

“Something Always Seems to Go Wrong Somewhere”

John Greyson

In Eisenstein’s camp masterpiece *Ivan the Terrible*, Tsar Ivan (Sergei’s stand-in for Stalin) throws a party for the Oprichniki, his favourite troop of butch young soldiers. (In fact, Eisenstein hand-picked these boys from the comely ranks of the Red Army, causing much consternation among the kino aparatchiks.) The boys dance wildly around a single alluring female, who wears a mask from which strings of beads cascade. The dancing reaches a climax—the boys are transfixed—and then this Soviet Salome removes her mask. Surprise! It’s Fyodor, the handsome popular leader of Oprichniki. Is he punished for such pervo cross-dressing? *Au contraire*: Ivan and the others loudly applaud his transvestism.

How to read this moment, produced near the end of this great commie queer artist’s life? Both Parker Tyler and Tom Waugh interpret Fyodor’s mask as Sergei’s own, the one he was forced to wear throughout an unhappy career, constantly concealing his sexual/artistic/political aspirations behind a façade of so-called feminine compliance. Yet there’s perhaps another way to read Fyodor’s unveiling. Could Eisenstein be using the mechanics of narrative identification to trick his audience, following the lead of their Red Army role-models, into applauding this newly-discovered faggot in their very midst? Is this moment of Fyodor’s the one that Sergei personally longed for, an embrace by the world he was never permitted?

Such an image of tolerance does seem to harken back to the early years of the revolution, when the Bolsheviks decriminalized homosexuality and the avant-garde was in the driver’s seat. The contrast between image and audience seems all the more extreme, given the repressive Stalinist context in which *Ivan* was produced and viewed.

Let this cinematic moment of Sergei’s, however circumscribed, however wan and abject, be emblematic nonetheless: let it exemplify the varied encounters between Left politics, queer desire, and avant-garde ambitions that have littered the past century. Like a well-intentioned three-way, these encounters were often more disruptive than productive, both conflicted and aborted, often tinged with hostility and frustration. As theorist/filmmaker Guy Hocquenghem observed wryly in 1972: “Something always seems to go wrong somewhere between desire and revolution; we get the same continual wail both from those who want to but can’t (the far Left) and from those who can but won’t (the communist party).”

Consider another encounter, thirty years later: it also involves a dissection of corruption and state power; it also is authored by a queer communist who continually clashed with his party; it also features boys in uniform dancing together. The final scene of Pasolini's *Salo* shows two guards in the tower of the villa, indifferently watching through a telescope the final horrific debauch of their masters in the courtyard below. They grow bored and flip the telescope around on its mount. Suddenly, the upper-class monsters who loomed so large are now tiny bugs, far far away. The guards—proletarian, illiterate, butch—put on a record and begin a gentle waltz with each other. It's an ambivalent, outrageous, unforgettable moment: these boys in uniform have colluded with their masters; we should despise them, and yet we can't help but fall in love with them in this moment of uncharacteristic tenderness. We can't help but deem them recoupable.

Pasolini, the card-carrying communist, fought passionately for the rights of his beloved ragazzi. Pasolini, the card-carrying fag, often expressed such lumpen solidarity horizontally. He would surely have concurred with Jean Genet's observation: "Perhaps if I had never gone to bed with an Algerian, I would never have approved of the FLN." Indeed, if Pier Paolo and Jean were around today, they'd probably weigh in on the homo-erotic charms of Osama Bin Laden, as John LeCarre did the other day. Pasolini always sided with the bad boys, his libido taking him back and forth across class lines. In March 1968, in response to a street battle between university students and the Roman police, Pasolini addressed this strident poem to the radical students. They were gloating over their victory against the cops, the class enemy. He begged to differ. Here are some excerpts of his poem on the left hand side—on the right, my (bold) interjections, trying to unpack his accusations.

You have the faces of spoiled children.

Good blood doesn't lie. You have the same bad eye.

It was '68. He was 48.

The collision of sectarian Marxist polemics.

