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The Queer Virtualities of Cinema and Gay Dating Apps

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partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts with
honors.

Professor Pooja Rangan
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Introduction

I begin with two fragments.

The first is a childhood memory, a few months before my tenth birthday in 2007. I remember sitting in my living room hearing my parents talk excitedly about a keynote speech that was occurring forty minutes away from our home in Mountain View, California. In that speech, as I would later find out, Steve Jobs unveiled the iPhone and changed the ways we communicate and interact with one another.

The second fragment is a more recent memory from last summer in New York City. One sweaty night in July, I ended up in a Lower East Side gay bar aptly named The Cock. After being ushered down a dark flight of stairs by a burly, unsmiling bouncer, I found myself submerged within a writhing throng of men. Unsure of what to do in this world seemingly so far removed from the New York City streets above, I stood in a corner and watched men of all shapes and sizes, of all ages and races mingle together in the hot room. After a few minutes, I was approached by a man who silently ran one hand across my chest in an oddly tender caress. It did not take me long to realize that for the patrons of The Cock, this caress was the universally accepted signal of interest. After these strokes of the chest and without ever exchanging a word, men would disappear in twos and threes into the dark corners of the bar for kisses, blow jobs, or sex.

I am the through-line that ties these two fragments together, demonstrating how, in my adult life, technology and my queerness have become inextricably linked.¹ I am a child of the

¹ Throughout this thesis, I use the word “queer” as an umbrella term to define anyone who identifies along the spectrum of LGBTQ+. “Gay” is a term that fits under this umbrella and refers to any person who is sexually and

Silicon Valley. I grew up within a short driving distance of the headquarters of Google, Facebook, Apple, and Netflix. I lusted after my dad's Blackberry, and later, his iPhone, got annoyed at how slowly self-driving cars drove (always the speed limit, never the speed of traffic), and had a friend who went to high school with Steve Jobs' daughter. I grew up surrounded by people who believed strongly in the power of technology to make our lives easier, to make us more connected, to form community. And for the most part, I believed this story too. I was in college when I first turned to technology to find a gay community. I turned to the dating app, the digital space where I thought I could fulfill the desire to want someone or to be wanted by someone in a place supposedly free from prejudice and judgment.²

I quickly realized that the coded modes of communicating and initiating sex between gay men that I experienced in my night at The Cock crosses the boundary from the physical and enters into the virtual space of the dating app. The interfaces of these apps look different (from Scruff's grid to Tinder's deck) and are known by users as having different purposes (Grindr is purely for sex, but Bumble is for relationships), but they are united in their purpose of bringing gay men together across geographies and degrees of "outness." The layering of a queer virtual space over physical spaces that are both hospitable and inhospitable to queer bodies contributes to new lines of thinking about forms of sociality that contemporary dating apps engender, especially among gay men. How do the forms of interaction that these apps solicit shape communication among gay men? What does this communication look like, how is it initiated, facilitated, and regulated? What kinds of futures do these new virtual socialities allow a gay man

romantically attracted to someone of the same gender, although for this thesis, I am using the term to describe a self-identifying man who is romantically and sexually attracted to other self-identifying men.

² When I refer to dating apps throughout this thesis, I am describing apps that are for both straight and gay users – such as Tinder and Bumble – but are used by gay men and apps that are tailored specifically for gay self-identified men, such as Grindr, Scruff, and Jack'd.

like myself to imagine? Does the virtual offer a communal escape from the closet, or does it erect new closets and divisions?

These are the types of questions that drive my thesis, which aims to produce a deeper understanding of gay socialities in the digital twenty-first century. The study of the dating app as it influences and shapes gay life is not unexplored in the field of new media studies: I cite and comment on a number of anthropological studies examining app behaviors in this thesis. Much of the scholarship on gay dating apps focuses on the ubiquity of online racism and toxic masculinity. While this scholarship contributes to a necessary dialogue on new media's implications for the gay community, they are largely pessimistic regarding the potential for transformative change. There is also a significant gap in the literature when it comes to the question of how app interfaces mediate behaviors and communications. My thesis attempts to bridge this gap by combining in-depth analysis of the interface with analyses of the behaviors that it solicits and shapes. I also posit that the apps do hold the potential to become more inclusive spaces. For me, potentiality is concretized by another media form that I increasingly find myself accessing in the very devices through which I access virtual space: cinema. The chapters of this thesis intersperse readings of gay dating apps with readings of films that explore gay sociality: *Love, Simon* (2018), *Shortbus* (2006), *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), *Call Me By Your Name* (2017), *Beach Rats* (2018), and *Moonlight* (2016). These are films that I have watched and loved, and in which I have sought solace from the toxicity of gay virtual worlds. I argue that these films have much to teach us about cinema's ability to create intimate pockets within inhospitable spaces, expand time to encompass queer experience, and render lives that are whole despite being fragmented. They reveal how transformative and restorative virtual manifestations of queerness are indeed possible.

I am particularly interested in how new digital media and personal mobile devices shape our experiences of watching cinema. One no longer needs to pay money to go to the theater to watch a movie. Instead, movies can be watched on a computer, a television, or even a phone through subscription services such as Netflix and Amazon. In this shift, one can see how cinema and the devices with which we interact everyday cannot be extricated from one another; we must explore the two in tandem. The film scholar Francesco Casetti offers a description of how cinema has become split in the way we experience it. Due to the introduction of new media that allows us to watch film outside the confines of the theater, such as the phone, computer, or tablet, cinema now needs to be examined in two separate senses. He writes:

[C]inema has long been both something to watch and a way of watching something. It has been a body of films and an apparatus (projector, screen, theater). The fact that, one moment, we are directed at the object, leaving the environment incomplete, and, the next, we are directed at the environment, leaving the object undefined, introduces a profound breach between the *what* and the *how*. Cinema becomes either the film object or a modality of watching films. Two things – no longer just one.³

There is now a split between cinema as the object we view *and* the way in which we watch it, which makes it all the more necessary to examine it in relation to the introduction of new media, the cause of this split. This thesis aims to produce a synthesis between the two virtualities of the space of the device and the virtual of the cinematic screen, focusing on the intersection between the *what* and the *how* that Casetti describes. This combination is even more important in relation to queerness. Just as the dating app has made connecting with other queer people easier, new media has led to a greater dissemination and popularization of films with queer protagonists and

³ Francesco Casetti, "Relics/Icons," in *The Lumière Galaxy: Seven Key Words for the Cinema to Come*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 54.

themes, films aimed to capture new queer audiences who spend more and more time on their devices. This is why I interrogate my cinematic spectatorship as a gay viewer alongside my exploration of the dating app as a gay user, with special attention to the affects and forms of imagined community that these two converging virtualities engender.

Dating apps are particularly successful in creating an affective experience even though the emotions in which these affects congeal may not always be positive. This is epitomized by my own experiences as a user of gay dating apps. In my first year of college, disheartened by the ease with which my straight peers seemed to couple with one another, I downloaded my first dating app: Tinder. I can still remember the immense complexity of my feelings in the moment I finished creating my profile: feelings of excitement, anticipatory nervousness, and freedom. Interwoven with all of these emotions was the prospect of an imagined queer community that representations of queerness on television, movie screens, and social media had curated for me: this app held the promise of finding a romantic partner with whom I could spend the rest of my life, or at least someone with whom I could connect meaningfully for a night. So I began to swipe.⁴ Soon after downloading Tinder, I downloaded Grindr, an app specifically for gay men. Completing my profile on this app yielded similar feelings of potential, yet I knew that on Grindr, this potentiality would likely manifest in a sexual encounter due to its codification as a “hookup app” by the gay community.⁵

I swiped through the deck and scrolled through the grid for months and yet, each interaction would follow a similar pattern. I would signal interest through a message, we would talk for a little bit, we may meet up for coffee or a one-night fling, and then we would never see

⁴ Tinder users swipe right on a profile to signify interest. Swiping left passes and removes the profile from the deck. Mutual right swipes yields a match and the two users can now chat with one another.

⁵ Grindr utilizes geolocation software to place user’s profiles on a photo grid of other users who are organized by proximity to the user.

each other again. Through these interactions, I became more and more frustrated by my failure to find a romantic partner, by my failure to rise above empty sexual encounters and connect intimately with another queer person, and by my failure to see the inclusiveness the apps claimed to promote. While I initially perceived these failures as personal failings, I began, upon reflection, to see them as structural, that is, as inherent in the logic of the digital economy. The dating app seems to be designed to fail. You choose to message someone you're interested in and get no response. You choose to swipe until you find the perfect match but no one seems right. You choose to block someone because they won't stop soliciting you for sex. What is more, users of apps such as Tinder or Grindr seem to *expect* to fail: to find a match, to connect intimately, or even to just be treated with respect. Many users, in their short, character-limited bios, will write, "Not expecting too much on here" or "This app has let me down so many times, yet here I am" or "I probably won't want to talk to you." Users seem well-aware of the limitations of both the app and the prospect of a happy queer future. So why do these users keep coming back? If they recognize and understand this inevitable failure, why do they continue to torture themselves? These are the questions that compel my explorations in this thesis.

In my life, cinema induces an affective experience analogous to that of the dating app, yet I find the imaginative possibilities of cinema and its prospective worlds more positive than negative. I remember feeling awestruck at the beauty of the final shot of Barry Jenkins' *Moonlight*, happy when Simon finally kisses his lover in Greg Berlanti's *Love, Simon*, and joyful during the final musical number in John Cameron Mitchell's *Shortbus*. Even the feelings of sadness at the conclusion of films like Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* and Eliza Hittman's *Beach Rats* felt almost cathartic and a potent reminder of how intensely I feel other people's pain. My emotional experiences of watching cinema are intrinsically tied to my identity as a gay

man, even though I may not directly identify with all of the characters in these films. Despite this, I am *moved* by cinema. I feel a certain kinship with the struggles of gay men in cinema that changes my experience not only of space and time but of my most intimate being. Sergei Eisenstein describes emotion as a kind of movement that is “completely identical with the primary phenomenon of cinema. [In cinema] *movement* is created out of two motionless cells. Here, a movement of the soul, i.e. emotion (from the Latin root *motio*= movement), is created out of the performance of a series of incidents.”⁶ Viewers fill in the montage of elements, which, Eisenstein argues, is akin to a movement of the soul.

Cinema’s affective potential is especially significant when it comes to queer experience . Theorist of queer film and media Bob Nowlan provides a useful distinction between two types of films: a film that “is queer” and a film that “does queer.” Nowlan describes the importance of queering as a verb, which “proceeds by taking up the position and interest of those who occupy the sexual margins of mainstream lesbigay sub-cultures as well as the far fringes of dominant-straight-culture.”⁷ In other words, a film that “does queer” expands beyond the characters and situations on the screen and challenges the straight hetero-culture that dominates our world. Nowlan presents a fairly rigid set of conditions that must be met for a film to be truly considered “queer,” including “a breakdown of conventional norms and assumptions and challenges to ostensible naturalness and a valorization of boundary-crossing.”⁸ My readings of queer films demonstrate a more flexible approach to thinking about how film queers, that is, of how one can read the very cinematic medium as queer through its various potentialities. These potentialities include cinema’s creation of a queer space (one that is mediated by moments of community and

⁶ Sergei Eisenstein, *Towards a Theory of Montage*, trans. Michael Glenny, ed. Michael Glenny and Richard Taylor (London: BFI Publishing, 1991).

⁷ Bob Nowlan, “Queer Theory, Queer Cinema,” in *Coming Out to the Mainstream: New Queer Cinema in the 21st Century*, ed. Joanne Juett and David Jones (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2010), 9.

⁸ Ibid.

kinship), its situation as a pedagogical tool for seeing a person as a whole or a sum of their experiences with the world, and cinema's expansion and layering of temporalities in a way that allows for a more inclusive conception of time and futurity. I am hopeful that this optimistic reading of cinema can be applicable to the digital app space, where we can realize similar potentialities and capabilities of virtual queerness.

My thesis consists of three chapters, which I had initially titled "Beginnings," "Middles," and "Endings" to correspond to chapters one, two and three. Later, realizing that the project of the thesis is to critique normative linear narratives, which are ultimately limiting in their scope and the futurity they propose, I decide to rename these chapters to demonstrate how they challenge our traditionally held conceptions of narrative and argue for a more expansive, queer understanding of mediated space and time.

I call my first chapter "Middles" to reveal how app users are literally placed in the middle of the different spaces they occupy while interacting on the app. These spaces in which the user finds themselves in the middle of include public/private, physical/virtual, and straight/queer. In this chapter, I use an anthropological study by Courtney Blackwell et al. to argue that the gay dating app causes a constant oscillation between these spaces due to a layering of the space. The constant managing of identity facilitates a loss of selfhood, as gay men are forced to adapt to the space they occupy. In order to visualize this concept, I turn to Greg Berlanti's *Love, Simon* and John Cameron Mitchell's *Shortbus* to explore how emotional expression is one aspect of the loss of self-hood that is perpetuated by the virtual space. I use Michael Warner's conception of a "counterpublic" or an imagined space where queer discourse can circulate freely, to offer a new space that eases the oscillation of identity. I call this new space an "intimacy pocket," a site of queerness that is mediated by a moment of connection, kinship, or community. A reading of Ang

Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* allows me to demonstrate how cinema projects and manifests intimacy pockets into different spaces. I speculate that something similar can occur on the digital. Moments of kinship and connection (facilitated through private chats that reaffirm one's queerness, that fulfill queer desires between both people, that makes someone feel comfortable) can be projected into the broader digital space as well, thus turning the app into a momentary intimacy pocket.

My second chapter, "Ends," literalizes how the dating app fragments the body into a conglomeration of loose bodily odds and ends. I begin with an exploration of the toxic landscape of the app through a close-reading of the Grindr grid. I argue that structures built into the app, such a race-filtering algorithm, contribute to the common occurrences of sexual racism. The form of the app's photo grid similarly facilitates the fragmentation of the body. I turn to new media theorist Dominic Pettman to explore how this fragmentation fuels the app economy, where certain bodies (white, gym-toned) and certain modes of interaction (prioritization of time spend on one's phone) are valued above others. Film theorist Douglas Crimp, writing about the collision of oppositional filmic elements in the films of Andy Warhol offers a different perspective on the transformative spectatorial possibilities of fragmentation. I argue that Crimp's ideas can be seen as a paradigm for queer spectatorship that embraces fragmentation without engaging in objectification: a dynamic that Laura Mulvey highlights in her analysis of heteronormative visual pleasure in narrative cinema. I examine Eliza Hittman's *Beach Rats* and Luca Guadagnio's *Call Me By Your Name* through Crimp's lens, exploring how fragmentation allows characters to exist in their individuality alongside their rich, complex personal histories. Viewing film in this way stimulates new understanding of queer spectatorship, one in which queerness is elevated above simple spectacle.

I end with chapter three, “Beginnings,” to reveal the possibilities for queer new beginnings. In an examination of Dan Savage’s original “It Gets Better” video and the Instagram accounts of gay influencers, I critique the commercialized discourse of present-day virtual queerness. I argue that the gay dating app turns users into influencers themselves who tell other queer users what their futures should look like. This future is one that ascribes to, in the words of Jose Esteban Muñoz, “reproductive majoritarian heterosexuality,” a kind of bourgeois futurity that is only accessible to the most privileged. This conception of time, a linear narrative that culminates in domestic bliss, is limiting and “straight.” It conforms to Muñoz’s concept of “straight time” and restrains those who do not fit into this hetero-chronology. Using Barry Jenkins’ *Moonlight*, I argue that the experience of watching film allows one to experience what Muñoz calls “ecstatic time” or a breaking free from straight time. This is achieved through a layering of multiple temporalities at once, which in turn, allows us to imagine a world that is more inclusive and more queer.

