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The transfeminist and the liberal institution: A love story

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Abstract

As queer owned and operated spaces shut down and we increasingly find ourselves annexed to public institutions and/or private corporate spaces, how do we build truly radical community practices? This piece critically reflects on the practical aspects of organising RadFem/Trans: A Love Story – an event on feminist history and trans inclusion that took place at BFI Flare 2018. It also examines how we might to create the conditions for a better conversation, greater trans inclusion, and deeper organisational thinking.

Keywords

cultural production, feminist politics, intersectionality, LGBTQ politics, trans inclusion

In 2018 I programmed an event called 'RadFem/Trans: A Love Story' at the British Film Institute (BFI). It was part of BFI Flare, London's LGBTQ film festival and a response to the proposed changes to the Gender Recognition Act 2004. At the time, a public consultation was underway and changes which would create a simpler procedure for trans people to change the sex on their legal documentation without arbitrary and invasive scrutiny from a panel of cisgender people was being fiercely contested. As the programming season drew near, it became clear that as one of the largest LGBTQ film festivals in the world, it was imperative that Flare address the toxic war between trans-exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs) and the trans community.

In this article I discuss what it means to produce an event about an explosive and divisive topic in a public institution, where the default approach is, ostensibly, to not take sides. I examine the purpose of LGBTQ film festivals as a physical location for queer discourse distinct from but tethered to conversations online. In doing so, I compare RadFem/Trans to a previous event I programmed in 2017 entitled 'Sexit: What the Fuck is Happening with UK Porn Laws?', which focused on a raft of now repealed legislation

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which criminalised the depiction of queer and female specific sex acts. This comparison shows how the legal battle for sexual minority practices continues even as the rights of cisgender lesbian, gay and bisexual people are considered largely won.

I argue that these laws are seen as secondary, even unimportant, but that they form a basis for discrimination and self-censorship within cultural institutions and beyond (not unlike Section 28, which outlawed the teaching and promotion of homosexuality by local authorities and in schools from 1988 to 2000 in Scotland, and 2003 in England and Wales). Moreover, these laws are part of a well-established turn towards authoritarianism in the UK, in which TERFs play a crucial part. This trend threatens all sexual minorities on the logic that the oppression of one makes likely and possible the oppression of all, and creates the conditions for regressive sex and gender-based oppressions. Many TERFs deride intersectional feminism, precisely because their activities justify and necessitate it. Hence my approach to programming is to avoid single issue discussions of identity and to take broader political, social and legal conditions into account.

As trans people are derided as a recent 'trend', it is important to hear trans history, feminist politics and queer cultural production in the same breath. On this point I discuss the controversy surrounding the London Porn Film Festival, the TERF protest at London Pride, and other examples of antagonism championed by TERFs, which has transphobia, and a particular abhorrence for trans women, baked in. I discuss the successes and pitfalls of RadFem/Trans and explore how it might have worked better. I also show how it is imperative that film festivals do not simply concentrate on cinema, but take into account screen culture more generally. Often such awareness is only with regard to competition, such as Netflix overtaking cinema attendance. But as this is being published, we are in the midst of a global pandemic which has shifted the attention to how we consume and create media online, as well as our modes of communication, and hence how we organise. Our screens have become our main, and in some cases, only, portal to the world, where once they were portals to somewhere else. Finally, the role of programmer is examined as a position of both precarity and power. I mention all of these events together because they form part of my acknowledgement of my own practice, ambitions, limitations and naiveties as a non-binary programmer, which I will return to later. Given that it often falls to individual programmers to address (and supposedly fix) social inequities, how do we negotiate the tension between our radical transfeminist politics and the liberal cultural institutions we work within?

Just do it

I proposed the RadFem/Trans session because I felt it was important for an event on the scale of BFI Flare to directly address the political conditions of the audiences we serve and the film productions we screen. This built on 'Sexit: What the Fuck is Happening with UK Porn Laws?', which I programmed in 2017 as a response to the insidious raft of legislation that had grave implications for the representation of queer sexuality and culture on screen. I mention 'Sexit' at the beginning of this article not to conflate or compare struggles, but to explain how programming at film festivals, ostensibly an artistic space, can address political issues in an ongoing way, and also to highlight the problems and complexities of this being down to programming rather than structural change.

