

# LIVING OUTSIDE QUOTATION MARKS

Queer film both transcends and exploits camp, **Kai Lossgott** writes in his take on the work of Nadine Hutton

Queer cinema often celebrates excess. Nadine Hutton's *Memoirs of a Killarney Houseboy* celebrates extreme experimentation. This film will never be what you might want it to be. It is a celebration of irony and camp, in which every movement, every word, seems to make fun of life lived within 'quotation marks', a state well known to anyone who has been inside the hetero-normative closet. It has no heart-warming Hollywood moments, great original score, skilled method actors, clear storyline, carefully plotted narrative arc or satisfying conclusion. Its protagonist is unbearable and the villains far more entertaining. It has one director, but no single author. Hutton worked without a script or budget and insisted on being free to experiment with her collaborators, filmmakers Brian Webber and John Trengove, and performance artist Myer Taub. Taub appears in the title role as the Killarney Houseboy, hirsute with unkempt beard and a sagging rabbit costume, a serial victim of narcissism, middle age and infatuation, petulantly trolling the high-rise buildings and swimming pools of the decaying suburb in search of a hero and some cash.

As horror movie genre theory and the psychology of abuse tell us, every narcissistic victim is in search of a villain to affirm their identity. Film viewers are transfixed by the inevitable decline of a victim. The Houseboy is rescued from the gutter outside her house by Nadine (played by Brian Webber), who turns her camera on him, posing and snapping him smeared with mascara, in a scene reminiscent of kiddie porn ('This is good! Now show your pain, baby.') Taub bleeds luscious moments of femininity as he flirts with the pose, framing his unshaven mutt with gingerly moving fingertips torn from pink plastic. In the catalogue for *I, JOBURG*, her recent exhibition at Room in Johannesburg, (which included this film) Hutton writes that Taub is her muse, he in turn refers to her as a 'quiet genius'. His performance no doubt helps her to think through identity:

*Where do you fit yourself if language doesn't fit you? I don't reject the 'lesbian' word. But it doesn't fit who I am and who I identify as, or my sexual desire as much as the word 'queer' does. 'Queer' invites your personal interpretation. You put your own meaning on it. There are so many interpretations. Overcoming the pejorative meanings and taking your own power back is what's great about language.*

Hutton had to leave South Africa to find her identity, her creative language and the medium she now feels most comfortable with: 'I only truly discovered queerness when I went to New York in 2011 – learning that you don't have to be stuck in the binary of "gay or lesbian." The artist also transplanted from New York the freedom of movement and safety she felt using her iPhone when she returned to Johannesburg: 'I can take it wherever I go. I don't feel as vulnerable. I don't feel like a tourist in my own city just for carrying a camera.' In making the shift from documentary observer to participant, she wants intimately to know Johannesburg and its people, through her body and the small iPhone lens that accompanies her everywhere. She shares these photos and video clips through an Instagram feed on her tumblr blog, and on Twitter. They make it into her videos or photographic prints. The iPhone is not an unusual tool in her practice, which moves fluidly between still and motion photography. 'When I started making video art, for the first two years I didn't own a video camera. I only had a stills camera.' Since 2006 she's made twenty short video art pieces. For Hutton, experimentation is existential. It is embodied in queer lives. 'If a film is going to be queer,' she argues, 'it would have to be experimental, or it would have missed the fundamental point about its identity.' The history of queer cinema, long before it had a name, is closely aligned with the avant-garde (Andy Warhol in 1960s New York) and underground film (Kenneth Anger). Hutton adores the outrageous films of South African queer cinema legend Stanimir Stoyikov, the homoerotic violence of Gregg Araki's films, and makes special reference to John Waters's cult classic *Pink Flamingos* (subtitled *An Exercise in Poor Taste*). *Alice in Wonderland* is another strong influence. In reference to South African artists who explore queer sensibility rather than just gay masculinity, Hutton cites the work of Zanele Muholi, Athi-Patra Ruga, Nicholas Hlobo, Tracey Rose – and Myer Taub. Gay identity and lifestyle choices transcend camp. However, *Memoirs of a Killarney Houseboy* makes liberal use of this tradition central to queer culture. Film critic Shaun de Waal calls it 'bleakly amusing,' remarking that 'it's okay if you choke a little when you laugh.' Such knowing amusement over the roles played in life and art by gay people in a hetero-normative society is induced in the film by an excess of experimentation, stylisation, colour, outlandish

dress and behaviour. This includes the use of the pseudo-retro faux-8mm film look, a setting on an iPhone app.

There is not a single serious moment in the film, but many which might shock or disturb. While it is a farce, it has snippets of memoir ('Dear Diary, I have fallen for a man who is bad'). It includes mockumentary (Taub tries to sell his services to an unsuspecting Killarney senior citizen on the street). It flirts with amateur porn (Nadine flogs and has sex with Germaine while the Houseboy watches through a keyhole). It has delightfully unglamorous snippets of backyard water ballet and bench presses by a troupe of male nymphettes camping it up. It is no romantic comedy, but it is about a complex love affair between artist and muse. To love is to be vulnerable, to surrender to the feminine. Indeed, Taub has his penis chopped off in the climactic moment of the film. Play tragedy as comedy and you always get farce. 'It is strange that I made a film in which I tortured the protagonist,' muses Hutton, 'and I really hate slasher films. Making work about what frightens you the most is its own cathartic process.'