Chapter One

Middles

The Invitation

One Saturday night in my first year of college, I stood in the middle of a dorm party and watched as each of my friends receded into the crowd with another partner whom they had just met. Their courtship rituals fascinated me. They would begin with a smile and a greeting and then dance for a little bit, bodies drawing nearer and nearer to one another. Soon after, they were gone, leaving me alone in that crowded room. The reason for my fascination was that this type of interaction felt utterly inaccessible to me, due to the various closets that public spaces erect. I had yet to encounter a social space where I felt as if I could approach another man and signal my interests. How would I know if they were gay? What would my invitational gesture look like? My first question is a common experience of many gay men in public spaces dominated by heteronormative behavior. But my second question is one that must be confronted in *all* spaces, gay or straight, physical or virtual. These invitational gestures are expanded across these spaces by the gay dating app, which collides the physical and virtual worlds. This collision muddies the identities of dating app users, forcing them to constantly negotiate who they are in physical and virtual space. As the boundaries between the two grow more and more blurred, so too does queer self-presentation. The gay user is put directly into the “middle” of two experiences of space that mediate their self-identity and which they must negotiate.

The invitational gesture begins with a cinematic projection into space, immediately creating a division between actor and spectator. Usually, the physical gesture manifests in body language, in universally accepted signs of greeting: a smile, a wave, a handshake. Each of these

gestures signal the desire to begin something. Whether the “something” that begins after these signals is erotic or not, there is some form of intimacy engendered by these greetings. A smile brings focus to the face, where personality and emotion are often communicated. A wave signals “hello,” while maintaining some distance. A handshake, while formal, is also intimate, since flesh comes in contact with flesh. Thus, an invitational gesture is more than just a greeting; it is a communication of intimacy as well. This transference of intimacy is profoundly visible in straight-coded spaces. For example, in that dorm party, I am positioned as a spectator, looking in on the intimacy of two people meeting for the first time. A cinematic projection then occurs; the display of straight intimacy is rendered visible and, in turn, encloses my queer desires as ones that must be kept private. The invisibility of the queer gesture in public space is explored by Jose Muñoz, who writes about the ephemera, or traces, that are left embedded in queer acts. These acts differ widely and could include “the cool look of a street cruise, a lingering handshake between recent acquaintances, or the mannish strut of a particularly confident woman.”⁹ These transferences of intimacies are similar to the ones I witnessed in the dorm party. The difference lies in the invisibility and privateness of the queer gesture compared to the straight one and in the things that go seen or unseen by bystanders.

The queer conflict of visibly displaying intimacy seeps into the digital world as well, a friction that contributes to a difficulty managing identity. Whether this intimacy is realized through a physical encounter (a date, sex, etc.) or a stream of virtual chat, the dating app potentiates interactions that exist outside of the bounds of traditional notions of public or private space. Due to the very nature of the apps’ geofilters, a queer space becomes layered on top of a straight one, where users can oscillate between occupying their phones and/or the world around

⁹ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 65.

them. This contributes to a blurriness of public and private space, of queer and straight space, of virtual and physical space. Users, forced to define themselves against people in accordance with the social norms of the space they occupy, struggle with the transition between these various spaces. The constant fluidity between various spaces and the adaptation that these transitions require pose direct challenges to the ways users present themselves within the digital space.

The coexistence of the virtual and physical world can be realized in the space of the in which one watches a film, specifically mediated by films featuring queer protagonists. As I will explore by way of John Cameron Mitchell's *Shortbus* (2006) and Greg Berlanti's *Love, Simon* (2017), these films operate on two levels: as the characters on the screen layer the virtual on top of their physical space, audiences witnessing these moments in the theater or on their devices similarly exist in the virtual (the diegesis of the film) and the physical (the movie theater) simultaneously. This conjunction of space is a passive experience for the audience; just by watching the film, they become spectators *and* actors in the projection of intimacy across space. But this experience demonstrates a kind of mediated relationality, where the flow between the virtual and physical can be made easier. Cinema also potentiates the projection of what I call "intimacy pockets," sites of queer-world making. Borrowing from Michael Warner's idea of counterpublics, I argue that intimacy pockets are moments (however brief) mediated by instances of community, kinship, or connection, where the transition and oscillation between various spaces becomes smoother. Through a close reading of Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), I explore how the very space in which one watches a film – a medium that visualizes how the contradictions in space can be managed – becomes an intimacy pocket by way of a queer projection into the dominant public sphere, forming, in the words of Francesco Casetti, "an

existential bubble.”¹⁰ Through this lens, I argue that moments of kinship and connection can similarly be projected into the broader digital space as well, thus creating the potential for the dating app to also become an intimacy pocket. Within this digitally projected intimacy pocket, users exist in the middle of an in-between space, one that comfortably straddles the virtual and physical.

We must first, however, return to the verbal and nonverbal invitational gestures, which are not limited to the physical spaces of college dorm rooms or crowded bars. The world of the dating app shapes its own unique set of virtual gestures. On Scruff they are called “woofs.” On Grindr, they are “taps.” On Tinder, they are “superlikes.” These gestures on the gay dating app (Grindr and Scruff) in particular demonstrate something more than just a mutual swipe. Unlike Tinder’s “superlike” and Bumble’s “superswipe,” which are extensions of the action of swiping right to demonstrate interest but with a little more emphasis and require a right swipe from both users to open a chat, the “woof” and “tap” are separate features characterized by separate app icons. The invitations on Tinder and Bumble essentially say, “I think you’re *really* attractive” whereas Grindr and Scruff’s purpose is more unclear. By tapping, am I saying that I think the person is very attractive? Am I just saying “hello?” Does a tap mean that I want the other person to start the conversation? This confusion of purpose forces users to draw their own meanings from these gestures. Already a friction between the gesture and the intent appears; the invitations on the gay dating app are unreliable in a way that they may not be in the physical world, where a handshake, wave, “hello,” and body positioning signal intent. While these gestures in the physical world can also be mistakenly interpreted, the apps intensify this confusion.

¹⁰ Francesco Casetti, “Relics/Icons,” in *The Lumière Galaxy: Seven Key Words for the Cinema to Come*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 48.

The differences between the invitational gestures on the gay dating app and the space of a dorm party may make it seem as if the virtual and the physical are two very distinct entities but there is often an imbrication of the spaces. By their very nature as location-based apps, gay dating apps potentiate the blurring of space, creating small pockets of queerness in otherwise heteronormative spaces.¹¹ Courtney Blackwell et al. note this phenomenon, which they refer to as “layering,” in their anthropological study of Grindr.¹² They explain that participants in the study “viewed Grindr as a virtual place in which they were co-situated with other MSM [men who have sex with men].” This co-situation, a term the researchers use for technologized spatial relationships between people, is the subject of a question that asked participants how they experience this concept on the app. One participant, Jim, describes the experience of being uncomfortable in a bar with his friends because it is a “very very straight feeling space.”¹³ However, Jim only has to open Grindr on his phone to locate and chat with another co-situated gay man who is just down the street at another straight bar. Jim’s experience thus “illustrates how Grindr serves as a gay place that is accessed from and layered on top of a range of physical places.”¹⁴

The significance of an overlaying of gay space on straight space cannot be understated since space can be taken for granted by cisgender/heterosexual people, whereas it never can be for transgender/homosexual people. This superimposition of space has profound implications for the latter, although, for the purposes of this thesis, I am focusing on the experience of gay men.

¹¹ Location-based apps refer to apps that use location tools, such as GPS triangulation, to reveal profiles that are within your immediate geographic location. Apps like Tinder and Bumble allow users to change the range of their location from 1-100 miles. The profiles on Grindr and Scruff appear in a grid, with profiles closer to users located higher up in the grid.

¹² Courtney Blackwell et al., “Seeing and Being Seen: Co-Situation and Impression Formation using Grindr, a Location-Aware Gay Dating App,” *New Media & Society* 17, no. 7 (2015).

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Jim notes this importance in another response. When asked about his feelings toward Grindr, Jim says:

What I like about Grindr is that it makes every space a potentially gay space... Gay men have plenty of spaces much more than other people but there's a lot of places that are still heterosexual. And Grindr gives me the chance to pull out my phone and have a gay bar in my pocket.¹⁵

Here, Jim acknowledges that while there are public places just for gay people, the world is primarily centered around the heterosexual experience. Because of this fact, Grindr provides the ability for a gay person to perform their invitational gesture visibly on the digital space while guaranteeing a modicum of physical safety. This is exemplified in how Jim is engaging with and addressing multiple audiences simultaneously. He is publicly interacting with the mostly straight clientele at the bar *and* privately chatting with other nearby gay men on Grindr. These public and private presentations of the self as Blackwell et. al. note, further multiply within the app space. Jim's profile is visible to all others signed in to the app. Private conversations, however, change how users present themselves. Sometimes, invitational gestures are consistent with the public-facing image on one's profile, but there is often a tension, epitomized in an example of people who write "looking for friends" in their bio but solicit sex in private chat.¹⁶ This cleave between public and private presentations of the self reflects how the queering of space by way of the gay dating app often leads to a friction between the self and prescribed modes of being.

Although there is a potential to expand queerness into various spaces previously inaccessible, the tension between an expression of the authentic and performed self is exacerbated by a constant oscillation between the public world of the physical and the seemingly

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

private world of the virtual, which itself contains pockets of publicness and privacy. In order to understand this behavior, it is helpful to think of the layering as producing a blurring, a blurring of public/private spaces as users interact with a gay virtual world while being physically situated in a physical straight one. As notions of public and private grow more and more hazy, app users are forced to manage their identities in both spaces. Thus, an app like Grindr becomes both a safe-haven *and* a prison, where users can queer their heterosexual worlds while simultaneously confronting new virtual closets online, even in the context of a seemingly queer heterotopia.¹⁷ This constant oscillation reveals how the gay dating app, a space that claims to eradicate closets by being free and open, actually reinforces closet culture by rendering public space as markedly different from the virtual and still often inaccessible to gay users.

These blurred boundaries require app users to constantly think about and recalibrate their behaviors, actions, and ways they navigate spaces that are simultaneously public and private. No one knows this more than Simon Spier, the protagonist of Greg Berlanti's *Love, Simon*. Simon seems to have it all; he's white, male, cisgender, with great friends and a supportive all-American family (a mom, dad, sister, and dog). But, addressing the audience in the chummy voice-over narration that opens the film, Simon lets us in on his big secret: he is gay and no one else knows about it. The film deploys Simon's voice-over narration often, yet the voice-over oscillates between two different registers. One of these registers is purely informational, exemplified by the opening address to the audience which reveals Simon's inner thoughts. The second register, and the one most utilized throughout the film, is a projection of Simon's virtual self, the person he presents as he reads his online communication with Blue (a pseudonym for

¹⁷ Michel Foucault uses this term to describe worlds within worlds, spaces that simultaneously mirror and problematize what is outside. Heterotopias are closely approximated with a utopia but contain aspects (usually undesirable) that make a real utopian space impossible. Here, I use the term to refer to the space of the dating app, which originally appears to be a space of freedom, yet is also incredibly confining.

Simon's anonymous classmate with whom he falls in love) and his coming out post on the school's gossip blog out loud. The Simon that we hear in the voice-over and the Simon that we see walking down the school halls are markedly different. Simon's online self is more vulnerable, more emotional as we can hear in the timbre and shaking of his voice as he apologizes to Blue (via email) after their correspondence is leaked to the entire school. Even the moment where Simon comes out to his friend Abby for the first time while they are sitting in the car shows Simon exhibiting a hesitant vulnerability, markedly different from the ease with which he expresses his emotions online. Indeed, it seems as if Simon's mom is right when she tells him, "It's like you've been holding your breath." The juxtaposition of Simon's interior self (as portrayed in the voice-over) and exterior self (as he occupies the school hallways) visually demonstrates the oscillation of virtual and physical queer identities that public spaces necessitate.

Simon's fluctuation of online/offline identities is precipitated by his layering of the virtual on top of the physical in a similar way to Jim in the study by Blackwell et. al. When Simon's correspondence with Blue begins, Simon is constantly attached to his phone, as depicted through a montage of Simon checking his phone at various points throughout the school day as he awaits an email from Blue. In one shot, Simon sits in the middle of a crowded classroom, one hand underneath this desk vigorously responding to an email from Blue. In another, he sits in a bathroom stall scrolling through his phone messages. Another, he is on his phone in his car. These spaces – a bathroom stall, underneath a desk – are classically rendered as semi-private spaces in film and television representations of high school. They are the places where the protagonist eats their lunch after being unable to find a seat in the cafeteria (a la Lindsay Lohan eating in a bathroom stall in *Mean Girls*) or where notes asking for a date are surreptitiously

passed under desks (like the note Joey King's Elle Evans receives from a boy during detention in *The Kissing Booth*). Thus, Simon's vulnerabilities and emotions are collapsed into the spaces to which only the audiences of the film are permitted access. At the same time, Simon's correspondences with Blue queer spaces that are traditionally defined by heterosexual behavior. The bathroom stall, the classroom, and even the school hallways – spaces of suffocating heterosexuality – are opened to Simon, who finds refuge in the virtual alongside Blue. But this refuge also doubles as a closet, as the vast majority of public space is still rendered unavailable for Simon to express his full range of emotions.

Where *Love, Simon* shows the ways that layering of space can queer heterosexual spaces but pose challenges to expression of emotional vulnerability in them, John Cameron Mitchell's *Shortbus* demonstrates that traditionally queer spaces (or publics) are not exempt from this dynamic. In *Shortbus*, a raunchy comedy about the lives of several twenty-something New Yorkers as they navigate relationships, sex, and love, much of the action takes place within the eponymous Shortbus salon. The salon is undeniably queer; people inhabiting the spectrum of genders and sexualities mingle over drinks or over each other's naked bodies as they have sex in full view of everyone else. For example, the "Sex-Not-Bombs" room – the room where an extraordinary orgy takes place – is filmed with wide angle shots, allowing the writhing bodies within to blend together. Bodies are just that—bodies—inside the salon and people talk, cruise, and perform with reckless abandon. And yet, one sequence shows a character turning to the digital to layer the already-queer space. In the scene, the twinkish Ceth and the sex therapist unable to experience orgasm Sofia meet for the first time. Ceth only briefly acknowledges Sofia, as he is intently focused on a small device in his hands. Sofia asks about the device and Ceth tells her that it is his "Venta," a gadget that will, he claims, find him a husband. The viewer can assume

that like Grindr, the fictional Venta uses some type of location-based software to organize profiles, as Ceth is soon approached by a man with whom he had just been interacting on the device. The two men exchange a few words of greeting before retreating into a nearby Shortbus room, leaving Sofia alone and confused. Not only does this sequence depict Ceth layering the virtual on top of the physical, it also acts as a reversal of my experience at a dorm party at the beginning of this chapter: Sofia, a character who begins the film in a relationship with her boyfriend, is left alone while two men disappear together.

I will return soon to the significance of this moment, but for now I turn to another scene in the film that is reminiscent of how Simon's virtual engagements enhance his vulnerability. The following scene demonstrates how the constant oscillation between emotional vulnerability online and stoic masculinity offline takes its toll. Throughout the film, one character, James, is shown recording and editing a film about himself and his relationship with his boyfriend Jamie. Towards the end of the movie, we learn that the film James has been working on is actually a suicide note and the film contains all of the things that James could never say to Jamie face-to-face. James' emotional vulnerability that is only accessible in the virtual world of film is similar to Simon's experiences of communicating with Blue. In both of these instances, the virtual allows some sort of emotional solace that the physical does not. For James, it manifests in his suicide attempt that is ultimately foiled. For Simon, it occurs in the (brief) loss of Blue's trust. These films demonstrate the kind of mediated relationality that cinema precipitates as audiences become privy to the the problems of this oscillation (James and Simon's struggles with authenticity and their troubles with vulnerability).

With this fluctuation of identity in mind, we can return to Ceth's use of the Venta to explore how queer spaces can be sites of homogeneity despite their claims to be otherwise. As I

have discussed, the Shortbus salon leaves the “straight” and binary New York world at the door as people exist in a genderless and sexually fluid state. Because of the very queerness of the space, Sofia’s confusion upon learning about the Venta is apt. Why would Ceth, a gay man in a queer space, feel the need to turn to a virtual world to form a relationship with someone who is *already* in the physical space of the salon? This is a question that the owners of many gay bars across the country are being forced to confront in the digital 21st century. A 2017 New York Times article detailing the influx of straight patrons in The Abbey, a West Hollywood gay club, poses some potential reasons for the increased closures of gay bars, including “a shift in the hookup culture, from bars to apps like Grindr and Scruff.”¹⁸ Clearly, the virtual affords people something that the physical cannot. Even within the queer public space of a gay bar, gay people are immersing themselves in digital worlds, turning the first moments of contact into pixels on a screen. Now, we are confronted with the question of *why*? What is so appealing about the virtual? In order to answer these questions, I now turn to the dichotomy between two ideas: the public and the private.

