

## **21 Years of Image & Nation: Legitimizing the Gaze**

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**Abstract:** As a means of activating the queer archive, this paper explores *image&nation's* imagination of itself through twenty-one years of festival guides. The guides serve as a tool for tracking the festival's development, shifting political positionings, and fluctuating commitments to a queer international and bilingual mandate. Having been launched prior to the internet, *image&nation's* humble beginnings were a labour of love, a response to an AIDS pandemic, and a rejoinder to and venue for feminist appropriation of video. Twenty-one years later, GLBT visibility and queer politics have entered new territory: has *image&nation* achieved its goal?

In November 2007, *image&nation* celebrated its twenty year anniversary as an international film festival. *image&nation* is the oldest and longest-running LGBT/queer film festival in Canada and the third-ranked festival in Québec in terms of attendance. [1] As one of many festivals part of a growing international circuit of film and video events, *image&nation* distinguishes itself through its bilingual GLBT/queer audience and international mandate. As such, it necessarily showcases marginal voices, and, in turn, serves to legitimize and normalize them. Over the course of the last twenty-one years, *image&nation* has undergone multifarious transformations in attempts to expand as a festival and adjust to the ever-changing political climate that positions queer culture within and against the mainstream. It has also had to adapt to the growth, and eventual decline, of the film industry.

As Gupta & Marchessault (2007) suggest, “over the last two decades, film festivals have emerged as important channels for the distribution and promotion of indigenous and mainstream media” (239). In the case of *image&nation* this has tended to be in the form of a shift *from* low-budget activist film-making *towards* a more polished, if not formulaic, product. This transformation invariably reflects both the production of queer films as a growing industry, and the festival’s attempt to construct itself as a legitimate and successful event within an international cinema circuit. The task to balance these two incentives—remaining true to the community from which it grew all the while aspiring for recognition in cinematic terms—is an incredibly difficult task to undertake and one that is all too easy to criticize.

By looking at *image&nation* as a case study of film festivals, we begin to understand that the very concept of a film festival is one that requires constant redefinition and reinvention. What speaks to the unique nature of the films presented within the context of *image&nation*? How does it appeal to a specific audience? Is it a niche market? How does it delimit what constitutes queer cinema? And, who comprises the queer audience? Festivals are ephemeral events, despite their recurrent nature. In the case of *image&nation*, the trace it leaves behind is first and foremost through films and videos, but it also lives on through the festival guides, the media attention it garnered, film reviews and promotional materials,

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newspapers, (and more recently) online, archival artifacts (media passes, ticket stubs, etc.), administrative documents, and most affectively perhaps, through the collective memory of its audience.

Given its elusive nature and structure, I approach this research project based on the festival's imagination of itself. Specifically, I look to the program festival film guides from 1988-2008 in order to track its changing imagination and commitment to social change. Looking to the festival's political engagements as afforded first by and through cinema—as a medium and activity—I take into consideration the way the festival managed and balanced a bilingual and international mandate as the festival became more popular, as well as its links to community activist groups. Methodologically speaking, I rely on archival traces that promote and reflect a particular, yet changing, history of LGBT/queer identity in a Québécois context. I begin the paper with this methodological note. Following this, and supplemented by interviews with current and past programmers (Charlie Boudreau, Anne Golden) and a translator (Gabriel Chagnon), as well as scholarly writing on “New Queer Cinema” (Rich 1992; Waugh 2006; Pidduck 1990[2003]; 2004), I explore the festival's ongoing quest for legitimacy as a film festival and its position as a site of queer resistance, rooted in 1980's AIDS film and video activism, and feminist home-made erotica.

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Program guides offer a particular entry point into studying cinema and film culture. [2] As I briefly outline here, reflecting on the methodological particularities of using program guides to study social phenomena—in this case LGBT/queer festivals—allows for and demands an exacting dissection of various elements surrounding the organization of film festivals. As their most basic function, program guides make information about the films and programs within a particular festival available to its public(s). However, the length of the film descriptions, the choice of words, the tone, and the placement of these descriptions within the guide, or within certain programs, all potentially tell us something about the nature of the film, the festival and its audience. The cover images also reveal a shifting aesthetic: the drastic changes in design in

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terms of colour, layout of information, cover image or images, size and format. And, needless to say, the films themselves also reveal a shifting aesthetic, though that assessment is well beyond the scope of this paper. The guides thus provide an interesting lens through which to explore how the festival promotes itself, how films are scheduled and organized for viewers, how the festival has been named and how it renames itself year after year depending on language politics, which venues are used for screenings, who sponsors the events, and which themes surfaced throughout the last twenty-one years. [3]

That said, because the festival aims, at least in theory, to attract a wide audience, the write-ups are typically meant to entice rather than offer any sort of critical engagement of the films. Program guides, then, can be used in research to determine the relationship between the festival, which arguably works to vehicle of a particular cultural formation or community, and its intended audience, who both shape and are shaped by this exchange. Ultimately, the festival program guides inform the festival's representation of itself—if not an ideal self, a self that is politically, historically and socially constituted.

