

## “We are the new Lithuania”

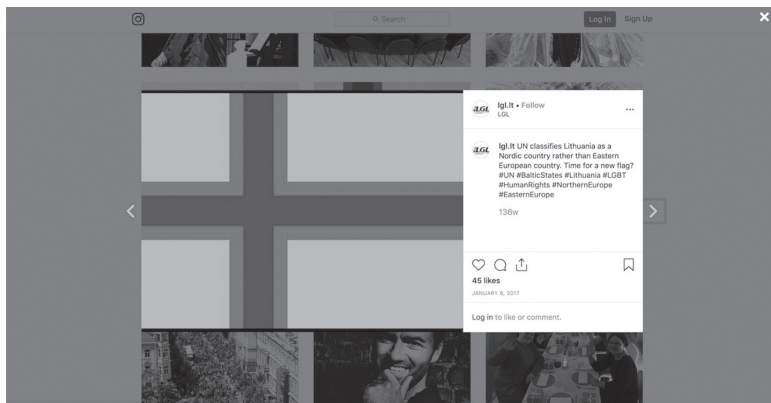
Deconstructing Queerness and Nationalism in  
Romas Zabarauskas' *You Can't Escape Lithuania*  
(*Nuo Lietuvos nepabėgsi*) and *Porno Melodrama*.

### ABSTRACT:

In the Baltic States, LGBT representation in the media is limited at best. While LGBT activism continues to gain support and visibility, LGBT characters are considerably less common on film and television, and only Lithuania has produced films with openly gay or lesbian characters in main roles. This stands in contrast to the tendency in Baltic media and politics to lay claim to Nordic values and to identify as Northern European rather than Eastern European. In this paper I examine how two Lithuanian films grapple with identity and place in their depictions of gay characters. *Porno Melodrama* (Romas Zabarauskas, 2011) follows a gay couple as they are forced to choose between nationalistic homophobia and fleeing to “safer” cities in Western Europe. *Nuo Lietuvos Nepabėgsi* (*You Can't Escape Lithuania*, Romas Zabarauskas, 2016) features a fictionalised version of its director in a meta-narrative meditation on the meaning of cinema as well as the place of queerness in the “new” Lithuania. In this article I interrogate how sexual and national identity are placed in contra-distinction to one another in the two films by Romas Zabarauskas: in *Porno Melodrama*, where gay identity is met with violent retribution; and in *You Can't Escape Lithuania*, where queerness serves as a critique of the underlying foundations of gender, sexuality and nationalist narratives of belonging. I critique Western conceptions of homonormativity and homonationalism, where their problematic mapping onto a Baltic context fails to take into account the diverging reality in which neoliberalism has not been accompanied by more inclusive attitudes to sexual and gender diversity.

**Keywords:** cinema, representation, LGBT, Lithuania

IN JANUARY 2017, LGL (Lithuanian Gay League), the largest LGBT rights organisation in Lithuania, sent a post to their Instagram followers declaring: “UN classifies Lithuania as a Nordic country rather than Eastern European country.” Following the post was the brief query “[t]ime for a new flag?” with the colours of the Lithuanian flag transposed onto the standard Nordic cross flag design.



*Figure 1. “UN classifies Lithuania as a Nordic country rather than Eastern European country. Time for a new flag?” LGL.lt, Instagram, January 8, 2017.*

Elsewhere in the Baltic States, Latvian and Estonian MPs similarly noted the “reclassification” on Twitter and Facebook, though a blog post by Estonian World (2017) indicated that the decision dated to at least 2002 – hence the “reclassification” was nothing new. While the posts provoked only a short discussion about the place of the Baltic States in Europe, the desire to define the Baltics as Nordic as opposed to Eastern European is highly symbolic, particularly when one examines the conception of “shared values,” which does not extend to how sexual and gender minorities are treated in the Baltic States.

In Lithuanian popular media such as television and film, LGBT representation is almost non-existent, save a few examples from tele-

vised singing competitions such as *Pabandom iš naujo!* (*Let's Try Again!*), the national selection process for Lithuania's Eurovision entry in 2020. When looking at cinematic depictions of LGBT characters from the three Baltic countries, there are only a handful of films that feature a main character that is identified as gay or lesbian, while bisexual and trans\* characters are absent. Of the small group of examples that exist, the vast majority come from Lithuania, which has been referred to as one of the most homophobic countries in the European Union (Message & Sibille 2014). In particular, a notorious piece of legislation enacted in 2010, the Law on the Protection of Minors against the Detriment Effect of Public Information, forbids the promotion of non-normative families in public discourse and has been used to target positive representations of LGBT families and individuals in local media. This contradicts the desire of Lithuania to return to Europe and embrace European values that protect minority identities – and therefore leave behind the legacy of the Soviet occupation.

In this article, I examine two films by the openly gay Lithuanian director Romas Zabarauskas to address the question of how national and sexual identity intersect in cinematic narratives from the region. In *Porno Melodrama* (2011) and *Nuo Lietuvos nepabėgsi* (*You Can't Escape Lithuania*, 2016), discourses of European sexual exceptionalism and Lithuanian nationalism intersect to investigate the place of contemporary Lithuania within the European Union. The films take two very different approaches to exploring how gay male sexuality has been treated within Lithuanian society. In *Porno Melodrama*, a gay male couple becomes the object of both symbolic and literal homophobic violence at the hands of a spurned female lover. In contrast, *You Can't Escape Lithuania* is a road movie centred on a fictional version of the director aiding and abetting his actress friend as she flees, after murdering her mother, with the director's boyfriend in tow. In a reversal of the violence narrative, the fictional Romas catches his friend and lover in a sexual act and murders them in the film's narrative climax.

