represent what Foucault calls "heterotopias"—real places and countersites that are "formed in the very founding of society" and in which "all the other real sites . . . are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted"—other films attempt to carry the setting completely outside the commodity space.[25] However, this is an attempt that eventually remains unfulfilled. As I will argue, especially in the case of *Stranger by the Lake*, the representation of space in queer cinema is generally not sterile. It does not provide a perfect shelter with characters that are fully aware of complicated networks of oppression. It is more likely to host characters that are caught in transit: characters that experience temporary anonymity, temporary identity loss, and temporary breakthroughs. Such queer film settings resemble, more than anything else, Marc Augé's "non-places."[26]

I bring up non-places here because both urban queer spaces and some queer film settings that at first seem different from urban queer spaces fit very well into the category of non-place—a similarity that certainly jeopardizes the viability of certain queer film settings as sites of breakthrough. Motorways and highways, which appear in plenty of queer films including *The Living End* and *My Own Private Idaho*, are some of these controversial sites, and they clearly show how and why some queer film settings cannot become ultimate sites of resistance. The plainest answer is that these settings are never completely detached from hegemonic spaces. The turning point in *The Living End* occurs when the cash dispenser does not respond to the couple's stolen credit card. An unrespon-

Figure 3. *My Own Private Idaho* (dir. Gus Van Sant, US, 1991), New Line Cinema

sive machine in a gas station is enough to mark both the end of the drifters' breakthrough and the beginning of their breakdown until the complete immobility, isolation, and solitude in the final scene.[27] Similarly, a highway becomes a home for homeless Mike in *My Own Private Idaho* (fig. 3), demonstrating another paradox of non-place: "A foreigner lost in a country he does not know (a 'passing stranger') can feel at home there only in the anonymity of motorway."[28]

Apparently, the preferred setting in these films (like those in the next section) is precarious as a site of breakthrough. The road does not provide an ultimate deterritorialization for the queer characters in transit. In *Feminism and Geography*, Gillian Rose notes that "space itself—and landscape and place likewise—far from being firm foundations for disciplinary expertise and power, are insecure, precarious, and fluctuating."[29] Space, from Rose's perspective, is discursive, heterogeneous, and complicated. Therefore, there might be no reason to expect its narrative representation to be very different. The real resistance, then, is to be found in the queer characters' attempt to escape, in which they gradually fail in the absence of a firm and safe space. The representation of a non-place in this context underlines the absence and persistent demand for a real space.

Queer cinema's engagement with non-places, or sometimes with what Augé calls "supermodernity" (in contradistinction to fin-de-siècle modernity), comes into being in settings other than the road as well. Films such as *Brother to Brother* and *Shortbus* touch on the queer experience in the metropolis by exerting alternatives to non-places. In *Brother to Brother*, the black-and-white reenactments of the Niggerati Manor, the rooming house that was once the meeting point for the African American *poètes maudits* of the Harlem Renaissance, present an alternative world in which Black queer desire is unrepressed, friendships are more intimate, and art is not commodified.[30]

Shortbus uses a utopic salon in New York City, which is quite similar to the Niggerati Manor in *Brother to Brother*, as a line of escape for the alienated queer characters. The salon hosts a mixed-gender and pansexual community whose members can socialize, share their thoughts and feelings, and realize their sexuality, unbound by the bourgeois dictum of bedroom privacy. The neighborly atmosphere is also meant to be exempt from generational, physical, and racial standards of beauty by means of token representations of overweight, elderly, and Black figures (fig. 4).

The three main characters, James (Paul Dawson), Sofia (Sook-Yin Lee), and Severin (Lindsay Beamish), are the outsiders since they are unable to make an intimate connection with others. What accounts for the reason behind their predicament is defined in the film as their "impermeability," or one could also say their "love blockage," which prevents them from connecting with others.[31] Shortbus and New York City are supposed to be an antidote to their impermeability. Shortbus, whose name is a reference to the school buses that are used for the transportation of children with

Figure 4. *Shortbus* (dir. John Cameron Mitchell, US, 2006), Safeword Productions LLC

special needs, provides a communal transgression for the "challenged" and "gifted" ones, as Justin Vivian Bond, the salon's host, puts it, and according to Tobias, the ex-mayor of the city, New York City is "one of the last places where people are still willing to bend over to let in the new."[32]

