

Glimpsing Queer History

Queerama is a queer film; not just in the stories and images that it shares, but in the way that it weaves them together, playfully, knowingly, and emotionally. It moves between celebrating the strength, endurance and power of queer lives, and marking the scars, transgressions and cruelties experienced by them. It's a fitting way to map queer history. For queer history is sometimes the history of not being seen, or of having to work really hard to find yourself acknowledged. To write a queer history of queer lives you have to work really hard with what you are given.

If we rely on the traditional documents of courts, medics, government and the police cell we will probably produce a history of the freak, the pervert, the duplicitous spy, the blackmailer, the victim. Charge sheets, court records, news reports uncover the traces of sexuality as constructed by the law, which gives us a particular focus on sexual relationships between men. This history is often marked by the year 1885, in which the offence of "gross indecency" made all sexual acts between men illegal. This surpassed the previous law on sodomy as a sexual act which applied equally to heterosexuals. Before 1885 it was the act, rather than who performed the act, that was the problem, from 1885 this changed. The trials of Oscar Wilde in 1895 are often seen as the point at which the legal offence became embodied as a homosexual identity. However, *Queerama*, invites us to mark a different piece of legislation; The Sexual Offences Act of 1967. Although the first and second world war both provided increased concern and opportunity for queer lives, it was the post-war era that changed the legal, social, political and cultural discussion around sexuality. The post-war settlement extended the government's social responsibility. Britain's declining international role combined with a new modern civilising mission in the permissive moment. The relationship between the state and private lives was reforged as the post-war period developed into 'the sixties'.

In the 1950s onwards, public responses to the 'uncivilised' laws relating to a variety of social issues; homosexuality and prostitution, abortion, divorce, adoption, caught the spirit of reform. As the focus on homosexuality as a crime was displaced by discussion of homosexuality as a tragedy, or social problem. A series of high profile chain prosecutions, attempted suicides and famous trials raised questions about the equity, and proportionality, of the law. Growing engagement with ideas around identity, psychiatry, trauma implied that locking up men who had sex with men in prison might not be the solution to the social problem of queer lives. Actor John Gielgud was arrested in a public lavatory in January 1953, but rather than it damaging his career, he was met with standing ovations when he returned to the stage. That same year, the case of journalist Peter Wildeblood and Lord Montague and some sailors further raised public debate. The prosecution was seen as vindictive and unequal. The Lord was able to escape prosecution, the sailors were coerced into giving evidence in protection from their own prosecution and courtmarshall. Wildeblood, who was sentenced to prison then wrote his own account, at least got to perform his own experiences in his own voice. The book *Against the Law* 1955 exposed court experiences and prison conditions more generally as an important social problem.

So here, the law was not an all encompassing structure, it produced its own criticisms, and raised its own questions. After all, if queer lives were so unnatural why did the state have to spend so much time dealing with them? Each attempt to silence or deny queer lives, leaves its own trace for us to explore historically, just as it provided its own glimpse of validation in the moment.

The anniversary of the Sexual Offences Act is also the anniversary of the report it was based on; the Wolfenden Report which broadly recommended pity for the afflicted individual, rather than condemnation of homosexuality as a sin, was published in 1957.

The Wolfenden Commission had heard evidence in favour of decriminalisation from churches, housewives, and those who had served alongside gay soldiers in the Second World War. These comrades in arms gave powerful testimony of acts of heroism and also outlined a Catch 22. Anyone who ‘admitted homosexuality’ in order to be exempt from conscription would then in turn be liable for prosecution. Similarly the commission heard, those arrested or threatened with arrest who attempted, but failed, to commit suicide became liable for two criminal offences; homosexuality and the attempted suicide. Gay men had little choice, the commission heard, but to fall between the gaps.

The Report was a best seller. It became the subject of a number of films and plays, some of which made their way into the BFI archives and thus into our film. In the discussions around the changes in this, and other laws impacting queer lives, it is important to note that wanting to change the law was not a statement that homosexuality was an acceptable alternative to heterosexuality, but that the utility of the law was undermining its own logic. The issue was seen to be public opinion, and what the law said about the state of the nation, rather than support for queer lives. As The Times made clear in April 1958, “The most humane and thoughtful people in this country would welcome the early implementation of the Report findings”. In other words the legal position of homosexuality said more about the public than it did about gay mens' lives.

