

Title: New Gay Sincerity' and Andrew Haigh's *Weekend* (UK, 2011)

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'New Gay Sincerity' and Andrew Haigh's *Weekend*

In the last few years an important new aesthetic direction for non-straight cinema has emerged. A handful of films have chosen a mode of frank, observational realism, capturing the everyday lives of gay people in ways that 'feel' authentic but which are far from naïve about the image-making process. Adapting Jim Collins's concept of 'New Sincerity', this article proposes that the new trend in gay cinema can be thought of as a mode of 'New Gay Sincerity'.¹ Collins first coined his phrase to account for conservative genre-cinema in the late 1980s and early 1990s that had turned its back on forms of parody and self-reflexivity to present instead an 'aura' of authenticity. It signifies a tentative reaction against the polished irony and the proliferated textuality of postmodernism. A related tendency can be found in examples of recent gay independent cinema. Andrew Haigh's *Weekend* (UK, 2011) seems most clearly and successfully to signal the new direction, though other recent films have employed similar strategies. Two recent releases from the USA (the first set in Manhattan, the second in San Francisco) operate in similar ways. *Keep the Lights On* (Ira Sachs, US, 2012) is a close-up examination of a gay filmmaker's difficult relationship with a crack-cocaine addict and it incorporates parts of a queer historical documentary the central character is making. *I Want Your Love* (Travis Mathews, US, 2012) explores definitions of fictional narrative, pornography and documentary realism by housing scenes of 'real' (i.e. un-simulated) sex within its dramatic frame. It is important to remember here that, like all categories of identity or desire, homosexuality has many different inflections, and is shaped by factors such as location and time. Care is therefore needed when comparing films

separated by the Atlantic, but it is also true to say that western, metropolitan homosexualities do share features that that cross national boundaries. The one British and two American films that are this article's focus each respond to a shared heritage of internationally distributed non-straight (and predominantly Anglophone) cinema, exhibiting a remarkably shared set of aesthetic and narrative strategies. Their emphatic use of realism – a defining feature of New Gay Sincerity – recalls debates about authentic, non-stereotyped representation to be found in gay politics of the 1970s. More particularly, though, their New Gay Sincerity sees them reacting to (and substantially rejecting) some of the central features of 'New Queer Cinema'.

It is over two decades since the label 'New Queer Cinema' was given by B. Ruby Rich to a crop of politically oppositional independent films dealing with non-straight sexuality.² Films such as *The Living End* (Greg Araki, US, 1991), *My Own Private Idaho* (Gus Van Sant, US, 1991) and *Edward II* (Derek Jarman, UK, 1991) responded to the American and British rise of the New Right in the 1980s, and angrily articulated some of the trauma surrounding the AIDS crisis. This was despite the very different cultural roots between Jarman and the Americans on Rich's list (something Rich did not comment on). In Rich's briefly sketched outline, films like these explored the connectivity between gender, sexuality, race and class; they showed how social discourses shape who we are, and they constructed anti-essentialist, fluid, multiple or hybrids senses of the self. They also drew on fashionable, postmodern forms of pastiche and genre-fusion, and were shaped in part by punk aesthetics and displayed a spirited intertextuality. In some ways, then, New Queer Cinema's political and artistic agendas ran on

tracks parallel to the anti-humanist, performative strands of Queer Theory developing within academia.

New Queer Cinema was always hugely male, and some of the still unsettled issues about it involve gender – for example, how far it offered a limited voice for women, or how viable or advantageous it was to include within its putatively rainbow flag of inclusivity examples of lesbian and queer film by or about women (with their distinct traditions and often very different positions). Because it centred so much on male desire, an understanding of New Queer Cinema is inadequate to explain female-queer, lesbian or indeed the feminist cinema of the 1990s. At times there were areas of productive crossover. As Anat Pick has argued, ‘New Queer Cinema enabled new ways of screening female intimacy as well as facilitated the transition of lesbianism into a more popular cultural arena.’³ The films identified in this article as representatives of a New Gay Sincerity all respond to the New Queer Cinema heritage, and like so much of it, they too are male-centred and male-authored.

Rich came to acknowledge that New Queer Cinema ‘was a term more successful for a moment than a movement. It was meant to catch the beat of a new kind of film- and video making that was fresh, edgy, low-budget, inventive, unapologetic, sexy, and stylistically daring.’⁴ She retains a sense of its oppositional hipness here, but by limiting it to a ‘moment’ seems to admit that the term she coined had become a too-convenient label, a point around which a very specific set of historically governed cinematic and political activities could rally. Momentariness also implies a singular ‘flash in the pan’; it brackets off much

consideration of consequences. Usefully, then, Michele Aaron and her contributors to *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader* went on to elaborate on Rich's original article to consider how the phenomenon productively intervenes in ongoing debates about lesbian and gay representation, about diversity within the LGBT movement, and about queer spectatorship.⁵