Interestingly though, it is neither in New York City nor at Shortbus that the impermeable characters of the film begin their resistance and recovery. Their initiation to connection with others first occurs in other, smaller and darker places of refuge that are sheltered from the unfeeling crowds of supermodernity. James expresses his inner feelings only when he and Severin get into a dark closet during a game of truth or dare. Severin and Sofia, too, articulate their predicament to each other only when they are inside a womb-like isolation tank (a dimly lit saltwater tank used for floatation therapy). The characters' wish to return to innocence might at first signal an oedipal entrapment and evoke psychoanalytic considerations, as they suffer from self-pity, traumatic childhood experiences, and family problems. Yet their impermeability or their physical and emotional alienation also says something about the condition of humanity in the present age. *Shortbus* aims to present a postsexual revolution, a post-AIDS and post-9/11 utopia in which the outsiders, the ones who cannot merge with the modern city, are doomed. However, the film incidentally highlights the present era in which people suffer from feeling unable to receive or give enough pleasure, sensually or emotionally. Justin Bond's remark that "it's just like the '60s, only with less hope" is misleading. Unlike the 1960s or before, in the context of the film sexual desire is blunted because there is no human connection or intimacy.

The characters are also living in a virtual reality: they constantly record, watch, and edit their and others' activities, surf the internet for sexual fulfillment, use electronic gadgets to find automatically matched dates nearby, and use remote-controlled vibrators to stimulate their partners. Interaction with these electronic devices replaces human connection with the outside world. They provide ephemeral pleasures and more isolation "combined with non-human mediation."[33] This technological mecca, however, is as fragile as the postmodern New York City in Paul Auster's 1985

novel *City of Glass*. Throughout the film, lights occasionally dim due to brownouts, which coincide with moments of crisis. At a climactic scene, the electricity goes off in the entire city, and the blackout coincides with the three main characters' nervous breakdowns, which are depicted through intercutting sequences. Following the blackout, having been temporarily relieved from the technological burden of a toxic supermodernity, the characters unite in a carnivalesque gathering at Shortbus under candlelight and acoustic music. Only after the characters "unplug themselves" and are left in a temporary darkness can they merge with the community at Shortbus.[34] The final scene, in which everyone sings in unison and makes love with each other, marks the characters' ultimate recovery and breakthrough.

The characters in *Shortbus* struggle to open themselves up to the outside world, to "the wide open spaces" where "the dirty little secret" is replaced by "the drift of desire."[35] But this world is not the world of supermodernity, capitalism, or the nuclear family. It is a world not of social and sexual isolation but of connection and intimacy. In this regard, *Shortbus* and *Brother to Brother* are better understood as a critique of the present. Both of these films yearn for a utopia, which encourages us to imagine a space outside of heteronormativity, the nuclear family, modernity, and, in the case of *Brother to Brother*, racial segregation. Each film compares and contrasts two different social spaces and territorialities—on the one hand, a narrative setting of resistance that promises liberation and intimacy, and on the other hand, a representation of the modern city marked by sexual repression and alienation. In this way, the films show us what the world is actually like and what it should be like. They offer us, in Muñoz's words, "a critique of the present, of what is, by casting a picture of what can and perhaps will be."[36]

Setting as a Mise-en-Scène of Queer Desire

As noted earlier, the settings of breakthrough in queer films show up in various forms and they become places of survival for characters who normally are not welcome in a world hostile to differences. Therefore, setting functions as a mise-en-scène in which

Figure 5. *Weekend* (dir. Andrew Haigh, UK, 2011), Glendale Picture Company/EM Media

queer desires are temporarily and quixotically realized. The production of setting in queer films is formed by a need for physically, financially, and emotionally secure territories to which, under normal circumstances, the characters have no access. The creation of such territories usually rests on some visual contrasts or heightened representations of space that make class and sexuality joint problems in the production of space—a quality missing in the utopianism of *Shortbus*. *Weekend*, for instance, gives insight to a paranoid fear of homophobia by contrasting the relatively secure space of a laborer's home with the hostile atmosphere of outdoor spaces.

