

The New York Times

Isaac Julien: "The Day New Queer Cinema Said: Let's Do This"

By Erik Piepenburg

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Images from the Barbed-Wire Kisses panel at the 1992 Sundance Film Festival. Credit: Sandria Miller for Sundance Institute

On Jan. 25, 1992, the Sundance Film Festival convened a panel on contemporary lesbian and gay cinema and "the significance of this movement," according to the program. It was a bold declaration that drew nine speakers to a dais at noon, even though they were probably hung over from the big party the night before, where Brad Pitt showed up.

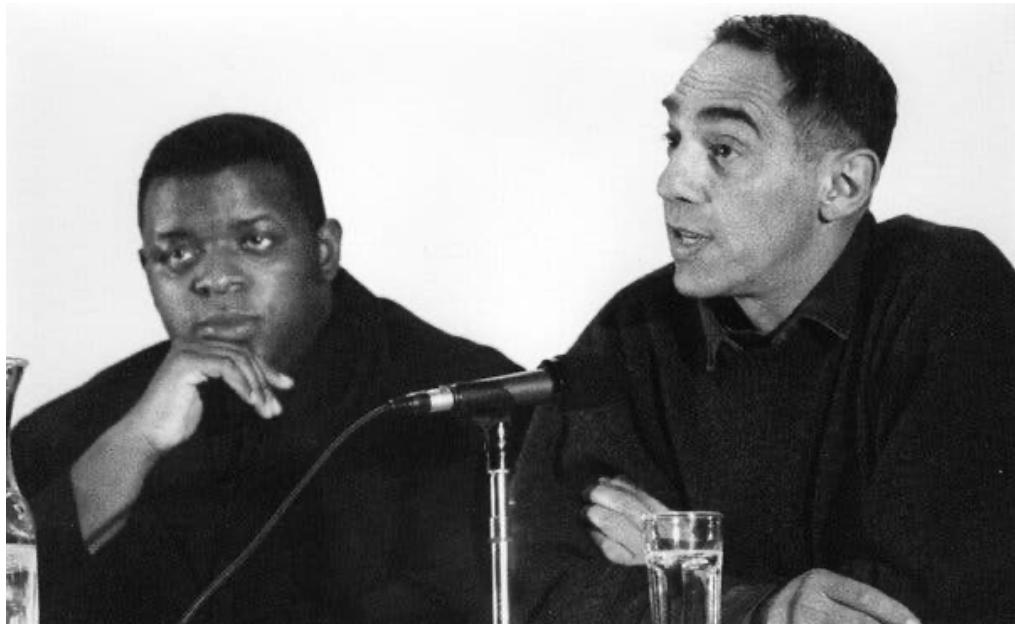
Sharing a name with [an album](#) by the Jesus and Mary Chain, the Barbed-Wire Kisses panel was a turning point for queer film. Not just because of the activist-driven, identity-cinema particulars it covered — there was talk of “having to rethink history according to our terms,” as the director Todd Haynes said during the discussion, and debate over [protests regarding transgender representation](#) in “The Silence of the Lambs.”

What happened that day was a flash point in the genesis of New Queer Cinema, a call to arms of angry and unapologetic independent films that were made during the '90s by, and arguably for, a community in crisis.

"It was a supercharged moment," said Tom Kalin, a filmmaker and one of the speakers. "The rest of the year bore out what happened on that panel."

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Isaac Julien, left, and Derek Jarman speaking at the Barbed-Wire Kisses panel. Credit: Sandria Millier for Sundance Institute

"People hit pause to catch their breath," said the film critic B. Ruby Rich, who moderated and helped organize the panel, which ran for almost two and a half hours.

The legacy of that Saturday afternoon is being revisited this year as New Queer Cinema turns 30, and it's going to be a rowdy look back. New Queer Cinema threw punches, and no wonder — the mostly white gay men who made the early wave of films were terrorized and exhausted by the first deadly decade of AIDS, and they'd had it with what they saw as the crushing conservative politics of the Reagan-Bush era.