The independent queer film sector has continued to provide space for directors like John Cameron Mitchell and Xavier Dolan, whose films perpetuate 'New Queer Cinema' strategies but the specific 'moment' Rich spoke about has indeed passed. Lacking the clearly articulated radical agenda of the 1990s, there has been a sense that queer cinema – at least that coming from Anglophone cultures – has lost its sharp-edged militancy. The development of viable combination drug therapies in the mid 1990s changed the prognosis for some Westerners with AIDS who had access to this medical care, and the stigma directed at these people ceased to be such a dominant and all-informingly phobic narrative. It is not that the hopes of the liberation movement have been secured. In more conservative countries such as Poland, an LGBT themed film like *In the Name Of* (Malgoska Sszumowska, 2013), tackling homosexuality in the Catholic Church, is still clearly controversial. However, a liberalised and more incorporative mainstream in the USA has meant that commercial releases like *Boys Don't Cry* (Kimberly Pierce, US, 1999), *Brokeback Mountain* (Ang Lee, US, 2005), *The Kids Are All Right* (Lisa Cholodenko, US, 2010) and *Behind the Candelabra* (Steven Soderbergh, US, 2013) have achieved significant crossover success, though we should not forget that the last of these was not able to secure a theatrical release in the USA. There is also now a highly expanded DVD (and straight to DVD)

market for LGBT feature films, often featuring teenage romance, coming out narratives, and soft erotica.

In *New Gay Sincerity*, the traces of a knowing, postmodern vision are still detectable, as if the lessons of *New Queer Cinema* cannot be unlearned, but the queer quotient has been subsumed within a more earnestly non-judgemental and naturalistic style. Films in this style oscillate, in fact, between two distinct and contrary discourses. Realistic gay imagery, where the emphasis is on content matter and a supposed fidelity to the actual, balances delicately with a distancing, meta-cinematic inquisition into how these images actually operate. In each of the films discussed below, efforts to conjure a sense of 'unmediated' authenticity vie with a more self-consciously artful engagement with questions of film form. This is the essence of *New Gay Sincerity*.

Weekend: Authenticity meets Artifice

Weekend's impact is a matter of record. Its launch at the Texas-based 'indie' showcase 'South by Southwest Film Festival' (SXSW) in 2011 won it an audience award and a run of North American theatrical screenings. It toured the festival circuit outside of North America, achieved international distribution, and has garnered two-dozen other awards, including a jury prize at Outfest in Los Angeles, two British Independent Film Awards, a London Critics Circle Award and an Evening Standard award for Best Screenplay. After an initial deal with the gay, lesbian and art-house distributors Peccadillo Pictures, it was then selected by the prestigious Criterion Collection, which specializes in 'classic status' cinema, for DVD and Blu-ray release. Immediately, this checklist of *Weekend's*

achievements clues us into a number of important stories: that its early distribution profited from the sort of festivals that spawned New Queer Cinema in the early 1990s and from the distribution/exhibition networks and audiences which New Queer Cinema itself helped to propagate; that the tactical decision to launch at SXSW signals a reluctance to be pigeonholed solely as a gay film, or as a gay film at all (it may ally itself more with American indie romance films like *Before Sunrise* (Richard Linklater, US, 1995)); and that the deal with Criterion immediately brands it as a 'quality' film sold with art-house credentials, escaping the ghettoization of gay niche marketing and claiming to make a serious intervention in contemporary cinema culture. Despite its apparent subject matter – gay male identity, sex and romance – its appeal is not limited to gay male viewers, and these are not necessarily or exclusively the audiences it addresses. It does make a significant contribution to 'gay British cinema', though neither of these adjectives can signify a watertight taxonomy. Its Britishness reached audiences via exhibition and distribution channels based in the USA, while Haigh himself has admitted to being confused about *Weekend's* gayness. In an interview he has accepted: 'I'm happy for people to call it, if they want, a gay film, and for it to be seen as part of queer cinema. That's fine with me, and I'm proud of that and that's good. But at the same time I understand that you almost don't want to be that because you don't want to be limited or defined just by that. I think that's the thing ... People ask if I'm a gay filmmaker or am I not a gay filmmaker and that's just a weird one to answer as well.'⁶

Weekend is intimate, disarmingly simple, coolly naturalistic and politically astute. It charts a casual yet ultimately meaningful sexual/romantic encounter between

two young men, Russell (Tom Cullen) and Glen (Chris New) during one weekend. It shows us different ways of being gay, how sex and sexuality can be discussed, how gay men navigate public and private spaces, and it records the residual 'white noise' of homophobia in 21st century Britain. Russell and Glen differ starkly in their attitudes to sexuality, though Haigh strives to document the everyday minutia of their lives without being schematic or didactic. Tellingly, he shows his protagonists realistically as people existing *in the world*. While two-shots dominate for conversation scenes, Urszula Pontikos (the Director of Photography) often uses long-shots to situate the protagonists within crowded environments. 'Real' people enter and exit the frame untidily; snatches of conversations (occasionally homophobic) are overheard. Gay identity, the film demonstrates, exists within a wider social context. As Russell and Glen get to know each other, we watch them exploring how their own identities have been shaped by their different histories. Russell is a lifeguard in a swimming pool: as his job implies, he is watcher and a doer - he has saved people's lives. He is less vocal than Glen about his sexuality. An aspiring artist, Glen is developing an oral art project about sexual personae by getting gay men to record intimate details of first sexual experiences with new partners. He is declamatory, confrontational, loud, and well versed in queer political jousting.