Intimacy Pockets

It is first necessary to understand the complexities of the terms “public” and “private.” Colloquially, these terms are simplified to a single binary: exposed to a general view (public) or restricted to a single person or group (private). However, the use of the terms in this way ignores intricacies that can potentially transform how we think about space and texts. A deconstruction of this binary ultimately expands our understanding of how normative public spaces can be queered and privatized by the projection of pockets of queer intimacy. To foreground my

¹⁸ Jim Farber, “How ‘Gay’ Should a Gay Bar Be?” *New York Times*, June 24, 2017.

discussion of the terms “public” and “private” as they relate to the dating app, I turn to social theorist Michael Warner. Warner argues that the two terms are “not always simple enough that one could code them on a map with different colors...the terms also describe social contexts, kinds of feelings, and genres of language.”¹⁹ The terms are further complicated by the fact that different sense of public and private typically intermingle and overlap, such as a private conversation between two people occurring in a public auditorium. The tension between public and private is epitomized in expressions of sexuality, specifically as it relates to the idea of the closet. For Warner, the closet feels private. But, due to the closet’s codification by the public sphere, it is clearly publicly constructed.²⁰ Thus, gay people have neither privacy *nor* publicness in the normative sense of these terms.

Warner offers the term “counterpublic” to describe an ideal occupied by those who fall outside of the dominant culture, a public that is radical because of its utopian imagination.²¹ Warner proposes that a counterpublic maintains “an awareness of its subordinate status” and marks itself off from “not just a general or wider public but a dominant one.”²² Warner describes dominant publics as ones that can “take their discourse pragmatics and their lifeworlds for granted.” We can think of spaces such as a straight bar or even a gay bar like The Abbey as a dominant public. In Warner’s gay or queer counterpublic, no one is in the closet, as the speech that would mark someone as “queer” is circulated in special, protected venue of the counterpublic. These venues of counterpublic discourse are societally marked by some form of

¹⁹ Michael Warner, “Publics and Counterpublics,” in *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2005), 27.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 52

²¹ Warner builds his idea of a counterpublic from Nancy Fraser’s definition of a “subaltern counterpublic,” which she describes as “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs.” While Warner does admit that a “subaltern” is a more inclusive space than the dominant public, he argues that the term does not quite imagine a truly radical public. In an effort to create his own version, Warner coins a term of his own.

²² *Ibid.*

stigma and in other contexts would be regarded with hostility. But in these spaces, members' identities are formed and transformed by the dominant counterpublic discourse. Warner outlines the *potentiality* of his counterpublic by saying that by participating in the discourses within these spaces, one does not just express the ways people live. Rather, one commits oneself to a world-making project and a circulation of discourse among others.²³ Thus, Warner's counterpublic definition is a utopian ideal, an imagining of the world if these spaces actually did exist.

With Warner's definition of a counterpublic in mind, I return to the space of the gay bar more broadly. These queer heterotopias initially seem as if they are perfect examples of counterpublics, yet further examination reveals the ways in which they perpetuate norms and standards of the dominant public. A quick YouTube search of The Abbey yields a number of promotional videos for the West Hollywood gay club. Each of these stylishly produced videos focus on patrons and dancers who all look relatively similar: incredibly buff, handsome, mostly white. It is clear from these videos that the presentation of masculinity that is prioritized in the space is a stereotype of the most masculine. Jose Muñoz describes these "troubling gender logics" in gay clubs by relating an experience of feeling like an outsider in a New York gay club.²⁴ He writes:

I am overwhelmed by the throngs of shirtless dancers with gym-crafted bodies. Their dance style is aggressive yet rigid; the moves they make are meant to show off the rewards of hours of gym workouts. They do not spread out but instead dance closely together, almost in packs...For the most part, the do not let themselves flow and keep

²³ Ibid. 121

²⁴ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 76.

close to one another, enjoying the ways in which their gym-sculpted muscles rub up against those of the next dance-floor compatriot.²⁵

Through the description of the rigid dance and the hyper-masculine ways these patrons present themselves, Muñoz implicitly addresses other closets that are erected in a queer space: the gender closet, the race closet, the able-bodied closet; to enter that space is to conform to the normative gender presentations that dominate. Forcing people to potentially hide their own gender expression is enough to fall outside of the definition of Warner's counterpublic, despite the freedom initially proposed by queer spaces.

Thus, gay men who constantly maneuver their identities in response to the public spaces that they occupy turn to the gay dating app, which seems to be more of a counterpublic than the physical space of a gay bar, for example. Yet the varying degrees of "publicness" within the app space ultimately perpetuates the same problems as *The Abbey* in the ways profiles are situated amongst other "clonish" users. Within the app space, the user's profile is situated in the public space of the photo grid or the card stack. Apps that are catered toward a straight audience, such as Bumble, do allow users to hide their profile from the deck via Snooze mode. This allows you to "hide from all of Bumble's modes for as long as you choose" but "your existing matches will remain accessible."²⁶ There is a similar feature on Tinder. However, no such feature exists on the apps whose target audiences are gay men, such as Grindr, Scruff, or Jack'd. While users can choose to be hidden while they are not using the app, any time the app is open, the profile appears in the grid, constituting a public that is created when a user simply enters the space of the app. Even when users take their conversations into separate chats, Grindr still reserves the "right...to monitor any user's use of the Grindr services, including a user's registration or

²⁵ Ibid 77

²⁶ Bumble, Apple App Store, Vers. 3.29.0 (2019).

messaging” as their Terms of Service Agreement states.²⁷ The Grindr Privacy Policy outlines a similar stipulation: “When you send a message (which could include photos, location, audio, or video) to other users of the Grindr Services, we may retain the message as necessary under applicable law.”²⁸ What these provisions reveal is that “private” messages could, in fact, be appropriated by Grindr LLC, with their content projected into another, wider public, one that is accessible outside of the digital sphere. Therefore, the varying degrees of publicness within the app reveal its status as a space that does not quite enable counterpublic discourse in the radical, utopian sense imagined by Warner.

As the public of the dating app fills with users similar to the dancers Muñoz describes in the gay club, users are forced to manage and police their own ways of navigating the world. As I will discuss more deeply in the next chapter, users hoping to form some sort of connection with someone else come to the realization that they must conduct themselves in a certain way, a way that echoes the requirements that characterize the queer experience in a physical heterosexual space. A study by Nathian Shae Rodriguez and colleagues employs a textual analysis of 500 individual profiles in gay dating apps (Scruff, GROWLr, GuySpy, and Hornet) in order to determine how the dating app “reinforces a masculine elite.”²⁹ They discover that hegemonic masculinity is heavily enforced on the apps, with profiles asserting that they are “masc for masc.”³⁰ Extra points if the profile picture reveals a toned or muscular body. Therefore, the message on Grindr’s community guidelines page that encourages users to “be authentic” is perhaps the most difficult guideline to follow. How can one be authentic when their authentic

²⁷ “Grindr Terms and Conditions of Service,” July 1, 2018, <https://www.grindr.com/terms-of-service/>.

²⁸ “Grindr Privacy and Cookie Policy,” December 3, 2018, <https://www.grindr.com/privacy-policy/>.

²⁹ Nathian Shae Rodriguez et al., “Mobile Masculinities: An Investigation of Networked Masculinities in Gay Dating Apps,” *Journal on Masculinities & Social Change* 5, no. 3 (2015).

³⁰ “Masc for masc” is a common term that refers to a man who presents as “straight-acting” and what society has codified as masculine who seeks a man of the same gender presentation.

self won't get any messages? Users are forced into a variety of closets, ones that pressure them to conform to gender norms, look masculine, and present themselves in a way that will appeal to the other users of the app. "Authenticity" and identity then become luxuries that are sacrificed in order to appear attractive to other users.

Therefore, the dating app becomes a locus for spectatorship, where queerness becomes something to look at and be looked at, an effect that is troublingly similar to the relations that exist in the heterosexual public sphere. This similarity reveals how dominant publics characterize queer virtual space *and* straight physical space. Because of this, truly queer counterpublics are incredibly difficult to create and although gay dating apps come close, their pitfalls ultimately create more frictions than bridges. I recognize that this critique of the app space paints a picture of a very bleak queer world, one in which the utopian idea of the dating app is shattered by the closets that they erect through the muddiness of space. Yet I argue that within this dark world, the gay dating app also has a queer-world building potential as gay men actively reclaim the spaces that were initially inaccessible to them by way of the intimacy pocket.

To form the term "intimacy pocket," I borrow from Warner's definition of a counterpublic, specifically about the circulation of discourse, to epitomize the potential of the gay dating app. An intimacy pocket is a type of counterpublic that is realized through a projection of oppositional desires (oppositional in their status as "nonnormative" in the sphere of the dominant public) on top of the wider space one occupies. This projection can occur as a digital projection or an internal one that is made external. As I have discussed, the gay dating app facilitates and engenders a transference of intimacies through individual chats and coded invitation gestures. An intimacy pocket is the expression of that transference in a non-digital space. By nature of its counterpublic discursive properties, intimacy pockets are loci for queer

desires and a reclamation of space from the dominant public. These pockets are often temporally constrained in that they exist for a short time, but they are also powerful in that they bind a queer futurity that is not always present in Warner's counterpublic into the space. This futurity centers around building community and kinship, where connections between other gay people can develop, deepen, and eventually flourish. Due to its transitory nature, users are enclosed in the middle of these pockets momentarily, but the impression of a future is indelible.

Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* demonstrates the making of intimacy pockets and their potential to queer even the straightest of spaces. The film also represents the way in which the space where one watches a movie becomes an intimacy pocket through a queer projection that is possible on the dating app as well. Set in 1963 Wyoming, the film explores the furtive, twenty year relationship between two shepherders, Jack Twist and Ennis Del Mar. The film is saturated with long shots of the stunning Wyoming landscape, including the eponymous Brokeback Mountain, the place where Ennis and Jack first consummate their affair. Even after the two men go their separate ways, marry women, and start families, for the next twenty years they sporadically return to Brokeback Mountain to spend time together. On the mountain, in the wide expanse of nature, the two men are vulnerable and open about their feelings for one another in ways they cannot be once they return to their lives. The domestic space, a stifling, heteronormative atmosphere, starkly contrasts with the natural one. The two men find the most authenticity in a place that is wide-open and public, where there are no walls or rooms to keep their relationship hidden. Film scholar B. Ruby Rich notes the intricacies of space portrayed in the film by critiquing the association between nature and freedom. She writes that the film "outs the Wyoming landscape...as a space of homosexual desire and fulfillment, a playground of sexuality freed of societal judgment, an Eden poised to restore prelapsarian innocence to a

sexuality long sullied by social shame.”³¹ The film does not end happily and is imbued with sadness throughout; as Rich acknowledges, it “cannot be a sunny picture, not in Wyoming, not in the early 1960s, not here or there, not yet.”³² But the image of a young Jack tenderly holding Ennis as they stare at the vastness ahead of them provides viewers with a fleeting moment of joy. Through their affection, it is as if the men are communicating to the audience that, “Here, in this natural paradise, we belong, and our queer longing and belonging is as natural as this paradise.”

The discourse between Jack and Ennis is indeed counterpublic within a dominant public. In a later scene, Jack confronts Ennis at the conclusion of one of their trips to the mountain. Jack proposes that the two men run away and start a new life together, which Ennis immediately rejects. Angry and frustrated, Jack, through tears, tells Ennis, “I wish I knew how to quit you.” With this statement, Jack creates an intimacy pocket within a counterpublic space. By layering his own vulnerabilities and open self on top of the dominant (yet also counterpublic) public, Jack has created a truly queer space, in which he and Ennis are the only occupants. This space is different than the counterpublic space they had previously been inhabiting in the rest of their conversation by virtue of its enclosed nature (the statement Jack makes hangs in the silent air while Ennis says nothing) and its brief temporality (Ennis gets into his truck and drives away). Bound within this intimacy pocket, Jack and Ennis imagine a world in which they *do* run away and live happily together, a utopian vision that is as powerful as it is fleeting. In another, earlier scene, the two cowboys huddle together in their tent. Jack wakes up in the middle of the night to hear Ennis’ teeth chattering in the cold air. Jack reaches over and holds Ennis, who initially rebukes his advance. But after a brief moment of pause, the two men have sex for the first time. In their lovemaking, the tent also becomes an intimacy pocket. Within this pocket, the futurity of

³¹ B. Ruby Rich, “Ang Lee’s Lonesome Cowboys,” in *New Queer Cinema: The Director’s Cut* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2013), 187.

³² *Ibid.* 190

the relationship between the two men is first realized and their queer desires and feelings are projected into the counterpublic sphere, however brief.

These intimacy pockets occur within the diegesis of the film, but their projection into the physical sphere envelops the space in which one watches a film, turning it into an intimacy pocket as well. Despite, or indeed *because of*, the variances in the medium of projection and the location of watching a film – the screen in a movie theater, a laptop in a dorm room, a phone or tablet on a bus – cinematic spectatorship in the digital era is an act of participating in the creation of counterpublic space, or what I have been calling intimacy pockets within the dominant public sphere. Francesco Casetti notes this phenomenon, describing the act of modifying one’s environment to watch a film. The modifications can be spatial – drawing closer to the screen, stretching out in a chair – or aural – raising the sound of headphones to drown out background noise. Through the minimization of action occurring within the space, Casetti describes the effect of “the creation of a space all my own, in which there is only room for the film I am watching, and in which, the flow of the external world seems suspended.”³³ Casetti acknowledges that this space “is an imaginary space: an *existential bubble* in which I take refuge because I choose to, not a ready-made physical place in which I take my seat.”³⁴ This reading posits that the audience takes an active role in creating this space, an ideal that describes the intimacy pocket as well. For example, by actively seeking to engage with the story of *Brokeback Mountain*, viewers create a space that imagines a world where queer stories hold equal import to straight ones. A bubble is indeed created during the entirety of the film before the intimacy pocket falls away and the audience returns to the straight, physical world after closing their laptops, pocketing their phones, or leaving the movie theater. But for the two hours of the movie, the intimacy pockets on

³³ Francesco Casetti, “Relics/Icons,” in *The Lumière Galaxy: Seven Key Words for the Cinema to Come* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 48.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

the screen expand to encompass the entirety of the physical space as well. The act of viewing a movie depicting queerness thus becomes a queering experience through the intimacy pocket's projection into the physical space.

As the cinema's creation of an intimacy pocket demonstrates, the virtual world has the potential to be the first site of queer worldmaking. Intimacy pockets exist within the digital space of the dating app as well, in brief moments of connection and kinship through virtual or physical intimacy. A chat that reaffirms one's own queer desires. A bio that suggests similarities between users. These moments powerfully imagine a queer futurity that relies on community and not on erasure or conflict. Just as the intimacy pockets in *Brokeback Mountain* extend into the physical space of the theater, the intimacy pockets on the dating apps can be similarly projected. Through this projection, the space around the user becomes an intimacy pocket as well, a brief moment of connection. The virtual then creates a physical queering of space that encompasses a powerful transformation. By creating and then projecting intimacy pockets in the space of the dating app, users are making a similar statement to Jack and Ennis that "here, in this place, I belong."