The key laws were the Audio Visual Media Act 2014, which (infamously) banned depictions of face-sitting, as well as female (but not male) ejaculation, among other acts; the Digital Economies Act 2017, which proposed age verification as a way to prevent children accessing porn, but ignored considerable privacy issues; and the Investigatory Powers Act 2016, which has since come into force and means the UK government has a record of every page we visit online for up to 12 months.

Caught in the nexus of these laws were sex workers, porn producers, activists, queer people, and basically anyone who watches adult content. Porn is figured as a minority taste when in fact it is very mainstream and a driver of technical innovation – good or bad, how we use technology has been shaped and directed by porn for centuries. Yet these laws create a pretext of criminality for the most vulnerable (sex workers themselves, who are so often queer and/or trans) while audiences consuming porn are relatively safe. What is doubly alarming is the way that the criminalisation of a small minority is then used as a pretext for the surveillance of the majority.

During Sexit, which featured obscenity lawyer Myles Jackman, and porn producers, performers and activists Jiz Lee and Pandora/Blake, we screened the very acts that were deemed illegal and showed how these laws were trampling over rights that many people did not realise existed. The Audio Visual Media Act in particular showed the continued horror of queer bodies and genitalia, and pandered to conservative feminist ideas which were anti-porn, anti-sex, anti-queer and against sex workers. None of these laws were explicitly anti-queer in the more legible manner of, say, Section 28, yet they significantly impacted queer people, complicating the notion that the UK is more enlightened than other places, such as third world or developing nations, in terms of the advancement of LGBTQ rights. This is also evident in immigration law, where queer migrants are regularly disbelieved, detained and then deported back to countries where homosexuality is a crime or culturally unacceptable.

The BFI's status as a cultural institution made it both the perfect place to challenge these laws as part of the raison d'etre of a film festival, and exemplified how class, power and privilege work to shield some from toxic laws and not others. A middle class, educated, film audience (Flare's main demographic) could theoretically watch pornographic material that contravened the law and not be seen as viable for prosecution whereas a sex worker making the same material at home could be – and technically was – under much more scrutiny. Although there were no individual prosecutions under the Audio Visual Media Act, many small, independent queer porn websites were forced offline, including Dreams of Spanking run by Pandora/Blake.

The law around obscenity is vague, which is also its power. It operates via licensing laws for venues. Technically it is not illegal to screen sexually explicit content publicly. The point at which it tips over into obscenity – which is illegal – is a grey area and highly subjective. This was exemplified by the attack on the London Porn Film Festival in April 2019, when it was forced out of its original location by Camden Council, who objected to the festival's programme. The festival then moved to a venue in the jurisdiction of Southwark where the corresponding legal department had no real understanding of obscenity laws and accepted legal assurance that the content did not contravene them. Two years prior, the Audio Visual Media Act could have been invoked, leading to the arrest and prosecution of the festival's organisers, all of whom are trans, non-binary and

queer. The message? Cis, straight, conventional ideas of pornography are okay. Queer pornography by and for ourselves is not. It seems like a small point, but this thinking undergirds the demonisation of trans people as sick, predatory and perverted, and for a time was supported in British law, not through overt criminalisation, but a vague back-up tellingly couched in cultural production, and available for use by TERF organisations like Object who protested the festival.