These two films are the only depictions of gay male characters in leading roles; while there have been other gay characters in Baltic film, they

are typically relegated to secondary roles and are not the focus of the narrative. A much fuller analysis would include films such as *We Will Riot* (*Streikas*, directed by Romas Zabarauskas, 2013), which explores the intersections of race and national identity in the context of nightlife culture in Vilnius; *The Summer of Sangaile* (*Sangailės vasara*, directed by Alantė Kavaitė, 2015), a coming-of-age story about a young girl wanting to become a pilot while coming to terms with her desire and affection for a new friend she meets at an aeronautics exhibition; and *Anarchy Girls* (*Anarchija Žirmūnuose*, directed by Saulius Drunga, 2010), a film about teenage rebellion and potential homo-erotic seduction filmed in the Soviet-era apartment blocks in the suburbs of Vilnius.

The director of *Porno Melodrama* and *You Can't Escape Lithuania*, Romas Zabarauskas, is known as much for his gay activism in Lithuania as he is for his films. His films are therefore not only as examples of fictional narratives featuring gay characters but are also examples created by a member of the local LGBT community. As I will discuss towards the end of this article, this dual role of director and representative bears a burden of representation and responsibility that must be taken into account when examining the films' impact. *You Can't Escape Lithuania*, as I argue, attempts to deconstruct stereotypical narrative structures, including the protagonist/antagonist binary. It addresses nationalism in three distinct ways: firstly, through the use of a "film within a film" framing device alongside the fictional depiction of the film's director; secondly, by examining the role that male writers and cultural figures play in the formation of national histories; and thirdly, by asking whether nationalism and national belonging can escape a grounding in patriarchal, heterosexist, and xenophobic values. This final point is problematically addressed in the film, where the fictional Romas recounts his past experiences with homophobia and exclusion in contrast to the present in the narrative, where he is considered a prominent cultural figure and his sexuality is tacitly accepted by many. In *Porno Melodrama*, the representation of a gay couple, struggling with the decision of one partner to make a pornographic film with his ex-girlfriend to fund their migration to France, signifies the struggle that

many in the local LGBT community faced in the wake of homophobic attacks on the first Pride held in Vilnius, the Lithuanian capital, in 2010. The film asks: should people stay and fight for recognition in the face of wide-spread societal hostility, or move to a more LGBT-friendly country in Western Europe?

In this article, I investigate how sexual and national identity collide in different ways in Romas Zabarauskas' films: for example, how national identity is often bound up in forms of biopolitical citizenship, such as the right to hold a passport or the ability to legally cross state borders, while sexual citizenship is tied to kinship rights and marriage. Specifically, I explore the place of Lithuania – both as a nation with a specific set of cultural and social values and as a nation tied to the broader transnational context of the European Union. Furthermore, I broach the question of LGBT representation in Lithuanian cinema: how do these representations speak for and to the local LGBT community as well as to straight audiences?

### ***Porno Melodrama and You Can't Escape Lithuania in the context of Lithuania's LGBT rights***

Released in 2011, Romas Zabarauskas' short film *Porno Melodrama* addresses the issues of LGBT rights from the perspective of a gay couple making plans to leave Lithuania for France. The film wryly carries the subtitle *Love and Death in Lithuania, the Country of Trauma*, and obliquely references the violent incidents that accompanied the first pride march in Lithuania and the passage of the “anti-gay propaganda” legislation in 2010. The couple, Jonas (Marius Repšys) and Matas (Kurtis) entertain Jonas' ex-girlfriend Akvilė (Vilma Kutavičiūtė), whom they confide in about their plans to move to Paris. In order to fund their move, Jonas has agreed to star in a pornographic film with Akvilė. The decision to star in the movie awakens old emotions and the film quickly devolves into a thriller when Akvilė kidnaps Matas, tying him to a chair in the auditorium of their old school and taunting Jonas over the phone. As Jonas runs through the school looking for them, Akvilė divulges the secret she has been keeping – that she had aborted her child with Jonas

when he left her. As Jonas approaches the auditorium doors the screen goes black with the implication that either Jonas or Matas (or both) have been killed, though whether the film's climax represents Akvilė's own violent fantasy or reality is left to the audience to decide.

*You Can't Escape Lithuania*, released in 2016, reverses the perpetrator/victim narrative through a fictionalised version of its director, who acts as the main character in the film. The fictional Romas (Denisas Kolomyckis) takes charge when his friend and occasional collaborator Indrė (Irina Lavrinovic) confesses that she has killed her mother in a confrontation over money. They go on the lam with Romas's boyfriend (Adrien Escobar) in tow, intending to drive to Portugal so Indrė can hide from authorities. Along the way, Romas films their escapades on his phone; this footage, he states, will be his final film. Romas and Indrė get into an altercation, with Romas accusing Indrė of lacking talent and Indrė forcing Romas to reveal that his boyfriend is an escort. While Romas seethes with anger Indrė has sex with Carlos; Romas subsequently stumbles across them in the woods and decides to capture the scene for his film. Later, at Romas' grandparents' summer cabin, Indrė finds the footage on his phone. When discovered by Romas, Indrė flees into the night. The scene then fades to black to the sound of her screams. In the film's denouement, Romas shows his completed film to a shocked audience in an art gallery in Vilnius. As they slowly realize the film documents two murders, he drives off into the distance.