The central motif in the film, the image of CCTV cameras—sneakily moving, buzzing, and recording everyone and every activity from the top of the ugly tower block where the main character, Russell (Tom Cullen), lives—exposes the actual dystopia of a strictly organized social life and aggressive state surveillance, culminating in a reification of Foucault's panopticism.[37] The farewell words of Russell and his lover, Glen (Chris New), in the final scene are drowned out by the disturbing repetition of the train station announcement: "twenty-four-hour CCTV recording is in operation at this station." There are few scenes without an intruding unfocused object on at least one side of the frame, which creates the

feeling that the characters are secretly being watched.[38] In addition to the voyeuristic shooting strategy, Russell's feeling of insecurity is subtly conveyed through the mise-en-scène. There is always a creepy, insecure, threatening atmosphere wisely presented in the outdoor scenes. This is portrayed through hostile looks from passersby, the occasional presence of a group of youngsters outside the camera's focus, or a parked sports car on the far side of the street playing techno music. Russell's cozy apartment, decorated with vintage paraphernalia, makes a stark contrast with the outdoor shots. "When I'm at home, I'm absolutely fine," he explains to Glen in a confessional moment, "I'm not embarrassed, I'm not ashamed, and I don't want to be straight."

Home is not always preferred as a site of resistance in queer films. For instance, *Paris Is Burning*, *Brother to Brother*, *Pariah* (dir. Dee Rees, US, 2011), and *Moonlight* (dir. Barry Jenkins, US, 2016) present characters of color that are expelled or estranged from their family homes for their sexual orientation. Other films such as *Weekend*, *Cloudburst* (dir. Thom Fitzgerald, Canada/US, 2011), and *Love Is Strange* (dir. Ira Sachs, US, 2014) reinscribe the meaning of home as a place of shelter. A very similar reconceptualization of domestic space occurs in bell hooks's *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*. Recounting her childhood experiences, hooks argues, in opposition to the white-centered second-wave feminist's view of home as a site of female subordination, that home for a Black woman is a site of resistance despite the persistent patriarchy. The feeling of danger and fear she experienced outside as a child due to racial discrimination, hooks tells us, would give place upon arriving home to "the feeling of safety, of arrival, of homecoming . . . the warmth and comfort of shelter, the feeding of our bodies, the nurturing of our souls."[39] As hooks clarifies, this feeling is tightly linked to her experience of growing up at the margins of a southern Black working-class community segregated from the white town center.

The correlation between poverty and Blackness in hooks's writing takes the form of correlation between financial insecurity and closeted homosexuality in *Weekend*. Behind the doomed-to-fail relationship between a shy lifeguard and an adventurous artist,

Weekend hints at the class inequality between the two lovers at several key points: for instance, in Glen's jokes such as "there's nothing wrong with being a lifeguard, you know," or Russell's remark to Glen in the beginning, "I thought you were out of my league or whatever." Unlike Russell, who grew up in an orphanage, Glen enjoys the freedoms of his bourgeois privileges. He is quite easy with his homosexuality. He self-assuredly came out to his parents when he was sixteen: "I told them nature or nurture, it's your fault, so get over it." He can ignore or yell at the homophobic people, and he enjoys speaking loudly about his sexual experiences to a crowd of heterosexuals in a straight bar. Being different from Russell, he belongs to the public space. This class difference may explain the real reason behind the strong attraction between the characters (and their eventual separation) as each finds something they lack in the other: in Glen, Russell finds the freedoms of self-realization and mobility, and, in Russell, Glen finds a sense of attachment and simplicity.

The feeling of insecurity not only plays a role in producing alternative spaces in queer films but is also a central component in complaints raised by some who are concerned with the invasion and destruction of urban cruising areas by profit-seeking corporations and government officials. Although the central argument in such complaints—that certain urban areas where homosexuals can socialize provide a relatively safe habitat protected from homophobic crimes and a chance for queer identities and practices to exist—is true to some extent, queer spaces are never safe enough, as is often depicted in queer films. *Stranger by the Lake* is one of these films, and a unique one with its portrayal of a cruising spot with all its complexities—in this case, in a lakeside holiday setting.

Stranger by the Lake employs a highly sensual cinematography to transform a cruising area in a rural French province into a bacchanal paradise until the film reveals its hidden perils (fig. 6). It features repetitive shots of trees slowly swaying in the wind, the surface of the lake wavering in the breeze, naked bodies lying on the beach and undulating in the bushes, and figures stealthily roaming in the woods to find other bodies. Each morning when the main character, Franck (Pierre Deladonchamps), comes to the