Then do it again

The reception of 'Sexit' is what emboldened me to programme 'RadFem/Trans'. It was extremely important to me that I didn't present 'Sexit' as a debate, and this concern carried over to 'RadFem/Trans'. To debate what was essentially the exclusion of trans women, repulsion or indifference towards trans men, and an attempt to undermine the advancing of trans rights by citing sexual assault and abuse, was non-negotiable, therefore I presented the event as an examination of the feminist movement as a whole. The original copy for the event reflected this:

> The feminist movement is no stranger to controversy, from class divisions among the suffragettes to the sex wars of the nineteen eighties. Debates around race, pornography, BDSM, socialism, lesbianism, separatism and sex work have caused schisms that have both threatened to tear the movement apart and enabled a more intersectional understanding of feminist struggle. Debates around trans inclusion have raged for many years, but have recently been reignited by imminent changes to the gender recognition act, which will allow people to self-identify without medical supervision. This talk by programmer Jay Bernard and invited guests will look at a selection of archive footage, media clips and more recent films to examine how these debates have been represented in cinema and what these representations can tell us about the imaginative ways in which deep-rooted conflicts have been resolved in the past. With an attitude of exploration, openness, imaginative possibility and – most importantly – compassion, this event will ask big questions about where we are and where we hope to be.

The word 'debates' precedes a list of subjects – race, porn, sex work as well as trans inclusion. Therefore, the debate is not 'should the Gender Recognition Act be reformed?' – yes, it should – but 'how has the acknowledgement of difference broadened Feminism?'

I began the event by pointing out that the feminist movement is not monolithic, but has in fact been created and developed precisely by the kind of transformative activism happening with trans politics today. And each new era has been met by people saying the incomers are 'not feminists'. To pose the event as a debate would be to operate on the terms of the exclusionary feminists who see themselves as gatekeepers, and to entrench the idea that trans women are imposters who need to be admitted. It would leave the rich and multi-valent term 'lesbian' in their hands.

I specifically and deliberately used the full term – trans-exclusionary radical feminist – as TERF was being refigured as a slur, specifically against cis women. I felt using it would be an open goal for those who are more offended by the acronym than the reasons it was coined in the first place. I wondered whether this was cowardice. I think it was a small, pragmatic decision, but it highlighted my instinctive protection of the festival, the institution and its revenue as a paid member of the Flare team. You very quickly absorb

the unspoken and unacknowledged rules of the institution, which like the British constitution, are unwritten and rely on a complex set of educational, social and political manners. This instinct is, essentially, what is learned when you are immersed in elite institutions. It serves as a formidable inner cop when it comes to taking action that moves beyond mere representation and begins to challenge the legal and economic structures that make the institution what it is.

The more I discussed approaches to the issue, the more necessary it seemed to examine the whole history of how feminism had been presented on screen – which moments had been captured and passed down to us, and how by looking at these moments, we might see the present day more clearly as not particularly or uniquely difficult. Indeed, we might laugh in the face of trans-exclusionary radical feminists and point out that they are on the same side of history as racist feminists who did not wish to include or acknowledge the struggle of black women; heterosexual feminists who did not want to include lesbians; sex worker exclusionary feminists who saw the economic and social conditions of sex workers as a betrayal of the movement; and middle class feminists who dismissed the concerns and lives of working class women.

The historical framing of the clips I chose were designed to illuminate our long and fractious history and to show how long exclusionary practices have been going on. And in my case, as a programmer, the question of how to directly speak about the intense transphobia I was witnessing around the GRA could not be separated from a broader discussion of how our community has documented its schisms, and more precisely, documented the exclusion of a marginal group by a more dominant one. The year-on-year presentation of politically informed events can sometimes create the illusion of discrete issues, yet the main programme has included films such as *Carmin Tropical, Tangerine, Call Her Ganda* and *Lucid Noon, Sunset Blush*: all films that deal with sex work and trans lives simultaneously, as well as other issues including class, race and economics.