The context into which *Porno Melodrama* and *You Can't Escape Lithuania* were released has been marked by over hostility on the part of the state and a lack of political will to address the situation of LGBT rights in the country. In particular, *Porno Melodrama* was released in the wake of legislation that prohibited the public dissemination and promotion of non-normative family configurations. The law, codified in the Lithuanian legal code in 2010, is similar in scope to Russia's notorious "anti-gay propaganda" legislation. Titled the Law on the Protection of Minors against the Detriment Effect of Public Information,<sup>1</sup> the legislation passed in the Lithuanian Seimas (Parliament) in late 2009 and came into effect in March 2010. In its initial form, it banned public

discussion of homosexuality as well as “bisexuality, polygamy, images of heterosexual intercourse, death and severe injury, the paranormal, foul language and bad eating habits” while not explicitly defining the concept of “public dissemination” – in effect, it was overly broad and vague. However, the final bill was amended due to the political intervention of then-President Dalia Grybauskaitė amid the fear of repercussions from the European Union. The final text prohibits the dissemination of “public information” “which has a detrimental effect on minors [...] which expresses contempt for family values, encourages the concept of entry into a marriage and creation of a family other than stipulated in the Constitution and the Civil Code” (‘Lithuania Revises Gay “Promotion” Law, Rights Activists Still Wary’ 2009).

Shortly after the implementation of the law, the first pride march was held in Vilnius in May 2010. After much bureaucratic wrangling with authorities, the parade was allowed to take place on Upės gatvė, a small street situated across the Neris River from the centre of Vilnius. Participants were bussed in from another location to the site where metal barriers defended by armed police protected the march. Behind the police cordon, local and international journalists documented the event. In effect, the staging of the march on the edge of the river at some distance from a public reinforced the marginalisation of those participating. Unlike the centre of Vilnius, where the march would have had more of an impact, the grey, dull space of Upės gatvė was characterised by its “cultural and historical insignificance” (Davydova 2012, 41). Any potential political or social impact the march could have had upon the populace of the city was eliminated.

Tomas Vytautas Raskevičius, human rights policy coordinator for the Lithuanian LGBT NGO LGL at the time of the march, also described the march as humiliating for the community, rather than liberatory (Message & Sibille 2014). The symbolic capital that such a march would seemingly generate was wasted; the possibility of protestors and counter-protestors interacting, mixing, and countering each other’s messages was foreclosed. As Davydova stated, “In this way, Baltic Pride 2010 did not emerge as a moment of live encounter between Lithuanian society

and its sexual minorities, but instead was a remotely staged and mediated performance” (Davydova 2012, 35).

However, Lithuanian politicians and media have repeatedly attempted to position the country as aligned with the Nordic nations rather than their post-Soviet neighbours. In 2012 and 2013 at a time when Lithuania was embroiled in controversy over the proposed Baltic Pride 2013 in Vilnius, the office of then-President Dalia Grybauskaitė described the close ties between the Nordics and the Baltics in terms of “common values, shared perceptions and similar traditions” (Press Service of the President 2013). Other than the shared celebration of midsummer, which the press release was marking, it is unclear as to what these “common values” and “shared perceptions” were. There remained a distinct division between the desire for Lithuania to be viewed as Nordic by other European nations and the internal conflict and hostility towards LGBT rights.

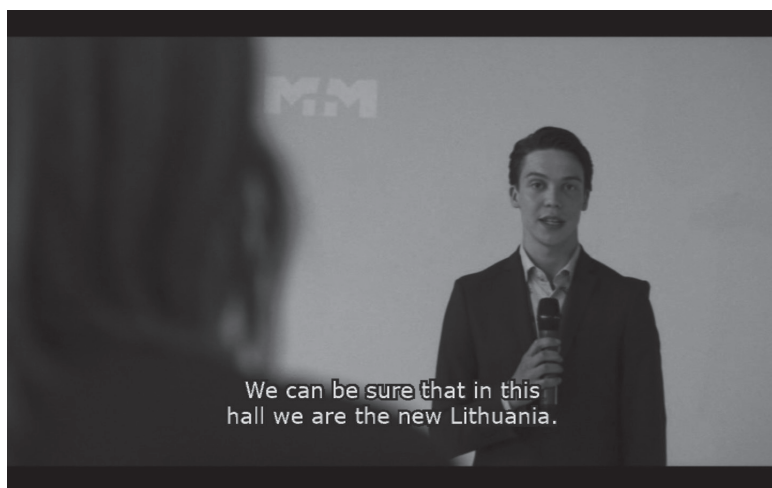
In the years since Baltic Pride 2010, Lithuania has not made significant progress towards greater acceptance of LGBT rights from a legal perspective. ILGA-Europe’s “Rainbow Europe Map”, a yearly ranking of countries in Europe based on national legislation protecting LGBT individuals, currently ranks Lithuania in thirty-second place out of the forty-nine European countries; of the members of the European Union, only Latvia, Romania, and Bulgaria rank lower (2019). There also remains a distinct disconnection between the desire or longing to be Nordic rather than “other” or “Eastern” and the treatment of sexual and gender minorities in the three states. This theme, of the tension between longing for sexual freedom and belonging in a homophobic nation, is central to both *You Can’t Escape Lithuania* and *Porno Melodrama*.

