

Anamarija Horvat. *Screening Queer Memory: LGBTQ Pasts in Contemporary Film and Television*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2021. Pp. 200. \$103.50 (hbk). ISBN: 9781350187658.



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Vito Russo’s 1970 lecture on lesbian and gay images in American cinema culminated both in the publication of *The Celluloid Closet* in 1981 and in the proliferation of analyses of queer media forms. The span of this boom finds explanatory reasons in the power of these mediums to make, as Schoonover and Galt suggest, “queer spaces possible” (3). Inscribed to this argument is Anamarija Horvat’s *Screening Queer Memory: LGBTQ Pasts in Contemporary Film and Television* (2021) which appears as a groundbreaking examination of “the ways in which on-screen works act as markers of queer memory” (2). Queer temporalities and historical configurations of sexuality have attracted critical attention in academia with the blossoming contributions of Jack Halberstam’s *In a Queer Time and Place*, Carla Freccero’s *Queer/Early/Modern*, Heather Love’s *Feeling Backward*, and Elizabeth Freeman’s *Time Binds*, among many others. Within this corpus, this seminal work hints at memory theory’s impassive quality in the constitution of queer pasts in the area of cinema and television. The book under review offers a critical analysis of five cinematic and televisual sources—Todd Hayne’s *Velvet Goldmine* (1998), Cheryl Dunye’s *The Watermelon Woman* (1996), Joey Soloway’s *Transparent* (2014), Tom Rob Smith’s *London Spy* (2015) and Matthew Warchus’s *Pride* (2014)—to prove that screen media could work as a site where queer memory might be analyzed and predominantly disseminated from one generation to another.

The book is logically structured in three parts including an introduction and a conclusion, comprising a total of five chapters. Interestingly, each part includes an introduction and a conclusion, thus, establishing lines of connection among the chapters. Throughout the book’s length, Horvat provides not only a pertinent methodological foundation for the dormant role of memory in shaping LGBTQ misrepresentations, intergenerational experiences of queerness, and in commemorating queer activists’ pasts, but also a close analysis of the elements that code them. The work opens with an introduction that legitimizes and justifies its *raison d’être*. Alluding to the controversy that surrounded the release of Emmerich’s *Stonewall* in 2015,

Horvat contextualizes one of the long-standing gaps in LGBTQ media: the role of on-screen queer representations in obscuring and/or shaping “societal memory”(2). Furthermore, in this introduction, the author also offers a concise but convenient literature review of relevant works by memory scholars that connect directly with this book’s concerns. For Horvat, concepts such as “postmemory,” postulated by Marianne Hirsch, described as a memory transfer from one individual to others (5), or Landsberg’s “prosthetic memory,” which refers to public memories of mass cultural depictions of—often traumatic—past events (45), become essential for the analysis of the enactment of queer memory through visual media. This introductory section, then, effectively outlines the research inquiry that prompts the successive chapters.

The first part, entitled “Queer Memories of the Screen,” brings together two chapters that investigate the role that LGBTQ spectators have in shaping queer memories through queer artists’ on-screen representations. Employing Todd Hayne’s *Velvet Goldmine* as an audacious tool of analysis, chapter one’s potential derives from Horvat’s perception of queer fandom’s memories as pivotal in the enactment of queer subjectivity. Approaching these memories as a “transformative experience” (23), she benefits from Freud’s “screen memory” for the analysis of this visual source. Given the obfuscation of LGBTQ representation in media, Horvat brilliantly comments on how the protagonist’s memories as a fan of the glam rock star Brian Slade turn into a screen that motivates the realization, and at the same time concealment, of his queer identity. The use of this notion also proves helpful for the rest of the chapter in which Horvat evaluates the potential of these fandom memories for the present. By focusing on the queer genealogy elaborated by the protagonist out of memories of queer figures such as Oscar Wilde or David Bowie, Horvat reads these screen memories as affective experiences that productively construct queer fans’ subjectivity. If the previous chapter enlightened the position of media as a screen for queer identity, in chapter two, entitled “Going on Faith: Cheryl Dunye’s *The Watermelon Woman* and the Invention of the Black Lesbian,” Horvat moves into analyzing how media “still often engulfs queer pasts, particularly those of already marginalized subjects” (58). Interestingly, Horvat concentrates on *The Watermelon Woman* and deploys Jelača’s concept of dislocated screen memories—or the perception of “the screen as a surface which both depicts and conceals the past” (21)—to build her argument. Thus, the author interprets the protagonist’s persistent but failed research on the erased lineage of the black queer actress Watermelon Woman as an instance of how media has benefitted the actress’ on-screen work but

obscured her queer biographical story. In an intelligent way, she expands this idea to African American lesbians by focusing on the film's depiction of key historical events. Examining these representations through Landsberg's concept "prosthetic memory," she claims that this deliberate act of exclusion and misrepresentation consequently "allows for a plethora of misconceptions about the past, leaving Black lesbians unmoored from all that preceded them" (57).