I began the event in the following way:

> I suspect this topic was attractive to some people because it caused a jolt to the stomach; what, a talk on this rather sensitive area, which invites so much bitterness and anger, at Flare, at the BFI? Without bullet proof glass? But why not? And why not view it as a love story? The schisms that have torn people apart have also brought people together and engendered radical new ways of living, relating and understanding. Why not view the present as the product of a whirlwind romance. One that began long ago, in the nightclub of history, where, in the smoke, middle class women reject working class women, straight women reject lesbians, lesbians reject straight women, vanilla lesbians reject S/M dykes, radicals and socialists reject each other, anti-porn campaigners reject sex workers, cisgender people reject transgender people; but the contrary too. The most unlikely lovers have been making out all over the place, in brilliant displays of solidarity but also sometimes in disguise.
>
> I think we are in the middle of one of the most exciting and interesting times for feminism, both culturally and politically and this was exemplified just a few weeks ago on March 8th, during the women's strike, and again on Saturday during the latest demonstration at Yarl's Wood. Changes to the Gender Recognition Act are imminent, and being opposed by feminist groups who feel they have not been consulted, who feel threatened, while also being championed by trans people who have pushed for a better, less medicalised practice. The #MeToo and Times

> Up campaigns have been met by hysterical claims of witch hunting and pleas for mercy by patriarchal cis men, who, (rightly, I think) fear that the feminists might treat them with the same contempt with which they have treated us. So this talk isn't only about schisms or current disagreements, the wilful misunderstanding of trans people and trans rights, nor the reduction of lesbian politics to its ugliest components. I hope that this event will be a small step towards examining and celebrating our varied herstories as they have converged and diverged; I hope that people will see themselves in the clips on screen as well as other people, and that we might make a bit of space at this festival for some conscious meditation on our collective triumphs and mistakes.

Over the course of 50 minutes, I looked at the following films: *Go Fish, Carry Greenham Home, Born in Flames, Under Your Nose, The 1982 Church Occupation in Kings Cross, A Way of Dying, Sylvia Rivera's Speech, Adventures in the Gender Trade* and *Audre Lorde in Conversation*. I selected each clip because it in some way referenced a rift, schism or disagreement within the feminist movement, and provided an opportunity to talk about how that rift was addressed if not resolved.

Go Fish includes a famous 'judgement scene', which encapsulated the thorny issue of lesbians sleeping with men, and showed the literal-minded policing of the term lesbian. Two clips from *Carry Greenham Home* depicted several women having a fight over how to run a highly politicised, activist space, as well as a clip of a working class woman talking quite lucidly about how much she had learned by living on the common and being privy to the discussions, arguments and ideas formed there. *Born in Flames* showed a similar discussion between two women who had opposing views of how an activist 'women's army' had responded to rape – one being radical, and the other more pragmatic.

Under Your Nose showed the little-known history of the black LGBT centre in London, which showed how the demise of political blackness as a concept revealed and entrenched key differences between black and Asian communities, as well as different faith communities. This felt particularly relevant given the re-emergence of political blackness as an issue within organising communities, but also because the film highlighted the complexity of the term's history, and that there was always opposition to its use despite widespread currency. The *1982* footage depicting the occupation of a church in King's Cross by the English Collective of Prostitutes was followed by footage of Selma James in a brilliant battle with a vicious news anchor, who aims to undermine her allyship and the occupation itself by pointing out that she is not a sex worker. The anchor also accuses the occupation of inviting more violence from the police, in a uniquely liberal approach to concern.

The third part of the screening looked more explicitly at gender identity. *A Way of Dying*, by Mijke van der Drift, depicted two trans people enacting and coming to terms with violence and death. *Sylvia Rivera's Speech* showed how the white, middle class, cisgender Lesbian and Gay Movement was being called out for the co-option of trans women's work before the dust of Stonewall had even settled. Finally, a clip from *Adventures in the Gender Trade* depicted Kate Bornstein, Justin Bond and Patrick Califia discussing, explicitly, the essentialism, gender binaries and forms of bigotry in feminism in the 1990s. It was especially important to end with this clip, because it showed how

long the exclusion of trans women from lesbian and feminist spaces had been happening, and served to show that trans people are not a trend invented on the internet.