Figure 6. *Stranger by the Lake* (dir. Alain Guiraudie, France, 2013), Les Films du Worso/ Arte France Cinéma/M141 Productions/Films de Force Majeure

woods, the cars in the parking lot are the same, positioned almost in the same places and shot at the same angle. The same people lie on the same parts of the beach, they turn and look in the same way, and they more or less know each other. This is, in fact, a small community that practices the same rituals with the same interest following a stable routine. The "strangers," however, are different. Michel (Christophe Paou), a man with whom Franck falls in love and who later turns out to be a serial killer, the jealous visitor who yells at the locals, and Henri (Patrick d'Assumçao), who spends time sitting by himself at the far end of the beach avoiding the sexual activity in the woods, do not belong to the place. Michel avoids any contact outside the cruising spot, seeks detachment from Franck after sex, and does not hesitate to kill his ex-partner when he gets bored. The drowning scene, reminiscent of the shooting in Albert Camus's *The Stranger* (1942), is shockingly bland. Shot in deep focus with a long take, the murder is as quiet and casual as a play, as if to not disturb the tranquility of the paradise. However, the murder triggers a turning point in the narrative after which the film questions the limits of passion.

Several times throughout the film, Franck gazes at the other side of the lake where, as he learns from Henri, families go. It surely must be a different world than the one Franck knows, and a world in which Henri has no place anymore since he has split up with his girlfriend. This side of the beach, with its own codes, pleasures, and dangers, is the only place where queers are allowed; it is, ostensibly, a liberated domain and a place of resistance. The beach and the woods are so indispensable for the cruisers that they begin to come back only a couple of days after the murder as if nothing has happened. For the outsiders like Michel, the woods is where one can play and leave "discreetly," as he puts it, but for the locals

like Franck, who is "really gay" and unemployed, it is the only place of existence. As a result, the final scene, in which Franck pathetically calls out for his murderer-beloved, naked and barely visible in the pitch darkness of the forest, presents a more disturbing view of unreasonable desire, unlimited to the point of self-destruction. (This is a theme that can also be discerned in some queer films that focus on HIV and drugs). The underlying message might at first seem twofold: "this is what queers do to themselves" and "this is what queers are led into."

On second thought, *Stranger by the Lake* draws a picture of the present condition of the whole of social existence as much as it gives insight into the queer experience. Desire (sensual or material) shapes identities, socioeconomic structures, and various spaces, but it also becomes arrested by the same structures and spaces, as Deleuze and Guattari polemically argue in *Anti-Oedipus*. Franck's entrapment in the cruising spot and his physical and emotional impairment can be seen as much as an outcome of such captivity as of the surrounding heteronormativity and homophobia.

The inclusion of Henri's character, therefore, is crucial to the narrative. Since Henri is not his type (he is older and heavier), Franck is able to approach him on different grounds, which gradually turns into an intimate friendship. Thanks to the deep attachment between them, Franck glimpses a different form of interaction, but he does not understand it. Henri's rhetorical question "Do you have to fuck someone to sleep next to them?" does not make any sense to Franck, because in the homophobic straight world where Henri comes from, and in the queer space in which Franck partakes, love without sex between two men has no meaning; it is oxymoronic. "Homosocial desire" per se, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick named it, is an invalid proposition.[40] This should not be understood as an idealization of asexuality. Rather, it shows how, with a derailment and rechanneling of desire, the body of a stranger can easily replace the fascinating commodity on display, and a rural cruising spot can transform into a commodity space. However, for Franck, the allure of the stranger, his vulnerability to the handsome and murderous interloper from another space, actually stems from a futile expectation of a chance of existence outside the cruis-

ing spot—a wish to be a couple, queer, safe, and back there at once. Such a place, though, does not exist.

Tropical Malady is another (and probably the most ambiguous) example that employs a bucolic setting, the jungle, in subtle and complicated ways. The film contrasts the jungle with the city to bring out, as in *Weekend*, a discrepancy between two gay men who belong to different classes and spaces, and who thus conceive of sexuality on different terms. The first half of the film presents an idyllic romance between Keng (Banlop Lomnoi), a forest patrol member, and Tong (Sakda Kaewbuadee), a shy village boy (fig. 7). Completely different from the first half, the second half of the film depicts a deadly tussle between Ekarat (Lomnoi), a hunter, and a mythical creature called Tiger-man (Kaewbuadee), a shape-shifting shaman who bedevils the locals and steals their livestock.[41]