### **Caught Between National and Sexual Identity**

Central to the narrative of *You Can’t Escape Lithuania* is the place of Lithuania within contemporary Europe. As a member of the European Union since 2004, Lithuania no longer shares a hard border with its neighbour Poland: individuals can travel by car or bus from Vilnius to Paris without passing through customs. The ease with which Lithu-



anians can cross borders characterises the flight narrative present in the film. In the wake of Indrė's confession to Romas that she has murdered her mother, Romas quickly hatches the plan of driving her to Portugal to evade the law because "we are in Europe now". This "we" refers to both Lithuania as a nation and to the lack of controls on movement – whereas Lithuanians had previously been cordoned off from the West as a part of the Soviet Union, the European Union allows for freedom of movement – of both people and values. This theme returns in the film's conclusion. As Romas introduces his latest film to an audience in an art gallery in Vilnius, he sarcastically claims that it is a "film about sexism, racism, homophobia", problems absent in the "new" Lithuania.



*Figure 2. Romas introduces his last film. Screen cap from Nuo Lietuvos Nepabėgsi (You Can't Escape Lithuania).*

The implication here is that Lithuania's entry into the European Union was supposed to mark a shift away from traditional heteropatriarchal values; however, those values have been reinvigorated and reinforced rather than left in the past. In the film "Europe" comes to stand as

a representation of socially progressive values, particularly concerning LGBT rights. As Koen Slootmaeckers and Heleen Touquet point out in their research on the EU accession process and the place of fundamental rights inherent in that process:

[B]eing ‘gay friendly’ has now become a symbol for what it means to be truly European and vice versa. And with this evolution, the EU’s enlargement policy has become an important mechanism for transforming candidate member states into countries ready (and worthy) to become a member of the EU and take up the responsibilities of such membership, including respect for LGBT rights. (2016, 20)

When Lithuania joined the European Union in 2004, the country was required to pass specific legislation forbidding discrimination against LGBT individuals in the workplace. However, the anti-discrimination legislation was accompanied by conservative backlashes in many of the new EU member countries, including attempts to “turn back the clock on LGBT rights, banning gay pride parades and introducing homophobic legislation” (Slootmaeckers & Touquet 2016, 28). While the reality of this dynamic – where joining the EU was accompanied by both pro-LGBT legislation as well as homophobic backlashes – is absent in both films, *You Can’t Escape Lithuania*’s narrative depicts the ease with which EU membership allows citizens to navigate across borders: Romas and Indrė can quickly drive across the EU by virtue of belonging. In contrast, in *Porno Melodrama* Matas and Jonas are faced with the problem of not being able to afford to emigrate to France: their physical mobility is hindered by their social and economic class.

In what follows, I want to address the queer theoretical impulse to read such narratives through frameworks of homonationalism and homonormativity. In the Lithuanian context, the absence of basic rights such as partnership legislation as well as political hostility towards sexual minorities foreclose the potential for a depoliticised gay subject in the same way as in Western Europe and North America. While *You Can’t Escape Lithuania* is somewhat more ironic in its reference to Europe as

the catalyst (or not) of social change in Lithuanian society, *Porno Melodrama* is blunter in its critique. Europe – and in the narrative, the safe confines of Paris – represent freedom, while Lithuania is presented as a space of patriarchal values and societal homophobia. However, there are problems in mapping the concepts of homonationalism and homonormativity onto the films, and onto contexts such as present-day Lithuania. Homonormativity, as defined by American theorist Lisa Duggan, refers to incorporative forms of neoliberalism that often depoliticise queer subjects who are socially and economically mobile. For Duggan, homonormativity describes a constituency of upper-middle-class white gay men with social and economic capital who help to perpetuate the neoliberal status quo rather than challenge and reshape the dominant logics of heteropatriarchy and capitalist consumption. As Duggan states, neoliberalism “upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilised gay constituency and a privatised, depoliticised gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (2003, 50). In effect, a once-marginalised group is incorporated into a normative form of citizenship through capital accumulation and consumption. However, when mapping Duggan’s conception of neoliberalism onto other national contexts, this form of social incorporation can lose its critical thrust. The problem with applying this formulation to contexts other than the United States is the assumption that the agents of neoliberalism, such as political parties, politicians, economists, and bureaucrats, view sexual minorities as potential populations to be incorporated into the nation and to be demobilised politically through rights such as same-sex marriage or partnership registration. In the Baltic context, neoliberal economic policies have not aligned with an expansion of LGBT rights; rather, LGBT people continue to be positioned as foreign influences or non-productive members of society under the perception that they do not contribute to the survival of the nation through procreation.