In the second part, "Queer Memory, Intergenerationality and Television," Horvat investigates the role of intergenerational transmission of memories within the LGBTQ community. In the ensuing chapters, she utilizes Hirsch's notion of "postmemory" to evaluate the function of queer film and television as alternatives to the absent intergenerational transfer of queer memory. Pertinently, chapter three ("Haunting and Queer Histories: Representing Postmemory in Joey Soloway's *Transparent*") makes a compelling case for understanding the consequences of the lack of passing on postmemory. Horvat does so by delving into the TV series' depiction of the question of remembrance and its effects on someone's identity. As a result, this section successfully captures how, because of the circulating heteronormative "gendered technologies of memory and frames of interpretation" (76), there is a particular gap in the transmission of queer memory of the past which complicates the understanding of the protagonist's transgender identity at a later age. Nonetheless, what is perhaps most innovative about this chapter is Horvat's appreciation of postmemory's power. More specifically, she enunciates how the TV series' brilliant link of familial history with transgender and feminist pasts reveals postmemory's crucial position in the cultivation of empathy and affect when re-imagining the queer experience of others. The other chapter of this section ("New Spies, Old Tricks: Intergenerational Narratives and Memories of the AIDS crisis in *London Spy*") offers a sophisticated analysis of the British TV series *London Spy* through the lens of queer postmemory to specifically detect the role of media in its transmission. By turning attention to the TV series' intergenerational queer couple, the author contends that while the transfer of mediated memories of queerness is continuously oscillating between "the 'dark' past of discrimination and 'rosy' present of queer rights" (83), this story problematizes the deceitful representation of queer history in institutions and the media. But, again, Horvat refuses to overlook the potential implications for memory studies that this queer TV series offers. The author's poignant argument is that *London Spy*'s evocation of queer film classics, such as that of Derek Jarman's *Blue* (1993), could help to build an "archive of feelings"

(Cvetkovich 8) which might function as a powerful “affective memory resource” (97) to resort to upon the absence of official histories about the LGBTQ community.

The remaining part of this book, “Remembering Queer Activism,” tackles the media’s recreation and commemoration of the history of LGBTQ activism since “memories of non-violent activism remained less examined” (104). Therefore, the strength of chapter five (“Reimagining LGSM: Gendered Activism and Neoliberalism in Matthew Warchus’s *Pride*”) lies in the engaging nexus between Horvat’s archival work on the history of the NGO LGSM—which stands for Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners—and its cinematic representation. For Horvat, *Pride* succeeds in giving voice and visibility to the LGSM group, but this works as a “double-edged sword” in many ways. First, she contends that this portrayal constructs a prosthetic memory of queer activism as predominantly white, male, and cisgender which obscures how transgenders, women, and people from different ethnic backgrounds have also forged LGBTQ history. According to Horvat, the film echoes Terry Castle’s notion of “the lesbian as apparitional,” because they are represented as subsumed under a male gayness category (117), and as a result, stigmatizes lesbian activists’ memory as unrelated to queer and labor history. Second, the film omits several political facts surrounding the LGSM group, such as the role that some of their members had in building communist organizations in the United Kingdom, or how funds raised for the strike were initially thought to be given to the NUM, the National Organization of Mineworkers, but later on rejected on grounds that they were going to be used by the state. By doing so, Horvat contends that this visual representation depicts sexuality and gender identity questions as economically untouched and as “essentially disconnected from broader criticisms of neoliberal politics” (134). Still, despite these two problematic areas at stake, Horvat notably detects that *Pride*—even with this chapter’s comparison to other visual mediums that deal with activism in a much more positive way—could be read productively through “memory’s ‘normative power’” (104). Benefiting from Resses Poole’s view that the power of memories of the past lies in that they could function as present and/or future makers, the author makes a case for interpreting the film’s references to the history of queer activism as vital for the embodiment of ritualistic activist practices in current collective actions.

In the overall conclusion, Horvat offers a brief but eloquent overview of transnational visual mediums of queer memory—South Korean, Croatian, French, Australian, Finish—to emphasize that this book’s exploration could

also be extended to worldwide on-screen representations. She points out that a particular “queer search for memory in cinema and television” (138) can be crucial for queers often in need of non-traditional mediums for memory transmission. Horvat moves on to highlight the powerful functions that this book has accomplished. Firstly, she points out that the analytic focus on different kinds of mediated queer memories has successfully elucidated “the position of the queer community within contemporary society” (138). Secondly, the study of these particular on-screen representations has brought to light a potential possibility for helping those in the present to develop subjectivity and agency for a promising future.

*Screening Queer Memory* fulfills its attempt to “better understand the specificity of how LGBTQ memory is constructed by the media and to grasp what this can tell us about the position of the queer community within contemporary society” (138). Even though it evaluates queer memory from seemingly contrasting perspectives, the effective methodological explanations, as well as the introductory and concluding sections, manage to establish a relevant link that provides cohesion and coherence. Similarly, the up-to-date selection of materials makes this book an engaging, easily approachable piece. I would contend, however, that Horvat could have benefited from more recent concepts, such as “queer coding” or even “queer baiting,” in the analysis of certain visual mediums. Despite this note, the author not only succeeds in exhibiting the mechanisms behind representations of queer memory, but also in paving the way for future research that will solidify the utopian potentialities, echoing José Esteban Muñoz’s *Cruising Utopia* (qtd. in Horvat 106), that these mediated memories have for the LGBTQ community.

## REFERENCES

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