On a Friday evening, Russell goes to a party at his straight friend Jamie's house. He is godfather to Jamie's daughter, whose birthday party he promises to come to on Sunday. On his way home, Russell decides to visit a gay bar, where he is cruised by Glen. The next morning we find them together at Russell's flat. Before he leaves, Glen persuades Russell to record his memories of their previous night

into his Dictaphone for his art project. When Russell finishes work that afternoon, Glen meets him and they go back to the flat, where they discuss Glen's recording project. Russell reveals that he grew up in care homes with his friend Jamie and does not know his parents. They have sex again, and as he is leaving, Glen (who has already said that he does not 'do boyfriends') announces that he is leaving the next day to start an art history course in Portland, USA. He invites Russell to his leaving party that evening. They meet again, and after a trip to the fair, go back to the flat a third time. While taking coke, Russell admits to a creative project of his own: he keeps a private journal of men he has met, and it transpires that one of the men is Glen's ex-boyfriend. They talk about sex, relationships and attitudes to sexuality, and the following morning, Glen links Russell's reluctance to display his sexuality in public to the absence of his parents: coming out, he says, is the 'gay rites of passage' Russell never had. He plays the role of Russell's father and Russell formally comes out to him as gay. They part, but Russell later leaves his goddaughter's party to find Glen at Nottingham train station for a last reel farewell. They kiss; Glen cries and gives Russell a parcel; they separate. The film's last sequence shows Russell at his flat window as he listens to the recording Glen has given him, recounting their first night together.

Weekend is shot entirely on location in what could be any English city. It is identifiable as Nottingham, although its landmarks are not dwelt upon. It might just as well be Leicester, Sheffield or any other mid-sized provincial city. Significantly, it is *not* London, the metropolitan destination customarily linked to 'lifestyle' gay culture (neither is it Manchester or Brighton, about which the same

could be said). Instead we are offered a landscape of 'ordinariness': high-rise flats, a suburban house, a run-of-the-mill gay pub, a loud straight bar, a municipal swimming pool, a train station. The film's props and costumes are resolutely ordinary too. There is obviously nothing inherently realistic about Nottingham *per se*, but looking at lives lived outside the clichéd centres of British gay fiction and film indicates a wish to represent experiences which are recognisable, but which rarely achieve screen space. The design of the film was influenced by the photography of 'Quinnford & Scout', a gay couple who had chronicled everyday moments in their relationship together in an intimate and apparently spontaneous photo-journalistic style. Haigh then employed 'Quinnford & Scout' to do stills photography for *Weekend*. This impulse to authenticity is not limited to the *mise-en-scène*. The soundscape is entirely diegetic, consisting only of conversation and ambient noise. There is no title music, no opening credits, and even when music is used for emotional effect, it is clearly sourced diegetically: Glen plays a recording of John Grant's ballad *TC & Honeybear* in Russell's flat during their Saturday night together, and his song *Marz* accompanies the film to its closing credits. Both are from Grant's 2010 album *Queen of Denmark* – it is entirely expected that two cool young gay men would know this gay singer-songwriter's work. By incorporating these tracks the film writes itself further into a realistic matrix of gay culture.

This is an unusual tactic, difficult schedule, and it was designed to help the actors and the production team follow Russell and Glen's weekend as authentically as possible. As seems evident from the assured performances of Tom Cullen and Chris New, the shooting scripts were developed from partly improvised

rehearsals. This all marks a respect for the pro-filmic events played out before the camera, and it is therefore not surprising that the film's most conspicuous stylistic feature is its use of long takes. The trend in commercial cinema has long been towards faster editing. According to David Bordwell, in the classical Hollywood period to 1960 films tended to have 300 to 700 shots, giving an average shot length of 8 to 11 seconds, though since then, the pace has quickened: by the 1980s, Bordwell reports, many films had at least 1500 shots, and now, aside from art movies like the 2002 version of *Solaris* (average shot length of 10 to 11 seconds), most films average 3-6 seconds per shot.⁷ The long-take *per se* is not a defining feature of New Gay Sincerity, but the trend is there: Travis Mathews's *I Want Your Love* has around 570 shots (6.8 seconds average duration) and Ira Sachs's *Keep the Lights On* has about 330 shots (averaging 17 seconds each). *Weekend* is spartan in comparison: it consists of just 187 shots, meaning the average shot length is just over 30 seconds. It is committed, to a mathematically emphatic degree, to a mode of observational realism founded in the long-take, though its pace never feels sluggish or self-consciously protracted. Rack focusing and camera movement effectively 'edit' what we notice within each shot, and people or objects often move into and out of the frame and serve as interruptions. Hand-held camerawork, frequent camera movement, and twitching jump-cuts demonstrate that this is not the sort of deliberately ponderous challenge to adrenalin-rushed commercial cinema associated with art-house directors of 'slow cinema', like Andrei Tarkovsky or Bela Tarr, whose work is also built on long-takes. If anything, the style here is closer to that associated with the 'Dogme 95' group. *Weekend* signals a similar wish to produce more authentic imagery, though its locations were carefully designed and