In the first part of the film, it becomes clear that class antagonisms like those in *Amphetamine* and *Weekend* undercut the couple's relationship. Keng does not come from a wealthy family; yet, he certainly does better than Tong, who is illiterate and unemployed (in one scene, he seems bewildered by the massive sight of commodities in a mall). Interestingly, though, the film does not convey Tong's pennilessness much like a depravity. Rather, Tong and Keng seem to belong to different worlds and spaces, and they become insecure when they step out. Keng spends his idle time in the city, and he does not lead a rural life except for occasional and seemingly uncomfortable visits to his family. Tong, however, whose peasantry is proclaimed in character traits such as naivete, timidity, and sincerity, lives in the village and feels awkward and estranged in the city. Although Keng's personality is not exactly the opposite of Tong's, he represents a different nature, which comes to the surface during a visit to an underground temple in the forest. Keng is intimidated by the dark and deep tunnels of the cave, which are too distant from his usual habitat. Their separation at the end of the first part of the film also signals the differences in their personalities and socioeconomic status. Tong, who belongs to nature, walks into the forest and disappears in the dark, while Keng, who belongs to civilization, returns to the city by his bike on a brightly lit road.

However, with a stark change of setting, ambiance, color scheme, and performance in the second part of the film, Keng (now the hunter, Ekarat) is forced to face his deepest fears. The magical atmosphere of the jungle gives the impression of a parallel universe where the emotional tension, which was latent in the first part, rises to the surface. It is as if Keng's desire to sensually possess Tong (now the tiger) turns into a hunt and trial, and Tong's elusiveness and peasantry take the shape of a wild and uncontrollable animal, fascinated by the hunter's strangeness. Vehicles, machines in an ice-cutting factory, the ambient sounds of the commercial sites and public spaces, and the upbeat music in the first part are not heard in the second. The hunter gradually becomes a part of the terrifying wilderness and the spiritual interconnectedness it entails. Overwhelmed by fear and exhaustion, in a final encounter with the tiger, he surrenders "his spirit, his flesh, and his memories." The final confrontation and surrender symbolize the removal of socioeconomic barriers between the lovers.[42] Keng/Ekarat's sacrifice in the end, which is conveyed through the still shot of a woodcut drawing, represents an allegorical withdrawal from the material world, including the commodity space to which he was firmly attached in the first part.

What can be discerned from *Tropical Malady*, *Stranger by the Lake*, and *Weekend* is that each film portrays the invasion of a queer domain by an outsider who conceives of sexuality as a practice of ownership. Michel, for instance, is like an unrepentant consumer; his desire to possess and consume bodies resembles the desire for commodities. The hunter/consumer Keng/Ekarat, however, makes an irreversible mistake by entering Tong/Tiger-man's domain and pays for his hubris in the fairy-tale second act. *Amphetamine*, *Weekend*, *Stranger by the Lake*, and *Tropical Malady* hint that it is only the economically or socially privileged character (Daniel, Glen, Michel, and Keng) who has the freedom of trespassing and cruising across the boundaries between public and private as well as heteronormative and queer spaces. The other character's fascination with the exotic stranger accounts for his social and financial insecurity as is evident in the space he is attached to. The different spaces that the

lovers belong to—the heteronormative public/commodity space on the one hand, and the isolated lower-class queer space on the other—both join and divide them.

Conclusions and Directions for Future Research

In queer cinema, settings of escape are often juxtaposed or interwoven with spaces of subjugation and inequality. As in the case of fantasies, what is being evaded "is always present in the actual formation of the wish," evidently for the purpose of making adverse comparisons in a Romantic fashion.[43] What is more, Deleuze and Guattari's fictional and rebellious figure resonates with queer film characters very well at three points: through the choice of setting (deserts, landscapes, journeys, and so on), which appear and reappear in Deleuze and Guattari's writing as sites of breakthrough; the motive of escape as a form of resistance; and the characters' ultimate failure in maintaining their breakthrough, which are all present in queer cinema.

