

ISSN: 2514-0612

Journal homepage: <http://briefencounters-journal.co.uk/BE>

On the Threshold of Desire: Queer Sublime and Erotic Liminalities in Werner Schroeter's *Der Rosenkönig* (1986) and Ulrike Ottinger's *Johanna d'Arc of Mongolia* (1989)

Author(s): Tristan Venturi

Email: tristanventuri@outlook.com

Source: *Brief Encounters*, Vol. 6 No. 1 (April 2022), pp. 13–26.

URL: <http://briefencounters-journal.co.uk/BE/article/view/298>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24134/be.v6i1.298>

© Tristan Venturi

License (open-access): This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. No warranty, express or implied, is given. Nor is any representation made that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for any actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

Brief Encounters is an open access journal that supports the dissemination of knowledge to a global readership. All articles are free to read and accessible to all with no registration required. For more information please visit our journal homepage: <http://briefencounters-journal.co.uk/BE>.

In association with

On the Threshold of Desire: Queer Sublime and Erotic Liminalities in Werner Schroeter's *Der Rosenkönig* (1986) and Ulrike Ottinger's *Johanna d'Arc of Mongolia* (1989)

Tristan Venturi

'Must imagination shun the encounter with reality? Or are they enamoured of each other? Can they form an alliance? Are they changed in the encounter with each other?'

— *Johanna d'Arc of Mongolia*

'No matter how much you walk, you never reach it. Suddenly its brilliance vanishes, and it becomes banal. And you won't reach it before night falls.'

— *Der Rosenkönig*

The word 'queer' first entered the English language in the early sixteenth century. Since then, it has not ceased to generate linguistic chaos and academic disagreement over what the term defines and describes. It also remains unclear whether it should be conceivable to even define or describe the idea of 'queer' itself without doing a disservice to its very own amorphous and erratic nature. An etymologically dubious adjective, 'queer', likely originated from the German *quer* ('cross, oblique, squint, perverse, wrongheaded'). Initially, it denoted someone or something 'strange, odd, peculiar, eccentric,'¹ 'unusual or not expected,'² 'differing in some way from what is usual or normal.'³ A pejorative use of the term gained traction at the turn of the nineteenth century. Around such time, the word designated men whose gender expression and/or sexual behaviour were presumed to be non-normative. This connotation remained predominant for several decades until a large segment of the modern LGBTQ+ community reclaimed it for neutral or positive self-identification.⁴ On this evolution, Judith Butler has written that the '*deformative and misappropriative power*' of the word holds subversive potential in that 'the very term that would annihilate us becomes the site of resistance, the possibility of an enabling social and

¹ Oxford English Dictionary, 'Queer', oed.com <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/queer_1> [accessed 12 May 2021].

² Cambridge Dictionary, 'Queer', dictionary.cambridge.org <<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/queer>> [accessed 12 May 2021].

³ Merriam-Webster, 'Queer', merriam-webster.com <<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/queer>> [accessed 11 May 2021].

⁴ Ramzi Fawaz and Shanté Paradigm Smalls, 'Queers Read This!', *GLQ*, 24 (2018), 169–187 (p. 170).

political signification.⁵ Crucially, Butler also remarks the political resonance and practicality of queer's intrinsic indeterminacy. In fact, queer alludes to 'that which is, in the present, never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes.'⁶

As an interdisciplinary category of critical deconstruction, 'queer' prioritises the interpellation of 'the discursive construction of sexualities and genders in terms of binary oppositions of normal versus abnormal, dominant versus subordinate, included versus excluded, and familiar versus strange.'⁷ Additionally, it foregrounds the problematisation of norms, practices, and rituals found within the 'sex/gender system'⁸ and regimes of 'compulsory heterosexuality'⁹ or 'heteronormativity',¹⁰ whereby cisheterosexuality comes to be regarded as an innate, natural, and standard mode of being. As such, the queer necessarily operates at/with physical, conceptual, and societal liminalities, concerning itself with notions of polarisation, demarcation, territorialisation, exclusion and transgression. In so doing, it challenges 'the structural symmetry of [...] seemingly fundamental distinctions and the inevitability of a symbolic order based on a logic of limits, margins, borders, and boundaries.'¹¹ In this sense, the queer theory posits that