Chapter Two Ends

Torsos

During the pre-Oscar media tour for Luca Guadagnino's 2017 film *Call Me By Your Name*, the movie's two stars, Timothee Chalamet and Armie Hammer, made an appearance on *The Ellen Show*. Dark-haired and slim Chalamet lounged next to the tall and muscular Hammer as the two told the story about how director Guadagnino facilitated on-screen chemistry between the two straight-identifying actors. In an effort to make the romance between the precocious Elio (played by Chalamet) and American exchange student Oliver (Hammer) seem real, Guadagnino instructed the two actors to kiss on one of the first days of shooting. The actors obliged but were immediately told to stop and try again, this time with more passion. Once again, Chalamet and Hammer kissed and what started in discomfort ended in a fervid make out session. After a substantial amount of time, the two actors stopped kissing and looked up, only to see that Guadagnino had just walked away, leaving the two of them alone. Hammer turns to Ellen's studio audience and repeats the punchline: "He just left us, rolling around in the grass." The audience erupts into laughter.³⁵

But what exactly about this situation did the audience find so funny? Was it the forced intimacy between two conventionally attractive men? Or, to push further, maybe the thought of two straight men engaging in intimacy was both shocking and arousing at the same time. The laughter of the audience initially seems benign. But it also operates in a more insidious mode by appearing as inclusive but also erecting a closet around queer intimacy through the positioning of this intimacy as a humorous spectacle rather than something to be taken seriously. The laughter

³⁵ "Armie Hammer and Timothée Chalamet Talk Passionate First Rehearsal," *The Ellen Show*, Nov. 29, 2017, Los Angeles, CA: CBS.

diffuses the awkward tension that is created when queer intimacy is discussed. *The Ellen Show*'s studio, therefore, becomes a space of faux inclusion, where queerness is made into a spectacle.

The dating app is a similar space of illusory inclusion, seen specifically in the standardization and idealization of one type of body. Just as the kiss between Hammer and Chalamet becomes something to be dismissed in its aberration, bodies that do not align with the codified standard of the app (read: white, muscular, "hyper-masculine") are turned into objects to be evaluated and then passed by. On the apps, this idealization not only manifests in the grid of headless torsos but also in the bios and app filters as well. The idealization leads to a certain type of standardization where everyone looks the same, acts the same, and interacts with one another in the same way. This creates an atmosphere that ultimately "straightens" social landscapes in an effort to uphold a uniform mode of being. The covert regulation of bodies and gender performances that do not present as "masculine," or processes of interaction that occur on these apps erect closet walls around those who do not embody or embrace the normative culture and attitudes of their peers. Through an unwritten set of expectations that dictate how people seeking connections should inhabit the world, the apps create an environment of faux inclusion, narrowly telescoping perceived societal expectations into homogeneity. In doing so, they become toxic homonormative landscapes where gay people are forced farther into race and gender closets.³⁶

This toxic landscape is facilitated by the very form of the dating app, as exemplified by the racist, built-in features and the types of economies that the app perpetuates. One such economy is the economy of bodies, which is engendered by the rigid fragmentation of the body in the photo grid or deck. Within this economy, certain bodies are prioritized over others, as pictures of body parts are bartered back and forth. On the deck apps, the body is further reduced

³⁶ Homonormativity refers to practices and aspects of the queer community that perpetuates ways of being and thinking that ultimately hurts marginalized identities.

into one part of a romantic whole, further devaluing the singularity of the body. This fragmentation turns the app space into a conglomeration of loose odds and ends, body parts that coalesce into the jumble of app space. Another type of economy that exists on the app is something that I call the time economy, or the valuation of time spent interacting with the apparatus of the phone versus time spent offline, which directly leads to feelings of intense exhaustion within the user. This fragmentation and economization of bodies reveal ways that the dating app actually creates division.

The dating app can and should draw inspiration from the cinematic medium, which allows us to witness fragmentation and wholeness at once. Cinema is made up of fragments at a technical level: for example, sequences are edited together from multiple shots, and often combine sounds and images taken from separate sources. Fragmentation also occurs at the level of representation, however, with profound ideological effects. To cite just one canonical analysis of this process, Laura Mulvey has shown how classical narrative cinema deploys close-ups to fragment and objectify women's bodies for the scopophilic pleasure of both the male characters on-screen and, by extension, spectators who are invited to identify with the masculine gaze of the camera. Keeping Mulvey's useful discussion of cinematic fragmentation and objectification in mind, I turn in this chapter to Douglas Crimp's influential analysis of the filmmaking of Andy Warhol to consider how the fragments that make up Warhol's films provide a a basis for a non-objectifying spectatorial practice.

In his essay "Coming Together to Stay Apart," Crimp writes about the stark difference in the filmmaking approach between Warhol and his frequent collaborator Ronald Tavel. Crimp creates a paradigm that he calls "coming together to stay apart," or the fusion of seemingly singular and oppositional elements (Tavel's insistence on a script mixed with Warhol's desire for

improvised action, for example) that allows these elements to coexist *and* retain their own autonomy. I argue that Crimp's paradigm, which I refer to as "disfitting" due to its nature of fitting distinct elements together, expands beyond Warhol's oeuvre and can apply to cinema as a whole – even traditional narrative films – especially in cases that entail a cinematic fragmentation of the body. The examples of fragmentation that I focus on include the images of broken Greek statues and the halving of Elio and Oliver's naked bodies in *Call Me By Your Name* (2017), as well as the extreme close-ups of the entangled bodies of the protagonist and his older, male lovers in Eliza Hittman's *Beach Rats* (2017). As I argue, the strategic deployment of fragmentation in these films creates scenes in which, to quote from Crimp, "the self finds itself not through its identification or disidentification with others, but in its singularity among all the singular things of the world."³⁷ This understanding of multiple singularities forms the basis for a theory of viewing film that does not fall into the trap of objectification that Mulvey describes. Cinema's potential to fit fragments together in a way that allows viewers to locate their own individuality allows us to think about the ways in which this fragmentation can be similarly generative in the digital space, in the instances of the community building tools of websites and Instagram accounts that capitalize on the negativity of the app space and in the theory of queer spectatorship – how queer people look and are looked at in the app space – that it explores.

The divisive aspects of the dating app may not seem surprising, considering the pretenses upon which Grindr was founded. Described by its co-founder Scott Lewallen as a "tool for connecting people," Grindr quickly became synonymous with prurient encounters and the sharing of explicit pictures and fantasies as gay men from disparate backgrounds are brought

³⁷ Douglas Crimp, "Coming Together to Stay Apart," in *"Our Kind of Movie": The Films of Andy Warhol* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2012), 66.

together into one platform.³⁸ The app, however, deviates from this mission. Lewallen notes that this commingling of different people initially formed the basis for the app's name. "We [Lewallen and co-founder Joel Simkhai] thought it was a word that has some kind of movement and action to it," Lewallen says in a 2012 interview. "We thought of it as an analogy – like a coffee grinder, a mixing pot or something analogous to bring a bunch of people together and mixing them together."³⁹ This goal, while respectable, is undercut by the reasoning behind Grindr's decision to adopt a mask as its logo. "[W]e wanted something that sort [*sic*] people back to a primal tribe almost – like an African mask," Lewallen says, seemingly unconcerned with the cultural appropriation entailed by this desire. Simkhai's follow up to Lewallen's comment is even more troubling. "And you want something that is rough," Simkhai adds: "This is, you know, masculine and 'grinding'. There's a roughness to it – something that was not about being gay."⁴⁰ Here, Simkhai perpetuates the negative stereotypical association of "gay" with femininity and softness and implies that the app was never for people who perform gender in a way that is not hypermasculinized.

Problematic gender expressions are bound to occur on an app that was founded on the qualities of "rough" and "masculine" sexualities, especially if the goal is to bring people of different backgrounds and experiences together. Existence on a virtual platform only exacerbates these tensions, as Grindr's format allows users to hide behind the anonymity of screen names and profile pictures. Although the level of anonymity fluctuates from user to user, with some electing for profile pictures of their bodies and others no profile at all, studies have shown that profile language surrounding masculinity remains relatively consistent. One such anthropological study

³⁸ Dino-Ray Ramos, "Interview: Grindr CEO Joel Simkhai on How the Gay Social App is Taking Over the World," March 26, 2012, <http://www.newnownext.com/interview-grindr-ceo-joel-simkhai-on-how-the-gay-social-app-is-taking-over-the-world/03/2012/>.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

by Brandon Miller examines profile bios whose language reinforces hegemonic masculinity.⁴¹ In the study, men who have sex with men (MSM)-specific mobile dating app users are surveyed and asked to provide copied-and-pasted text of their most used profile. The content provided is then analyzed for masculinity and body related messages. The responses from the profile bios and a set of research questions are evaluated in three language categories. The first is masculine language, which include instances of hegemonic masculinity directed toward either the self or others (e.g. “Masc guy here,” or “No fems”). The second category is body language, which encompasses looks and behaviors relating to hegemonic masculinity (e.g. “Looking for muscular and beefy guys,” or “I don’t have a six-pack”). The final category is sports/working out language, which is based on a link between body ideals and conceptions of masculinity. Miller finds that all three of these language categories repeatedly appear in profile bios of Grindr users. The results from Miller’s study largely supports other studies about the privileging of masculinity on MSM-specific dating apps while connecting masculinity language with language about the body or sports.⁴²

The phenomenon of the gender performance of hegemonic masculinity is not confined to the space of the dating app. It is deeply rooted in the societal pressure put on young boys to conform to normative gender roles. Yet the impact of the performance of “mascing” is heightened in the cramped space of the virtual photo grid which initially holds the perception of openness and freedom of expression. The grid, and by extension, the app, becomes active by telling users to take their place within the sea of chiseled toros. The user is therefore rendered

⁴¹ Brandon Miller, “Textually Presenting Masculinity and the Body on Mobile Dating Apps for Men Who Have Sex With Men,” *The Journal of Men’s Studies* 26, no. 3 (2018). ; Miller defines hegemonic masculinity as a term that refers to the most valued type of masculinity. Using terminology from other anthropological studies, he asserts that hegemonic masculinity is something that is performed; men can adopt it when desired, but it is not innate or fixed.

⁴² Ibid.

passive as they must conform to the rigid gender structures that the other Grindr profiles adhere to and reinforce.

Normative gender roles are not the only modes of exclusion on the apps; racism towards gay men of color is frequent. While already obvious to app users, this racism reached widespread attention in July 2018, after app user Sinakhone Keondara took to Twitter to threaten Grindr with a class action lawsuit, claiming that the app “bears some responsibility” from an “ethical standpoint” to address the “blatant sexual racism” present on the app. Keondara argued that the app should monitor or censor anti-Asian and anti-black profiles.⁴³ In response, Grindr launched a campaign, “Kindr,” which seeks to resolve issues of sexual racism by updating the community guidelines, creating stricter enforcement policies, and disseminating awareness-raising videos. Kindr’s updated community guidelines, written on a bright white page (a marked contrast from Grindr’s black and yellow color scheme) and with an image of the Grindr logo radiating sunbeams at the bottom of the page, tells users to “Be Authentic” and “Have Fun,” underneath which is written, “Finally, don’t overthink it.”⁴⁴ Kindr may be a step in the right direction, but the launch of the campaign does not address the inherently racist filters built into the app. After subscribing to the Pro subscription, users on Grindr are given the ability to filter the grid profiles based on ethnicity. Similar features are available for subscription members on Scruff and for free users on Jack’d.⁴⁵ These features only promote racism under the veiled excuse of aesthetic preference. Although some people of color may use the filter to not interact with white people, the filter’s perpetuation of racism cannot be understated. While the rhetoric and behaviors of app users reflects societal divisions within the gay community more broadly, race-specific filtering

⁴³ Kevin Truong, “Asian-American man plans lawsuit to stop ‘sexual racism’ on Grindr,” NBC News, July 13, 2018, <https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/asian-american-man-threatens-class-action-discrimination-suit-against-grindr-n890946>.

⁴⁴ “Kindr Community Guidelines,” 2018, <https://www.kindr.grindr.com/community-guidelines>.

⁴⁵ Scruff, Apple App Store, Vers. 5.6 (2019). ; Jack’d, Apple App Store, Vers. 4.2 (2019).

demonstrates the extent to which the digital app space not only promotes, but also reinforces these issues of racism.

Thus, the microcommunity on the app grows even smaller for some users as racial and gendered lines are drawn. These divisions extend from a society still entrenched in racism, but their presence on platforms intended to create community is troubling and explodes the myth that these apps are safe spaces for everyone. This also makes it clear that apps like Scruff cannot presently deliver on their promise to be the “safest and most reliable social app for gay, bi, trans, and queer guys to connect.”⁴⁶ Despite this unfulfilled promise, users are drawn to the idea of a digital utopia where a profile grid becomes a haven of possibility, where connections and relationships are forged through a shared identity. So the grid remains populated with bodily odds and ends: torsos, blank profiles, and blurred bodies as users wade through toxicity in the hopes of finding something real.

Fragments

When fully examined, the racist and transphobic rhetoric on the apps ultimately reveal the intentions of certain users: to facilitate the erasure of some peoples’ humanity. While it is true that these frictions reveal larger societal issues, the form of the dating app actually encourages a kind of forced assimilation that is achieved through fragmentation. Some of this stems from the nature of a dating app: users must collapse their traits and interests into a short bio carefully crafted to portray themselves in the most attractive way possible. But, like the race-specific filtering, the gridded form of the app facilitates this fragmentation. Using geo-location technology, the grid of Grindr, Scruff, and Jack’d organizes profiles three (Grindr, Jack’d) or

⁴⁶ Scruff, Apple App Store, Vers. 5.6 (2019).

four people (Scruff) across, by proximity to user. On the grid, each profile displays a small picture that can fit into a square with a username in the bottom right. Because of the small size of the square on the large grid, users must crop their profile photo to fit into the size parameters. Tapping on the profile displays the full picture of the user, their bio, and any stats that they have chosen to include.

By forcing users to crop their profile photos to fit onto the grid display, the dating app immediately fragments the body into separate parts. If a user chooses to include a picture of themselves, they are confronted with a conundrum: which part best represents me? For some users, this part is their bare torso. One respondent in Miller's anthropological study notes, "My face probably doesn't get me that much attention but to be fair my body does more so it's that, [sic] that's what I want to go first in a chat."⁴⁷ While this respondent discusses sharing a picture of his body in a chat and not in the profile grid, his statement reveals broader user intentionality. In an effort to appear most attractive, most authentic, and most desirable, users are forced to choose the small part of them that conveys this all. For some users, this part is their torso. For others, it is their face. And for others, it may be a profile without a picture. In all of these cases, the totality of the body is reduced to disparate parts, which subsequently become separate entities.

After being cut into various fragments, these body parts become commodities in the exchange economy of the gay dating app, specifically in the pornographic materials shared in private chats. For media theorist Dominic Pettman, pornography cannot be separated from economics, a concept which he refers to as a "libidinal economy." Pettman argues that pornography commodifies the body. Each part of the body, he asserts, becomes part and parcel

⁴⁷ Brandon Miller, "Textually Presenting Masculinity and the Body on Mobile Dating Apps for Men Who Have Sex With Men," *The Journal of Men's Studies* 26, no. 3 (2018).

of an exchange economy, where their function as images in a video, for instance, is exchanged for an orgasm in the viewer. This isolating of body parts (the penis, the vagina, the butt) in exchange for sexual pleasure is not simply a reduction of the body; rather, it acts as a intersecting of the (digital) economy and pleasure.⁴⁸ I would like to focus on this imbrication of the digital economy and pleasure; on the landscape of the grid apps, each fragmented body becomes part of a libidinal economy. The body, in private chats, becomes rigidly portioned into separate parts: a torso, a face, a penis. Each of these photo fragments becomes used as currency. Requests for payment are foregrounded by a constant stream of *if* statements: “*if* you show me yours, I’ll show you mine,” “*if* you want to keep talking, I need to see your face,” “*if* you want to meet up, show me your body so I can see if I’m still interested.” Thus, the dick pic, the torso, the face, all become nothing more than means of payment to achieve some sort of pleasure, with some bodies being “worth more” than others.