Queer theorist Jasbir Puar’s conception of homonationalism takes Duggan’s homonormativity a step further and weds it to the concept of nationalism to propose homonationalism as a “form of sexual exceptionalism—the emergence of national homosexuality [...]—that cor-

responds with the coming out of the exceptionalism of the American empire" (2007, 2). Puar links this form of exceptionalism to the expansion of American imperialism through the War on Terror, and the subsequent casting of non-white bodies as "other" and thus subject to state sanction and violence. In this frame, homonormative subjects become incorporated into the national body under the auspices of "protection" from racialised and religious others. Sexual exceptionalism, Puar explains, does nothing to undermine the heteronormative core of the nation; instead, "in actuality, it may support forms of heteronormativity and the class, racial, and citizenship privileges they require" (2007, 9). Here homonormativity reinforces heteronormativity rather than subverts it.

In *You Can't Escape Lithuania*, societal homophobia is strikingly absent in the greater part of the narrative. One prominent exception, however, comes towards the end of the film: after the trio are sidelined by a flat tire, Romas has a brief encounter with a motorcycle cop who stops to help. In seeing him approaching (and in fear of being arrested), both Indrė and Carlos flee into the forest, leaving Romas alone to deal with both the cop and the tire. After changing Romas' tire, the cop recognises him and refers to him as "the gay filmmaker", adding that his boss is "like him" – she is a lesbian – and that she is a fan of his activist work. Here this moment of recognition serves as a disjunction between the lived-experience of LGBT Lithuanians and their experiences of police indifference or violence and those of Romas – where he is recognised in a positive light by the figure of the police officer.<sup>2</sup> In *Porno Melodrama*, there is no such positive act of recognition – rather, the characters' encounter with authority is represented by the opening confrontation with a Catholic priest. However, I do not wish to claim that Romas' positive interaction with the cop represents a tacit acceptance of his sexuality vis-à-vis homonormativity or homonationalism, precisely because these terms can only be problematically applied in the context of CEE. The role of the cop is played by well-known Lithuanian singer Vaidas Baumila. His performance at the 2015 Eurovision Song Contest featured three couples – one heterosexual, one gay, one

lesbian – kissing during the chorus of his performance. Furthermore, the act of recognition here, where the cop explicitly places him as “the gay director” represents the overt visibility of Romas across the country. However, the use of the cop is not, in my view, an attempt to recuperate the authority figure as one that is accepting and an agent of benevolent state power. Rather, the role exists as a plot device – both to single out Romas as being recognisable and to represent a threat to Indrė’s plans to flee the country.

Other scholars from the CEE region have also been critical of the application of homonationalism and homonormativity to local social and political contexts. Polish sociologist Robert Kulpa has critiqued Puar’s conception of homonationalism altogether. He notes: “[Puar’s] persistent use and invocation of ‘homonormativity’ creates the impression [...] that it is an overarching contemporary lesbian and gay politics, not leaving much space for alternatives” (Kulpa 2011, 56). For Kulpa, one alternative is a form of inclusive nationalism where queer subjects make claims to national identity and belonging as transformative, as “one of the methods of their struggle (e.g. reclaiming history, writing queer national history) and not merely being ‘swallowed’ by them” (Kulpa 2011, 56). He calls for a more nuanced way of looking at the relationship between queer subjects and the contemporary European nation-state, and in particular, those that have emerged from the shadow of communism and the Cold War. Kulpa points to policies of austerity, imposed through the processes of accession into the European Union, which have led to “a general pauperisation of society, independent of ‘identity position’”, and as a result, “social groups are for now too poor to develop market-based ways of ‘buying’ into comforts of apolitical citizenship” (Kulpa 2011, 58). The depoliticised forms of homonormative national subjects that can be found in Western democracies are all but impossible in the current political and economic realities of Eastern European nations.

I am intrigued by Kulpa’s gesture towards a form of inclusive nationalism – one where LGBT constituents have a say and are represented within the different national contexts of CEE, as this conceptual frame

is often derided or treated with hostility in contemporary queer politics. While *Porno Melodrama* does not attempt to broach the possibility of inclusive nationalism, it would be a mistake to read the film as an imperative for LGBT individuals to flee to safer confines in Western Europe. *You Can't Escape Lithuania* leaves the door open for this potential – though the fictional Romas is only accepted within the confines of the social capital he has as a part of the cultural class in Lithuania. It plays with, although does not elaborate on, the idea that national belonging can be inclusive, and thus sexually progressive, rather than simply an agent of homophobia and xenophobia. Thus, the conflicts in both films are less about wanting to “become Western” – which can be read as a homonationalist move – and more about staking claims to national identity that is otherwise ceded to the political right. However, the fictional Romas does not neatly fit into the role of homonormative: while the film depicts him with a modicum of social capital, its narrative reinforces the perception of his being “trapped” by the nation of his birth. Unlike the incorporation of LGBT human rights discourses into neoliberalism present in Western countries, no such alignment exists in CEE.