As the festival became more popular throughout the nineties, and its budget increased, so too did its promotion, overall visibility and reach. As such, recent years allow for a more visible trace and assessment of the festival's movement, enriched by online sources including both the festival's own online archive, and the news coverage it inspired. Considering the various offshoots that constitute the festival's public memory, these guides provide only a limited representation of the festival, however unique and particular their vantage point may be.

The guides are made available prior to and during the festival, and as such, do not account for changes in programming, or audience demographics or reactions, among other things. Furthermore, they cannot provide feedback or clues about reception, they explicate neither curatorial decisions nor selection process, nor detail the films that were submitted but not included, and they do not (/cannot) reflect moments of elation, uproar or controversy, triggered by the

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programming of specific films. [4] A closer look at the guides also reveals inconsistencies in the festival's titles; its subtitle has changed every year except for the last three: currently going with "Montréal International LGBT Film Festival". This newfound "stability" may reveal a hard-earned consensus over three specific matters: the tension between cinema, film and video, the difficulties of bilingual labels, and the never-ending inclusion/definition game of identity politics. As stated by Marc Siegel (1997), "the identity that one affirms upon entering the festival can [...] become redefined to include not merely a different relation to race, gender, or sexuality, but to cinema as well" (133). Cinema, then, as a venue and activity, constitutes an important site for exploring the complexities of language, representation and membership in relation to queer identity formation.

Both the affordances and limitations of the guides as a tool for research constitute a rich body of ideas that make up public and archival memory of the festival - however fragmented and idealized. The festival itself, despite various transformations, remains an event (in time and place) and becomes a point of reference in bilingual Canadian LGBT/queer culture.

The way I analyze the program guides in this paper is by looking closely at the festival's editorial page, normally located within the first few pages of the guides. These guides outline the festival's goals by often referring to its past successes and failures, its links to community activism and the broader social and political climate around LGBT issues. The guides also offer an interesting entry point into the issue of bilingualism that remains so central to the Québécois context. I use these editorial pages to contextualize the festival's growth, its quest for legitimacy as a film festival, and its involvement in the fight for gay and lesbian rights. I argue that from its undeniable roots in tactical AIDS activism to the so-called post self-loathing stage of "New Queer Cinema," the festival's current conception of itself straddles the available categories of "niche market" and "post-queer," failing to properly acknowledge the complexity of the festival's current liminality.

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*image&nation* had very modest beginning. The effects of AIDS on gay and lesbian communities—and in particular their responses to the epidemic—motivated the production of hundreds of films and videos, thus fuelling a large part of the festival's first few years of programming. Launched by *Diffusions Gaies et Lesbiennes du Québec*, “Le SIDA et les médias/Aids and the Media” was one of the central themes of the first *image&nation* (1988), which served as an important historical landmark for the festival. Regarding the films, various shorts from Belgium and France were balanced in large part by American productions, ensuring a relatively even distribution of French-English content.

Importantly, *image&nation* screened activist videos—“highly visible protest tactics” -- influenced by work coming out of New York from video AIDS activists groups (like *Testing the Limits Collective*) and feminist collectives involved in the struggle (Pidduck 1990[2003], p.269). These works presented often collaboratively-made shorts, testimonial documentaries, safer sex films and PSA-style (public service announcement) films, in particular. The politics and aesthetics of these works are, in a sense, quick and dirty responses to the urgency of the events unraveling—sometimes known as “zapping” practices—which placed the emphasis of video on immediate impact, over originality or authorship. [5] These tactics also meant appropriating mainstream media to make a statement, which was both a means of engaging with the realities of oppression and, perhaps, the beginning of a queer genre of filmmaking (or a queer sensibility). As the festival co-organizer in the early years, Golden recalls:

When I first began at the festival, it was not easy to find films and videos to present. No internet, no festival circuit, no explosion of queer production. (Faxes anyone? Telegrams?) It started to become easier to research films as of 1990-1991, when a festival circuit began and exchanges occurred between festivals in different cities. All these people who were not filmmakers[...] it was their films that would play at the festival. They were testimonies and journals. It was absolutely

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fantastic. I was blown away by this explosion in video and film. (Golden, *personal interview*, 2008)

AIDS remained a central theme at *image&nation* into the early '90s, which further highlighted the close relationship between the festival's programs and the political climate of gay and lesbian communities, locally and internationally. This sense of community—a group fighting against the seeming inaction of the Québec government toward the AIDS crisis—may have called for and witnessed a more unified gay and lesbian audience than the festival's later years.