While the grid apps of Jack’d, Scruff, and Grindr split bodies into erotic commodities, the deck apps like Tinder and Bumble breaks the body into a different kind of fragment: a romantic one. Tinder and Bumble may seem to exist on opposite poles of Grindr and Scruff: they are not specifically for gay men (although I am writing specifically about men who set their preferences to show other men), users appear one at a time in a deck, multiple pictures appear on profiles. Yet a link exists in the ways bodies exist as parts in a larger whole. Here, I return to Pettman, who describes the concept of “love.” Pettman begins his explanation with a quotation from Georges Bataille’s reading of eroticism in the middle of the twentieth century. Bataille writes, “Each being is distinct from all others...Between one being and another, there is a gulf, a discontinuity. The gulf exists between you, listening to me, and me, speaking to you. We are

⁴⁸ Dominic Pettman, “‘How Was It For Me?’ Not-Seeing the Non-Spaces of Pornography,” in *Love and Other Technologies: Retrofitting Eros for the Information Age* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 116.

attempting to communicate but no communication can abolish our fundamental difference. If you die it is not my death.”⁴⁹

Pettman describes the tension of “melting into one another” that the Greeks claimed was love. The fusion of two people, the love that exists between them, can *never* bridge the deep chasm that makes them two distinct entities. Pettman goes on to note that Aristophanes describes the danger in being split even further. Pettman uses the classic phrase that introduces lovers – “She/he is my other half” – to argue that two people are immediately halves of one whole human being. By assimilating “this extremely long example of division, then perhaps we can be sliced again” and would thus only be “a quarter of the original One...yet...could feasibly consider this quarter to be a functioning entity.” Each split will only “recompose itself into a unit with yet more erotic valances.” These splits, Pettman asserts, are the backdrop for the alienation of the dating market, where people search for the original unity.⁵⁰

This reading of a romantic split is useful for thinking about the app space of Tinder and Bumble, which perversely trade on our desire to reach wholeness. For an app like Grindr, this desire is rooted in the erotic; each picture and fragment make up a sexual being. The whole is achieved when the fragments culminate in a meeting of a sexual encounter. On Tinder, however, the whole is as Pettman envisions: two lovers that are halves. Bodies on Tinder exist in their entirety in a way that they do not on Grindr. Thus, the entire body may seem complete, but it is still just a half of a romantic totality. The app reflects this as well, with its status as an app facilitating dates and relationships by being “your most dependable wingman.”⁵¹ The fragmentation on Tinder – the body is just a half of someone else’s – is no better than the erotic

⁴⁹ Dominic Pettman, “Love and Other Technologies,” in *Love and Other Technologies: Retrofitting Eros for the Information Age* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 24.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Tinder, Apple App Store, Vers. 10.10 (2019).

commodification on Grindr as it implicitly makes the claim that “you are not whole if you are not with someone else.” The fullness of the body, therefore, becomes devalued and reduced to nothing but disparate parts which are all struggling to become a whole.

The Time Economy

It is clear that different types of economies drive the usage and behaviors of the dating app. One of these economies I call the “time economy,” or the valuation of time spent on one’s phone versus interactions/time off the digital grid. This economization is visible if we zoom out from the space of the app (an exchange economy driven by subscriptions and other paid advertisements) to the space in which the app user physically moves. Queer media theorist Shakka McGlotten explores this phenomenon in his book focusing on the virtual world of dating apps, specifically Grindr. McGlotten discusses the shame that is associated with opening an app like Grindr in public, especially if there is a chance that a pornographic image may be on the screen. He writes that, when checking your phone in public, “you have to hold your phone like a miniature lover, close to your chest in a protective, hunched embrace” in order to protect your screen from prying eyes.⁵² The sentiment behind McGlotten’s statement can be applied to accessing any technology in plain view of people; in order to retain some modicum of privacy, one hides the screen from view. But McGlotten interestingly compares the technology to a “miniature lover,” thus personifying the phone. Therefore, the phone becomes a physical body, a body whose touching is prioritized above all else. The depiction of the phone as a prosthesis – an extension of one’s physical body – relates back to the romantic fragmentation Pettman describes. The phone merges with the user in a fusion that occurs through the personification of the

⁵² Shakka McGlotten, “On Not Hooking Up,” in *Virtual Intimacies: Media, Affect, and Queer Sociality* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2013), 126.

apparatus. The user is once again portrayed as a part of a romantic whole, as the phone becomes the “miniature lover.” In this becoming – the transformation of the phone into a person, the user’s desire to be connected to this “person” – the user prioritizes time spent with their phone.

In this way, time spent with physical bodies, in the physical world, is commodified as users choose the value of their interactions with their personified devices over interactions with other people. Once again, an exchange is foregrounded by *if* statements: “*if* I spend 20 minutes doing work, then I can check my phone for any new chats,” “*if* I spend an hour on Grindr, then I will find someone to hook up with,” “*if* I swipe long enough on Tinder, then I will have a boyfriend.” Thus, time online becomes a commodity that is traded for face-to-face interaction and vice versa. For many users, the app encourages an imbalance in time spent within the virtual, which is noted by some respondents in Brandon Miller’s study. One user, Peter, says:

I do think it’s taking over my life a bit... You’re watching a film on Netflix and you go ‘I’ll just check my messages’ and then you’re on until like [*sic*] 4 in the morning, just chatting and chatting and trying to hook up.. It feels like a massive waste of time sometimes but I’m hooked.⁵³

Peter interestingly notes how he prioritizes interacting on Grindr over watching a film, which, as I will discuss momentarily, holds the potential to alleviate his concerns with using the app.

Another user, Mike, notes the shame involved with spending so much time on the app, saying that when he wakes up in the morning after having fallen asleep with Grindr open, he feels “like an idiot”⁵⁴

Both of these statements reveal one of the side effects of the time economy: exhaustion.

Swiping through profile after profile or scrolling further and further down a grid puts an

⁵³ Brandon Miller, “Textually Presenting Masculinity and the Body on Mobile Dating Apps for Men Who Have Sex With Men,” *The Journal of Men’s Studies* 26, no. 3 (2018).

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

immense amount of affective pressure upon the user. Alicia Eler and Eve Peyser call exhaustion in the era of Tinderization “chill,” or “the millennial’s version of zoning out.” Eler and Peyser write, “To remain chill is to drop off, not reply to texts for days because you are receiving too many. There are too many relationships to manage and not enough energy for your own relationship to yourself.”⁵⁵ Constantly remaining in a state of chill has the dangerous potential to turn into the “Epic Chill” or, the point of constantly ignoring *all* aspects of one’s life.

Eler and Peyser are not the only ones to recognize digital exhaustion that stems from digital media. Media theorist Tung-Hui Hu argues that digital media cultivate a sense of lethargy in a neoliberal society. Hu describes humans as constantly buffering, even during periods of interacting with technology, because we are “constantly waiting for something to happen.” This constant waiting, Hu argues, calls the very “idea of a subject-as-user into question.” Lethargy, then, is a forgetting and letting go of the self as an individual, giving oneself up to algorithms, programs, and devices that are built by others and meant to keep users attached.⁵⁶

Eler and Peyser and Hu all describe the consequences of becoming attached to a time economy exacerbated by the dating app. Not only is the sheer number of profiles overwhelming, constantly shifting through bios full of racial epithets and pictures of men with chiseled torsos is literally and physically exhausting. This exhaustion manifests as the app continually reduces the body, culminating in the feeling of having one’s wholeness depleted. Bodies are fragmented, bartered, and traded back and forth in a digital landscape that prioritizes homogeneity. Despite the problems on the apps, these spaces do hold potential. In order to explicate this further, I turn to cinema, a medium that also fragments, but does so in a way that is both productive and

⁵⁵ Alicia Eler and Eve Peyser, “Tinderization of Feeling,” January 14, 2016, <https://thenewinquiry.com/tinderization-of-feeling/>.

⁵⁶ Tung-Hui Hu, “Wait, then Give Up: Lethargy and the Reticence of Digital Art,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 16, no. 3 (2017), 348-350.

generative. By using cinema as an example, we can see how fragmentation does not have to be problematic. Rather, it can allow people to locate their own individuality and uniqueness within the rest of the world.

Fragments: Part 2

Cinema is a medium that fuses fragmented, oppositional elements together in a way that allows one to understand their own uniqueness in dominant homogeneous environments. Here, I turn to Douglas Crimp, whose paradigm of disfitting in the films of Andy Warhol actually applies to the larger cinematic medium as well. Crimp centers his arguments on the “confrontation” between Warhol and Tavel’s distinct styles of filmmaking, with Warhol preferring improvisation from his actors and Tavel insisting on a script.⁵⁷ Crimp’s use of the word confrontation here already implies that two parts (in this case, the styles of filmmaking) collide into one unit: Warhol’s films, many of which featured actors half-reading from a script and half-making up their own lines. Crimp argues that this fusion of two oppositional elements (or fragments of style) actually elevates the Warhol film above a concentration on the story through its experimental form. Crimp foregrounds this with an example of Warhol’s film *Hedy* in which the camera, lights, and sound all seem autonomous, wildly moving in a seeming distraction from the on-screen drama. Trying to concentrate on the story, Crimp argues, only frustrates viewers. In removing attention from the story, viewers can “locate [their] interest in a world in which these characters—other *people*—and their stories—of *relationships*—are only one element among countless others.”⁵⁸ It should be noted that Crimp is writing about experimental,

⁵⁷ Douglas Crimp, “Coming Together to Stay Apart,” in *“Our Kind of Movie”: The Films of Andy Warhol* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2012), 50.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 63

non-narrative films. But I argue that his ideas of oppositional filmic fragments actually applies to the cinematic medium more broadly.

Cinematic fragmentation occurs in the way film is created. Each part of a film –the shot, the character, the setting, the plot– is indeed “one element among countless others [the other shots, characters, settings, plots, etc.]”⁵⁹ Through editing, these distinct elements are brought together into one cohesive film. These elements, as Crimp describes, are diametrically opposed to one another. For example, within a shot-reverse-shot structure, the shot of one character’s face *is* the opposite, both in its spatial positioning and its content, of the other character. Even the oppositional elements of sound and image come together to make up the film.

Fragmentation similarly occurs within the diegesis with different types of shots, a close-up for example, breaking the image into distinct parts. As Laura Mulvey argues, this fragmentation in the narrative film is problematic in that it turns women’s bodies into objects to be looked at and “gives flatness, the quality of a cut-out or icon rather than verisimilitude to the screen.”⁶⁰ Mulvey highlights an important caveat to diegetic fragmentation by arguing that, through this fragmentation, the film directs the viewer to look in a certain toxic way. Crimp’s idea of diegetic fragmentation provides us with a way to watch films that does not objectify the characters. This is achieved through the depiction of what I call wholeness, or the complex histories, emotions, or thoughts that make up a person. This wholeness is different from the romantic wholeness that Pettman describes because of the fact that this is the wholeness of a *singular* person rather than the duality of a romantic partnership. Seeing this wholeness on the screen allows viewers to understand how a character can exist as a unique individual. More simply, by applying Crimp’s theory to cinema, we can understand how fragmentation renders

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 838.

characters three-dimensionally and the self of the spectator “finds itself not through its identification or disidentification with others, but in its singularity among all the singular things of the world.”⁶¹

In order to explicate this theory, I turn to the fragmentation of the body in Eliza Hittman’s 2017 film *Beach Rats*. The film follows Frankie, a teenager in Brooklyn, over the course of a summer as he hooks up with older men from online while entering into a relationship with a girl. Throughout the film, but especially in scenes with or preparing to meet his older lovers, Frankie’s body is segmented in extreme close-ups. Frankie’s chest and arm becomes a fragment as he lifts weights before a hookup (Fig. 1). His back becomes nothing but a linear plane upon which a disembodied hand travels (Fig. 2). His neck is touched by the lips of a man who only has half of his face visible (Fig. 3). In each of these moments, Frankie’s body is split, becoming one element amongst all other elements. At first, this fragmentation may seem all too familiar to users of the dating app. However, a significant difference lies in how Frankie exists *beyond* the simplicity of these fragments. Unlike the disembodied, unnamed torsos on the dating app, Frankie is given ample room to flourish in his wholeness. Interspersed with the close-ups of the body are moments striking in their mundanity: Frankie and his friends playing a game of handball, Frankie practicing smoke tricks in a vape shop, Frankie and his new girlfriend playing carnival games on the boardwalk. In these sequences, Frankie is elevated beyond the parts of his body; he is a whole person, living his life as a teenager in Brooklyn. Thus, the fragmentation of Frankie’s body takes on an entirely different meaning. Instead of being the only important part of a person (as they do on the dating app), the body becomes a “singularity among all the singular

⁶¹ Douglas Crimp, “Coming Together to Stay Apart,” in *“Our Kind of Movie”*: *The Films of Andy Warhol* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2012), 66.

things of the world.”⁶² In the fragmentation by way of cinematography *and* the rendering as whole through the film’s narrative, Frankie is given the opportunity to be a unique individual among the other individualities of his world. This is achieved through an unconscious understanding on the part of the spectators who see Frankie’s place in the larger ecosystem of a Brooklyn summer. This creates a pedagogical effect in which Frankie is an example for viewers whose position in the world is reinforced; they are made unique (exemplified through the focus on Frankie’s specific body parts) *and* fit into their environments (through the appearance of other fragments which all come together). Understanding Frankie’s fragmentation through the lens of Crimp allows him to exist not just as a queer spectacle but as a full person.

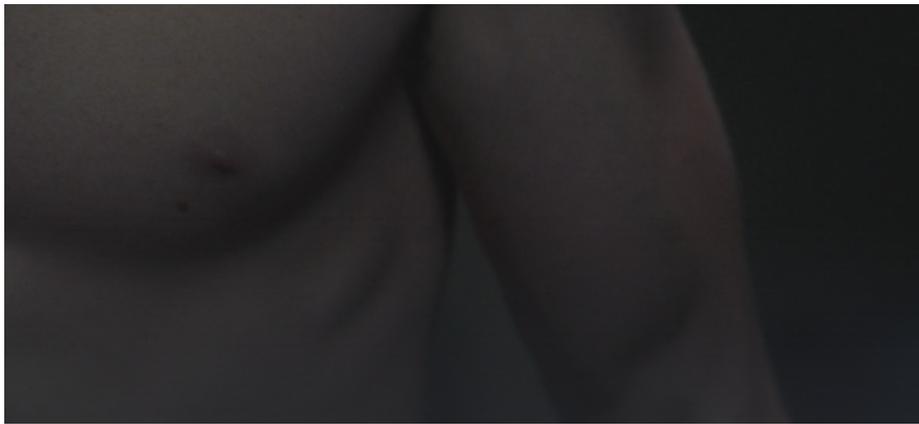


Fig. 1



Fig. 2

⁶² Ibid.



Fig. 3

A similar effect occurs in *Call Me By Your Name*, which is full of fragmentation on a formal and narrative level. The film continually returns to the visual motif of a statue. Many recurring images depict statues that have been eroded by both the elements and time and exist only in parts (Fig. 1). In one scene, Elio and Oliver accompany Elio's father, Professor Pearlman, to the coast, where they pull an ancient statue from the sea. While Oliver examines the arm of a statue, Elio holds out his arm and shakes the stone hand. In this moment, Elio and Oliver are literally connected by a fragment, one element of the statue (Fig. 2). In another scene, right after Elio and Oliver have sex for the first time, they become fragments themselves through a close-up that only centers their heads (Fig. 3). Like *Beach Rats*, the film displays images of fragments and disparate elements, from the broken statues to the segmentation of the character's bodies. And also like *Beach Rats*, the fragments exist alongside scenes depicting Oliver and Elio's wholeness through the mundanity. We see Elio reading, writing, listening to music, or playing the piano. We see Oliver working with Elio's father on his paper, Oliver napping, Oliver swimming in the pool. The two men ride bicycles together through the streets and go dancing at an outdoor disco. In these moments, the two are individuals who are rendered in their respective wholeness. The

fragments of Elio and Oliver's bodies and the fragments with which they interact reveal how their individuality and their wholeness. As with *Beach Rats*, reading *Call Me By Your Name* through Crimp's disfitting paradigm allows us to understand Elio and Oliver as more than just bodies on a screen, but as full people.