The collusion of far-left insults

Improved (in his case) by poetic charm.

You are scared, uncertain, desperate (very good!)

He was the son of an army officer.

But you also know how to be bullies, blackmailers, and
sure of yourselves; petit-bourgeois prerogatives, friends.

Does this explain the scolding, the arrogance?

When yesterday at Valle Giulia you fought with policemen,

I sympathized with the policemen!

Such a provocateur!

Because policemen are children of the poor.
They are twenty years old, your age, dear boys and girls.
(for roughly sixty dollars a month);
with a smile no longer, with friends in the world no longer,
separated, excluded (in an exclusion which is without equal)...

(and let's remember, while the students were fighting
he was shooting the actor Massimo Girotti
cruising the toilets of the Milano train station
for a scene in *Teorema*)

Tom Waugh sent me this Pasolini poem last April, before I went to Quebec City for the Free Trade Summit. A bunch of us had formed a loose video collective called Blah Blah Blah (after Chretien's infamous characterization of the Summit protesters). We wanted to make short art tapes responding to this new anti-capitalist moment and movement. It was clear it would be a demonstration unlike any other I'd attended. The infamous perimeter fence, the 4700 cannisters of tear gas, and the overwhelming police presence signalled that the Three Amigos (Chretien/Bush/Fox) were returning the city (and, indeed, the whole of the Americas) to a frontier moment of forts without borders. They also ensured we'd be focussed less on the Amigos than on the cops.

Triggered by the poem, Tom and I talked about the libidinous currents that have disrupted and energized previous Left movements. We wondered what a queer angle on anti-globalization might look like, especially since the very question runs the risk of being anachronistic. The Mob4glob movement has persuasively argued that a century of emerging queer identity—painstakingly built on the shoulders of the Eisensteins and the Pasolinis, elaborated through eighties identity politics and the struggle for diversity—was co-opted and niche-branded by nineties market forces. Indeed, in its search for mainstream acceptance, the gay community was all too happy to be Gapped, Starbucked, and Dieselled. “The need for greater diversity is now not only accepted by the culture industries, it is the mantra of global capital,” says writer Naomi Klein. “This revolution of identity politics turned out to be the savior of late capitalism,” writes gay activist Richard Goldstein.

We obviously agree against the police as institution.

I try to place Pier Paolo on Boul. René Lévesque
his hawk nose emerging
from a creamy cloud
of tear gas, his thin lips smiling

like a sparrow
as a kid in green swim goggles scoops up
the spewing cannister at his feet
and hurls it back.

At Valle Giulia, yesterday, we have thus
had a fragment of class conflict;

Would his allegiances have divided on similar lines?

Would he have recognized

in the vaguely plump faces

of the Sureté robocops

his beloved boys of the slums?

He wouldn't have recognized the Sureté salaries

(try sixty times sixty dollars a month!)

and you, my friends (even though on the side of reason),

Pier Paolo: guilty of treason?

were the rich,

You bitch?

while the policemen

His students thought so.

(who were in the wrong)

He was in the wrong.

were poor.

His argument poor.

A nice victory, then, yours!...

So today (I like to think)

Pier Paolo might smile wryly

and return to René Lévesque

to preserve the differences

on his Sony Handycam.

Frame the cop with the wistful look

who aims, then pauses, then aims again,

the angel-cop who is eager to shatter the throat of

the boy with the streaming eyes

and swollen face

who sits ten feet from the line,

composed, toxic, resolute.

And then, that night,

at the Hippo Camp baths up the hill

Pier Paolo could wander the halls in his towel

wondering who he'd prefer to meet:

The streaming boy or the wistful cop?

Here's a bunch of other encounters, all post-'68: brief park sex three-ways involving the commie outlook, the queer libido, and the avant-garde impulse (all three being defined very generously).