What about a deliberate attempt to give offence? 'I don't set out to offend people,' Hutton explains, 'but I'm pleased if they are. It's satire. I don't believe that by virtue of their queerness, men are weak. Through their white maleness, my collaborators embody a history of privilege, but our relationship extends beyond patriarchy. It's very rare that you can be so honest with your collaborators.'

Much of queer theory is concerned with the roles people play: spotting the gay character. It examines the stereotypical depictions of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender characters, bit-part players in the grand narratives of mainstream cinema. In film history, particularly the Classical Hollywood tradition, lesbian and transgender characters receive short shrift, in films that seem to be apologising for their characters. Gay male characters in mainstream cinema history tend to range from the 1940s sissy to the 1950s, '60s and '70s narcissistic victim or psychopathic villain (often taking punishment as both). They are villains who end up as victims of violent death. The 1980s AIDS victim, or 1990s romantic comedy's gay best friend, are more recent clichés. The lesbian, treated much the same, appears as ice maiden, antisocial butch, as vampire, or titillation for the male audience. Traditional social narratives, embodied in these mainstream film texts, have found it difficult to



**ABOVE LEFT** Nadine Hutton, *Memoirs of a Killarney Houseboy*, 2012, video still, John Trengove as Captain of the Flamingos Synchronised Swimming Team and Kieron Jina as love interest **ABOVE RIGHT TOP TO BOTTOM** Nadine Hutton, *Memoirs of a Killarney Houseboy*, 2012, video still, Brian Webber as Nadine Hutton; Nadine Hutton, *Memoirs of a Killarney Houseboy*, 2012, publicity image, Germaine de Larch (as Germaine), Myer Taub as Killarney Houseboy and Brian Webber as Nadine Hutton; Nadine Hutton, *Memoirs of a Killarney Houseboy*, 2012, video still, Myer Taub as Killarney Houseboy

accommodate queers, in particular lesbians, as regular citizens. In her intimate suburban horror flick, Hutton exploits the popular tradition of the gender-bender-gangster. Her role as a 'killer' in the film is played by a man. Her accomplice and lover is played by writer Germaine de Larch, a chain-smoking ladyguy covered in tattoos. Yet her critique transcends the binary. The ideal viewer of the film is neither male nor female, gay nor straight. Situated instead in a queer universe (*Alice in Wonderland* was a consciously intended reference), in many ways the film critiques the hetero-normative clichés of both heterosexual and gay films. Of course this does not always make for easy reception. 'Queer' is a minority even within the lgbt community, already a motley crew by definition. It continues to be deeply fractured and often finds itself prioritising the values of white masculinity. The Cape Town screenings of Hutton's film provoked outraged e-mails from two senior gay male viewers to festival director Nodi Murphy, who responded with an eloquent defence, remarking that the Out In Africa festival was 'homo, but not homogenous.' Hutton's response to these kinds of critiques cuts through the fluff: "I like it" and "I dislike

it" is language, it's so weak. I don't make things for people to like. I make things for people to viscerally experience. If somebody has a visceral positive or negative experience, that's strong, that means something to me.' Hutton's characters, soaked with fake blood for the film's publicity pictures, wear their painful survival with pride and irony. All babies are born in blood. Blood can be as intimate as it is violent. It is warm and close. Not unlike Stephen Cohen, glamorous in fake blood at the Durban July, insisting that everybody in the country is wearing it, Hutton offers up her subjects in metonymy. Gay people invent their own pride. We proclaim ourselves proud to be queer. We learn to love ourselves in the face of our symbolic castration, in which our alternative sexuality, the intrinsic gift we bring to culture, is taken from us and turned into shame.

Unsuspecting heterosexual viewers may be confronted with the same blood-curdling horror experienced by some people when thinking about what gay people really do in bed. By making an intimate horror film, shooting friends and lovers on her iPhone, Hutton seems to be applying one of the original gay liberation tactics. The movement took traditional insults

like 'queer' or 'moffie' and turned them into expressions of collective pride, until their associations were no longer powerful enough to insult. *I, JOBURG* staged the same confrontation, from the point of view of an uncompromising city:

*I am cautious, but never fearful of Joburg. I don't function that way. My work is about confronting the perception of Johannesburg as a place where people fear to tread, fear to work, fear to be a part of the city. It is about affirming myself as a Joburger, not as some scared white woman afraid to leave the gate. I belong here, not because I was born here, but because I am working to make it mine. It is as much a part of my identity as my queerness. I am not nor will I ever view myself as a victim.*

Hutton sees collaboration as integral to the future of her work. Now working as the newly formed collective, Against Jealousy, Hutton, Trengove and Taub are already busy with their next series, 'Work Will Set You Free'.

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