So legal change tells us more about how society sees itself, and how the state has seen its relationship to the public. But if we want to understand queer lives, as they have been lived, we also need to see the queer work behind the scenes. Laws are not just handed down to society, they are fought for, conciliatory and compromised as they may be. Behind the MPs publicly associated with law reform like maverick Labour MP Tom Driberg, were smaller and larger armies of activists, educators and lobbyists. Some focussed on the law itself, like the Homosexual Law Reform Society (HLRS), some provided counselling and support on the ground, like the Albany Trust, some began organising through local existing political networks and built social organisations such as the North Western Committee of HLRS which went on to become the Committee and then Campaign for Homosexual Equality. Many of the groups mirrored the government’s position that homosexuality as an issue was a matter of conscience, rather than party politics. They were, on the whole, presented as apolitical professional organisations, for, not by, homosexuals.

Queerama shows us how important representation has been in the history of queer lives. Being seen in film or video has a politics of its own. Some films were self-consciously part of political campaigns, like Dirk Bogarde’s role in the 1961 film *Victim*. Bogarde's character, Farr, was a middle class boy, married to a nice blonde teacher, who gets blackmailed over photographic evidence of his homosexuality by a nasty working class boy and a bitter old woman. At a cocktail party, there is a long involved, rather preachy, discussion about law reform that is taken straight from Wolfenden. Two separate films about Oscar Wilde in the same year used his life story to comment on the vulnerabilities that the law inflicted on men who had sex with men. These films may not have been perfect, and they might not hold up to today’s expectations of representation. But these imperfect films can give us, what Andy Medhurst’s powerful reading of *Victim* described as ‘[text as context](#)’. We might think about what work those stories did for people at the time.

Of course, not all queer politics has relied on politely asked for change. As the celebrated Stonewall riots show us, queer politics comes in as many forms as queer lives. A police raid on a lesbian and drag queen bar in New York, coincided with the collective grief the community of clientele felt on the day of Judy Garland's funeral. On the 27th June 1969 the Stonewall riots, brought 2000 queer activists into the streets to confront 400 police. It is often seen as a 'rupture' or new beginning; of a countercultural, liberational, DIY queer politics.

So we might see this as a tension, between reform and revolt. Where is our queer history, on the streets or in the back rooms of parliament? Is it populated by butch lesbians and drag queens, or by civil servants in suits? These tensions are why cultural representation matters for queer history. It lets us bring together, rather than compare and contrast, the varied, strands of queer resistance, and the variety of ways that queer lives have left their mark. These traces and glimpses show us a queer history that is active, involves hard work, last straws, grey suits and slow builds, alongside the spectacular and fabulous. Queer history has continued to jostle between the spectacular, the careful reformist, the top down changes in law, and the politics of cultural visibility.

In many ways *Queerama* is a perfect case study through which to think about how a social movement grows. Just as it was Wildeblood's personal account that captured the public imagination, the glimpses, shadows and glitter of queer representation in film, television and documentary get us much closer to the complexity of a queer history of queer lives. *Queerama* weaves together the different ways that change happens; from above, from below, incremental, cultural change, political ruptures, consciously constructed, or serendipitously conjoined. At some points the agenda has been imposed upon lesbian and gay communities from elsewhere, at some points the agenda has been firmly set from the experiences of queer lives. By building a montage, with a sense of the past, present and future, *Queerama* lets us see a history that can encompass difference, the exceptional, the spectacular and the hidden.

In the glimpses of the gay liberation movement, or the behind the scenes monitoring of representation of lesbians and gay men in the media, in the 1970s, or in the new connections between Trade Union organisations and lesbian and gay rights, or assaults on queer lives from Victorian values, HIV/AIDS and Clause 28 in the 1980s, or in the growth a new queer politics, new broadcast possibilities, campaigns for formal equality in marriage, the military and employment since the 1990s, queer history, like queer stories, have never only meant one thing. This is a history that weaves the spectacular and the everyday, jostling against each other, building on each other, sometimes in sync, sometimes on the edges and corners. You might see your own lives represented, you might have to work a bit harder, to find yourself in the glimpses and corners.