As such, *image&nation* constructed itself as a politically-engaged festival, drawing attention to the potential of film/video—and the festival in particular for its ability to mobilize large groups—to enact social change based on collective identities, or more precisely, collective oppressions. To this effect, Martha Gever suggests that the festival is a 'queer public sphere' where identities are forged as "ordinary, outrageous, ambivalent" (Gever in Pidduck, 2004, 89) and that identity itself—or the ability to name oneself—is an important first step in effecting political change. Emphasizing "identity" in a round-table discussion entitled "representation, responsibility and moveable merging" (*image&nation program guide*, 1990), the festival promoted AIDS documentaries on the one hand, and on the other, boasted Québec "firsts," as the early markings of a *true* festival of cinema. The role of queer cinema in promoting social change in a Québécois context, however, meant focusing on, and potentially (re)defining, sexuality and gender norms within and beyond the confines of what was made available in the two "official" languages. Golden, a volunteer in the early '90s, remembers the recurring criticism regarding the lack of francophone films, due in part to the overwhelming outpouring of American productions feeding the festival's content. [6] Golden recalls the precarious tasks of hand-picking a selection of films from France, made by lesbians, in order to respond to this lack. But as experimental structuralist films, having little or nothing to do with issues of lesbian representation, Golden's selection of films may or may not have responded to the needs of *image&nation*'s audiences at the time, as the dearth of images with which to identify may

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have called for more overt and obvious lesbian depictions. While these early program guides seem to equate sexuality with visibility on the screen, later narratives attempt to broaden the definition by distancing the body from identity. This distance, as I will argue, has also contributed to the festival's imagination of itself as a "legitimate" film festival.

Legitimacy is a key point in my analysis as it is often pitted against queer politics in favour of mainstream gay and lesbian politics, against the diverse queer experience in favour of 'pink money'. However, I propose that queer cinema exists not to resolve this problem/binary/tension, but to maintain a kind of paradox, for which both 'ends' are continually reconstituting themselves in relation to an imagined 'opposition'. Perhaps this is best explained rhetorically through Rich's question: "how can a marriage between the popular and the radical be sustained when such an association erodes the very meaning of each?" (2004, 19) However impossible it seemed in the early '90s, *image&nation* embodies this marriage of radical and popular in that it actually occupies many discursive and physical spaces simultaneously, as I continue to outline here.

From the onset, *image&nation* featured films that carved-out an aggressively self-aware and subversive queer identity, with entire programs dedicated to video art addressing the potentials and possibilities of celebratory sex through home-made erotic shorts. These shorts (self-)presented the queer subject as "outlaw" and as "vampire," because after all, the festival took pride in "videos and films that disturb, stimulate and encourage" (*image&nation program guide*, 1990). Because AIDS video activism brought queer sex to the forefront of queer identity, sex itself was being explored through explicit sexual imagery and erotica. Golden recalls the risky nature of this programming at early festivals:

I remember Chris Martin and I did a program that was [...] well[...] it's not hardcore by today's standards[...] but we called it the 'Contextualization Program.' You wouldn't name something like that now! We actually thought there might be some sort of uprising! We did have films or entire programs that were

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disliked and we knew it [...] (Golden, *personal interview*, 2008).

So while porn left most gay men morally unscathed, lesbian porn was (and remains) a relatively limited phenomenon. According to Pidduck, “explicit home-made sexual imagery has been especially risky and important for lesbians,” because, she argues, lesbian “sexuality has historically been either erased or appropriated for heterosexual male fantasies” (1990[2003], p.272). The divided feminist reaction to these works—sex positive vs. anti-porn—saw the emergence of another type of lesbian video project; the documentation of live performances and workshops that every so often addressed directly the feminist/misogynist porn debate. Interestingly, through *image&nation* these more conservative works conceded, in the '90s, to a distinctively pro-sex iconography for lesbians, exploring leather, sex toys, role-playing and S/M, and raising important questions around the role of cinema in relation to identification, or more precisely, embodiment (*Drawing the Line*, Boschman, 1992; *Thank God I'm a lesbian*, Colbert and Cardona, 1992). Identification and embodiment are especially troubled in a sexualized context—where the personal is made political by virtue of its exposure. Perhaps it is the nature of these images that pushed the debate of representation to its affective peaks: if these were graphic images of the queer body for the queer audience, they had better be recognizable as such. This era—nudged on to the emerging New Queer Cinema of the early '90s—saw the emphasis shift from simply naming the *queer subject* to naming *queer cinema*.