There's Guy Hocquenghem's and Lionel Soukas' *Race D'ep'* (1979), which attempted an impressionistic, non-linear interrogation of the historical image of the homo. There's Rosa von Praunheim's 1970 *It is not the homosexual who is perverse but the Situation in which he lives*, a clumsy series of shrill Brechtian skits denouncing the commercialism and political lethargy of the gay ghetto. There's also his 1979 free-wheeling, genre-busting *Army of Lovers or Revolt of the Perverts*, an inventive doc with agitprop flourishes about the evolving American gay movement. Notably, both are strident critiques of gay marketplace co-optation and consumerism long before the current Mob4glob critique. Most of all, there's Fassbinder, deploying the furthest excesses of melodrama to dissect queer class warfare (*Fox and his Friends*), a queen's victimization by the bedlam of late capitalism (*In the Year of Thirteen Moons*), and most movingly and memorably, his segment of the anthology film *Germany in Autumn*. In the latter, his boyfriend, his mother, and Fassbinder play themselves in a series of domestic tableaux set during the week of Ulrike Meinhof's "suicide" in prison. His anguished struggle with the line that society seeks to draw between order and freedom cuts to the heart precisely because there's no line between his convictions and his performance.

And then there is Genet, whose single film *Chant D'Amour* proposes erotic love as a form of resistance to the tyranny of the regime of prison. And then Jarman, with his operatic queer-anarcho indictments of Thatcherite devastation (*The Last of England*, *The Garden*), and Marlon Riggs, with his poetic radical black fag manifesto *Tongues Untied*. And then Isaac Julien, whose *Passion of Rememberance* sought to visualize the thorny conversations of the early eighties between race, sex, and gay discourses, and whose *Franz Fanon* dared to assert homoeroticism within the intellectual biography of this deified black revolutionary. And Richard Fung, whose *Sea in the Blood* effortlessly weaves fragments of movement politics into the juxtaposed stories of his lover and sister. And Noam Gonnick, who in his faux silent-movie *1919* restages the Winnipeg General strike in a gay bathhouse, perfectly mimicking the syncopations of Charlie Chaplin. And Stuart Marshall, whose landmark *Bright Eyes* (1985) was the first tape or film to historicize AIDS within a history of medicine, representation, and social critique.

Within the canon of the American queer avant-garde (Anger, Smith, Warhol), it's hard to find any explicit engagement with Left politics. This observation is intended less as a value judgement and more as a commentary

on the American political/cultural landscape of the sixties, and the permission of dissent. It's worth crediting General Idea with taking Warhol's wan exploration of late capitalism and exaggerating it into a full-on-faggotty, take-no-prisoners love affair with the dark logic of consumerism: Pee Wee Herman does Anti-Oedipus. It's also worth noting that their critique of the branding of culture dates back three decades.

These brief and admittedly sweeping observations about the American avant-garde caused an uproar at Tulips. Various speakers (Child, Kibbins, Doyle) felt I was unfairly dismissing Jack Smith's unique brand of radicalism, excluding him from a perceived pantheon of pervo shit-disturbers. That he exemplifies a particular outsider tradition within the history of the American counter-culture is unquestioned—indeed, his outsider status has been conclusively reified by numerous retrospectives, publications, and museum exhibitions (!). However, the idea that Smith created work in dialogue with the organized Left of his day, in the manner of Pasolini, Fassbinder, or Julien, is simply unsupportable. Like many queer artists throughout this century, and particularly in the States, he felt or practised no sustained connection to the (often homophobic) social movements of his era, nor felt any urge to yoke his anarchic “enchantment” to any organized social change agenda. This is not the same thing as saying that his works aren't subversive or radical—it's simply stating the commonplace that his works don't engage with the organized Left of his artistic and political moment.

Several conventional narratives are worth mentioning, both because of their narrative collisions between Marxist sentiments and a gay sensibility, and equally because of their instrumental intervention into domestic debates on sexuality. *Strawberry and Chocolate*, the 1993 Cuban comedy by the legendary Tomas Gutierrez-Alea, concerns the flirtation between a strident straight revolutionary and a frivolous queen. Conventional in form, it was remarkable for the social upheaval it unleashed, quickly becoming the all-time top box-office champ in the history of Cuban cinema—a lightning rod that zapped the nation's sexual discourse. Its success was in strategically finding the right tone, the right note, the right way to dialectically position the topic in direct relation to that moment in Cuban society.