Considering the queer film characters as Romantic fugitives in the sense of Deleuze and Guattari makes it possible to suggest that queer film settings, far from being a showcase of escapism, fatalism, or despair, pave the way for a political cinema. The uses of setting I describe here can be regarded as critiques of prevalent social and economic structures as the characters try to find spaces outside heteronormativity, the nuclear family, capitalism, racism, and modernity: *Shortbus*, *Brother to Brother*, and *Tropical Malady* construct sheltering spaces for socially and sexually isolated queer characters in the modern city. *The Living End*, *My Own Private Idaho*, *Weekend*, and *Stranger by the Lake* adopt some already existing spaces (i.e., the road, domestic space, and the woods) as possible and eventually unsuccessful sites of breakthrough. In each of these films, unclaimed yet precarious and transitory sites are preferred to more hegemonic and heteronormative areas as if to emphasize the absence of reliable spaces. In *Weekend* and *Tropical Malady*, economic discrepancy comes between the lovers in the form of attachment to different settings (e.g., home and the jungle versus public/

commodity spaces); in *Brother to Brother*, race tampers with relationships and is again associated with public spaces (e.g., the rooming house as a site of resistance versus public space as a site of segregation). Intersectionality in these films signals that "the major systems of oppression are interlocking."[44] *Stranger by the Lake*, *Weekend*, and *Tropical Malady* can be seen as a critique in defiance of a significant bottleneck that concerns all humanity—that is, the replacement of all physical and intellectual senses with a single one, the sense of having.[45] Commodity spaces are parodied in several satirical references in *The Living End* and *My Own Private Idaho*. *Shortbus* challenges the domestic space and the pressures of nuclear family while it dreams about a healthy, harmonious, and collective relationship between the individual and the metropolis. In the final analysis, whether the queer characters fail in their escape upon discovering the impossibility of finding or experiencing actual spaces of resistance, or maintain the breakthrough by fantasy and hope as in *Shortbus*, *Brother to Brother*, and *Tropical Malady*, the escape in queer cinema harbors a wish for a utopia—a world without segregated spaces. It could be argued that the use of alternative settings, nonplaces, and spatial contrasts actually encourages the audience to think about and wish for social change by showing us the various barriers in the way of a better world.

Most of the settings in this study deserve much closer attention. The ideas that can be extracted from them are waiting to be extended to new horizons. The meaning and function of home, for instance, is likely to acquire a new direction for many queer-identified individuals with the legalization of same-sex marriage in the US and several other countries in recent years. A paradigm shift has already begun to take shape in queer filmmaking: *Cloudburst* and *Love Is Strange* are interesting examples that let viewers reflect on the Stonewall generation's reception of same-sex marriage.

Small towns, which have gained attention in recent scholarship, are another contested setting in queer cinema. Queer experience in nonurban America is often represented in contrasting ways. While films such as *Boys Don't Cry* (dir. Kimberly Peirce, US, 1999) and *The Mudge Boy* (dir. Michael Burke, US, 2003) portray

small-town life in a very negative way, others such as *Spork* (dir. J. B. Ghuman Jr., US, 2010), *Bumblefuck, USA* (dir. Aaron Douglas Johnston and Sam de Jong, US, 2011), and *Boy Meets Girl* (dir. Eric Schaeffer, US, 2014) draw a more positive and sometimes utopian picture. These films allow the audience to move away from the identities and communities in the Western metropolis; as Ann Cvetkovich notes, "in such contexts, what counts as (homo)sexuality is unpredictable and requires new vocabularies."[46]

All these changing representations and understandings of existing spaces invite new consideration in queer film studies. Yet, despite the unprecedented intrusion of queer main characters into award-winning mainstream productions, queer film settings are recurrent and they continue to remain on the margins of society, like the beach in *Moonlight*, the countryside in *Call Me by Your Name* (dir. Luca Guadagnino, Italy/France/Brazil/US, 2017), the stage in *Bohemian Rhapsody* (dir. Bryan Singer, UK/US, 2018), and the road in *Green Book* (dir. Peter Farrelly, US, 2018).

Notes

1. *Queer* in this context refers to individuals/performances with gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, intersex, genderqueer, or asexual orientations. *Queer cinema* refers to films that present apparently queer-identified main characters and their experiences in a nonstereotypical way. The use of the terms *space* and *place* relies on Michel de Certeau's succinct definition "*Space is a practiced place*. Thus, the street geometrically defined by urban planning is transformed into space by walkers." Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, vol. 1, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 117.

2. Marilyn Butler, *Romantics, Rebels, and Reactionaries: English Literature and Its Background 1760–1830* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 126.

3. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 4.

4. Butler, *Romantics, Rebels, and Reactionaries*, 16.

5. Butler, *Romantics, Rebels, and Reactionaries*, 16.

6. The transgender protagonist, Hedwig (John Cameron Mitchell), is seen from behind in deep focus, stripped of her drag costume and completely naked. As she staggers through a dark, empty alley at night toward a busy street in the upper portion of the frame, the camera gradually moves up to an overpowering high-angle shot until the helpless figure wanes and vanishes in the darkness and the screen fades to black.