The festival's identity crisis is highlighted here, as long-time festival organizer, Charlie Boudreau, explains her attempt in the mid-'90s to rectify the inclusion problem by altogether removing the queer signifiers in the festival title:

I took away “gais et lesbiennes.” At the time I didn't feel it was representative. It was also the time of “queer”—I like the notion of it. It's a mentality. Can we please not be defined by our sexual practices? It's a sad way to see a human being! Maybe ten years ago, it was more

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“queer” because friends of mine who were “straight” came. There was more of a mix. Now we’re the LGBT festival, but I don’t know what to tell you. I’m trying to move away from labels, and we keep adding labels (Boudreau, *personal interview*, 2008).

The reappropriation of the epithet ‘queer’, according to Pidduck, “is a conscious political strategy that rhymes with an aesthetics that celebrate the ‘abject’, the criminal, the underworld of queer desire” (2004, 279). But as Boudreau’s quote suggests, using the term ‘queer’ remains problematic. For one, “queer” has a distinctively Anglophone attachment, and while its circulation in academia has managed to navigate somewhat across language barriers, its popular use remains predominantly Anglophone, and perhaps appeals more generally to a generation for which it was never a direct assault. There are also political attachments to the word—implying a radical turn, a re-appropriation, and revenge of sorts. Thus, while one can presume the *image&nation* audience to be predominantly GLBT or queer-identified, this same label is more difficultly applied to film and video. Can film and video take on such an affective and embodied term to define itself (as presumably the festival has had to)? What makes a work queer: its creator(s), the content, the context of screening? What does this newfound distance from or rejection of the GLBT labels imply? Does it risk dividing the community further along language lines? And what is more implicitly queer about being “undefined,” as Boudreau insinuates? While the answer to the first set of questions may be partially elucidated by the guides, the latter remains at the crux of the festival’s ongoing identity crisis, which may never be solidified as its audience(s) and films constantly renegotiate and redefine the movement and its representation.

What makes a work queer, or how the tensions of this category have played out, is well illustrated in the example of Midi Onodera’s 1985, *Ten Cents a Dance (Parallax)*, screened at *image&nation* in 1989. [7] Onodera’s film was an experimental structuralist film. In three parts, it depicts a lesbian couple, a sex scene between two gay men in a bathroom stall, and a phone sex sequence. In conversation,

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past organizer Anne Golden and festival translator Gabriel Chagnon explain the film's impact on the lesbian community in the late '80s:

The film got shown in festivals that were more experimental or non-narrative. And then it got picked up by gay and lesbian film festivals because Midi herself is a lesbian [...] we showed it, San Francisco showed it [...] but here it provoked. People stormed out [...] they wanted to stop the screening. This film traveled around the world as a "lesbian film", and really people should have been saying this film is an experimental structuralist film by a lesbian director! But it somehow got skewed. Midi went everywhere with that film and confronted all kinds of hostility. (Golden and Chagnon, *personal interview*, 2008)

The memory of angry feminist-lesbian audience reacting strongly to the way they were represented in various films, as rare as they were in the early years, is key in understanding the trajectory and accessibility of lesbian films, and the festival as a site of resistance. Golden suggests that these outbursts were part of the structure of early festival organizing (into the early '90s), "for an hour-long screening, we had a four-hour long discussion" (*personal interview*, 2008).

These forums, which were conceived as much for audience members to vent their frustrations as to provide an open space for discussion, highlighted the importance of images for the queer community, and lesbians in particular. Chagnon reminisces, "There was such scarcity of images, for all kinds of "us", all kinds of colours, classes[...] so we had to watch *Desert Hearts*, two [*white*] Bourgeois ladies [*who*] had nothing to do with us!" and adds that, "because of this scarcity, the images became intensely scrutinized. The intensity with which the audience invested themselves with the viewing is not seen today" (*personal interview*, 2008). So while images, in an almost unabashed quest for positive representation over diversity of modalities, failed to "represent," audiences were formulating their desires to identify with the screen, and perhaps, putting into words for the first time, the importance of

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the shared viewing experience that both relied on and challenged its feminist framework (Waugh, 2006). What remains unsure is whether or not lesbian/feminist cinema has had the power (and responsibility) to change what Pidduck, borrowing from deLauretis (1991), calls “the conditions of lesbian visibility” (1990[2003], p.280).