Once the clips had been shown, I directed the audience to pens and paper below their seats. I asked them that, given the trip through history we had taken, they write down what they hoped the future of our community was, and how people might view that historical moment. Then I asked them to turn to their neighbour and discuss what they had written, which felt like the risky and important bit: I wanted to re-frame the debate, if only for that evening and with the people in that room. There was no vetting, no division – people had to take the risk of potentially speaking honestly to someone with whom they passionately disagree. This automatically changes how you phrase things and what you are willing to discuss. Online debates, where much of the anxiety and pain that had informed RadFem/Trans in the first place, are notoriously toxic precisely because we forget that there are people on the other side. Digital platforms manipulate discussion and encourage division as a simplistic marker of engagement, while at the same time personalising the content of our timelines so that we experience an echo-chamber: content that reflects our previously held views and gets us riled so that we comment, like and click, thus creating a perfect, profitable, circle.

During the final section of the evening I sat down with a panel formed by myself, KUCHENGA, Camille Kumar and Sarah C – all activists, writers and organisers. I deliberately chose an all-Black and People of Colour (BPOC) panel to address the relative lack of BPOC representation in the films and to continue showing that this event was not simply about trans exclusion, but how it intersected with race and other factors. Prior to the event, we had met in the delegate centre of the BFI and worked out what to do if there was any disruption (as moderator, I reassured them that I would take the heat). Our voices were low, and then we walked to the auditorium with a strange solemnity.

All things considered, the event went very well. But then something happened: as people were leaving the auditorium, and as I was chatting on the stairs with people who had attended, the fire alarm went off. It was extremely surreal and at the back of my mind I wondered if a TERF or two had intended to disrupt my event. The BFI reported that CCTV showed some young people had pulled the alarm in a corridor that they had gained access to. This was a relief, but the coincidence was unsettling. While we waited outside in the cold, several people came up to me and talked about their views on the evening. Two comments in particular stand out.

The first was a woman who said she had enjoyed the clips and especially the one of ‘that guy talking to the crowd’. She meant Sylvia Rivera. I pointed out that Sylvia Rivera was not ‘a guy’, but she looked at me with a strange smile and did not respond. This brought home something programmers constantly experience: the gulf between what we think we are putting on the screen and what audiences are taking away.

Second, a trans man who I have known for several years pointed out that trans men are always left out of the discussion. This felt like an important oversight. Although I had included *Adventures in the Gender Trade*, specifically to point out Patrick Califia’s journey from trans-exclusionary feminist to S&M advocate and trans man, I had prioritised women-identified people, and saw myself as a non-binary person as a mediating presence. But I had inadvertently replicated the silencing and invisibilisation of trans men that the media perpetuate. For example, in the same year Channel 4, as part of a series of

misguided and opportunistic TV programmes, hosted a 'debate' with Germaine Greer and Caitlyn Jenner as the main act. The sole masculine-presenting non-binary participant was mostly ignored and their experiences of being aggressively policed in women's toilets was met with incuriosity.

Now what?

A little while later, I was part of a group that drafted and published an open letter on *The Independent* newspaper's website (Bernard et al., 2018a), criticising the interruption of London Pride by lesbians who were calling for the 'L' (for lesbian) to be removed from the LGBT acronym, and thereby disassociated from the 'T' (for trans).[1] The action at Pride felt like an attack on history; the formation of the acronym had come about because of decades of queer activism, in which each letter symbolised the political organisation and mobilisation, not the newness, of that group. The solidarity statement, which was signed by 125 people, read:

> We are a group of feminists, many of whom identify as lesbian or whose politics were influenced by lesbian culture. We are cisgender, we are non-binary and we are trans. We have all benefited from the deep analysis, radical lifestyle and astonishing bravery of the lesbian feminists who came before us – actions that we understood to be about dismantling the patriarchy, liberating all women from gendered oppression and reimagining the future.
>
> We were dismayed to see Pride in London being hijacked by a fringe group determined to divide the LGBTQIA+ community along the issue of trans rights, particularly rights for trans women.
>
> This cannot stand.
>
> We restate our support for trans people everywhere. Transitioning in a transphobic society is a brave – sometimes medical – decision. It is not a fad. We have a long way to go in defeating sexism, homophobia and transphobia. We have a long way to go to defeat the systems of class, border control and racism that reinforce them. But we know bigotry when we see it. We recognise the difference between critique and hatred. . . .
>
> Trans women are an essential part of an intersectional and successful feminist struggle. The astonishing campaign in Ireland to legalise abortion patently understood that abortion rights and trans rights go hand in hand (Redmond, 2018). . . .
>
> There are many other campaigns and acts of solidarity we can be engaged in, including:
>
> Speaking up for trans rights and helping reform the Gender Recognition Act (Government Equalities Office, 2018)
>
> Letter-writing to LGBTQI prisoners through Bent Bars project (2011) . . .
>
> Donating to Action for Trans Health (2018)

> Either you work for the liberation of all or you work for the liberation of no-one. (Bernard et al., 2018b)

One can critique the lumping together of all sexually diverse people (besides straight people, though they are included in some extended versions of the acronym as 'allies') beneath a single umbrella. We can also critique LGBT as a marker of liberal values aligned along the axis of sexuality and sexual identity only – hence newer terms such as QTIPOC (Queer, Trans, Intersex People of Colour) and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Colour). We can also critique the acronym for not being inclusive enough; intersex, asexual and pansexual identities are rarely included, yet all, particularly the first, have growing movements behind them. But we can also see the acronym as an attempt at solidarity; an unusually public, mutable and messy one at that. This was the point behind the final line of the statement: critiquing how we organise is different to wanting to break up the acronym because one objects to other people within it.

As the letter was being published (and greatly cut down by editors) I worried about whether it was wise, as someone who works for a very public festival, to nail my colours so firmly and publicly to the wall. But the answer is best summarised by something Mijke van der Drift, whose film I had excerpted during the talk, wrote in a piece called 'The Gentrification of Politics' about trans femmes being punished for speaking up or attempting to move freely in certain spaces:

> The worst is when spaces of expression, such as queer cultural festivals claim to be 'neutral and welcome everybody'. This literally means they will be mainstream and have a high chance of having offensive material, screenings and debates. (van der Drift, 2017, pp. 19–20)

The piece describes the process of gentrification in which offensive, toothless films are screened at the expense of trans femmes 'because they are beautiful', and in turn:

> . . . gentrify the debate away from . . . structural trans-misogyny, racism and by being such single-issue approaches [that they] manage to turn away from 5 decades of political organising aiming for an understanding of interlocking oppressions, interlocking solutions, multi-layered critique[.] (van der Drift, 2017, pp. 20–21)

It ends with the following challenge:

> The question to platforms, festivals and spaces is how one can centre the reasonability that is radicalism relieving [the] pressure of adaptability and disposability of trans femmes, and shift the centre of discomfort from the margin to the middle. Part of the answer lies in modesty when claiming one is already there. (van der Drift, 2017, p. 23)

I questioned whether I should back the letter precisely because I was worried about being seen to present 'radicalism' as reasonable. This is a line that programmers and cultural curators in mainstream institutions regularly have to tow. For a start, this line is tacit. Second, it is exacerbated by the contradictory role programmers have, being powerful in the context of the festival and yet powerless in the larger arena of the institution. Flare takes place within the BFI, therefore I am associated with the BFI. Yet I am not employed

by the BFI, have zero employment benefits and grace its offices for only one day per week, five months of the year. I am in fact a consultant; and this precarity is part of why I am able (and encouraged) to put on events such as RadFem/Trans, and why I will inevitably fail at bringing about the kinds of changes I wish to see. This combination of association with radical ideas without commitment to integrating them is the problem many black, queer, disabled, sex-working, migrant and otherwise marginal cultural producers face. Commitment would mean refusing to check passports (as is currently required as part of the Conservative government's drive to make immigration officials of all administrative workers). It would mean white, cis, able-bodied, middle and upper class people at the top resigning their privilege and pay packet in order to make room for others. It would mean fundamental structural change. And that is not going to happen via programming. Yet I must also eat. Frustration or starvation? I take the former. It is precisely because I am not an employee at the BFI that I am able to continue to work there. I have watched many others burn out and leave.