7. Daniel (Thomas Price), an educated and successful white-collar executive, cannot sustain his contact with Kafka (Byron Pang), a disoriented man addicted to methamphetamine who grew up in poverty with a fugitive father who commits suicide, a brother who deals drugs, and a mother with mental illness. Kafka cannot overcome his drug addiction and traumatic past or come to terms with his homosexuality.

8. The examples of settings are wide and varied: the desert in *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (dir. Stephan Elliott, Australia, 1994), the woods in *Heavenly Creatures* (dir. Peter Jackson, New Zealand, 1994) and *Tomboy* (dir. Céline Sciamma, France, 2011), the stage in *Paris Is Burning* (dir. Jennie Livingston, US, 1990) and *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (dir. John Cameron Mitchell, US, 2001), the countryside in *Three Dancing Slaves* (dir. Gaël Morel, France, 2004), the underground salon in *Looking for Langston* (dir. Isaac Julien, UK, 1989), the Turkish bath in *Hamam* (dir. Ferzan Özpetek, Italy/Turkey, 1997), and many others, which are always on the edge of society.

9. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 341.

10. Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 332.

11. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 39.

12. Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 277. Kara Keeling's notion of the "black femme" is reminiscent of Deleuze and Guattari's schizophrenic figure. For Keeling, the Black lesbian figure, who has been denied access to the white screen in almost the entire history of cinema, offers a glimpse into "alternatives to existing

organizations of life" because "she challenges racism, sexism, and homophobia." Kara Keeling, *The Witch's Flight* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 1–2. Although Keeling does not mention it, Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman* (US, 1996) is a good example.

13. Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 341.

14. Gary Genosko, "Deleuze and Guattari: Guattareuze & Co.," in *The Cambridge Companion to Deleuze*, ed. Daniel W. Smith and Henry Somers-Hall (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 151–69.

15. Concurrently, the last frame of the film functions as a reification of Bergson's major thesis on time, which Deleuze translates into modern cinema as the "time-image": the past, the collective memory, and the trauma of the epidemic coexist with the present in a single image. The final shot of *The Living End* presents a postapocalyptic spectacle of a community similar to that of the European postwar wasteland reflected in neorealism. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 82.

16. Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 283.

17. José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 1.

18. Michael D. Sibalis, "Paris," in *Queer Sites: Gay Urban History since 1600*, ed. David Higgs (New York: Routledge, 1999), 11.

19. Dennis Altman, *The Homosexualization of America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 96.

20. Dianne Chisholm, *Queer Constellations: Subcultural Space in the Wake of the City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 12.

21. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 164–65.

22. Chisholm, *Queer Constellations*, 78. Similar arguments have been voiced by Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place* (New York: New York University Press, 2005); Scott Herring, *Another Country: Queer Anti-Urbanism* (New York: New York University Press, 2010); Karen Tongson, *Relocations: Queer Suburban*

Imaginaries (New York: New York University Press, 2011); and Christina B. Hanhardt, *Safe Space: Gay Neighborhood History and the Politics of Violence* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

23. A refined portrayal of this is found in a bath scene in Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Fox and His Friends* (West Germany, 1975). According to Thomas Waugh, in the bath scene, commodities and artifacts of bourgeois existence—antiques, furniture, clothes, cars—are extended to the body and the genitals through "a backdrop of strolling naked young lovelies and carefully posed crotch shots—anonymous and almost disembodied." Thomas Waugh, *The Fruit Machine: Twenty Years of Writings on Queer Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 48.

24. For instance, *My Own Private Idaho* parodies the inherent codes of white upper-class homosexuality with its portrayal of rich perverts who give silly performances to rent boys. The narcoleptic attacks of the main character, Mike, are like a symptom of resistance to being fetishized and consumed. Similarly, in one of the absurd scenes of *The Living End*, after Luke writes "I blame society" on a pillar in a public garage, two men in kinky costumes—a master and a slave—pass by. One is sitting in a shopping cart like a commodity with a leash attached to his neck, and the other one is pulling him by the neck, in what is seemingly a parody of commodification.

25. Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias," in *Architecture/Mouvement/Continuité*, trans. Jay Miskowiec, 1984, web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/foucault1.pdf.