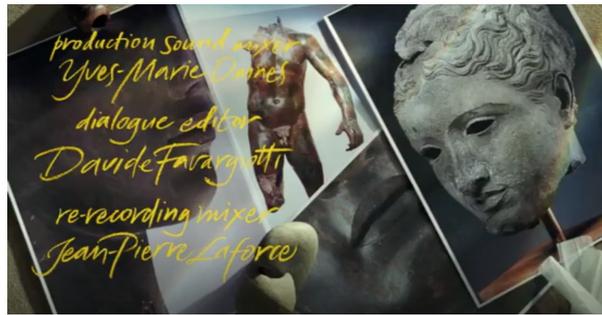


Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

Through the examples of *Beach Rats* and *Call Me By Your Name*, we can see how cinema departs from the dating app in its depiction of fragmented bodies by allowing the fragments – the loose ends of the body – to exist *alongside* the wholeness of a person. This

allows the characters on the screen to retain their own uniqueness (in their individual fragments) while also being depicted in all their complexities. Applying Crimp's paradigm to narrative film informs viewers of how to view fragments in a way that elevates them beyond the flatness that Mulvey describes. Disfitting also teaches viewers how the "self finds itself not through its identification or disidentification with others, but in its singularity among all the singular things of the world."⁶³ This realization of the self in turn allows viewers to "find unanticipated recompense in new pleasures of looking and new ways of being in the world."⁶⁴ These new ways of being in the world includes the knowledge that people are more than just the parts of which they are made; they are both their parts *and* they are their whole. This understanding can be integrated into the app space, where, currently, gay men are segmented into a rigid form of standardization. Users can mitigate this by actively forming narratives of wholeness. This is achieved through conversation, where users can ask about the histories and backgrounds of others. Users cannot let others exist as mere fragments that are nothing else. Actively forming these narratives on the digital potentiates community, where narratives can intersect and intertwine thus forming a more holistic queer space.

These spaces have already begun to form within the digital through a website – www.douchebagsofgrindr.com – and an Instagram account – [@best_of_grindr](https://www.instagram.com/best_of_grindr) – where users share photos and memes about the ridiculous and offensive (and ridiculously offensive) interactions, messages, or bios of the "Grindr douchebags." The posts on the "Douchebags of Grindr" site come with tags, such as "racism" (under a picture of a profile bio of a user who states, "Mexicans stay away, I don't like you"), "classism" or "arrogance" ("I drive an Audi and wear Burberry, proud member of the 1%") or sometimes both ("No princesses, No Jackie Chan,

⁶³ Douglas Crimp, "Coming Together to Stay Apart," in *"Our Kind of Movie": The Films of Andy Warhol* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2012), 66.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* 63

Black, No Old”). On the @best_of_grindr Instagram account, images of the absurd conversations with Grindr users (in one post, the user responds to a solicitation for a sugar baby saying, “Flattering but im not really a gold digger.” The other user responds, “Ok. You can die poor then.”) reach 1.4 million followers. These digital spaces become microcommunities, ones that take the fragments (of conversations, of profiles) and create their own narratives of wholeness (the totality of humor, the totality of relatability). These unexpected microcommunities are important and do the work to queer the spaces from which they were born by existing as completely unique iterations of their sources. They are inherently divergent in that they act in opposition to the toxic landscape of Grindr through the co-opting of the Grindr fragments. The digital microcommunities serve as further examples of the spaces that can be created and facilitated in even the darkest of places. Within these communities, laughter is not employed to diffuse uncomfortable tension as it was in the space of *The Ellen Show*. Instead, it becomes a chorus of individual voices that rise together to form a whole.

Chapter 3 Beginnings

All-American Influencers

On September 21, 2010, Dan Savage and his husband Terry Miller uploaded a video to YouTube. The eight minute video is minimally produced; Dan and Terry, clad in t-shirts, sit in front of a brick wall, one microphone in between the two of them. The two men talk casually about their experiences with being bullied throughout their childhood and how much their lives have improved, citing their own meeting at a gay bar, acceptance from their previously hesitant family, and the adoption of their son. They then encourage others to share their own stories of overcoming adversity. By the end of that week, Dan and Terry had received over two hundred videos of people describing their own survival and success.⁶⁵ From this, the viral social media campaign called “The It Gets Better Project” was born in an effort to diminish teenage suicide and “provide hope and encouragement to LGBTQ+ people” through the sharing of stories about overcoming adversity.⁶⁶

Now, the scope of the project has expanded and continues to grow today, with more than 60,000 videos recorded and hosted on the It Gets Better project website and YouTube channel. These videos are uploaded by a wide swath of people, from young teenagers to actors to politicians. They range in production value, with some featuring grainy webcam footage and others displaying high definition and glossy video production. The project’s YouTube channel features multiple video series, including one hosted by gay Instagram celebrity Max Emerson,

⁶⁵ Dan Savage, “Welcome to the It Gets Better Project,” Oct. 7, 2010, <https://web.archive.org/web/20101011092256/http://www.itgetsbetterproject.com/blog/entry/welcome-to-the-it-gets-better-project>.

⁶⁶ “About Our Global Movement,” <https://itgetsbetter.org/about/>.

who interviews LGBTQ+ YouTubers and bloggers. In the nine years since Dan and Terry's initial call-to-action video, the project has grown from a community space to a nonprofit organization with sponsorships from large conglomerates such as Lexus, American Eagle, and Converse. Indeed, the introductory video on the project's YouTube channel seems more like an advertisement for various corporations than it is an explanation of the project's goals and aspirations; undercut by gentle piano music, the rainbow logos of Doritos, Uber, Pixar, and Google Chrome flash across the screen.

The It Gets Better Project's shifting to a more commercial appeal reveals the currency of queerness in virtual space. The vast and unwieldy range of queerness has been distilled into a small subset of influencers, whose beliefs, behaviors, and conceptions of queer futures are homogeneous and standardized. Dan and Terry, by espousing a future defined by bourgeois pairing, extravagant trips to Paris, and family ski outings, have become the prototype for a whole chorus of influencers advertising the same message: "assimilate into dominant, heterosexual, and hegemonic societal norms." The homogenizing power of "influencer culture" is facilitated by the sharing of content on social media, from websites, to social networking sites, to dating apps. YouTube videos like the It Gets Better Project videos feature queer celebrities, wealthy gay couples advertise their flashy domestic lifestyles on Instagram, and dating app users are put to work crafting an image that commodifies their values, desires, and beliefs.

Users often transform their self-image in this manner in the hopes of a better future: a transformative potential that dating apps hold out as a lure. Tara McPherson, writing in the early days of Web 2.0, argues that transformation is an integral part of the experience of web-surfing: unlike previous media, digital space responds to the navigational desires of the user, seeming to suggest that something newer and better is always around the corner. For McPherson, this

transformation is nothing more than a “tantalizing lure” that causes users to “remake information into a better reflection of the self.”⁶⁷ Queer media theorist Shakka McGlotten also describes the transformative nature of the dating app, writing that Grindr and apps like it have “become part of the texture of gay life, part of the media ecologies that shape our daily practices and desires, that transform how we think of ourselves and how we move through the world.”⁶⁸ I argue that the transformative potential to these media ecologies is warped by the saturation of influencers, who channel normative societal expectations in their homogenization of queer conceptions of self and their experiences of moving through the world.

If we are to believe the influencers like Dan and Terry of the It Gets Better Project, this process of transformation takes a bumpy start and turns into a happy ending: you get bullied in high school, you graduate and move to an urban center, you meet and marry a man, and settle down to a life of queer domesticity. I argue that this this narrative is not only overly linear and limiting; its idealization of domesticity as the only future worth striving for erases the experiences of gay men who are unable to arrive at this goal. This sequential understanding of time is something that Jose Muñoz calls “straight time,” or a futurity that promises “reproductive majoritarian heterosexuality.”⁶⁹ Trying to navigate a world that prioritizes an assimilation into straight time is challenging and is made more complicated by the fact that most digital mediums exist within the confines of straight time. Both the dating apps and Instagram firmly situate the user within the present because of the way users can *only* exist on the space when online; when users log off, they become part of the past. Thus, this linear temporality – existing in the past

⁶⁷ Tara McPherson, “Reload: Liveness, mobility and the web,” in *The Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff (London: Routledge, 2002), 465.

⁶⁸ Shakka McGlotten, “On Not Hooking Up,” in *Virtual Intimacies: Media, Affect, and Queer Sociality* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2013), 124.

⁶⁹ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 22.

when offline, logging onto the present when online, while swiping, tapping, and hoping for a future – epitomizes Muñoz’s straight time and problematizes these digital mediums. Because of the problematic temporality of the digital medium, I argue that a new queer life must be envisioned, one that allows for an inclusive future from the very beginning: the moment when one comes out.

The imagining of a new beginning is located in cinematic temporality, which transcends straight time by demonstrating the simultaneous existence of multiple virtual times. For example, the different stages of Chiron’s life in Barry Jenkins’ *Moonlight* (2016) all coalesce together into one cohesive narrative. Cinema – both in its narrative elements and in its form – allows us to imagine queerness as a utopian horizon that breaks out of the confines of straight time through the deployment of a term Muñoz calls “ecstatic time.” I argue that this ecstatic time is stimulated by the affective qualities of the narrative and formal elements of film, specifically in moments that induce emotions of pleasure or awe, in addition to allowing the viewer to contemplate their own personal histories. These moments occur while the viewer is situated in the present of the space where they are watching a film, while simultaneously existing in the alternate present, the past, or the future that is presented on the screen. Here, cinema has the ability to queer audiences through the criss-crossing of multiple temporalities all at once, breaking free from the straight, linear time that characterizes the heterosexual experience, while also imagining a more inclusive queer futurity.

Juxtaposed with cinema’s hopeful imaginings of queer futures is the queer influencer prototype on digital mediums that is intrinsically tied to the capitalist ideal of wealth gain. This is nowhere near as apparent as it is on Instagram, the photo sharing app that hosts hundreds of accounts of people who profit from their large following. Take the Instagram accounts of couple

Rick Twombly and Griff King (@rick_and_the_griffopotamus) and PJ and Thomas McKay (@pjandthomas). The photos on the accounts tend to verge on the monotonous; most of them show the shirtless gym-toned couples kissing, touching, and holding each other or the two men lounging in their beds or living room couch. On Rick and Griff's account, their images are undeniably sexy. In a video interview with Vice called "Monetizing Thirst," Rick says bluntly, "Sex sells...Nudity is going to catch people's attention."⁷⁰ Now, after catching people's attention, Rick and Griff can capitalize on the commodity that they are selling: a gay dream. In the interview, Rick makes this clear, stating, "We're selling an idealized version of what most people probably want in a gay relationship. And I think that's great! Because we are living this dream."⁷¹ While Rick and Griff's nudity can be accessed by anyone visiting their account, exclusive content about their lifestyle is restricted by a paywall on their OnlyFans account, linked in their bio.⁷² After paying \$9.99 per month, users can watch videos of couple's workout routines, the meals that they eat, or get a behind the scenes look at their relationship. Rick and Griff's use of an OnlyFans account underscores one way in which queer futures are commodified by digital influencers.

PJ and Thomas similarly capitalize on their selling of a gay domestic lifestyle. The images on their account do not ooze sex like Rick and Griff's. Rather, their pictures present a life that is straight out of *Town and Country* magazine. We see images of the couple jet setting to exotic locations: Paris! The Caribbean! But they always return home to Tennessee, where they curl up on the couch and talk about how much they love each other. The pictures on the account depict and make attractive the privileged lifestyle of white gay men, whose biggest problem in

⁷⁰ VICE, "What It's Like to Make Money as an Instafamous Couple," March 6, 2018, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/437ewb/what-its-like-to-make-money-as-an-instafamous-couple.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² OnlyFans is a subscription service where users can upload videos and content that is available to subscribers for a monthly fee.

life is whether their kitchen counters should be marble or slate. After drawing users into the fantasy life of the couple, PJ and Thomas are able to capitalize on their following. In the beginning of January, the two men posted a picture of the two of them wearing sweatshirts with “Property of Y’ALL University” (“y’all” being an oft-repeated phrase by the couple in their YouTube videos) embroidered across the front. The caption leads followers to an Etsy link in their bio, where sweatshirts and t-shirts bearing the identical phrase can be bought. Their supply is now sold out, with over 500 clothing items and art pieces sold. Like Rick and Griff, PJ and Thomas demonstrate how the influencer culture that saturates queer media landscapes profits from the commodification and homogenization of queer futures.

The more problematic influencers use their platforms for personal *and* corporate gain. This can be seen in the accounts of ABC News Correspondent Gio Benitez (@giobenitez) and his husband, Tommy DiDario (@tommydidario). Both accounts are fairly similar; they are full of solo shots of the muscular men out and about in New York City, interspersed with occasional photos of the two of them together. Their profiles are also both undeniably monetized. This commercialization takes shape in the paid advertisements that each of the men promote on their respective accounts. Mostly, these advertisements are located within a caption of a solo picture or in the location of a picture (with the words, “in a paid partnership with...”). The comments on Gio and Tommy’s photos are largely the same, with users exclaiming how good each man looks, how attractive their profiles are. Yet these comments ignore how the profiles of these men have become commodified; not only are the accounts selling a fantasy of gay life, they are also literally selling goods on behalf of a company. This is not a phenomenon that is unique to gay influencers; Instagram is full of media personalities and celebrities who use the platform to advertise products. But the difference for queer influencers like Gio and Tommy who participate

in the same economization is that they use a fantastical gay domestic future as a vehicle for personal and corporate gain.

Just as this culture of influencers has seeped into major digital platforms where queer culture thrives, from YouTube to Instagram, it similarly finds its way to the gay dating app, where users become pseudo-influencers crafting profiles that affect the “purchasing” decisions of other users within the app economy. These decisions span a variety of app space behaviors, from the trading of explicit pictures to an invitation to initiate a sexual encounter. To further explicate the influencer culture on the app, I return to Courtney Blackwell et. al.’s anthropological study of the interactions of users on Grindr, specifically focusing on the answers to a question posed by the researchers about how people manage identity and identifiability on the app. One respondent, Max, says:

You pick one [photo] that you think you’ll look good in, and more importantly what will attract others... [I want others to think I am] hot. I want to be wanted, to be desired by others. You have a good picture. Something that shows off something you have, or that you think makes you look good.⁷³

Max’s answer reveals a few things about the self-presentation of dating app users. The first is that the way Max presents himself on the app is enforced by and dependent on the perception of other users. Indeed, Max asserts that *his* opinion about whether he looks good in a photo is much less important than whether *other people* think he looks good. Max’s answer also shows the ways in which desire is intrinsically tied with one’s presentation on the app. Max wants “to be wanted” and “desired by others,” demonstrating how the opinion of other users is informed by their own wishes. Max’s response echoes the Vice interview with Rick and Griff. Rick’s

⁷³ Courtney Blackwell et al., “Seeing and Being Seen: Co-Situation and Impression Formation using Grindr, a Location-Aware Gay Dating App,” *New Media & Society* 17, no. 7 (2015).

assertion that “sex sells” and his description of how the men use pornographic images to draw users to their account is strikingly similar to Max’s desire to be wanted and perceived as desirable by other users on the app. Also similar to the Instagram couples is the reliance on other people to inform and influence the content that is posted. On Instagram, this dependence rests in posting pictures that will both keep their followers engaged or attract new followers to the account (after all, on Instagram, one cannot be an influencer without any followers). On the dating app, Max (and others like him) rely on others to think he is attractive enough, funny enough, smart enough, to open a conversation or swipe right.

Another similarity can be drawn between the Instagram and dating app influencer: they are both preoccupied with the idea of transformation, or to paraphrase proto-queer influencers Dan and Terry, the idea that “It Gets Better.” On Instagram, this transformation occurs when one’s account reaches a level of popularity where the account can be verified (marked by a blue check mark next to the profile’s name) or has a similar number of followers to a verified account. According to Instagram’s help page, an account becomes verified after Instagram confirms “that an account is the authentic presence of the public figure, celebrity or global brand it represents.”⁷⁴ Although the account of Rick and Griff is not verified, they have 305 thousand followers, compared with the 246 thousand followers of Instagram-verified account @pjandthomas. Rick and Griff describe the transformation that occurred when their follower count started drastically rising. Rick says that suddenly, “I feel a responsibility...because they [the followers] care.”⁷⁵ Here, Rick describes how the account (which had previously just been used to share photos of the couple’s relationship) and the men’s presence on the account changes with the amount of followers they have. Not only has an economic change occurred (through the

⁷⁴ “Verified Badges,” 2019, <https://help.instagram.com/854227311295302>.