Another “Cuban” drama, *Before Night Falls* (2000), attempts a similar intervention, and yet the strategies (and results) are diametrically opposed. Adapted by New York painter Julian Schnabel from the memoir of the same name by novelist Reinaldo Arenas, the film seeks to dramatize the persecution of this heroic HIV+ free spirit, who spends his entire life trying to escape Castro's Cuba only to die in a roach-infested coldwater flat on Manhattan's Lower East Side. The real Arenas was militantly anti-

communist, yet organized his entire narrative around this central irony: after spending twenty years trying desperately to escape, he finally achieved American-style “freedom.” He was free to die, an illegal immigrant, poor and alone, without heating or healthcare, battling the rats of lower Manhattan. His memoir frontloads this irony—such “freedom” costs him his life—but the movie is content to erase this observation, bizarrely underplaying this central point to the extent that audiences experience Schnabel’s feature as a sincere essay about escaping the homophobic tyranny of Castro’s Cuba at any cost. Despite Javier Bardem’s breathtaking performance, it becomes a determinedly cold-war narrative that sacrifices Arenas’ complex faggotry (and tortured love of Cuba) for simplistic flag-waving about the American free speech tradition.

East Palace, West Palace, a Chinese feature by Zhang Yuan, the sixth generation troublemaker who authored *Beijing Bastards*, attempts a similar intervention. A queen cruising the park toilet “palaces” of Beijing is arrested by a hunky cop, and the two embark on a lengthy, somewhat tedious and metaphorically overburdened SM duet. Part Mishima, part Genet, part Honcho porn fantasy, the film was memorable mainly for its subversive ability to get itself made at all within the censorious bureaucracy of the Chinese film industry.

Hector Babenco’s *Kiss of the Spider Woman* is arguably the ur-text of both *East Palace, West Palace* and *Strawberry and Chocolate*, again featuring the schematic collision of an earnest revolutionary and a dizzy queen. (It’s also a fascinating example of Hollywood hubris, where the adaptation of a truly great novel, by Argentinian legend Manuel Puig, is undermined in a single stroke by the casting of William Hurt as the faggotty fabulist. I mean, what were they thinking? William Hurt couldn’t get in touch with his inner queen if it hit him over the head with a handbag. William Hurt is to faggotry what George Bush is to global stability. But I digress.) This tale of how a macho Marxist is seduced by an interior-decorating Scheherazade is relevant here primarily for its extracurricular impact. One example of how cinema (even starring William Hurt) can unfurl the pink flag of the gay Left in unlikely circumstances, and with surprising results, is the story of Rafik, the last ANC prisoner to be released from Robben Island. He was also a mathematician who ended up in the prison because the ANC thought: “Hey...math—you can do bombs!” Sadly, no. The first bomb he wired blew up in his face, and he was convicted. On the island, a few years later, it was his turn to select the convicts’ weekly movie. He proposed *Kiss of the Spider Woman*. The other comrades hadn’t heard of it. “Oh, it’s a prison drama, a dialectical conversation about the nature of activism between a petty bourgeois Argentinian and an idealistic Marxist.” The comrades applauded his sug-

gestion. Then, they saw it. One by one, as they realized what it was really about, they stomped out of the viewing room in disgust, loudly cursing moffie faggots and their petty bourgeois concerns. Finally, Rafik was the only one left in the room, and the screening became his Stonewall. Despite taunts and insults, his act of queer rebellion was to watch the film through to the end.