the force of the queer relies upon the preservation of a kind of boundary-effect at the same time as queer critical praxis involves the queer troubling, and transgressing, the boundaries that the straight trusts tend to separate itself from the queer [...] The queer [...] represents the performance of an identity-effect by all those who cannot—or will not—conform to the dictates of the naturalizing illusion that gender and sexual identities are, could be, or should be straight-forward, fixed, stable, and coherent. Queers [...] act out the fluidity, instability, and incoherence of gender and sexual identities.¹²

Accordingly, rather than describing static positionings at either side of the sexualised self/other binary, queerness engages with the act of crossing and temporarily inhabiting such margin. Dominant

⁵ Judith Butler, 'Critically Queer', *GLQ*, 1 (1993), 17–32 (p. 21).

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁷ Bob Nowlan, 'Queer Theory, Queer Cinema', in *Coming Out to the Mainstream: New Queer Cinema in the 21st Century*, ed. by JoAnne C. Juett and David Jones (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishers, 2010), pp. 2–19 (p. 5).

⁸ Gayle Rubin, 'The Traffic in Women: Notes on the "Political Economy" of Sex', in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. by Rayna R. Reiter (New York & London: Monthly Review Press: 1975), 157–210 (p. 159).

⁹ Adrienne Rich, 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence', *Signs*, 5 (1980), 631–60 (p. 634).

¹⁰ Michael Warner, 'Introduction: Fear of a Queer Planet', *Social Text*, 29 (1991), 3–17 (p. 3).

¹¹ Diana Fuss, 'Introduction,' in *Inside/out*, ed. by Diana Fuss (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 1–10 (p. 1).

¹² Nowlan, p. 8.

conceptualisations of the margin itself are thus destabilised, allowing for the emergence of what Diana Fuss has termed ‘borderline sexual economy,’ where self and other are not mutually exclusive—rather, ‘each is haunted by the other.’¹³ Diane Raymond, who defines queer as ‘a category in flux,’¹⁴ observes that there is a ‘parasitic’¹⁵ quality to heterosexuality, in that it nominally relies on homosexuality (or any other instance of non-heterosexuality) to exist and make sense. Similarly, self and other can only exist individually in the dynamic, precarious and volatile encounter with one another. Even boundaries and their transgression maintain the same osmotic interdependence. Fuss notes that ‘a transgression of the border [...] is necessary to constitute the border as such’¹⁶ and, conversely, ‘every transgression, to establish itself as such, must simultaneously resecure that which it sought to eclipse.’¹⁷

The set of prerogatives that characterise the essence and might of the queer bears a resemblance to a range of philosophies of the sublime produced from the eighteenth century onwards. Among these features are the fascination with strangeness and difference; the interrogation of traditional dichotomies; the engagement with notions of distance and proximity; the reconfiguration of the value of liminality; the destabilisation of normative understandings of subjectivity. Christine Battersby writes that throughout its history, ‘the sublime was overwhelming; breath-taking; awe-inspiring; tremendous; terrifying; unrepresentable; revolutionary [...] slippery, denoting a concept that was subject to metamorphosis and flux.’¹⁸ The queer engenders an affective and affecting experience of unsettling proximity to limitlessness and otherness. Similarly, the sublime initiates ‘an encounter with something tremendous: an infinite; something indefinitely great, grand, or boundless; a longed-for absolute [...] a kind of overwhelming compulsion and a reaction so powerful and so inexplicable as to appear irresistible.’¹⁹ In both cases, such process radically alters all selves involved, whose subjectivities are newly rewritten by and in the tension of their encounter. The resulting selfhood is one of mutable and malleable nature, one that interstitially

¹³ Ibid., p. 2.