furnished, its props were judiciously sourced, its mise-en-scène is designed with a deliberately bright colour palette, and at times the dialogue we hear is briefly detached from the visual images. All of these are departures from the strictures of the 'Dogme 95' Manifesto.

We should not be surprised at this partial and selective use of Dogme stylistics, for the film's agenda is to marry its vérité realism to patterns of static long shots that detach the viewer from the material. An establishing shot of a tower block; a long take out of one of the flat windows; an interior corridor; a high angle view of Russell in the bath: this opening quartet of shots creates a tone of quiet, deliberate contemplation. Establishing shots of the flats will recur half a dozen times, dividing the film's action into clear episodes. One of these shots watches a security camera panning round the estate, a reminder that Haigh is undertaking an intimate surveillance of his own, and that we are watching it. Conspicuously, there are three near-identical high-angle shots from Russell's window, looking steeply down to watch Glen leave on Saturday morning, Saturday afternoon and finally on Sunday morning, and each shot lasts five seconds longer than the previous one (16, 21 and 26 seconds respectively). This well-patterned and meaningfully rhythmic design implies Glen's increasing reluctance to leave Russell, and Russell's reluctance to let him go.

Formally underscored moments like these 're-establishing shots' punctuate the more immediately experienced action between the protagonists. Glen's voice-recording art-project allows for a yet more conscious layer of self-reflexivity to

be inscribed, and the taping scene allows Haigh to achieve four distinct and important things without being heavy-handed about it. First, the intimate details that are recorded reveal Russell and Glen's characters. Russell is private, hesitant, and troubled at the thought of everyone being 'open' about sex; Glen is prurient, provocative and defiantly articulate about all aspects of it. A set of political positions about gay identity and the closet on one hand, and queer provocation on the other, are thus verbalised at character-level. Second, it allows us to hear, explicitly, what Glen's philosophical and artistic defence of the project is: he is interesting in the ways we become blank canvasses when we first meet, allowing us to project different versions of ourselves, to perform different identities. His recording project hopes to capture some of these moments of performance. By extension, this is Haigh's project too, for it is exactly what is enacted in the encounter between Glen and Russell. As Thomas Dawson has remarked, 'Haigh himself says he has always been fascinated by people struggling for authenticity in who they want to be, and the gap between who they are in private and who they are in public.'⁸ It is important to note here that while the philosophical kernel of the film (the mismatch between private and public identity) can certainly be tilted towards aspects of LGBT experience, it is in fact a universal social experience we all encounter. LGBT specificity and universal application: achieving both of these seems to be an aspiration of New Gay Sincerity.

The third and fourth functions of Glen's voice-recording project turn the film's attention back onto itself meta-cinematically. Since Haigh has elided their first night together and cut straight to their morning coffee, Russell's recollection of

sex with Glen retrospectively substitutes for the withheld images. Both genre expectation (boy meets boy) and gay male viewers' desires alike would probably want the sex-scene be shown, but the audio-recording serves to mark its absence, and audiences are left to visualise the events for themselves. Debates about visibility, explicitness, artistic/personal liberation and exploitative sexual imagery were all part of the rhetoric of the lesbian and gay movements after Stonewall, and above-the-parapet gay cinema emerged from an underground context that was often hybridised with erotic and pornographic cinema. Any film that trades in gay sex scenes has to be read against this cinematic history, and so it is with *Weekend*. It manipulates gay male audiences desires, and the recording device is a way of underscoring that fact that visualising gay sex honestly is one of the things the film is about. Scenes of Russell and Glen having sex do feature later in the film. These are 'sensitively' and naturalistically filmed, though they are not overly eroticised and neither do they adopt an explicitly pornographic grammar. The camera never dwells on the actors' genitals, and there are no actual shots of ejaculation. Nevertheless, a brief glimpse of semen (or, to be precise, what seems to be semen since we haven't seen any ejaculation) on Russell's belly is a casually observed and intimately realistic detail insisting that just as sex is a bodily function, so too is sexual identity an embodied phenomenon. A cinematic consideration of film-sex is underway here. As Richard Dyer has argued, 'The goal of the pornographic narrative is coming; in filmic terms, the goal is ejaculation, that is, visible coming.'⁹ Dyer's persuasively concludes that such shots have two functions: they are literal proof of orgasm, connected to the 'realness' of the actor's arousal, and they signify how central the 'visible' is to constructions of male sexuality. *Weekend* traffics in this visual

economy. Its concealment and exhibition of Tom Cullen's and Chris New's bodies are a strip-teasing acknowledgement of gay cinema's pornographic cousin. Haigh's actors are fit, sexy objects of desire, their bodies approximating to the same socially driven standards of toned physique that we find in pornography. Perhaps there is an element of idealisation here, which runs counter to New Gay Sincerity's emphatic naturalism, though neither body is hyperbolically muscled, and neither is lingeringly objectified.