"The '80s had been so brutal — work didn't get made because people were dying too fast," said Rich, now the editor of the journal [Film Quarterly](#) and the author of ["New Queer Cinema,"](#) a collection of her writings. "That's when these films came into being, to try to start making sense of what was going on."

Three directors on the panel were at Sundance with feature films that became bedrocks of New Queer Cinema: Derek Jarman (["Edward II,"](#)) Isaac Julien (["Young Soul Rebels,"](#)) and Kalin (["Swoon,"](#)). There was also Todd Haynes, whose dark queer film ["Poison"](#) received the grand prize from Sundance's dramatic film jury [the year before](#). Jennie Livingston's ["Paris Is Burning,"](#) another New Queer Cinema guiding light, [split](#) the documentary jury's grand prize that same year with Barbara Kopple's ["American Dream."](#)

Next to Haynes in a backward baseball cap sat the 18-year-old Sadie Benning, known for shooting [intimate short tapes on a Fisher-Price camera.](#) In from Australia were Stephen Cummins and Simon Hunt, who made ["Resonance,"](#) a homoerotic experimental short. Rounding out the panel were Lisa Kennedy, then the senior editor of the Village Voice film section, and Rich, who [wrote about](#) the new films after the festival, and is credited with naming New Queer Cinema.

Julien said he remembers the panel as "a beginning of a movement, and a change."

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Friends at a Brooklyn ball, as seen in the documentary "Paris Is Burning," directed by Jennie Livingston. Credit: Janus Films



Tony Pemberton in "Poison," directed by Todd Haynes. Credit: Zeitgeist Films

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"There was a pushing against genre and boundaries, and against what was being received as more classical ways of filmmaking — a disruption," he said. "That was twinned with an anger and urgency about how films could reflect our lives in ways that gave voice to our concerns."

New Queer Cinema didn't tug at the heart, it kicked the crotch. Its AIDS-themed films especially — they were the storm after the calm of earlier life-affirming movies that mourned the young dead like "[Longtime Companion](#)," which in 1989 politely asked straight people to pay attention. Three years later, Gregg Araki's "[The Living End](#)" warned everyone to run for cover.

It's not as if gay-themed movies weren't being made at the time. It's just that the straight-made ones that got attention — box-office hits like "The Crying Game" and "Basic Instinct" — were part of a media landscape that was, as Benning said on the panel, "responsible for the kind of pain that I was in by not representing my identity at all."

[Haynes](#) said that what distinguished New Queer Cinema was that its films were "acts of protest and rebellion."

"What's most startling, particularly in today's culture around identity politics, is how the films that we were all doing, independently, were incendiary," said Haynes, an Oscar nominee whose Hollywood career stayed queer in films like "[Far From Heaven](#)" and "[Carol](#)." "There was a spirit of challenging normalcy and heteronormativity and identifying with criminality."

In its embrace of queer bad behavior — "Swoon," for example, was a gay riff on the Leopold and Loeb murder case — New Queer Cinema owed debts to its renegade forebears like John Waters and Kenneth Anger. Formally, it walked in the footsteps of scrappy queer films made in the '80s: Lizzie Borden's "[Born in Flames](#)," Gus Van Sant's "[Mala Noche](#)," Marlon Riggs's "[Tongues Untied](#)." As a movement, New Queer Cinema took off in earnest in the glow of the 1992 panel, and for about the next decade, it plowed through the straight-dominated indie scene with hotheaded, sexually rebellious and believe-it-or-not sweet films from the directors Todd Verow (["Frisk"](#)), Rose Troche (["Go Fish"](#)), Bruce LaBruce (["Hustler White"](#)), Maria Maggenti (["The Incredibly True Adventures of Two Girls in Love"](#)) and others.