Instead, the imposition of neoliberal economic policies coincided with the emergence of LGBT activism and the agitation for political and social rights in the early 2000s. Political parties in Eastern Europe spanning the left–right spectrum have often linked the two phenomena. In the Lithuanian context, this has taken the form of virulently homophobic political rhetoric claiming that homosexuality is a “foreign import” and that homosexuality did not exist before the country joined the European Union. This misguided view is enforced further in religious rhetoric. The link between religion, nationalism and social homophobia is readily apparent in the opening scene of *Porno Melodrama*. The film opens with the funeral of Jonas’ father, to which Jonas arrives unannounced with Matas following behind. As Jonas comforts his mother, he is confronted by the priest who has presided over the service and who also happens to be Jonas’ brother. He angrily scolds Jonas, warning him that he and Matas should repent their sins.



Figure 3. Jonas confronts his brother at his father's funeral. Screen cap from *Porno Melodrama*, directed by Romas Zabarauskas, 31 min., 2011.

The Catholic priest as personifying the morality of the nation and its symbolic “soul” is intimately linked to the struggle for Lithuanian independence from the Soviet Union. The main cathedral in Vilnius, for example, acted as a refuge for Sąjūdis, the independence movement in the late 1980s, and was the site of national protest and mourning after the violent repression of the January Events in 1991.<sup>3</sup> In *Porno Melodrama*, the priest’s admonition to Jonas and Matas to repent metonymically represents the collective morality of the nation itself. The film then shifts to their shared flat where they entertain Akvilė, Jonas’ ex-girlfriend. Jonas has decided to act in a pornographic film with Akvilė – he needs the money so he and Matas can leave Lithuania for Paris. Matas is unhappy with the situation but goes along with it because they will be able to relocate with the funds. As the film progresses, it becomes readily apparent that Akvilė is not ready to let go of her relationship with Jonas. After Jonas and Matas fight about their impending departure, Akvilė kidnaps Matas and ties him to a chair in the old auditorium of their high school, taunting Jonas over the phone. As Jonas

runs through the school trying to find them, Akvilė confesses that she has been pregnant with his child, but that she in the wake of their break-up had an abortion. She states that had she told him about the child, he would have certainly stayed with her. The film ends with Jonas entering the auditorium and the screen fading to black, followed by a single gunshot. While the audience never sees the victim's body, the narrative implies that Akvilė has killed either Jonas or Matas, thus permanently separating the queer couple.

Here I contend that violence has a dual function in the narrative: heteronormativity acts as a corrective to the (im)possibility of queerness, while Akvilė's abortion signifies the symbolic death of the nation's future. In the film, heteronormativity reasserts itself as a barrier that must be negotiated so the gay couple can flee, while reinforcing the perpetual violence they face at home. Akvilė's confession of her abortion thus implicates queerness in the death of the child. In a more literal sense, Akvilė's revenge – whether fantastic or real depending on the opinion of the viewer – represents a much broader battle in Lithuania over the role of reproduction in the survival of the nation. As Richard C. M. Mole notes in his discussion of homophobia in Central and Eastern European politics, “[h]omosexuality is seen not just as deviating from, but as actually threatening the norms on which the nation is built” (2016, 107).

While not as literal, *You Can't Escape Lithuania* represents the character of Indrė through a similar lens. Indrė describes herself as a failure because she has ‘sold out’ by acting in television shows and commercials in Russia, rather than starring in the types of film projects she deems culturally valuable. Romas also positions her as a failure because she is a woman. In one particular scene, Indrė interrogates Romas about the nature of his relationship with Carlos, questioning whether it is genuine or not. In a vitriolic response, Romas gets under her skin, stating that she can never be a great writer like her father and grandfather because she is a woman. He spitefully says: “Men create. Women procreate.” Postcolonial Baltic studies scholar Benedikts Kalnačs has described the importance of maintaining local language and knowledge during the Russian occupation of the Baltic States, stating: “[t]he representation



of the life of the local community and the use of national languages were seen as principal means of resistance and of keeping traditional values intact” (Kalnačs 2015, 59). The figures that represent Lithuanian national identity are thus tied to literature as a form of national survival. In the context of Romas’ criticism of Indrė, his claim that she cannot be great is rooted in her gender, her lack of accomplishment compared to her male ancestors, and her career in Russia.

### **Locating *Porno Melodrama* and *You Can’t Escape Lithuania* in LGBT or Queer Cinema**

Both films clearly relate to broader trends and discourses in cinema, though their place in LGBT or Queer cinematic traditions is up for debate. For example, through the central figure of the fictionalised Romas can be placed in line with the long history of cinematic representations of murderous queers, correlating the two is not without its problems. Unlike the murderous tropes that populate classical cinema,<sup>4</sup> the apparent murders in *You Can’t Escape Lithuania* can be read as both literal and figurative. The film’s climax begins with Romas and Carlos asleep in the cabin. Indrė sneaks in and steals Romas phone, flipping through his photos. She comes across the video that Romas has taken earlier, after he caught Carlos and Indrė having sex. Here the fantasy of the queer relationship between Romas and Carlos is laid bare for its transactional nature: heteronormativity supersedes the homosexual coupling. Romas catches her and simply responds by suggesting that they shoot the film’s final scene. Indrė runs from the cabin with Romas in pursuit as the scene fades to black to the sound of her screams. Yet a murder does not appear on-screen: the audience is left to determine the sequence of events that lead to the gunshot that punctuates the blackened visuals.

