

# QUEER CULTURAL MEMORY

Ingrid Ryberg

**IN ONE EPISODE** of the recent Netflix sequel *Tales of the City*, twenty-something documentary filmmaker Claire (Zosia Mamet) brings her date Shawna (Ellen Page) to the legendary site of Compton's cafeteria in San Francisco. Overwhelmed by the wings of history, they lay down on the pavement next to the memorial plaque in a gratitude ritual whereby they "[feel] the vibes of fiery resistance [seep] into [the] skin" – and begin falling in love with each other.

This emotionally and textually dense scene is emblematic of how the film camera, in our present moment of unprecedented queer audiovisual publicity, is recurrently turned toward the past. In *Pose*, the FX series about New York City's ballroom scene, Robin Campillo's feature *120 BPM*, about AIDS activism in France, and documentaries such as Susan Stryker's *Screaming Queens*, about the Compton's riots, and my own *En armé av älskande* [*An Army of Lovers*], about queer filmmaking in the Swedish liberation era, half a century of diverse queer struggles are commemorated and mediated as fundamental to contemporary queer experience. Countless other artistic and archival projects across the globe are similarly contributing to the rich ongoing creation and circulation of *queer cultural memory*. The activist and scholarly interest in the queer past is not new *per se*, but the current proliferation and accessibility of queer historical accounts and records – audiovisual and other – certainly are and they promise to keep queer scholars busy throughout the 2020s.

Queer cultural memory is going to be a fruitful key concept in this future research. Signaling an imperative distinction from *history* (see, Doan 2017), the concept intrinsically propels attentiveness to the construction, politics and meanings of remembering and popular history-making (see, Sturken 1997). When it comes to the current boost in audiovisual and other cultural representations of the queer past, the concept has the potential to stimulate revitalized discussions about queer publicity and world-making (see, Warner 2002; Muñoz 2009), and about the affective and political meanings of cinema and media as private and collective fantasies (see, de Lauretis 1999; Freeman 2010; White 2015; Koivunen 2018).

Our present moment's heightened attention to the queer past is characterized by, on the one hand, a conventional and linear temporal logic of anniversaries and ceremonies – in 2019 most notably of “Stonewall 50,” but also of the centenary of the Hirschfeld Institute in Berlin and local milestones, such as the removal of the illness classification of homosexuality in Sweden in 1979. On the other hand, it is a logic that invokes a sense of urgency and risk. There is a historically accumulated sense of fear that the stories, knowledge, and belongings of LGBTQI+ people will be lost and forgotten by history, due to neglect, silencing or violent eradication (as in the case of the Hirschfeld Institute). Hence, many, including myself, have initiated projects driven by the need to preserve and document invaluable testimonies from the last fifty years of transformative activist resistance, coming out, and counter-publicity – *before it is too late*.

This temporal logic is articulated throughout in the new season of *Tales of the City*. In particular, it is pronounced in the subplot about Claire's documentary film project that becomes a vehicle for ultimately unearthing ninety-year old trans woman Anna Madrigal's secret and troubled history of navigating between individual survival and trans community solidarity. Claire's project evokes how the present urge to preserve the passing generation's life stories is infused with melancholic mourning of the perceived passing of an entire era of queer urban (and sometimes rural) life, as a consequence of gentrification, neoliberalism, and on the horizon: right-wing backlash.

As a filmmaker, Claire's declared mission is to document "the queer community and its disillusion as a result of the strangling grip that capitalism has on San Francisco." The cynical filmmaker's quest to capture a vanishing world of locked down queer bars stands in contrast to the still vibrant (and heavily romanticized) queer sociality of the series' own fictitious historical site, the apartment house at Barbary Lane. Like an anti-social *edelmanesque* angel of vengeance, Claire does not shy away from the most selfish and destructive means to secure footage to prove her film's thesis of queer disillusion.

The toxic meta-filmic project within the series offers an unflattering comment on contemporary "archive fever" among queer artists and scholars obsessing with the past, rather than devoting time and energy to burning social justice struggles in the present era of homonationalism and necropolitics (see, Haritaworn et al. 2014). The series' "fever" could be said to operate on multiple levels though, not least in the revival format's inherent nostalgia – mobilized in Showtime's new *The L Word* as well, and broadly defining contemporary popular culture as such. Audiences today are provided with plenty of occasions for remembering and reliving formative media moments in one's own as well as in a fan community's shared past.

*Tales of the City* not only contributes to the current broad construction of queer cultural memory in audiovisual media culture, but also capitalizes on the multilayered, forty-year cult legacy of Armistead Maupin's series of nine novels and previous television adaptations. It offers opportunities both for experiencing the thrill anew and for connecting with a historical queer readership. Just like the scene where Claire and Shawna return to the original site of Compton's cafeteria, the new series in itself evokes how cultural memory merges the private with the collective through ritualized embodied practices. The notion of "fever," hence, could in this case also be used as a metaphor for an affectively transmitted sense of a shared past in queer intimate publics (Berlant 2008) – such as the ones currently forged through the practice of individual binge watching.

*Tales of the City* is just one example of the centrality of queer cultural memory in our present audiovisual media moment. Numerous questions

remain for queer scholars to answer in the next decade, but undoubtedly – and excitingly – this memory is both more diverse and more accessible than before. How is “our” history imagined and narrativized? Who belongs to and who falls outside of its collective fantasy? What desires and politics are served in the present? The 2020s have a fertile archive to dig into and unpack.

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