¹⁴ Diane Raymond, ‘Popular Culture and Queer Representation’, in *Gender, Race and Class in Media. A Text Reader*, ed. by Gail Dines and Jean M. Humez (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2003), 98–110 (p. 98).

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 104.

¹⁶ Fuss, p. 3.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 6.

¹⁸ Christine Battersby, *The Sublime, Terror and Human Difference* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2007), p. 1.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 3.

embodies the temporary collapse of the inside/outside disjunction. A status of *ekstasis*, of ‘standing outside one’s self’²⁰ is produced, leading to identification with the margin itself—a queer ‘position at/as the border.’²¹

However, rather than embracing Kantian theorisations of a bourgeois, ennobling sublime to be found within the subject’s own human mind, the queer reconceptualisation of sublimity contemplates a fraught interaction with external elements procuring both pleasure and terror. In subverting the preestablished terms of material and spiritual relations, such experience of the sublime results in the ‘surrender or displacement of the ego,’²² rather than in the Kantian supremacy of human rationality over extraneous forces. Drawing on Schopenhauer’s destructive and ‘object-oriented’ sublime, Eric Robertson describes queer sublimity as the realisation that ‘beneath hard and seemingly coherent exteriors, there is a rumbling that disturbs ideas of stasis and wholeness.’²³ Robertson suggests that the queer sublime represents ‘a state that flashes between identity and utter dissolution and engages the process of once again becoming part of the cosmic maelstrom [...] an ecstatic force that revels in the disassembling of human matter.’ Such a state finds its ‘creative vantage point’ in the ‘liminal space between the subject and the object.’²⁴ Translated onto the planes of cinematic narrative and aesthetics, queer sublimity manifests itself through the erotic exaltation of instances of margins and surfaces made available by filmic language. A centrifugal displacement or mischanneling of sexual energy is thus produced, away from the heteronormative centre and towards (and beyond) queer marginalities.

Ulrike Ottinger’s *Johanna d’Arc of Mongolia* (West Germany, 1989) brings forth multiple instances of a cinematic embodiment of the queer sublime. Ottinger’s documentary and fiction work is characterised by a blend of high stylisation, fantasy elements, and pronounced ethnographic interest of ‘strong and idiosyncratic authorial style.’²⁵ Her production has reputedly contributed to a larger

²⁰ Ibid., p. 4.

²¹ Fuss, p. 6.

²² Battersby, p. 1.

²³ Eric Robertson, ‘Volcanoes, Guts and Cosmic Collisions: The Queer Sublime in *Frankenstein* and *Melancholia*’, *Green Letters*, 18 (2014), 63–77 (p. 63–65).

²⁴ Ibid., pp. 66–67.

²⁵ Brenda Longfellow, ‘Lesbian Phantasy and the Other Woman in Ottinger’s *Johanna d’Arc of Mongolia*’, *Screen*, 34 (1993), 124–136, (p. 124).

feminist project of ‘radical rewriting of normative definitions of gender and difference’ and ‘affirmative constitution of a new subject of vision and pleasure,’²⁶ as Brenda Longfellow argues in her study of lesbianism in *Johanna*. The film chronicles the vicissitudes of a group of seven Western women aboard the Trans-Siberian railway, subsequently sequestered by warrior princess Ulan Iga and brought into her all-female community out in the spectacular Mongolian countryside. Longfellow describes it as ‘a meditation intimately bound up with exploring the process of travel and subjectivity,’ whose ‘central structural strategy [...] is to create oppositions and simultaneously to deconstruct the apparent intractability of the relation between terms.’²⁷