Similarly, the final scene jumps a year into the future where Romas premieres his newest film to a packed crowd in an art gallery. In his introduction, he refuses any questions from the gallery’s curator, simply saying a few sarcastic words about how contemporary Lithuania is inclusive and European. As the film begins to roll and the attendees

react to what appears to be a murder being played out (again, off-screen), Romas jumps into his car and drives off. Taking the narrative and the dream sequences together, the film presents a metafilmic query into the structures of both patriarchal nationalist stories and cinematic narratives. Rather than view the film as strictly representational – where the goal is to depict the fictional Romas as a “positive” portrayal of a gay Lithuanian subject – the film adheres closer to the experimental aims of New Queer Cinema, which B. Ruby Rich characterised as using “appropriation and pastiche, irony, as well as a reworking of history with social constructionism very much in mind” (Rich 1992, 31). *You Can't Escape Lithuania* fits well within this typology, through its experiments with narrative structure, use of psychoanalytic categories as a framing device, its portrayal of the main character as an antagonist, and its frequent use of irony and sarcasm.

The question of “positive representation” is essential to acknowledge in any analysis of *You Can't Escape Lithuania* precisely because of the work it does outside the frame of the film. As one of the few films from the country to have a gay character in a lead role, it carries the added burden of representation. Representation, as film scholar Richard Dyer notes, was a significant concern for the early generation of lesbian and gay cinema produced in Western Europe and North America, cinema that was created by and for lesbian and gay audiences. These filmmakers were concerned with positive forms of representation, or “films that sought to present a ‘positive image’ of lesbian/gay life-styles” (Dyer 2003, 245) to counter societal homophobia and misconceptions about gays and lesbians. Furthermore, these films were created in reaction to negative or stereotypical portrayals in mainstream cinema – where gay and lesbian characters were pathologised and marginalised by heterosexual directors and writers. While Dyer was referring to a body of work that was produced starting in the 1980s, the comparison with Zabarauskas’ films is still appropriate: the desire and need for positive representation continues to exist in regions where LGBT communities are largely invisible. This desire aims to, on the one hand, to show the local community that they are not alone and to allow for individuals to

see diverse life experiences on screen; and on the other, to address non-LGBT audiences in order to challenge misconceptions and misperceptions of who LGBT people are.

However, the burden of representation in this context acts as a form of constraint on the acceptable types of representation. Dyer notes these constraints through the three characteristics of affirmative politics: one, “thereness, insisting on the fact of our existence”; two, “goodness, asserting our worth and that of our life-styles”; and three, “realness, showing what we were in fact like” (2003, 254). These three elements, as he notes, are often in conflict with one another, with goodness, or the desire to show positive representations on screen, conflicting with the lived homophobic realities that many individuals experience. *Porno Melodrama* fits into this dynamic of conflict – it presents the central gay couple in their lived experience, which is characterised by social and familial homophobia – while being unable to represent Jonas and Matas as positive or “good” figures simultaneously.

In contrast, *You Can't Escape Lithuania* aligns itself more with the performative and deconstructive moves that queer theory makes. Referring to queer cultural criticism, Dyer notes that “there is a vanguardist tendency within these circles to celebrate independent or experimental works while vilifying ‘mainstream’ commercial or Hollywood forms” (2003, 284). This is evident in the film where Romas’ work is referenced – his movies are described as money-losing, while his final film is presented in an art gallery rather than a cinema. Furthermore, the use of dreamlike sequences overlaid with narration reinforces the deconstructive moves the film makes in the narrative.

In the first dreamlike sequence, the narrator describes the typical components of historical and literary narratives, noting how they can be understood as metaphors for life.<sup>5</sup> Most importantly, the narrator contrasts two desires with linear plot devices in films. The first, sex drive (or *Eros*), is linked to the idea of creation (through sex, children, the stories people write, and the production of meaning). This is contrasted with death drive (*Thanatos*), which is described as “the secret desire to dissolve into nothingness that we once were”. The narrator ties this to the

viewer's desire for a conclusion to the story that, as in *Porno Melodrama*, is linked to violence. The second sequence describes the contradictory desires of the viewer: for the heroes in a film to survive despite overwhelming odds, and – following the logic of archetypal film narratives – for one or more of the characters die, foreclosing any possibility of a happy ending. The third sequence describes the role of the psychoanalyst in creating narratives: the analyst pieces together a narrative from the patient's responses to simple prompts. This narrative is then used as a therapeutic tool to help the patient understand their life. The final psychoanalytic sequence is overlaid with the final scene where Romas shows his latest creation to a stunned and horrified audience in an art gallery. The sequence is somewhat ambiguous, ending in mid-sentence.

The deconstructive aspects of the narration serve to break down cinematic and narrative conventions rather than to reinforce a specific worldview or offer a positive representation of community. Furthermore, the film challenges the hegemonic narratives that undergird national history – either through literature or other cultural production. In this respect, *You Can't Escape Lithuania* has much more in common with the avant-garde modes of queer cinema. As cinema studies scholar Amy Borden explains, queer cinema “draw[s] on avant-garde and art cinema conventions to highlight the importance of performativity in contemporary queer theory and to celebrate an aesthetic subjectivity as an alternative to foundational gender-driven identities” (Borden 2017, 99). While neither film is critiquing the essentialising aspects of gender, both films attempt to deconstruct gender roles within Lithuanian society. In looking at both films, and in particular *You Can't Escape Lithuania*, the film's primary focus is less about depicting accurate and positive representations of LGBT characters and more about the potential for a queer critique of narrative, be it cinematic or nationalist. However, perhaps unwittingly reflecting the film's title of the inescapability of Lithuanian national identity, the inescapability of representation, linking the fictional to the real-world, hangs over the film.

