

**Review of *Féminin/Féminin*. 2014. By Chloe Robichaud.
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A discussion on generative queer spaces.

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I remember the moment the world got wide. I was a teenager at a party, exploring the way my body *felt* queer and *performed* queer. At the age of 14 I'd fostered my own notions of *queerness*. It was a composition of intimate realms that lay uncharted. I felt removed from the way other girls would fall into the nook of a boy sitting on the couch, navigating bodies of opposition. At one point during the party there was a break in the music and a girl mentioned that she stayed up until 11pm each Thursday to watch episodes of *The L Word*. She spoke of the uninhibited representation of a group of lesbians living in Los Angeles. Their relationships, their friendships and their affairs were exposed, ready to be consumed. The show had only recently aired in Australia. I feigned indifference, masking my intense curiosity. But a sensation of recognition *ran* through me; a sensation of having arrived home, like the world had finally extended outward, tendrils of familiarity embracing me.

Before this moment, being queer and creating myself as queer was self-generative. This process of creation existed almost entirely within the tangible world, which in turn governed entirely tangible experiences. I navigated my

body next to other bodies (un)like mine. This sentient realm felt entirely of my own and wasn't predetermined by what I discovered through *scrolling* and *browsing* and *pausing*. Sure, the internet was a *thing* we did as adolescents. We would pass hours talking nonsense in chat rooms to strangers, sloughing off narcissistic, hormonal energy. However, adolescent naivety, the absence of free flowing information and limited resources made it difficult for a young queer teenager to have any point of self-reference. Despite feeling comfortable in my own skin, my experiences stood alone and felt silenced by their individuality in front of normative adolescent movements and becomings. I waited eagerly for several months for the first season of *The L Word* to be released on DVD. Its reception transcended the boundaries of queer cultures and subcultures, initiating the popularisation and delineation of what it meant to be lesbian or gay or queer. It took a stance in the public sphere and was recognised by heterosexual communities as the *Same Sex, Different City*. This was the slogan published on the cover of the first season DVD release, an evident reference to *Sex and the City*. *The L Word*, in its popularity, created space for other forms of queer expression. These forms would move beyond popular culture and conventional viewing platforms.

Féminin/Féminin (2014) is an online mini-series, directed by French Canadian film maker Chloé Robichaud, which explores the lives of several queer women living in Quebec. In each episode we are introduced to the intimate life of a single character. This character is revealed through a dynamic process of representation, all of which inevitably ties back into the greater queer community of the series. Consider Léa of Episode One. Her fictional narrative, which revolves around her passionate aversion to relationships, is broken up by questions posed by director Robichaud about lesbian stereotypes and behaviours. During these breaks in her narrative we find her sitting, centred on a stool amidst the warm light of her lounge room. The walls behind her are adorned with pictures of women, the shelves bulging, an involved and lived in space. She is comfortable being questioned and responds confidently. Her interview space, in essence, is not her own, but shared amongst her community and other characters that we meet. We can also consider Céline, an older

woman who finds herself at a bar full of younger lesbians, distinguished by her age and status, her long-term relationship over. Her disassociation from the prolific younger lesbian generation shifts rapidly as she finds herself at home with the 26 year old bar tender. Together they discuss what it means to love at different ages. She too, is questioned by Robichaud about her ideas of age and relationships and the barriers that are inherited through the reiteration of cultural norms. Chairs are stacked up behind her, a simple, transitional space. There are also characters who defy identification with any one sexuality and those who deal with changes and challenges in their relationships through sickness and betrayal. And so it continues, their lives unfold endless as if they were unobserved.