A postmodern motif of deconstruction of a unified and objective reality, both temporal and spatial, subtends the narrative and foreshadows its engagement with the queer sublime. For instance, the film’s temporal universe ties together objects from disparate historical epochs into an artificial simultaneity, revealing an underlying critique of linear time. Structurally, *Johanna* tends to sacrifice temporal consistency in favour of the ‘critical space of spectacle and performance,’ generating a ‘sense of de-centredness of a narrative which continually veers off into other stories and tales.’²⁸ This movement is propelled, particularly throughout the first third of the film, less by a logical succession of causal-temporal events than by the capricious alternation of performances reciprocally offered by the passengers. Similarly, besides the more obvious reference to movement through space inherent in the theme of a voyage, *Johanna* also seeks to re-conceptualise the political meaning of travelling. Here, travel is no longer an ideology ‘centred around the illusion of an unmediated encounter with “differences” [...] a virgin constitution of reality, a confirmation of perceptual mastery and the Euro-centredness of subject vision.’²⁹ Rather, it becomes a performative terrain where the hierarchised subject/object binary dissolves for the sake of a dynamic interplay between equal, mutually permeable selves.

The film thus sets out to interrogate traditionally rigid sets of oppositions such as reality/imagination, here/there, and self/other. More pressingly, however, it entertains itself with the experience of the

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 125–27.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 128.

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 125–26.

sublime, understood in its literal meaning of lingering *sub limen*, below or close to the threshold, and it does so by queering such positioning. Drawing on Judith Mayne's *The Woman at the Keyhole*, Longfellow writes that lesbianism 'informs Ottinger's film not primarily or predominantly as a diegetic element but as a kind of phantasmatic that is centrally concerned with "eroticizing the thresholds between women."³⁰ Same-sex desire is most palpable in the pedagogical relationship between the cosmopolitan ethnologist Lady Windermere and the titular Giovanna, a young and inexperienced backpacker who also serves as the film's 'pivotal figure of desire [...] because of her ability to cross the thresholds of cultural differences.'³¹ The resulting economy of (homo)sexual desire is founded upon a concern 'with women as both like and unlike each other, with separation and desire, projection and distance as the forces that determine women's relationships to each other.'³²

Lady Windermere's sentimental transport towards Giovanna sprouts precisely from the space that separates one from the other, and it is perpetually fed by such distance. At the visual level, the refusal to consummate the relationship is echoed on numerous occasions by Ottinger's direction. The camera lingers on Lady Windermere, gazing insistently at Giovanna while drawing unbearably near to her face, and then immediately cuts away, as if suggesting a tension that must remain unresolved if it is to retain its erotic potential. An element of sensuous mystery and ineffability seems to be responsible for such liminal tension between the two women. This spell-like experience of queer sublime derives from the erotic play with material and abstract thresholds and from the film's invitation to face the pleasurable yet frightful limitlessness evoked by the Other. In this sense, Giovanna's character is a quintessential example of the embodiment of liminality even on its own. Not only does she epitomise age, class, and ethnic difference among the group of women she travels with; her physical appearance also incorporates masculine and feminine traits.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 133.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Judith Mayne, *The Woman at the Keyhole* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 146.

The reference to Giovanna's androgyny³³ operates the destabilisation of additional sets of oppositions: male/female; masculine/feminine; but also, familiar/strange, somewhat in the style of the Freudian uncanny.³⁴ Ottinger has argued that 'usually, it isn't the things that are completely and utterly foreign, but rather those with which we seem to have some connection, that can unleash an incredible sense of strangeness when suddenly transported to another context.'³⁵ In this sense, the film's predilection for the extravaganza, camp, and excess serves as a stylistic referent for its engagement with (and violation of) margins. As Longfellow points out, the surface can be regarded as the critical point where internal and external meet. In other words, the surface itself is an example of *limen*, and in *Johanna*, the heightening of surfaces as operated through aesthetics of sumptuousness and saturation provides a visual illustration of the sexually charged margins invisibly separating characters. Bob Nowlan notes that

Queer cinema revels in stylization, or, at the least, substantial complication and problematization of the conventionally naturalistic, often in preference for expressionism, magical realism, sur-/super-/and hyper-realism, as well as conversion of the historical into the mythical and the fantastical. Queer cinema is often hyper-self-reflexive and overtly foregrounding of intertextuality, as well as frequently relying extensively on appropriation and expropriation, pastiche and montage, and irony and parody—and highly aleatory and minimalistic or deliberately excessive and frenetic manipulation of elements of mise-en-scène, cinematography, editing, and sound. Queer cinema queers by means of form, style, and content.³⁶