Finally, Haigh uses Glen's project to initiate a discussion about art, audiences and sexuality that is so pointed it might as well be about *Weekend* itself. 'No one's going to come and see it because it's about gay sex', Glen sincerely rages. 'The gays'll only come because they want a glimpse of a cock (and they'll be disappointed) and the straights won't come because, well, its got nothing to do with their world. They'll go and see pictures of refugees or murder or rape but gay sex? Fuck off!' Haigh's reluctance to be defined as a gay filmmaker; the sense that 'gay cinema' will be erotic; *Weekend's* launch away from the LGBT film festival circuit; the suspicion that 'New Queer Cinema' was too 'niche': all of these contextual problems about non-straight films and their audiences are condensed into Glen's own artistic frustration, though the emotional impact of the film and its DVD distribution by Criterion indicate that Haigh's wish to document a narrative which speaks about gay lives but which transcends the gay ghetto has been a recognised by the market.

Significantly, the film avoids the issues-led 'social problem' narrative which have become clichés of many gay storylines: the closet, coming out, AIDS, social

intolerance or exclusion barely feature thematically, and when the 'coming out scenario' is raised, it happens in a novel and surprising way, enacted around a discussion of Russell's adoption. *Weekend* is governed by its sense of realism, and although it is not innocent of debates about how images are created and received, it alludes to these with a light hand, falling far short of any genuinely postmodern, self-reflexive register. It is a film about gay lives, not about other gay films. Hence, when Glen asks Russell if their farewell-scene at the train station is their '*Notting Hill* moment', referencing Roger Mitchell's rom-com commercial success (UK, 1999), a quick note of postmodern irony is struck, but only briefly, and by a character who has so far shown himself to be culturally aware and to be guarded about his own emotional sincerity. The very next shot – a 3 minute long take of their final farewell – treats its subject matter in an astonishingly sincere way. Glen and Russell are in the distance, seen through the train station's iron railings, their words barely audible. The camera moves towards them slowly till the railings disappear from view, as the usually cool controlled Glen cries and they kiss. Someone off-screen wolf-whistles and shouts 'fucking gay boys'. This time it is Russell, customarily demure in public, who looks to respond and Glen who tells him to ignore the abuse. When Glen has gone, Russell starts to cry and walks away alone, where we finally see him at his window, listening to John Grant's song *Marz*. Nothing here is knowing, hip or cynical.

New Gay Sincerity USA-style: Ira Sachs and Travis Mathews

New Gay Sincerity is manifesting itself elsewhere too, as has been mentioned, and comparisons allow us to delineate its features more confidently. Launched at the Sundance Festival, Ira Sachs's *Keep the Lights On* charts a long-term relationship between Erik (Thure Lindhardt), a documentary filmmaker in New York, and Paul (Zachary Booth), his crack-addicted lawyer-boyfriend. It is an episodic chronicle (title cards tell us that sequences take place in 1998, 2000 and 2003) and over its story duration of almost a decade it closely details the relationship difficulties from Erik's perspective, presenting a realistic account of addiction in relationships. As in *Weekend*, neutrally observed sex scenes are included, primarily to indicate physical and emotional intimacy, and also, here, to show some of the messy frank realities of anal sex. If the narrative does centre on a 'social problem', sexuality is not it. Addiction (to drugs, to sex phone lines, to partners) is Sachs's theme, and while it is explored within a gay male relationship, these concerns are obviously not exclusive to LGBT people. Again issues are raised realistically within a gay context but which are more universally applicable.

The cinematography and editing throughout *Keep the Lights On* are conventional: shot/reverse shot structures and stable master shots tend to dominate, and the camera is not always as obviously handheld as it is in *Weekend*, though the tendency to long-takes is still present, and natural lighting is often used. Where *Weekend* used John Grant's music minimally and entirely diegetically, *Keep the Lights On* is thoroughly woven through with the music of Arthur Russell, the cellist and singer-songwriter who died of AIDS in 1992, similarly binding the film to a gay-queer sensibility. While the gay and artistic milieux of the film are

affluent and Manhattanite (just the sort privileged class-stratum New Queer Cinema tended to reject), the narrative is based on the director's own lived experience of his difficult relationship with Bill Clegg. If there is little of the ordinary 'social realism' of Haigh's work here, and if the extra-diegetic music and camerawork couch the film more comfortably within a classical narrative tradition, its frankness and its autobiographical elements are still putative markers of authenticity. Reviewers certainly picked up on this. To the *New York Times*, 'the look, mood and rhythm of the film are exquisitely, even thrillingly authentic'¹⁰ while *The Hollywood Reporter* found in it 'a kind of poetic realism that feels fresh and culturally specific.'¹¹