Back to Quebec City in April. I'm there with my camcorder, thinking about desire and Pasolini. If this were the nineties, I'd hyperbolize about the utter lack of a queer presence within the ranks of the protesters. But that would be old-fashioned. This is a different political moment, a new one: it's more accurate to characterize the lack as utter indifference to queer concerns. Not in any hostile or repressed way—these twentysomething Mob4Globbers, many of whom are presumably queer even on a part-time basis, are genuinely indifferent. They don't care, they see no connection, but they wouldn't object if there was one. They're post-homophobic. Or at least they think they are.

And then I showed my tape. *Packin'* is a five-minute account of the Quebec City anti-FTAA activism, told entirely through a montage of cop crotches. These baskets are on a roll, literally—each crotch scrolls from top to bottom, as though the vertical hold has slipped. The crotches are variously plump, hilarious, wan, each fetchingly framed by state-of-the-art riot gear: truncheons, hand-guns, pepper spray spritzers. They wait, they shift, they lurch into action and attack. Crotches on duty, protecting crotches inside the perimeter fence.

...but then, Pasolini goes to the Genoa summit in July 2001. His beloved cops are better paid, better fed than when he last saw them in '68, but still as cute. And then: they shoot twenty-three-year-old protester Carlo Giuliani repeatedly at point-blank range, and run over his body with a jeep.

Pier Paolo is mute, his erotic day-dreams now riddled with bullets. His men in uniform are killing machines. He sees the sharp cheeks and olive skin of Carlo. Toxic. Resolute. He switches sides, and falls in love again. Another dead martyr, another Roman doomed to be romanticized.

From Eisenstein onwards, the desiring gaze of the committed avant-garde has often come to rest on the bodies of its heroes and foes. These looks are sometimes covert, hiding their interest behind narrative excuses or formal constructions. On other occasions, the looks are explicit, wading into treacherous waters where the currents of activism are disrupted by the rip-tide of lust.

The questions raised by such gazes are many. Does eroticizing activism run the risk of romanticizing it? Does critique soften when it's mediated by a crush? Is focus undermined when it's distracted by a crotch? Is there

some lingering truth to the old/new Left dismissal of gay concerns within revolutionary struggle: too diversionary, too petit bourgeois, a distraction from the serious work of class struggle?

With *Packin'* I wanted to make an agitprop for the anti-glob movement, using the time-tested techniques of humour and irony. I wanted to unpack the iconic power of the man in uniform, and then argue that the real crotches of terror and violence aren't these well-cupped polyester servants of capital, but their dark-suited masters safely behind the barricades. Yet, like Pasolini's dilemma, questions linger. Does such a below-the-belt focus traffic in the masochistic pleasures of fascinatin' fascism, the age-old allure of discipline and punish, the familiar need to rebel and then be spanked by Daddy Warbucks? If explicit, if foregrounded, is this always a bad thing? Will a movement which has so far demonstrated not much interest in humour welcome *Packin'* in all its campy glory? Do the anti-glob militants agree with Richard Goldstein and Naomi Klein: that since diversity has been co-opted by market forces, we must focus our analysis solely on the economic and ecological issues of globalization? Can the movement march forward, post-racist, post-sexist, post-homophobic, feeling confident that these issues were resolved by an earlier generation?

This political moment in some ways seems like the mirror image of Pasolini's '68: thirty-five years ago, activists were discovering and claiming their identities and subjectivities, leaving behind the economic focus of traditional Marxist politics. Now the Maude Squad has embraced a resurgence of class struggle, redefined by the realities of global capital. Where does this leave the twentysomething Eisenstein-in-waiting (let's call him Fyodor) who wishes to make queer avant-garde media for the new activism?

The first wave of anti-glob art is already showing signs of champing at the bit, of wanting to expand the definitions, the languages, and the images being created by the new movement. There's hopefully a growing interest in the avant-garde production of previous movements, even if work by nineties Act Up artists and eighties feminist experimental filmmakers is viewed through the smug prism of generational condescension. In a word, I'm optimistic that the Fyodors of today will find a place and a voice within the new movement, a space where they feel enfranchised to pursue their new ideas with their new forms. A moment when they can turn to the movement post-screening and say: "Was it good for you?"