The economics of film festivals is the subject of another paper. However, the work expected of programmers (and generally freelancers from marginal communities) is often integral to the institution acknowledging our presence at all. The core of the machine is unchanged by events such as RadFem/Trans, and yet the exhaustion (stress, fear, risk) of producing such an event is part of the reason you are there in the first place. Yet to not do this work results in nothing happening at all, or it being undertaken by well-meaning but uninformed cultural producers who have no clue about the material realities of our lives. How to get at the core?

Some might argue this is not necessarily a bad thing, especially if such cultural producers can amplify the message. In that respect film festivals are a stealthy cultural front and political thermometer, particularly for countries in which queer and trans people face more danger. It is easy to criticise and dismiss something others would die for.

Moreover, to return to an earlier point: the phenomenon of someone from one group standing in to represent members of another is partly down to the structural rigidity of our institutions. We have no trans femme people on our programming team, nor in the broader team that delivers the festival. For many years I was the sole person of colour on the programming team, until Tara Brown joined as an assistant programmer for 2020,[2] a scheme we will be continuing in the future. We do however have two programmers who identify with and care about trans politics, therefore we stand in during a range of events which, because of our marginalisation in one form, makes us sensitive to another. Earlier I mentioned my 'practice, ambitions, limitations and naiveties as a non-binary programmer'; the fact that I pass as both cis and trans, the fact that I am skinny and can pull off jeans from Topman, my educational privilege and the fact that I am able-bodied interlock with my blackness, my immigrant family background and working class experience in such a way that I am the perfect minority: well-spoken, well-dressed, well-versed in film and literature.

I would hope that my programming ethic was as 'interlocking' as van der Drift's piece outlined. But I am also the same programmer who was called out for the lack of disabled people in the festival; who was asked by a Turkish woman where the black British trans people were in my programme that stretched back to the early 1990s – I had not even thought of including *The Crying Game*.

The festival might have a new remit in our age of digital debate and exchange: to be a site in which our history is constantly explored and shown, contrary to the film industry imperative to always be new. It might become a site for contesting production conditions and values, where we continue to be critical of all-white, all-cis crews making the most successful queer films. Where people don't grow up thinking that sex work, queerness, race and disability have 'never been explored' because films are screened once, do not get proper distribution, are victims of some unfavourable algorithm, then fade away.

Art is important in and of itself, but this cannot distract from the fact that it is produced and those conditions must change alongside broader social changes that emerge from the pandemic. It cannot be that year after year programmers must present discussions and panels because no film submission addresses legal battles or the TERF wars. It might even be that physical film festivals disappear altogether, though I would be cautious about seeing such a development as 'progress'.

As everything changes, this might be something we see with COVID-19, where screen culture has become a central, global issue. We must continue to think deeply about how we engage with cultural institutions, how we build platforms that serve our needs and how we preserve and disseminate the cultural histories of trans people in a way that draws from multiple sources of radical thought and praxis.

I do not know, as a programmer, how to address this other than peppering the programme with the approach I do have at my disposal: events such as RadFem/Trans that do not mimic the combative, amnesiac tone of the mainstream, but attempt to speak multiply, from the intersections; to always begin from a position of collectivity, not individual identity.

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Notes

1. Of course, BFI Flare itself had changed its name from the London Lesbian and Gay Film Festival to reflect a shifting cultural and political terrain. In 2020, it also added I for intersex to all official publicity.
2. Unfortunately, this edition of the festival was cancelled due to COVID-19.

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Author biography

Jay Bernard is a writer and film programmer from London. They have worked at BFI Flare, London's LGBTQIA film festival since 2015. Their short film *Something Said*, an essay film about physical transformation and Black British history has screened in the UK and internationally, including Sheffield Doc Fest, CinemAfrica, Aesthetica and Leeds International Film Festival.