Accordingly, *Johanna* resorts profusely to the 'desubstantialization of signification,'³⁷ most notably the cardboard-like flatness of the train's interiors; the shimmering palettes of Western and Mongolian costumes; and the caricatured acting, best exemplified by the histrionic Mr Katz's verbose dinner order. Additionally, Longfellow notes that the gaze in *Johanna* is 'fully reversible,' 'mutual,' 'constituted and

³³ Significantly, according to the alchemic tradition so influential on the conceptualisation of the sublime, androgyny is associated with the element of gold and, as Mayne explains, with the 'production of a perfect and spiritualized type of being.' (Mayne, p. 107)

³⁴ In his 1919 essay *Das Unheimliche*, Freud theorises the uncanny as 'something which is secretly familiar, which has undergone repression and then returned from it,' (p. 245) and, therefore, has the ability to be perceived as familiar and strange at the same time. Sigmund Freud, *Das Unheimliche (The Uncanny)*, trans. by Alix Strachey, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud. Volume XVII (1917-1919). An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works*, ed. by James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1955).

³⁵ 'Interview with Ulrike Ottinger', [ulrikeottinger.com](https://www.ulrikeottinger.com/en/film-details/johanna-d-arc-of-mongolia-2), <<https://www.ulrikeottinger.com/en/film-details/johanna-d-arc-of-mongolia-2>> [accessed 11 May 2021].

³⁶ Nowlan, p. 18.

³⁷ Longfellow, p. 124.

returned as an effect of an extravagant and exhibitionist display of images.³⁸ Ottinger's gaze thus provides a performance of reciprocal desire and pleasure rooted in intersubjectivity and proximity rather than in the hierarchical mastery of subject over object, as well as a rejection of the cinematic ocularcentrism³⁹ traditionally associated with the latter. As such gaze is transported onto the spectator, a new, extra-diegetic liminal experience emerges between spectatorial gaze and onscreen images. In this process, the viewer 'is not seduced into a phantasy of illicit viewing but is proffered an invitation to play, an invitation to invest, as a woman looking at other women, in the erotic phantasy which is the film.'⁴⁰ Queer and sublime desire is therefore encoded in *Johanna* as erotic colonisation of boundaries—between characters, characters and surfaces, and, possibly, characters and spectators. It 'troubles the notion of an autonomous self,'⁴¹ as it is inscribed less in the process of merging of separate identities than in the act of endlessly crossing the space that separates them ('It is always like crossing for the first time').

Werner Schroeter's *Der Rosenkönig/The Rose King* (West Germany/Portugal, 1986), whose release slightly preceded *Johanna's*, also tells a tale of queer, sublime, liminal eros through an aesthetic of fantastical overtone, stylisation, and intensified surface. Schroeter's career in underground filmmaking dates to the dawn of New German Cinema and has exerted enormous influence on the work of notable compatriots such as Rainer Werner Fassbinder and Werner Herzog. However, much like Ottinger's, his films have remained confined to the fringes of contemporary German cinema, largely unavailable on the market and little-known to popular audiences. At the centre of this oneiric psychodrama are three characters living in a mansion on the Portuguese coast: Albert, the titular gardener obsessed with growing the perfect rose; his mother Anna, a mentally troubled widow; and Antonio, a young Italian man whom Albert has sequestered after having caught him stealing from the property's chapel.

The erotic tension linking Albert to both Anna and Antonio recalls Decadent conceptualisations of desire, which Caryl Flinn describes as 'overtly, unabashedly unfulfillable [...] not even legally expressible,

³⁸ Ibid., p. 134.