Whilst Walters (2001, p. 15) notes that increased cultural visibility can diffuse the essence of "gayness" for hetero consumption, queer communities have a deep need for visibility in order to normalise non-hetero-normative ways of being. In many ways *The L Word* (along with *Queer as Folk* that spoke to the experiences of young gay men in Pittsburgh) was a right of passage towards achieving heightened public, lesbian visibility. It was, after all, aired on mainstream television for mainstream consumption. Its scope was much broader than that of cinema, but also more homogenised. Comparatively, *Féminin/Féminin* attempts to re-humanise generalisations about queer communities through its dynamic inter-narrative discourse and discussion. With the passing of each episode we experience the unfurling of each character's fictional, intimate lives. These narratives give back to the community in which they function and perform. Yet we are also allowed an opportunity to view them objectively as if they are *actual bodies* within our *actual communities* through Robichaud's questioning. The director's willingness to draw out information, which we wouldn't normally have access to without this inter-narrative documentary style, dissolves the boundaries of what is real and unreal in the character's fictional narrative. This style stands out in stark contrast to a show such as *The L Word*, where queer representation seems *hyper-real* and numbs queer identities and communities for hetero consumption. *Féminin/Féminin* is subtler in its approach and as we watch the lives of each character

unfold through interview and narrative it becomes unclear whether we are watching a fictional account or not. Queer stereotypes about relationships, sex, love and even alcohol consumption are dissolved through interviews and express hetero-relativity. Rather than creating queer lives as hetero-normative through a process of deconstruction, queer spaces are normalised through active discourse and discussion. These ideas and deconstructed stereotypes are then performed and exemplified through each character's fictional narrative. This mode of representation serves to decentralise the real and the unreal, which re-humanises and recreates queer bodies, cultures and communities as multiplicitous. In the act of becoming multiplicitous, queer cultures take on forms that coincide closely with that which can be considered as normal, a process now nourished and simultaneously generated by the digital world.

This notion of re-humanising through decentralisation calls us to give consideration to the mutual dependence between transgressing queer boundaries [as a concept] and the digital realm. Stern brings our attention to the performative nature of online cultural landscapes in saying that "our classroom spaces today occupy traditional, physical outlets but also imaginary, online gathering places [...] that have become extensions of our pedagogical bodies [communities]" (2011, 250). In this sense, we can consider *Féminin/Féminin* as performative in having occupied an online space in which those who are queer and non-queer can gather from anywhere to view. In being performative and reaching in nature, it is powerfully generative of queer cultures as being multiplicitous, which are then normalised through digital diffusion. It brings to the foreground the importance small scale, online productions have in occupying space. Its accessibility and ability to be shared through digital hubs such as *Facebook* allows queer identities and communities to continually appropriate, create, deconstruct and recreate themselves. Stern (2011, 257-258) notes that this happens through connecting in with larger cultural, digital hubs such as *Féminin/Féminin*, sharing histories and telling stories to foster relativity of experience. This generative aspect of the queer in the digital can also be seen in *Tumblr*, an online blog community that harbours millions of images, videos, gifs. and stories that can be blogged and re-blogged. *Tumblr*.

evokes a sense of infinity. Infinity scrolling allows one to seamlessly flow on from one image to the next without having to change webpage. I follow a mix of queer and non-queer blogs. I have endless access to photos and videos of women kissing, making love, enacting and creating queer lives (contrasted rather ironically with photos of dogs, cafes, skateboarders, hetero sex scenes and rolling landscapes). And whilst these photos/videos/gifs. may not be exact replications of the ones that preceded them, thematically they fail to fall into any one categorical stream; the flow simply blends and normalises. Through repetition queerness is in a constant state of creative reproduction. These forms of media are mobile and mobility, in this sense, is the essence of growth as the boundaries of the real/unreal, queer/non-queer, dissolve and reach into all spaces; a cultural and sub-cultural decentralisation.

In watching *Féminin/Féminin* I became hyper-aware of how publically *visible* being queer has become. The outward movement of queer culture from the physical into the digital continuously gives me (and countless others) an opportunity to gather what it means to be queer beyond my experience and beyond our collective experiences (being both queer and non-queer). It also allows me to form narrative and knowledge around my own experience in a world where being queer is still becoming something. The digital platform generates creative, productive space where queerness is nurtured and re-humanised, its process of becoming multiple and accessible fluid, open and ready.

Bibliography

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