The treatment of queer culture and history is even more overt than that dramatized via Glen's artwork in *Weekend*, and the effect is more thoroughly meta-cinematic. We see Erik collecting interviews and editing a film on the (real) queer underground filmmaker and Broadway photographer Avery Willard, who worked from the 1940s to the 1990s. One of the people Erik interviews is James Bidgood, the director of *Pink Narcissus* (US, 1971), and we see some brief scenes from Willard's own films as Erik watches them. Willard's own homoerotic imagery clearly counterpoints the images Sachs himself presents, as does the montage of male nude sketches that accompanies Sachs's opening credits. What is peculiar is that the short documentary we see Erik making, *In Search of Avery Willard*, actually exists as an independent text. It was made in partnership with *Keep the Lights On*, Sachs was its Executive Producer, Cary Kehayan directed it and it was released in 2012. The interviews that purport to be in the character Erik's film are actually from Kehayan's documentary. Sachs references and

spotlights this gay cultural past, and when we learn that Willard was 'important for the gay community' because he filmed 'stuff nobody else would film', we recognise that Sachs is self-consciously adopting the same role for himself, claiming an artistic lineage back to Willard.

Brief comparisons with Travis Mathews work are also constructive because he is mainly interested in the interface between narrative fiction, documentary and pornography. *I Want Your Love* grew out of the San Francisco episodes of a multi-city project of his called *In Their Room*, a series of short films (2009 – present) intimately featuring gay men in their bedrooms, at times vulnerable, banal or erotic. Featuring some of the men from *In Their Room*, *I Want Your Love* has minimal narrative: Jessie (Jessie Metzger) is about to leave San Francisco and return to Ohio. Over a few days, we see various sexual couplings strung together into a storyline that is built around Jessie's leaving party. Not a lot more happens, though the San Francisco location is of course narratively significant as the location of much of the counter-cultural revolution, and as one of the longest established gay centres in the USA. Mathews's visual style is utterly naturalistic. His handheld camerawork is like that in *Weekend*, though the cutting is faster. All of the men in the film (it is almost entirely male) play characters with their own first names, and they portray versions of themselves onscreen. Everything borders on documentary. This is made explicit in the sex scenes, which are graphic, and which often feature shots of ejaculation, documentary proof (as I suggested earlier) that the sex is 'real'. However, this does raise a related question about identity, performance and masquerade: how far are these people acting? The solicited spectator response is not arousal. The flat, natural lighting

and the casting of men with un-toned bodies distance Mathews's imagery from commercial porn, though the sex scenes inevitably allude to that iconography and (bluntly put) an ejaculation is an ejaculation.

Andrew Haigh had, in fact, covered similar thematic territory himself with an earlier low-budget feature, *Greek Pete* (UK, 2009), his first feature (*Weekend* was his second). It is a narrative-documentary – a piece of 'structured reality' with agreed scenarios and improvised scenes – following a year in the life of a real London rent-boy and including brief footage of one of his sexual encounters. Rent-boys were one of the stock character types of New Queer Cinema. They feature strongly, for example, in both the fictionalised narrative of *My Own Private Idaho* and in that film's quasi-documentary sequence where young male prostitutes recall incidents from their sex-work in almost direct addresses 'to camera'. Rent boys connote vagrancy, disadvantage, possible rebellion, and marginalisation, and the sex they engage in is potentially and remarkably queer. The relationships between their sexual identities (whether gay, straight, bisexual or anything else) and the actual sex acts they undertake might be blurred or disjointed. Their sex lives might be 'denaturalised', commodified, and performed in multiple or shifting ways. Hence, they had become standard-bearing character types of the queer movement. Despite this, *Greek Pete* shows that the escorting business can be dealt with realistically, rather than as a textual signifier of sexual outlawry or fluidity. *Greek Pete* normalises its protagonist, and successfully undoes many of the clichés that have concretised around the image of the male escort.

Charting the Parameters of New Gay Sincerity

The term 'New Sincerity' has evolved since Jim Collins first used it in 1993, yet it remains a useful one for considering certain responses to the proliferation of postmodern culture. For Collins, it accounts for films like *Field of Dreams* (Phil Alden Robinson, US, 1989) and *Dances With Wolves* (Kevin Costner, US, 1990) that draw on generic patterns 'to recover a lost 'purity'.'¹² Parody, irony and self-reflexivity are beyond their rhetorical frame; they aim to forge an aura of authenticity. As Warren Buckland has noted, Collins writes well about the 'sincerity' of these films but loses sight of what is 'new' about them. *New Sincerity*, finessed conceptually by Warren Buckland to emphasis the 'new', knowingly responds to postmodern aesthetics without jettisoning the sincerity: 'In a dialectical move' he argues, '[it] incorporates postmodern irony.'¹³ The New Gay Sincerity in the fiction films of Haigh, Sachs and Travis performs a similar function by purporting to provide transparent images of LGBT realities, while remaining self-aware enough to interrogate (but not subvert) those images.