³⁹ In film studies, ocularcentrism refers to the privileging of sight over all other senses throughout the cinematic experience and hyper-reliance on the visual aspects of the film. In Gillian Rose's succinct definition, ocularcentrism serves as a 'scopic regime [that] equates seeing with knowledge'. Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials* (London: SAGE, 2016) p. 3.

⁴⁰ Longfellow, p. 134.

⁴¹ Robertson, p. 66.

projected instead onto sets of objects that would never end, much less satisfy.⁴² Citing Wilde, Flinn also notes that such unbridgeable distance but fuels its own erotic charge: ‘Difference of object does not alter singleness of passion. It merely intensifies it.’⁴³ Torn between homoerotic and incestuous drives, sensual liminality in *Der Rosenkönig* is ciphered as a prolonged longing for something that can never be fully attained or possessed, but only fleetingly approached. Such longing is queer in its acting as a counterforce to the requirements of normative sexual economies and sublime in its invoking a larger-than-self experience of greatness and terror at once.

Like the women in *Johanna*, Schroeter’s characters are continually captured in lascivious physical proximity, threatening to act on impulses that are not meant to be acted on. Anna slowly slips into Albert’s bed before the camera swiftly cuts to his naked body lying supine on the shore at night, defenceless against the (maternal) waves impetuously breaking onto him. She suggestively kneels at the feet of one of the local boys, then hugs him just as ambiguously (‘It’s because her husband left,’ a friend of his will later explain). Albert leans on Antonio’s naked thighs, hands clasped in prayer and dangerously close to the man’s groin. All throughout, there is a strong suggestion that these prohibited carnal relationships might have been or will be actualised once the camera cuts away. Yet, the impudence of sex is regularly conflated with the imminence of tragedy. For instance, the camera frames a blood-drenched rose, then cuts to Albert’s hand grasping for Antonio’s genitals, then cuts back to the rose, this time focusing on a pair of scissors violently cutting the flower into strips, metaphorically threatening castration. The sophisticated murder of Antonio is amply foreshadowed by the torturing of animals (a caged frog; a crucified cat; and other agonising or lifeless creatures)—as if to reiterate the inextricability of pleasure and terror.

Stylistically, *Der Rosenkönig* shares *Johanna*’s love of staginess and eccentricity; and the emphasis on the surface also returns as an instance of eroticisation of liminality. Fairy-tale characters move across spaces reminiscent of theatrical stages, bidimensional and ablaze with scarlet costumes, petals, and bloody hands. The artificiality of the acting is reinforced by the ubiquitous operatic soundtrack that

⁴² Caryl Flinn, *The New German Cinema: Music, History, and the Matter of Style* (University of California Press, 2003), p. 237.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

'jumbles the sublime with the ridiculous to the point of indissolubility.'⁴⁴ The intermittence of voice-over and off-screen dialogue, carried out in five different languages, aligns with the film's general tendency to attribute glossolalic powers to sentiments of love ('I will call you the tenderest names, and those names, I know them; it's a song that every lover in the world will be able to sing, because love, love invented them'). According to Flinn, Schroeter's deployment of kitsch, with its 'excesses and breaches of taste,' signals the embracing of 'a form of counterproduction, [which] generates horribly useless objects, and is unsuitable to standard capitalist or heterosexual notions of production or reproduction.' In fact, kitsch art naturally 'undoes borders between center and margin, external and internal, oppositional and majoritarian;' its 'tainted qualities are, in fact, surprisingly mobile' in their acknowledging categories while at the same time threatening to undermine them.⁴⁵

A preoccupation with surfaces and textures emerges each time the camera lingers on footprints in the sand, broken window glasses, or fingers scraping wall paint; even the family's past is told almost exclusively through the surface of photographs. The most crucial eroticised surface in *Der Rosenkönig*, however, is undoubtedly that of the human (male) body. Albert meticulously grafts roses into the deep wounds he has inflicted all over Antonio's skin, transmuting the prisoner's body into a beatific simulacrum of homoerotic desire and Christian passion, in conformity with the film's heretical use of Western religious iconography. Of the rose, Schroeter has said it is 'simultaneously an emblem of perfection and transitoriness. It is a multifaceted cipher for man's longing (*Sehnsucht*). It may be that it finds its fulfilment in the conflict of opposing temporal forces: between the states of physical eroticism and mystical ecstasy.'⁴⁶

