

Porous Cels

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Abstract I use my most recent film, *Thick Relations*, to argue that traditional narrative structures are by definition oppressive and controlling. Traditional narratives demand a straight progress through time, through life, through love, through sexuality and conflict and family—a straight progress that would have us believe in and desirous of state-sanctioned institutions and relations. Queer lives don't make sense. We are not supposed to be alive, to love the people we love, to live in our bodies so creatively. And it is precisely this confusion—this nonsense—that I seek to preserve for the ways that it exposes and rejects normativity. I believe we need to hold onto, acknowledge, and celebrate this otherness, not because we thrive on being contrarian, but because the regimes of normality are the forces that seek to obliterate us. We must resist in order to survive.

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If failure can be measured in rejection letters, my film *Thick Relations* is a failure. I am used to being rejected from top-tier mainstream film festivals; it is a familiar routine. I was not, however, expecting a string of rejections from nearly all the American LGBTQ film festivals. Beyond my emotional investment in the film, I came to see that this response (or lack of response) spoke to a broader anxiety about trans representation, queer lives, and the ways we are often forced to narrate them.

Thick Relations is a meditation on the richness, creativity, diversity, and alterity of a queer kinship laboratory that privileges bloodless and lawless relations as the most crucial of bonds. It is a chosen family affair. The film is a celebration of the intimacies that exist outside the normative trappings of “proper” or “mature” romances. It intentionally defies narrative resolution by allowing for relational ambiguity in tracing the ways that chosen family arrangements embrace a different logic of love, alliance, and identification.

When I say that the film defies narrative, I mean that I did not use a traditional three-act structure as a way of creating a dramatic tension, nor did I wrap up the film in a way that relieves tension with some personal, or political, triumph. Circling through three main characters, the film creates a participatory

experience of the family unit they create and re-create in the face of loss. There are many things about *Thick Relations*' characters we never know for sure: their names, their genders, the specific relationships they have with each other. Within the first fifteen minutes of the film, the person established as the main character disappears, without (direct) acknowledgment; sexual encounters interrupt the narrative flow in extreme close-up; dialogue can be hard to hear; text appears on the screen; nobody "gets the girl" in the end. We viewers are required to let go—of our expectations, sure, and also of the information we wish to gather and of the basic thrill of narrative development. And this, I believe, is the logic of our queer lives.

Our lives don't make sense. We are not supposed to be alive, to love the people we love, to live in our bodies the ways in which we so creatively do. And it is precisely this confusion—this nonsense—that I seek to preserve for the ways that it exposes and rejects normativity. I believe we need to hold onto this otherness not because we thrive on being contrarian but because the regimes of normality are the forces that seek to obliterate us. We must resist in order to survive.

My films utilize complex and nonnormative structures precisely because as a queer and trans person I use complex and nonnormative structures to understand myself and the world around me. Traditional narrative structures are by definition oppressive and controlling. Traditional narratives demand a straight progress through time, through life, through love, through sexuality and conflict and family—a straight progress that would have us believe in and desirous of state-sanctioned institutions and relations. When I try to fit stories and images into traditional narrative structures, these stories lose the queer temporalities and teleological inversions inherent in our trans lives. Our stories and images are constrained, restrained, and strain to fit into narratives within which they lose so much of their queerness and their specificity.

What does it mean to refuse the expectations about how we live and love? We see this in *Thick Relations* as we watch a relationship develop between two characters, but the nature of this relationship is not made explicit. To label this dynamic as platonic, romantic, or sexual would not only dilute it, but it would disallow its amorphous nature—its queerness. We cannot pin it down, and as Eve Sedgwick has warned us, we *must not* pin it down.

When we demand that something fit into expectations in order for it to make sense, we are echoing the modalities of our own oppression—perhaps we even perpetuate it, perpetrate it: "You, queer, make sense of yourself." Assimilation into expected roles becomes a tactic for survival, but it comes at the cost of erasing the difference and the particularity of our own attempts to be ourselves on our own terms. Is our only possibility to reveal ourselves through stories that have already been written by others for others?

Through narrative interruptions, through changes in shooting style, through the use of text, and through a slow but irregular pace and a focus on what could be considered the banal, *Thick Relations* seeks to undo expectations of narrative. However, it does not offer us a clearly marked alternative “way in.” And this position “outside”—this critical distance—is precisely the position from which perception can shift.

If I watch a film and find that it is not what I thought it was going to be, or it is not acting the way I think a film is meant to act, I can dismiss it, decide that it’s bad, that I no longer want to watch it; I can walk out. Or I can take a risk and trust that perhaps the film is not “acting right” because it has other things planned for me. That the film is perhaps articulating itself through a language I am not yet familiar with—not the language that speaks the name of my oppression but the language I learn in the act of liberation. Instead of asking it to be like other films I have seen, I can open myself to the radical possibilities this new language may offer me.

Perhaps this experience is not dissimilar to what happens for some cis-gender folks when they are asked to let go of their need for there to be only two—clearly demarcated—genders. An experience of terror. Everything unravels, and queerness seeps in through porous cels.

I suspect that I face an issue endemic to LGBTQ film festivals: there are people who attend in the hope of seeing themselves represented, and then there are those who attend in the hope of coming to understand or to learn something about the people represented. There is a double imperative: represent me *and* include something instructive so that I can point someone else toward this as a *text*—a site for learning, perhaps for justice.

Out of this double imperative is born a double frustration with a film like *Thick Relations*. The audience is not getting an experience they can definitively say is theirs, nor are they given a tool they can offer to someone else as a way to understand them. And it is here, in the dark of the theater, where so many viewers grope for this familiar narrative, for the film that reinforces the story they already have about themselves. They reach for the hand next to theirs, for the familiar comforts, instead of submitting to the dark and to the queer form unfolding on the screen.

If “making sense” is necessary for success—in art and otherwise—then I think I probably prefer failure. The task of making sense of myself, of the world I imagine, is far less interesting to me than living in that world and in myself. I suggest that rather than making sense we aim to disrupt sense. We aim to tell stories that are unconcerned with mapping triumph and identity and instead reveal the twisted secret joys and miseries, connections and undoings, big and little deaths of which our lives and relationships are made. I suggest that we be

willing to make nonsense. That we be willing to misunderstand and to be misunderstood. That we concern ourselves with the confusion of our hearts rather than with ordering our minds.

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