The newly emerging cinematic tendency described here is, of course, terminologically problematical. As Charles Jencks suggests in his attempt to map out the cultural forms that supersede postmodernism, 'Unusual names should mark changing situations.'¹⁴ Post-New-Queer-Cinema; post-postmodern-cinema; neo-queer-cinema; gay-neo-realism: all these terms are partially suitable, but none is quite right, and their awkwardly repetitious hyphenations warn us that we are entering a definitional quagmire. While it is productive to draw on the

post-postmodern implications of 'New Sincerity', the presence of the word 'Gay' in my chosen formulation does warrant explanation.

Gayness, here conceived, refers to modes of identity that are figured around same-sex desire, and since this article focuses specifically on gay male cinema, it also needs to be reported that the term is seen here to be distinct from lesbianism, though that word also denotes a mode of identity centred on constructions of same-sex desire. In the rapidly developing discourses around homosexuality during the years of western gay and lesbian liberation that followed Stonewall, calls to group solidarity were figured around a particular set of values and acts (coming out, visibility, pride) and they crystallised around campaigns against homophobia and for gay and lesbian rights. Richard Dyer called his study of lesbian and gay film *Now You See it* because issues around visibility have always been vital to homosexual men and women, before and after Stonewall (1969), and the affirmation politics of the LGBT movement were drawn to the documentary form precisely because it asserts 'thereness ... the fact of our existence'.¹⁵ It is worth remembering that from early on the movement's values were expressed through various hybrid fiction-documentaries. Chris Larkin's *A Very Natural Thing* (US, 1974) is an early instance of this because it incorporates documentary footage within its fictionalised narrative, deploys a largely realist aesthetic. It may serve as a gay domestic melodrama insofar as it traces its gay male protagonist's romantic relationships but in most ways it accords to the expectations of classic narrative cinema. Jack Hazan's *A Bigger Splash* (US, 1975), nominally a documentary about David Hockney, anticipated current trends in 'structured reality' television by being partly scripted and

relying on dramatic enactments. In LGBT cinema like this, as in the New Gay Sincerity that owes a debt to it, filmmakers actively participate in a political movement which mobilises itself around the *issue of representation itself*, because identities based on same-sex attraction are not visible unless they are made so, and because non-stereotyped and non-demeaning images of non-straight people have always been in short supply.

Queer as it is now understood is a term deriving from the 1990s, and as David Halperin memorably formulated it signifies 'whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. It is an identity without an essence. 'Queer' then, demarcates not a positivity but a positionality *vis-à-vis* the normative.'¹⁶ There were certainly strong oppositional strands in debates among homosexual men and women after Stonewall. Some conceived the gay and lesbian movements as containing radical utopian possibilities, such as the toppling of normative genders and sexualities altogether, the removal of sex-roles, and the elimination of straight male power. Elements such as these might be thought of as queer *avant la lettre*, and they were formulated alongside the more central strand of sex politics that centred on gay and lesbian rights-based activism. Holding fixed, socially constructed roles and identities at a distance, the radical wing of the gay movement fed into what would emerge as the marginal Queer agit-politics of the 1990s and into the more fluid, deceptive, unmanageable, performative, contingent and flighty modes of identity and desire seen in New Queer films such as *My Own Private Idaho*, *The Living End* and *Paris is Burning* (US, Jennie Livingston, 1990). Because New Gay Sincerity acknowledges but ultimately rejects the sort of postmodern play

associated with New Queer Cinema in favour of a more studied and unblinking realism, the adjective 'gay' is a better fit than 'queer'.

This is not to say that New Gay Sincerity is conservative. Witness the debate about LGBT issues in *Weekend*, for it seems to dramatise the transition from queer politics to something new. Glen could stand for many of the values of New Queer Cinema: he is loud, cocky, irreverent, provocative and embattled. He even arranges Russell's fridge magnets to spell the word 'faggot' (an irreverent gesture that might stand synecdochically for all of queer culture's disruptiveness). Glen also claims to reject fixity in the name of fluidity and possibility too. 'Everything becomes cemented' he complains. We never see his home, potentially a place of stasis for him, so he is always on the move. He is about to relocate to Portland Oregon, incidentally a city associated with New Queer Cinema through the figure of Gus van Sant, who lives there and has set and shot many of his films there. He is so insistently argumentative, though, that for all the merits of his points about hegemonic heterosexism they sound like a mantra, and Russell's challenge to his liberalism is well made: 'You want everyone to think independently but you want everyone to agree with you.' Russell might readily stand for the very mode of assimilationist positions that queer politics renounced. He is cautious; he is not flagrant. However, and with characteristic sincerity, he does return a sense of vigour to the reformist gay rights agenda that queer politics has written off, by addressing a very topical issue: 'A man standing up with another man in front of everyone saying that 'I love you and I want to get married.' I think that's a pretty fucking radical statement.' It is as if two moments in the history of the Gay and Queer

movements have been brought into dialogue, and repeatedly, Glen is the one who seems disarmed by his encounter with Russell.