When considered through the lens of the queer sublime, it becomes a symbol for perfection *in* transitoriness as well. Implanted onto the epidermal surface of Antonio's object of homoerotic desire, the rose sanctions the tension of liminality as the source of absolute passion. In so doing, it fulfils the role described by Karl Schoonover and Rosalind Galt in their discussion of queer touching: 'the gift of the

⁴⁴ Gary Indiana, 'Scattered Pictures: The Movies of Werner Schroeter,' *Artforum* (1982), qtd. in Flinn, p. 233.

⁴⁵ Flinn, pp. 231–36.

⁴⁶ Werner Schroeter, '16 Internationales Forum des Jungen Films', qtd. in Michelle Langford, *Allegorical Images: Tableau, Time and Gesture in the Cinema of Werner Schroeter* (Intellect Books Ltd: Bristol, 2006), p. 159.

flower mediates queerly between subjects and objects [...] the flower becomes a token that produces proximity.⁴⁷ According to Fuss's theorisation of sexual borders, to a certain degree 'most of us are both inside and outside at the same time.'⁴⁸ However, the homosexual male body is especially disruptive to heteronormative dichotomies, since in its 'occupying the frontier position of inside out, [it] is neither completely outside the bounds of sexual difference nor wholly inside it either.'⁴⁹ What ensues is that 'the fear of the homo, which continually *rubs up against* the hetero (tribadic-style), concentrates and codifies the very real possibility and ever-present threat of a collapse of boundaries, an effacing of limits, and a radical confusion of identities.'⁵⁰ Homoerotic physicality thus becomes a site of liminal, sensuous contradiction, the figuration of 'a gay sensibility in which the sexual aim is dispersed onto the textures of surfaces.'⁵¹ It also provides an operating table for 'the process of attempting to create the romantic ideal of the beautiful perfected individual,'⁵² comparable to the erotic centrality of Ottinger's *Giovanna*.

Both *Johanna d'Arc of Mongolia* and *Der Rosenkönig* take delight in their fascination with hesitation, with lingering and temporarily occupying foreign spaces (also thematised in both through representations of hospitality, abduction, and interaction with racial and cultural Others). More crucially, they both encode the queer sublime as the fetishisation of margins and surfaces and unresolvable tension between not-so-separate entities. Schoonover and Galt write that 'queerness promises to knock off kilter conventional epistemologies.' Cinema, a 'queerly inflected medium,' serves such a mission through its 'ongoing process of constructing worlds, a process that is active, incomplete, and contestatory and that does not presuppose a settled cartography.'⁵³ In fact, 'the dynamism of the cinematic image pushes against the reification of meaning, as it keeps the signifier in motion, never fixing terms of relationality.'⁵⁴ If 'queer touch and closeness [are] formal registers able to reference forms of relationality that are otherwise deemed socially marginal and unproductive,'⁵⁵ then Ottinger and Schroeter's queer sublime speaks to

⁴⁷ Karl Schoonover and Rosalind Galt, *Queer Cinema in the World* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 239.

⁴⁸ Fuss, p. 5.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Longfellow, p. 135.

⁵² Langford, p. 27.

⁵³ Schoonover and Galt, pp. 5–7.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 238.

the erotic potential of 'queer's constantly reinscribed status as liminal in relation to humanness.⁵⁶ More broadly, queer sublimity voices the urge for a re-orientation of subjecthood, for a politics—to borrow Butler's words—of the 'deformative and misappropriative,' that violently transcends the known margins of subjectivity and individuality. Ultimately, it faces viewing subjects with the destabilising possibility of selfhood that is to be found neither within oneself nor in the other, but rather in an endless reaching outward. Indeed, the queer sublime denotes a transitional self that can only exist in its attempt at being: like riding a timeless train; like growing the perfect rose.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