Daniel Schlachet, left, and Craig Chester in "Swoon," directed by Tom Kalin. Credit: Fine Line Features

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Guinevere Turner and Cheryl Dunye in "The Watermelon Woman," directed by Dunye. Credit: First Run Features

Last year, one of the cornerstones of New Queer Cinema — Cheryl Dunye's ["The Watermelon Woman"](#) — was [chosen for preservation](#) on the Library of Congress's [National Film Registry](#). This year it's among the 33 titles in ["Pioneers of Queer Cinema."](#) a retrospective that is scheduled to begin Feb. 18 at the Billy Wilder Theater of the UCLA Film & Television Archive in Los Angeles. May Hong HaDuong, the director of the archive, said plans are afoot for the films — "queer heirlooms," she called them — to travel to other cities.

Dunye said the movement had legs, but its promise remains a work in progress.

"People on the margins who are still invisible — trans and queer folks of color, or people who are on continents who have no rights at all — those stories are the ones that we're still building a world for," she said.

Queer film continued to take root at Sundance in the decades after the panel, and never left. Among this year's selections is Chase Joynt's ["Framing Agnes."](#) a docu-fiction feature about a transgender woman who participated in gender health research in the 1960s. (The festival runs through Jan. 30 as an all-virtual event after organizers scrapped plans for a hybrid of online and in-person programming.)

Joynt said he was inspired by the "urgency and defiance" of New Queer Cinema, even though transgender voices were mostly missing from its canonical films. He gave credit to one of his

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mentors, the director John Greyson, whose ["Zero Patience"](#) and ["Lilies"](#) are among the movement's foundational Canadian films.

"As a trans person making an experimental documentary, I recognize myself in the movies" of New Queer Cinema, Joynt said. "They were stories that needed to be made by those people."

As the 21st century arrived and L.G.B.T.Q. lives weren't under attack by AIDS or Congress quite like they were in the '90s, the outrage and immediacy of New Queer Cinema waned.

"In many ways it pushed the medium forward," Haynes said. "This turned into — and I saw this coming — a Rupert Everett-izing that helped ease and relax the country into feeling not threatened."



From left: Tom Kalin, Lisa Kennedy, Todd Haynes, Sadie Benning and B. Ruby Rich. Credit: Sandria Miller for Sundance Institute

Fast forward to "Love, Simon" and "Call Me by Your Name" — mainstream cinematic worlds that are far removed from that queer Sundance 30 Januaries ago.

Any commemoration of the Barbed-Wire Kisses panel will be absent two voices. Jarman [died](#) of complications from AIDS in 1994, at 52. Cummings also died that year, of H.I.V.-related lymphoma, at 34. Hunt, who worked with him, said the shadow of AIDS makes 1992 a bittersweet time capsule to reconsider.

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"So many of us had friends who were dying and sick and we thought: maybe we don't have time to make our mark on the world," he said. "These people, who were all around 30, were trying to boost up their voices and throw away the old rules."

Kennedy, a freelance [culture writer](#) (whose work also appears in The New York Times), said her brother Kevin died of AIDS at 29 just two months before the panel. She recalled feeling "completely wrecked" but also encouraged by sitting next to filmmakers who were elbowing their way toward visibility.

"For me, it has that sentimentality around it," she said of New Queer Cinema. "It had beautiful tendrils that continue today."

Benning, a multidisciplinary artist, declined several interview requests through Mitchell-Innes & Nash, a New York City gallery that exhibits their work. Benning, who uses they/them pronouns, identifies as transgender and nonbinary, according to a [biography](#) from the Museum of Modern Art, which has several of their works in its collection.

The panelists never stopped making art. Haynes's "[The Velvet Underground](#)" is on this year's Oscars shortlist for documentary feature. Julien has a new [film installation](#) at the Bechtler Museum of Modern Art in Charlotte, N.C. Hunt is an artist and composer in Sydney.

Kalin is a writer, activist and [video artist](#), and teaches filmmaking at Columbia. He said his memories of 1992 aren't the only ones that still matter.

"I made a movie 30 years ago that people still discuss," he said. "I'm honored that's been the case."

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