⁷⁵ VICE, “What It’s Like to Make Money as an Instafamous Couple,” March 6, 2018, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/437ewb/what-its-like-to-make-money-as-an-instafamous-couple.

fact that Rick and Griff can now reap the profits from their OnlyFans account), but there is also a transformation in the presentation of themselves and their relationship, stemming from their popularity on the app. The transformation of Rick and Griff's digital environment is made obvious simply by the number of followers they had versus the number of followers they currently have. Yet the transformation that occurs on the dating app is slightly more murky. A closer engagement with Tara McPherson illustrates this point.

McPherson's arguments about the fantasies of the digital space begins with a modality that she calls "volitional mobility," a term that I argue applies to the dating app space as well. McPherson is writing during a moment of digital history that precedes the explosion of the app economy but her points remain salient to our current moment. When discussing transformation, McPherson employs a quotation from Janet Murray, who writes that transformation is a "characteristic pleasure of digital environments," environments that include the app space as well.⁷⁶ McPherson describes "volitional mobility" as a sensation in which users have a feeling of choice, "structuring a mobilized liveness in which we come to feel we invoke and impact, in the instant, in the click, reload."⁷⁷ This feeling of mobility – that we are completely in control of our digital environments – is just that: a feeling. On the dating app, this fluidity is concretized in the form of the apps themselves, in the swiping on the deck app to the scrolling of the grid app. This movement from one profile to the next engenders a sense of freedom for the user, who feels as if they are in control of their own destiny. However, the app user continues to swipe and scroll with no end in sight, thus perpetuating the illusion of liveness that is not actually present.

The second modality of the digital that McPherson names is the "scan-and-search," which applies to the spatial layout of the dating app. The "scan-and-search" is characterized by a

⁷⁶ Tara McPherson, "Reload: Liveness, mobility and the web," in *The Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff (London: Routledge, 2002), 465.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* 462

“fear of missing the next experience or the next piece of data,” an experience that is crystallized on the dating app. McPherson also describes this as a more active process than the “glance-or-gaze” that is a factor of other digital environments. This activeness – the physical act of swiping or scrolling – is another facet of the illusion of control that the app space engenders within users. Through the action of scanning and searching, users are led to believe that the next profile they come across may be the person to fulfill their desires, whether those desires are romantic, erotic, or platonic. If it is not the next profile, then maybe it is the next one. Or the next one. Or the next one and so on and so forth. While users may feel as if they have agency in this scanning and searching, the form of the app – the swiping through the deck or scrolling through the grid – actually facilitates the illusion of mobility.

McPherson’s final modality – transformation – fully epitomizes the app’s illusion of choice, an illusion that keeps users engaged with the apps even as it is never fully realized. McPherson argues that this transformation is rooted in the delusion of personalization, where information can be remade “into a better reflection of the self.”⁷⁸ This personalization on the app space is exemplified by Tinder’s recently introduced “Top Picks” feature. “Top Picks” sets a more limited set of potential matches based on information such as job, hobby or education in users’ profiles. This data is then put into groupings, such as “Traveler” or “Scholar.” The Top Picks refresh daily and the information is combined with users’ previous swiping behavior.⁷⁹ Users who subscribe to Tinder Gold (6 months for \$52.99) can swipe on an unlimited amount of Top Picks, while non-paying users are relegated to one pick a day.⁸⁰ McPherson’s ideas remain relevant as a description of the potential of digital apps as spaces where users are 1) transformed

⁷⁸ Ibid. 465

⁷⁹ Sara Perez, “Tinder launches its curated ‘Top Picks’ feature worldwide,” September 2018, <https://techcrunch.com/2018/09/11/tinder-launches-its-curated-top-picks-feature-worldwide/>.

⁸⁰ Tinder, Apple App Store, Vers. 10.10 (2019).

into an influencer of their digital environments through a personalization of their experience and 2) left to a hopeful imagining of the future that may come from continued conversations in a private chat.

McPherson describes the temporality of the web space as multidirectional and simultaneous. However, my experience of the temporality of the app space suggests otherwise: although gay dating apps promise transformation, they actually reinforce an experience of time that is linear and “straight.” This modality of time is reflected in the kinds of futures that the apps imagine. The very word “transformation” already implicitly implies a “before” and “after.” This can be applied to the digital influencer culture as well, where time is cleaved between the before becoming an influencer and the after becoming an influencer, or before situation in the digital space versus after. Rick and Griff’s inchoate Instagram account hardly held the same level of popularity as its current account. The transformation in relation to a digital personalization and online dialogue also follows a linear temporality; users must first swipe for a curation of Tinder “Top Picks” just as one person must first initiate chat before a conversation can occur. All of these events are sequential, x always coming before y . Yet on the digital, the z that comes after the x and y is situated firmly in the future, nothing more than the promise of something to come. On the dating app, the x could be the beginning of the user’s swiping, the y could be a swipe on a “Top Pick” and the z could be the promise of a relationship with said swipe. But for McPherson, the digital “promises everything and changes nothing,” specifically relating to “the promise and feeling of choice, movement, and liveness [that] powerfully overdetermine its spaces.”⁸¹ This problem of the unfulfilled promise is crystallized on the space of the dating app, where the distorted versions of a homogenous queer future are assured at the very beginning but ultimately

⁸¹ Tara McPherson, “Reload: Liveness, mobility and the web,” in *The Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff (London: Routledge, 2002), 465.

never realized. Therefore, I return to the beginning – the dating app itself – to invert this queer future.

Queer Futures

One only needs to search for a dating app on the app store to understand the futurity that the founders of the app envision for their users: this becomes clear from the language used in their advertising material and on the app itself. The language on the advertising for the deck apps of Tinder and Bumble intended for both a straight and gay user base primarily personifies the app in an attempt to turn the virtual into a physical entity. Tinder encourages users to think of “us as your most dependable wingman – wherever you go, we’ll be there” and tells users, “Don’t be shy, come on over.”⁸² Interestingly, the language immediately genders the app as it refers to itself as a “wingman,” a military term for backup fighter pilots that “has been appropriated to refer to an accomplice who assists a designated leading man in meeting eligible single women, often at costs to his own ability to do the same.”⁸³ Tinder’s use of the term here only serves to reinforce normative modes of dating that are traditionally limited to heteroculture.⁸⁴ Tinder’s advertising material also tells users to remember, “When in doubt, Swipe Right. Trust us, the more options you have, the better-looking life becomes.” As I have discussed in previous chapters, the sheer number of profiles is exhausting, but Tinder promises the user that swiping *will* lead to options, that someone better is always around the corner. Bumble address the user as a coach or mentor, whose purpose is to encourage the user to take the first step to begin a

⁸² Tinder, Apple App Store, Vers. 10.10 (2019).

⁸³ David Grazian, *The Girl Hunt: Urban Nightlife and the Performance of Masculinity as Collective Activity.* *Symbolic Interaction* 30, no. 2.

⁸⁴ Grazian also writes, “In public rituals of courtship, the wingman serves multiple purposes: he provides validation of a leading man’s trustworthiness, eases the interaction between a single male friend and a larger group of women, serves as a source of distraction for the friend or friends of a more desirable target of affection, can be called on to confirm the wild (and frequently misleading) claims of his partner, and, perhaps most important, helps motivate his friends by building up their confidence,” thus describing the ways in which male heterosexual courtship rituals are a collective experience.

relationship. When users receive matches, messages appear: “You are in charge of the conversation”; “introduce yourself!”⁸⁵ The app’s gentle prodding and encouragement reflects how the promise of the app is strongly rooted in forming relationships. The relationship is not always a romantic one; on Bumble users can switch their setting from Bumble Date to Bumble BFF (people looking for friends) or Bumble Bizz (people looking to network for employment opportunities).⁸⁶ Yet the apps’ encouragement to create and maintain relationships forces users to become (unknowingly) active participants in a quest for transformation that benefits the app and ultimately leaves the user disappointed; the app wants to keep users engaged with their product and thus encourages them to swipe and swipe and swipe, hoping that the next person in the deck will be the one who makes their life better.

In a marked contrast to Tinder and Bumble, which advertise a long-term future, Grindr highlights the speed with which one can make connections. Grindr also markets itself as an app that creates connections between gay, bi, trans, and queer people, but rather than focus on the first moment of contact (Tinder or Bumble’s swipe), Grindr’s advertising hints at the potential outcome, stating: “Chat *and* meet with up with interesting people for free.”⁸⁷ The use of the word “and” in this sentence is telling; rather than structuring the sentence to connote potentiality (using the word “or” instead or replacing the “and” with a comma), the app immediately suggests that chatting guarantees or most likely will lead to a physical meeting. The app also places an emphasis on speed and the ease with which connections can form. We learn that “Grindr is *faster* and better than ever” before seeing a list of ten bullet points. Some of the bullets that follow are: “See people nearby based on your location,” “Send your location to make it easier to meet,”

⁸⁵ Bumble, Apple App Store, Vers. 3.29.0 (2019).

⁸⁶ The fact that Bumble encompasses three different modes – two pertaining to relationships, one pertaining to business – further reflects how the digital queerness and corporatization have become so intertwined.

⁸⁷ Grindr, Apple App Store, Vers. 5.5.2 (2019).

“More ways to quickly find what you’re looking for.” Another line reads, “*Within minutes* you’ll be ready to connect, chat, and meet.” The language of immediacy is reflected in the geo-location technology integral to the app’s function. As soon as a user opens Grindr on their phone, their profile is *immediately* situated on the entire grid. Here, we see McPherson's volitional mobility at work. By quickly and directly inserting users back into the app’s grid, Grindr “remembers where we’ve been even if we don’t.”⁸⁸ This situation makes us feel as if we are autonomous yet in reality, the app is the one to place us within the confines of the grid. The focus on the speed and ease with which one can connect with others is the closest Grindr comes to hinting at the quick and erotic meetings that the app often engenders.⁸⁹

In reality the experience of using these apps is one of disappointment and depletion, both in technological and affective terms. Shakka McGlotten teases out the app’s technological limitations in describing how quickly his phone battery depletes after cruising on Grindr. After a few hours of use, the battery is exhausted, in a “mechanical dissolution [that] can uncannily mirror the loss of intimacies – the phone numbers, photos, and memories that make these devices meaningful to us.”⁹⁰ The technological constraints of the app are also closely tethered to economical limitations that create further rifts between those with and without privilege. McGlotten explains: “without a wi-fi connection, being online means using a data plan, and these plans have become increasingly stingy.”⁹¹ The economic limitations of a data plan forces users

⁸⁸ Tara McPherson, “Reload: Liveness, mobility and the web,” in *The Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff (London: Routledge, 2002), 463.

⁸⁹ Interestingly, the app information for Grindr asserts that one must be 17 years or older to download the app, citing “Frequent/Intense Mature/Suggestive Themes.” The app information for Tinder includes the same content warning *in addition to* “Infrequent/Mild Sexual Content and Nudity.” Grindr may hint at the app’s sexual undertones, but it is much less explicit about its presence on the app.

⁹⁰ Shakka McGlotten, “On Not Hooking Up,” in *Virtual Intimacies: Media, Affect, and Queer Sociality* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2013), 126.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

into spaces that McGlotten calls “semi-private” such as “a café or bookstore with free wi-fi.”⁹²

The experience of using gay dating apps is thus a drain on energy and resources in more ways than one. Deeply threaded into the fabric of the app space, these moments of drain characterize the experiences of app users who oscillate between hope and disappointment as they realize that it really may not get better.

The temporal modality that characterizes the app space is best described by what Jose Muñoz refers to as “straight time,” or a future of “reproductive majoritarian heterosexuality.”⁹³ Muñoz describes the dangers that exist for people who retreat into this temporality, specifically in the ways in which it communicates to queer people that the present moment is the zenith of queer acceptance and progressiveness (when, as we have seen through the previous chapters of this thesis, it is not). Straight time promises a straight future that reinforces “reproductive majoritarian heterosexuality,” or what Muñoz calls “the spectacle of the state refurbishing its ranks through overt and subsidized acts of reproduction.”⁹⁴ In other words, straight futures are intrinsically tied to a social majority, leaving no room for those who fall outside the margins of this majority or choose not to participate in the normative reproductive practices implicitly dictated by the state. App time is straight time, in its normalizing efforts to fit queerness into a majoritarian regime. For example, on Instagram, straight time is advertised by gay influencers who post about their extravagant trips to Paris and domestic bliss. This assimilationist content is similar to the dating app space as well, where, as I have discussed in previous chapters, normative modes of being include the pressure to look the same, act the same, and follow the same path to domesticity. Here, the apps perpetuate “reproductive majoritarian heterosexuality”

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 22.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

while simultaneously claiming to be gay spaces, demonstrating how they are driven by straight time.

For Muñoz, the focus on the present is problematic because it prevents queer people from imagining the future in terms different from the present. The present, as he writes, is simply “not enough. It is impoverished and toxic for queers and other people who do not feel the privilege of majoritarian belonging, normative tastes, and ‘rational’ expectations.”⁹⁵ App time coercively emphasizes presentness: “this is going on.” As soon as a user opens Grindr, Tinder, or Bumble, they immediately enter the online space. For the entire time that they have the app open, the user is firmly placed in the present tense. On Grindr, this temporality is represented by the green “online” dot next to a user’s profile. An offline user is not located on the app and thus, does not register as present. But whenever a user opens the app, they are located in the presentness of online, as if they do not exist in the past or future. This temporality is similarly experienced on Instagram as well, where, like Grindr users, an online presence is marked by a green dot next to a profile. Even though users may be looking at a “throwback” picture on the digital space, they are still rigidly fixed in the present of the app space.

In order to break free from straight time, we must turn to other mediums that horizontally extend temporalities, an expansion that holds the potential to explode the linear modality of straight time. Muñoz argues that one should not just turn away from the present; instead, it “must be known in relation to the alternative temporal and spatial maps provided by a perception of past and future affective worlds.”⁹⁶ These alternative temporal and spatial maps allow us to reimagine queerness outside of the confines of straight time. Once queerness is elevated above the homogenization of straight time, it assumes a different kind of futurity, one that is utopian in

⁹⁵ Ibid. 27

⁹⁶ Ibid.

its imagining. Muñoz asserts the necessity of this temporal maneuvering, which is important to “wrest ourselves from the present’s stultifying hold, to know our queerness as a belonging in particularity that is not dictated or organized around the spirit of political impasse that characterizes the present.”⁹⁷ This political impasse is one that stems from the normalization of the heterosexual experience and should not, as Muñoz argues, be so heavily rooted in the queer experience. Our project then is to turn to places and spaces where this version of queerness – one that exists in an entirely different temporality – can be fully realized.

One such space where temporalities expand across the linearity of straight time is cinema, where different times overlap, including the times of what Francesco Casetti calls the “what” of cinema (its content) and its “how” (its medium). Today, it is possible to watch the entirety of a film on one’s cell phone, the very device for accessing dating apps that reinforce straight time. This experience layers another time-space – that of the film – on top of the time-space of the app (the movie takes up the entirety of the phone screen when playing and depicts an alternate present, past, or future). Already, by watching a film on a phone, viewers are immersed in layered and simultaneous temporalities. However, I do not need to be watching a film on my phone to experience the imbrication of multiple temporalities. Wherever I am watching a movie on my phone or laptop – whether in my bedroom, an airplane, or in some other public or common space – I am undeniably situated within the present; as I watch the film, the world continues to turn around me in the present moment. However, unlike and *despite* app time, which forces me to *only* exist actively in the present, cinema allows me to experience time in a more mobile and transformative way. I am simultaneously positioned in the present of my time-space *and* a future, a past, or an alternative present that occurs on the screen. The narrative of a film,

⁹⁷ Ibid. 28

while significant, is one facet of this expansion. The other is cinema's emotional potentiality, which can shape a modality that Muñoz refers to as "ecstatic time."