New Gay Sincerity's long-takes, its neutral gaze, its avoidance of cliché and gay stereotypes, and its presentation of understated narratives might all sound worthy or pious, but just as I wish to argue that it is not conservative, I also wish to argue that, in navigating away from the artful provocations of queerness and the performativity of postmodernism, it is not culpably naïve. It does risk this verdict, though. On a parallel track, and in a celebrated essay, David Foster Wallace predicted a fertile new direction for American novelists exhausted by the facile irony of their media-saturated PoMo world, and what he expresses neatly anticipates New Gay Sincerity:

The next real literary 'rebels' in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of 'anti-rebels', born oglers who dare to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse single-entendre values. Who treat old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction. Who eschew self-consciousness and fatigue. These anti-rebels would be outdated, of course, before they even started. Too sincere. Clearly repressed. Backward, quaint, naïve, anachronistic ... The old postmodern insurgents risked the gasp and squeal: shock, disgust, outrage, censorship, accusations of socialism, anarchism, nihilism. The new rebels might be the ones willing to risk the yawn, the rolled

eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the 'How banal.' Accusations of sentimentality, melodrama. Credulity.¹⁷

New Queer Cinema defined itself by its rebellion, and New Gay Sincerity might well look conspicuously anti-rebellious if judged against those standards. The ripe phrase 'born oglers' catches the insistent observational long-take which structures the new gay sincere gaze, and the deployment of single-entendre sounds like a clear rejection of one form of clichéd camp gay discourse. New Gay Sincerity's fly-on-the-wall depiction of the quotidian may veer towards banality too. It is particularly noticeable that Foster Wallace ultimately arrives at the words 'sentimentality' and 'melodrama', for while New Gay Sincerity owes something to the social-realist documentary form, the films detailed in this article also operate along melodramatic lines.

Film Studies finds melodrama to be a charged site for exploring familial and romantic dynamics, and feminist criticism has analysed its female-centred narratives for their exploration of disempowerment, passivity and entrapment.¹⁸ Melodrama like this deals with those who are either the victims of bourgeois patriarchy or who fail (or refuse) to measure up to its masculine, virile and heterosexual ideals: women, the sick, and injured or impaired men. Hence it has proved to be particularly adept for narrating gay and lesbian storylines too. *I Want Your Love* uses Arthur Russell's music heavily and chronicles the lives of two people trapped in an addictive and damaging relationship. *Weekend's* use of John Grant's music is more restrained but its melodramatic elements are at least as strong. In fact, by marrying social realism to understated melodrama, two

landmarks of British cinema ghost through it. Its title, its working-class Nottingham locations (including the fairground), and its construction of an Arthur Seaton-like rebel in the character of Glen channels the spirit of *Saturday Night and Sunday* (Karel Reisz, UK, 1960). This much was implied in the title of Thomas Dawson's article on the film, 'Friday night & Saturday morning.'¹⁹ The very provinciality of *Weekend's* vision Nottingham undeniably writes it into the British New Wave tradition. When Arthur Seaton throws a stone at the hoardings for a new housing estate in the closing sequence of Reisz's film, his ambiguously futile if vigorous gesture anticipates Glen's railing against heteronormativity. At the same time, *Weekend* points to the enormous emotional effects of a seemingly insignificant relationship; Russell is reluctant to express his desires in public and is associated with a small domestic space; romance is clued through music which is shown to be diegetic in origin; themes of entrapment and escape are writ large in the image of an emotional farewell at a railway station; and a formal sense of circularity is insisted upon in the closing image of Russell at home returning (via the tape-recording) to the memory of his first night with Glen. In these respects, *Weekend* closely resembles one of the melodramas that helped to define what John Ellis termed 'Quality British Realism', a film whose theme of romantic taboo, and whose homosexual quotient has left it open to queer interpretation: David Lean's *Brief Encounter* (UK, 1945).²⁰ While intertextual allusions and generic allegiances can therefore give shape to New Gay Sincerity, its authentic candour and eschewal of cliché are what defines it, as Andrew Haigh's own reflection on *Weekend* makes clear: 'I wanted to do something honest about gay relationships because I just don't see that in films. People talk about the romantic element in *Weekend*, but to me it's a

character study about two complex, well-rounded characters. I don't want to watch a film unless the characters feel real and I care about them.'²¹ The evidence is that his work is symptomatic of a fresh direction for gay-themed cinema.

End Notes

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18 See, for example, Christine Gledhill (ed.), *Home is Where The Heart Is*, British Film Institute: London, 1987 and Jackie Byars, *All That Hollywood Allows: Re-reading Gender in 1950s Melodrama*, University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill, 1991.

19 Dawson, 2011, p. 15.

20 John Ellis, 'Art, Culture and Quality: Terms for a Cinema in the Forties and the Seventies', *Screen*, 19: 3, 1978, 9-50.

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