Where do Zabarauskas' films, then, fit into the larger transnational picture of LGBT or Queer cinema? In referencing the potential of queer

cinema in Europe, Robin Griffiths describes the dynamic as “an invariably unique, yet contingent, repository of the social, political and cultural fantasies of a region caught up in a seemingly endless process of rebirth and reconstruction” (Griffiths 2008, 16). Queer cinema in the Lithuanian context could potentially be described as an inflexion point in broader debates over national belonging, particularly in the frame of the European Union and in relation to the West. How much this aligns with a North American understanding of queer cinema – particularly concerning the New Queer Cinema movement of the 1990s – is still up for question. However, what seems clear is that neither *Porno Melodrama* nor *You Can't Escape Lithuania* must be understood through their rootedness in place, in a national context. In my view, Zabarauskas' films represent a potential origin point for LGBT representation in Lithuanian cinema, and as such, remain fascinatingly outside the binary of affirmative versus negative representation, and can perhaps be seen as a Lithuanian take on New Queer Cinema, though with local concerns at the film's core.

### **Conclusion: Towards as Queer(er) Baltic Cinema**

*Porno Melodrama* depicts a dilemma many LGBT individuals in overtly homophobic societies face: should one stay and fight, or emigrate to a “friendlier” country? This dilemma can also be found in the title of *You Can't Escape Lithuania*: it is not merely a warning to an unnamed “you” that it is impossible to escape the literal borders of the nation, but also a reflection on the way that national identity marks citizens when they travel outside of their home country.

In an interview with the English-language online newspaper *The Baltic Times*, Zabarauskas reiterates the tension inherent in *You Can't Escape Lithuania*'s title. He describes his own experience as a foreign student, first in New York and then in Paris, noting how it would be easier to “live a normal life abroad”. However, his connection to Lithuania keeps drawing him back: “[b]ut, I have many friends and fans here, and I feel what I do is interesting and somewhat important” (East 2015). He describes this through the connection he feels to his country:

The title is a metaphor for that because I have escaped Lithuania in a way in that I studied abroad, but there's something that always brings me back here. [...] But I feel like I know this context best and when you're discussing these issues, you probably feel you can't escape your original background and you can't escape your social context. That's what I mean in the metaphorical sense. (East 2015)

Here, the impossibility of escaping Lithuania is linked both to a desire to return home and to a form of responsibility to Zabarauskas' place of origin. The fictional and real Romas merge to become a visible representation of all sexual minorities in Lithuania.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Zabarauskas' films come to stand in for LGBT cultural production in and from Lithuania, where few other examples of such production currently exist.

Briefly returning to the conclusion of *You Can't Escape Lithuania*, I do not see how queerness can play an active role in the frame of national identity within the Lithuanian context at the present moment. It is the nation, rather than sexuality, that becomes the restraining force that the main characters in the film cannot escape. However, in my reading, both films also entail the possibility of queerness as a murderous force, deconstructing historical narratives to claim national identity. For Zabarauskas, his newly released film *The Lawyer* (*Advokatas*) shifts from the national to the transnational, where a bisexual Syrian refugee living in a refugee camp in Serbia begins an online relationship with a disaffected lawyer from Vilnius. The film, which Zabarauskas has described to me as his "first real gay film" stands as a distinct contrast to his earlier films described herein – and, in my view, represents an example of a queer response to nationalist isolation and xenophobia: solidarity and support across ethnic, linguistic, and sexual boundaries. Whether such queer potential is explored in future films from Lithuania – or the three Baltic States in general – is an open question that is influenced by differing political trends in the countries, the availability (or lack thereof) of funding, and the particular interests of filmmakers and writers.

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## NOTES

1. In line with the Lithuanian LGBT NGO LGL's shorthand for the legislation, I henceforth refer to the law as the "anti-gay propaganda" legislation (LGL n.d.).
2. In particular, there have been several prominent cases recently in Lithuania where anti-LGBT attacks have been treated with indifference and hostility by local authorities. For a broader picture of the current context, see: "Lithuania at a Glance," in *Awareness of Anti-LGBT Hate Crime in the European Union*, eds.



Piotr Godzisz and Giacomo Viggiani (Warsaw: Lambda Warsaw Association, 2019), 241–261.

3. For a fuller account of the January Events and their importance to Lithuanian identity, see: Anatol Lieven, *The Baltic Revolution: Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania and the Path to Independence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 244–254.
4. For a much more thorough discussion of the history of depictions of homosexuality in cinema, see: Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987).
5. Notably, the narration is in English, unlike the rest of the film which is in Lithuanian. The director explained to me that this was done because of the difficulty he had in translating psychoanalytic concepts into Lithuanian.
6. Zabarauskas is very visible in local media, having founded the LGBT Friendly Vilnius project and as an outspoken member of the LGBT community. He has been the target of violence, particularly in the wake of the firebombing of the entrance to the offices of LGL, the leading LGBT rights NGO in the country, in August 2018.