In describing the utopian possibilities of queer futures, Muñoz argues for seeing queerness as a horizon. To view queerness in this way, he writes is:

to perceive it as a modality of ecstatic time in which the temporal stranglehold that I describe as straight time is interrupted or stepped out of. Ecstatic time is signaled at the moment one feels ecstasy... and more importantly during moments of contemplation when one looks back at a scene from one's past, present, or future.⁹⁸

Muñoz is not writing about cinema, but for me, the cinematic medium exemplifies ecstatic time; not only does it stimulate emotions of ecstasy as I cheer when good things happen to the protagonist, gasp in awe at a gorgeously composed shot, or laugh at an outrageously funny scene, but it also allows me to project my own life onto the screen. This projection contributes to moments of contemplation; in moments of identification with the protagonist, I think about my own present life in the context of the alternate present, past, or future on the screen.

My experience of watching Barry Jenkins' 2016 film, *Moonlight* encapsulates cinema's melding of temporalities and stimulation of ecstatic time. As I recline in my dorm room, holding my phone close to my face, I watch the story of Chiron, a young black man growing up in Miami. As I watch the narrative split into the three chapters of Chiron's early life, focusing on the conflict between his burgeoning sexuality and the hyper-masculine landscape into which he is born, I am directed to think about how my life, in the comfort of my bed, diverges or aligns with Chiron's. Watching multiple temporalities unfold, I think about my past in relation to Chiron's past, my present in relation to Chiron's present, and my imagined future in relation to Chiron's imagined future. This is a feeling induced by the very narrative of the film, which

⁹⁸ Ibid. 32

exemplifies the way different times intersect with one another; its status as a coming-of-age narrative that centers on three distinct time periods in Chiron's life – his young childhood, his adolescence, and his young adulthood – demonstrates how the present intermingles with other temporalities at the same time. Each period of Chiron's life is separated by a black intertitle with the name of each "chapter" corresponding to the names that he was called in each stage of his life (Little, Chiron, Black). The idea of names is the through-line that intersects temporalities; each moment of Chiron's life on-screen refers back to names that he has been called in the past and will be called in the future.

The layering of temporalities becomes strikingly apparent in the final shots of the movie. Most of the events of the film's final chapter take place over the course of one day and night, with Chiron as a young adult going back to Miami to visit his mother at a drug treatment center. While he is in Miami, Chiron also goes to visit Kevin, Chiron's childhood friend with whom he had shared a sexual encounter many years ago. After an emotional visit, Chiron admits that he has not been intimate with anyone since that encounter. In the next shot, Kevin holds Chiron on his shoulder and gently strokes his head while the sound of the distant ocean echoes in the room. The sound of the waves serves as a sound bridge between this shot and the next one, which is of Chiron as a child standing in front of the ocean. The image is saturated with a cool blue tone and once the camera nears Chiron's back, the child turns, looks directly at the audience, and the film ends. This shot literally represents a merging of temporalities in that Chiron as a child immediately follows the final chapter's Chiron as a young adult. But I want to focus on the sound of the waves for a moment, as it represents the occasions in Chiron's life in which he has experienced ecstatic time for himself. In the first chapter, the drug dealer Juan takes Chiron under his wing. Juan is a father-figure to Chiron, exhibiting a kind of gentleness

and tenderness that Chiron does not experience from the other male figures in his life. In one sequence, Juan teaches Chiron to swim in the ocean. The camera is positioned right at the water level and watches Chiron enter the water with a mixture of apprehension and awe. Juan holds him gently and tells him, “I won’t let you go.” As waves lap over the camera, we see Chiron in a moment of beauty with Juan; he is held and supported in Juan’s arms, experiencing tenderness for the first time with a man. In the second chapter, Chiron’s moment of ecstatic time is crystallized in the ecstasy of an orgasm. In the sequence, Chiron and Kevin sit on the beach and watch the waves roll over the sand in the darkness. After talking for a little bit, Kevin leans in and kisses Chiron hesitantly. The kiss deepens and Kevin leans over and begins to masturbate Chiron. We see the two young men from the back and hear the waves crashing and Chiron’s groans of pleasure. Once again, Chiron experiences a moment of intimacy with another man. His moment of ecstasy is “announced...in a...grunt of pleasure.”⁹⁹ Each of these moments of ecstasy – Chiron learning to swim, Chiron kissing Kevin, and Chiron being held by Kevin – are connected by the sound of the waves and represent Chiron’s experience in ecstatic time.

Moonlight also allows me to experience ecstatic time through the affective quality of moments in the film, specifically in the shot between Chiron and Kevin at the movie’s conclusion. This shot and the subsequent beauty of the final shot of Chiron on the beach exemplifies an ecstatic time that allows viewers to see a queer horizon. The film does not end in happiness pure and simple, with Chiron coming to terms with his sexuality and happily spending the rest of his life with Kevin. Yet there is a feeling of completeness and an undeniable emotional impact that imbues the final moments of the film. The affective nature of this final scene induces moments of contemplation, as viewers ask themselves, “Why does this moment

⁹⁹ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 32.

have such an impact on me?" *Moonlight*'s final shots demonstrate cinema's potential to elevate queerness above linear straight time and to imagine a horizon which promises a futurity while encouraging a reflection on the past.

Cinema's ability to transcend straight time demonstrates that positive sites of queer futurity *can* exist on virtual spaces from the very beginning, or, the moment when one comes out in the virtual space. Although the culture of the dating app may not yet reach a positive impact similar to the one cinema creates, its potential is nonetheless significant. As we have seen, the virtual imagines different worlds that transcend spatiality and temporality. The interactions within these virtual spaces need to reflect these imagined worlds for their significance to be concretized. As cinema demonstrates, this is within the realm of possibility. If accomplished, the virtual has the potential to become loci of imagined queer worlds, where visions of a utopia can become a reality and where the future is inclusive, expansive, and truly queer.

Coda The After

I conclude with two more fragments.

First fragment: I delete Grindr and Tinder from my phone for the first time. I am in the middle of my freshman year of college and, fed up with the toxic behaviors of other users and my own loneliness, which the apps have done nothing to alleviate, I hold my finger over the two app icons until they start to shake, then X them out. Gone. A few months later, I re-download them, as many users do, but for a small amount of time, there are no dating apps on my phone.

Second: I am sitting in front of my computer at the kitchen table after watching *Call Me By Your Name* for the first time. It is late and the rest of my family is asleep upstairs so, illuminated by the blue light of the oven's digital clock, I sob quietly so that I do not wake them. My emotional response to the film surprises me; I have read the book from which the film was adapted so I already know how it was going to end. Yet there is something about *seeing* the relationship between two men develop and then collapse as they go their separate ways that that deeply affects me.

Each of these moments *created* something: a space and time that I call "the after," something that allows me to weather the difficulties of the present while imagining a free, queer future. The after is created when manifestations of queer worlds – physical and virtual – fall away. It appears the moment I delete the gay dating apps from my phone and when I close my computer at the conclusion of *Call Me By Your Name*. The after is the space of my phone screen that no longer holds the apps that once populated it and the space of my kitchen that no longer holds the intimacy pocket that the film created. It is also a temporal zone that is situated in the present but makes the past, something I call "the before," felt and in which a future is imagined.

When you, my reader, finish this thesis, perhaps you will similarly find yourself in the after, confronted with the question, “What has changed?”

As I have discussed, transformation characterizes the queer digital space. Apps like Grindr have, in the words of Shakka McGlotten, “become part of the texture of gay life, part of the media ecologies that shape our daily practices and desires, that transform how we think of ourselves and how we move through the world.”¹⁰⁰ But how do we move through the world in the after? When we delete the apps, walk out of the movie theater, close our computers – how does that transformation manifest? This is the subject of another thesis, to be sure, but in reflecting on what I have written here, I would like to posit that the transformation that McGlotten describes turns the body into a repository for the queerness experienced or absorbed in the before. In other words, *you* are the after.

You become the after by holding onto the queer ephemera left over from interactions in the before. Jose Muñoz describes this ephemera as “trace, the remains, the things that are left, hanging in the air like a rumor.”¹⁰¹ These queer, gestural ephemera can be virtual as well as physical. After the gesture expires, “its materiality has transformed into ephemera that are utterly necessary.”¹⁰² For Muñoz, ephemera are necessary because of how they transmit “knowledge of lost queer histories and possibilities within a phobic majoritarian public culture.”¹⁰³ The after contains these ephemeral traces, allowing us to simultaneously *feel* queer histories and possibilities and also *become* part of those histories as well. If you have interacted with any of the dating apps that I have explored throughout this thesis – Grindr, Tinder, Bumble, Scruff,

¹⁰⁰ Shakka McGlotten, “On Not Hooking Up,” in *Virtual Intimacies: Media, Affect, and Queer Sociality* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2013), 124.

¹⁰¹ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 65.

¹⁰² Ibid. 81

¹⁰³ Ibid. 67

Jack'd – you have existed within the app space – the before – and have left with queer ephemera that are now intrinsically part of you. The same is true if you have seen any of the films – *Love, Simon, Brokeback Mountain, Shortbus, Call Me By Your Name, Beach Rats, Moonlight*. And the same will be true as soon as you finish reading this thesis. The after is a space of possibility and self-reflection, induced by the queer ephemera that sticks to you at the end of things.

The ease with which the after is created is what makes it so generative. The simple action of watching a movie can induce the after. Even though the intimacy pocket has fallen away, its ephemeral traces are forever ingrained within the spectator or user. The significance of this parallels my process writing this thesis: what began as an exploration of the dating app became a description of why I love cinema. For me, cinema is powerful in its potential to create an intimacy pocket, to create a pedagogical framework for seeing queer potential in the darkest of virtual futures, to create a multiplicitous temporality, to create the after. In this creation, we are given access to pasts, presents, and futures, in turn queering our own conceptions of the world in which we live.

The after that you encounter after reaching the end of this page is not the only after you will experience in your lifetime. As new technologies and films are continually introduced, we find ourselves absorbing more and more ephemera. What we does with the queer ephemera we encounter is up to us. In a world where the experiences of queer people are erased, where sites of supposed community are anything but, the holding of this ephemera is all the more important. The after is a space of possibility and should be treated as such by taking risks and dreaming big. But it is also a space of responsibility where we are now made up of the queer histories that have stuck to us from the before. Deleting the dating apps from our phones, watching the credits scroll

at a movie's conclusion, reading the last sentence of this thesis: these are not endings, they are beginnings, new and radical in their potential.

Welcome to the after.

Appendix A

Installation Intent and Process

The following is a statement describing my choices and the process of creating the art installation that accompanies this thesis.

The goal of my art installation is to create an immersive experience which places viewers directly into the space of the phone, an integral part of the new media landscape that shapes our lives. The installation also visually contextualizes many of the themes, ideas, and subjects about which I have been researching and writing throughout this thesis process. At its very broadest, the installation is a literal attempt to queer the heteronormative public space through a projection of the digital sphere and a layering of virtual space on top of the physical. Throughout the day, the installation will move to various places on campus – McCaffrey Room in Keefe Campus Center, the classroom in Val Dining Hall, my suite in Jenkins Dormitory, Fayerweather 113, and a Frost Library study room – to parallel the movement of an app user on the Amherst College campus. While these locations are Amherst-specific, they signify the spaces a college student moves through the most; they are the places where one eat, sleeps, and studies. This installation attempts to queer these spaces for a day, allowing viewers to get a brief understanding of the power these digital spaces hold. Because the goal of the installation is to immerse viewers into the space of the phone, the video projection will literally play from my iPhone to lend a materiality to the digital.

The projection is split into three videos, or “chapters,” that will continuously loop. I call the first chapter “expectation.” The video opens with a screen recording of my own iPhone and does not fit the screen. The two black bars on either side of the image represent the presentation of pictures in Grindr, which appear with black bars on either side of the image. I scroll through the apps on my phone screen until I reach the dating app folder. As I open Grindr, the voice of

Dan Savage from the original “It Gets Better” video comes from a nearby speaker that will also be in the space. I deliberately refrained from putting sound and video into the same file to literalize the idea of “fragments”; I want to make it clear that the sound and image are two separate entities. The doorway transition between Grindr and the subsequent image emphasizes how when users open the app, they are literally in a different space. The images that follow are all profiles and pictures sent from real Grindr users and used with their consent. I decided to use real Grindr profiles to give the project a sense of authenticity and reality but also to encourage some form of recognition among viewers who may have used Grindr and recognize the kinds of images that are shared on the app. Each image is of the fragmented body, a concept that is further literalized through the gridded transitions between each image. The silence in which viewers can sit with these images is cut once in a while by audio from the “It Gets Better” video, in which Dan and Terry talk about their happy lives. This audio mirrors the feelings of potential that app users feel when joining the app. Near the end of the audio track, Dan’s voice skips and cuts out, hinting at what is actually in store for app users.

The second chapter, “reality,” utilizes the exact same video loop as the first chapter. Instead of positive discussions of community from Dan and Terry, the audio is clips of the racist, transphobic, body-shaming, and HIV-shaming messages real Grindr users have received. This audio comes from videos on Grindr’s YouTube page promoting their campaign, Kindr, that aims to combat these issues. Each video opens with Grindr users sharing the hateful messages that they have received. I use the audio in this loop to underscore its opposition to the first loop. Where the first loop represented the expectation that users have while downloading the app, the second loop represents the reality.

The final chapter is called “cinema.” As I discuss throughout my thesis, cinema positively manifests queerness in a way the dating app cannot. This final chapter has no audio; I want viewers to just sit with the beauty of images on the screen. The video begins with a screen-recording from my iPhone of me quitting out of the Grindr app to underscore that this loop is still taking place within the space of the phone. After quitting out of Grindr, I open Netflix, the streaming service that hosts hundreds of movies and television shows and is one of the places where cinema can be accessed on a cellular device. A transition of doors open onto scenes from Eliza Hittman’s *Beach Rats* (2018) and Barry Jenkins’ *Moonlight* (2016). The scenes I chose are moments of cinematic beauty and queer intimacy. In this loop, I hope to create a brief intimacy pocket with these moments, where queerness is literally projected into space. At the conclusion of this loop, the entire playlist loops again.

This installation went through numerous iterations before it ended up in its current form, specifically in the audio. I initially layered the audio from Dan and Terry, Grindr users, and from the movie scenes, so that it came together in a cacophony. However, after getting feedback from other people, I realized that this audio/visual onslaught did not allow viewers any moments of respite where they could just sit with the images. I had also thought about inviting viewers to move the projector around the room, paralleling the way in which phone users are constantly attached to their device. However, I realized that all of this tactility and movement was not giving the cinematic or Grindr images space to breathe and become intimacy pockets in their own rights. This final version is slowed down with moments of silence, where viewers can visually and aurally get a sense of our digital moment without becoming overwhelmed.

Appendix B

Artist Statement for the Public

The following is the statement for the viewers of my art installation. My goal is for viewers to have an affective experience and thus, I am intentional about the information I disclose about my own reasoning behind my choices.

This installation is an attempt to queer the dominant heteronormative public sphere through a layering of virtual space on top of a physical one.

The three video loops of this installation chart a gay dating app user's experience in our digital moment where the dating app and cinema can both be experienced in the space of our phone. The first two video loops include images from real Grindr users, used with their consent. These images are fragmented and anonymized bodies as they appear on the app. The audio in one loop is from the first video in the viral social media campaign, the "It Gets Better Project," in which queer people share stories about overcoming adversity. The audio in another loop is from actual Grindr users recounting the messages they have received on the app.

The final loop depicts scenes of queer intimacy and cinematic beauty from Eliza Hittman's 2018 film *Beach Rats* and Barry Jenkins' 2016 film *Moonlight*, scenes that project a pocket of queer intimacy into the space.

Throughout the day, this installation will move from Keefe Campus Center, to Valentine Dining Hall, to Jenkins Dormitory, to Fayerweather 113, and finally, to Frost Library.

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