Bibliography

- Battersby, Christine, *The Sublime, Terror and Human Difference* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2007)
- Butler, Judith, 'Critically Queer', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 1 (1993), 17–32 <<https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-1-1-17>>
- Fawaz, Ramzi, and Shanté Paradigm Smalls, 'Queers Read This! LGBTQ Literature Now', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 24 (2018), 169–187 <<https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-4324765>>
- Flinn, Caryl, *The New German Cinema: Music, History, and the Matter of Style* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: California University Press, 2003)
- Freud, Sigmund, *Das Unheimliche (The Uncanny)*, trans. by Alix Strachey, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud. Volume XVII (1917–1919). An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works*, ed. by James Strachey, (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1955).
- Fuss, Diana, ed., *Inside/out. Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories* (London: Routledge, 1991)
- Indiana, Gary, 'Scattered Pictures: The Movies of Werner Schroeter', *Artforum* (1982) <<https://www.artforum.com/print/198203/scattered-pictures-the-movies-of-werner-schroeter-35616>>
- 'Interview with Ulrike Ottinger', Ulrikeottinger.com, <<https://www.ulrikeottinger.com/en/film-details/johanna-d-arc-of-mongolia-2>>
- Langford, Michelle, *Allegorical Images: Tableau, Time and Gesture in the Cinema of Werner Schroeter* (Bristol: Intellect Books Ltd, 2006)
- Longinus, *On Great Writing (On the Sublime)*, trans. and ed. by G. M. A. Grube, Bobbs-Merrill, The Library of Liberal Arts, 1957, in *The Sublime, Terror and Human Difference*, edited by Christine Battersby (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2007)
- Longfellow, Brenda, 'Lesbian Phantasy and the Other Woman in Ottinger's Johanna d'Arc of Mongolia', *Screen*, 34 (1993), 124–136 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/34.2.124>>
- Mayne, Judith, *The Woman at the Keyhole* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990)
- Nowlan, Bob, 'Queer Theory, Queer Cinema', in *Coming Out to the Mainstream: New Queer Cinema in the 21st Century* ed. by JoAnne C. Juett and David M. Jones (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010)
- 'Queer', *Cambridge Dictionary* <<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/queer>>
- 'Queer', *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* <<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/queer>>
- 'Queer', *Oxford English Dictionary* <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/queer_1>
- Raymond, Diane, 'Popular Culture and Queer Representation. A Critical Perspective', in *Gender, Race, and Class in Media. A Text Reader*, ed. by Gail Dines and Jean M. Humez (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2003)
- Rich, Adrienne, 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence', *Signs*, 5 (1980): 631–60 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/3173834>>

- Robertson, Eric, 'Volcanoes, Guts and Cosmic Collisions: The Queer Sublime in *Frankenstein* and *Melancholia*', *Green Letters*, 18 (2014), 63–77 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/14688417.2014.890530>>
- Rose, Gillian, *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials* (London: SAGE, 2016)
- Rubin, Gayle, 'The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex', in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. by Rayna R. Reiter (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1975)
- Schoonover, Karl, and Rosalind Galt, *Queer Cinema in the World* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016)
- Schroeter, Werner, '16 Internationales Forum des Jungen Films', qtd. in Langford, Michelle, *Allegorical Images: Tableau, Time and Gesture in the Cinema of Werner Schroeter* (Bristol: Intellect Books Ltd, 2006)
- Warner, Michael, 'Introduction: Fear of a Queer Planet', *Social Text*, 29 (1991), 3–17 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/466295>>

Filmography

- Der Rosenkönig*, dir. by Werner Schroeter (1986), online video, YouTube <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uy1bWde4wDM&t=2843s>>
- Johanna d'Arc of Mongolia*, dir. by Ulrike Ottinger (1989), online film recording, , Ulrike Ottinger <<https://www.ulrikeottinger.com/en/film-details/johanna-d-arc-of-mongolia-2>>