26. In *Non-places*, Augé argues that in the late twentieth century the word *place* has gradually become something different from its traditional definition in anthropology. For Augé, place was once conceived with history, memory, and identity (66–67). The proliferation of what he calls "non-places" in the "supermodern" age, on the other hand, means just the opposite. Hotel chains, holiday clubs, refugee camps, the air/rail/motorway routes with high-tech means of transport, leisure parks, and large retail outlets, as well as cable and wireless networks, offer the individual new forms of solitude that are full of nonhuman mediation of signs, images, words, and texts (94). Marc Augé,

Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity, trans. John Howe (London: Verso, 1995).

27. Also, the seductive neon signs in service stations, which occasionally catch the drivers' eyes, the cigarette Luke carries in his mouth (he does not smoke it), the pistol he plays with, and his masculine bravado throughout the journey signify the roles and performances assigned by the filmic representations of this non-place.

28. Augé, *Non-places*, 106. Mike's loneliness and homelessness finds its best expression in the primary motif of the film—the perfectly straight asphalt road that breaches the desert and recedes into the horizon with no end. Mike is removed from the non-place of the highway and the commodity space of hustling in the campfire scene, which takes place on a reservation. In this scene, as he poignantly reveals his personal feelings to Scott (Keanu Reeves), his best friend and unrequited crush, distant sounds of a Native American ceremony underscore the scene.

29. Gillian Rose, *Feminism and Geography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 160.

30. The reenactments are a stark contrast not only with the public spaces, which are infected with violent homophobia and racism, but also with the subway scenes and the fast-motion time-warp shots in the subway station. Completely different from the rooming house, the ghostlike images of commuters in this non-place depict a world "surrendered to solitary individuality, to the fleeting, the temporary and ephemeral." Augé, *Non-places*, 78.

31. Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 293.

32. According to Nick Davis, *Shortbus* implies that "desire only achieves new becomings within a privileged and recognizable metropole, arrogating to itself a myth of 'permeability,' implicitly or explicitly marking most other terrains as voided out-of-fields." Nick Davis, *The Desiring-Image: Gilles Deleuze and Contemporary Queer Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 104.

33. Augé, *Non-places*, 118.

34. Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 315.

35. Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 270.

36. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 35.

37. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1995).

38. Referring to *Dog Day Afternoon* (dir. Sidney Lumet, US, 1975), Karl Schoonover and Rosalind Galt write that "queers [in films] never seem to calibrate their privacy 'correctly,' and our relations, like Sonny and Leon's, are always either restrictively private or too overtly public." Karl Schoonover and Rosalind Galt, *Queer Cinema in the World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 129.

39. bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Toronto: Between the Lines Press, 1990), 41.

40. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

41. Arnika Fuhrmann claims that Apichatpong's story deploys "Thai-ness" unconventionally by refiguring "the conventionally female tiger spirit of Thai folklore as a queer male being." Arnika Fuhrmann, *Ghostly Desires: Queer Sexuality and Vernacular Buddhism in Contemporary Thai Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 150–51.

42. Fuhrmann suggests that the ending could be interpreted as a sign of impermanence in Buddhism. Fuhrmann, *Ghostly Desires*, 154. However, David Teh argues that "the eager recourse to Buddhism by Apichatpong's Western interpreters" tends to ignore a regional conflict between his native northeast, which encompasses traditions such as animism, religious syncretism, and matriarchal social structure, and the neighboring regions, which are marked with monological Siamese-Buddhist patriarchy: "While Buddhist symbols appear frequently in his work—as in everyday life—he avoids the sacral zones of religious life . . . [and] he eschews all the obvious markers of 'Thai' cultural heritage." David Teh, "Itinerant Cinema: The Social Surrealism of Apichatpong Weerasethakul," *Third Text* 25, no. 5 (2011): 602.

43. J. Laplanche and J. B. Pontalis, "Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 49, no. 1 (1988): 318.

44. Combahee River Collective, "The Combahee River Collective Statement," in *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, ed. Barbara Smith (New York: Kitchen Table, Women of Color Press, 1983), 272.

45. Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. T. B. Bottomore, in *Marx's Concept of Man*, ed. Erich Fromm (New York: Continuum, 2003), 107.

46. Ann Cvetkovich, "Public Feelings," in *After Sex? On Writing since Queer Theory*, ed. Janet Halley and Andrew Parker (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

Serdar Küçük is assistant professor of English language and literature at Istanbul Gelisim University. He has publications on contemporary cinema and literature in several international journals.