In the early program guides, the role of the film/video artist is speculated upon, as it appears to be necessarily tactical, a tool for queer activism. Situating itself as a venue through which to *question* rather than *represent* queer bodies and queer lives by re-appropriating realities too often thwarted in the mainstream, the “festival is there to raise questions rather than to bring answers or to propose an aesthetic, a vision or representation—we believe in respect of difference in difference” (*image&nation program guide*, 1990). However, this admittedly diverse voice also points to the difficulties of defining community and cause: “if someone asks for quick, neat definition of what/how we are and how/ we are/were perceived in the films and videos careening through this festival, we say ‘don’t even try it’” (1990, *image&nation program guide*). The urgency and consistency with which the festival rejects the notion of a static identity nonetheless informs its paradoxical (re)presentation: on the one hand battling out negative stereotypes and making “queer” visible, on the other hand refusing to delimit itself, or its function, or its audience, perhaps to counter the fact that being defined in the mainstream had up until then meant being made “other.” Or, perhaps naming what constitutes ‘visibility’ is more a question of the interplay of allegiances, complexities of understanding oneself as a sexual subject primarily, and identifying with both the audience and the images on screen.

This problem of naming and of being defined is central to queer identity, which the festival necessarily continues to take on especially as Golden, and later Boudreau, address, through the program guides, a distinct lesbian audience, further divided along language lines. The separate addresses—to men and women, the francophones and to anglophones—appeared in the guides until 1995, at which point the texts became co-written by the organizers and directly translated, from French to English. Despite the joining of the audiences in text, the audiences remain largely

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segregated along gender and language lines (though Boudreau asserts that language differences are more of a divisive factor in the lesbian community). As a translator, Chagnon believes the synopses would be more accurate and dynamic were they written in their (original?) languages as they were in the early days of the festival “because when you translate a synopsis without having seen the work, the result is inevitably of lesser quality, less “alive” and the risk of [*making*] mistakes is higher” (*personal correspondence*, 2009). [8] As such, language politics effectively play into the historical accuracy of the festival’s textual memory.

As an international bilingual festival for both gays and lesbians (and bisexuals and trans folks, though not explicitly mentioned in the title), this “unity” serves a key purpose and points to the importance of queer politics as they extend to outside of the theatre. While the film festival caters to different audiences, it is possible (actually, more than likely) that without the joint effort, women would have no festival. This is speculative, of course, but attendance and film production attest to the imbalance in numbers between genders—as Boudreau recalls, men consistently sell out large theatres, constitute 90% of the target of ads in the guides, and purchase special passes ahead of time, while women continue to come out in modest numbers. Boudreau notes, “The guys get the Imperial and the girls get the little theatre [...] they can’t even fill that. That was a business decision. It stopped making sense to be ‘equal.’ The boys screenings were sold out three times and the girls are like 100 in a 600 people theatre” (Boudreau, *personal interview*, 2008). Arguably, and perhaps even more speculatively, the festival is richer for this diversity—that women rely on the “male dollar”, but that in return, the festival can function as a more diverse and inclusive political platform. However, Boudreau laments this division as a failure of the festival in relation to a broader queer movement:

A sad thing about the audience is that [...] there are very few women in men’s screenings and vice versa [...] I think it’s problematic to not go see a film because it’s a good film, that is, to only need to see yourself. [...] A festival should be more of

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a 'cinophile thing' than a 'social thing.' It's still too stuck with the social. If you are always catering to the lowest common denominator, you are not doing well. (Boudreau, *personal interview*, 2008)

As Boudreau describes, there is an intricate weaving of identity politics to queer representation, both challenged and subsumed in cinematic discourse. Seeking legitimacy in making *image&nation* "about film," distances the festival from what is arguably at its core: a diversity of underrepresented and marginalized queer identities, bodies, and ideas. In other words, *image&nation* becomes increasingly positioned as a legitimate film festival, for what it is and what it stands against, and in particular, by denying the affective qualities of representation within a queer context—both in the narratives on screen, and the shared spectatorship experience: "I don't go see myself at the movies, I go for the story. I want to be embraced by an image and words for an hour and a half and leave the world and fall into someone else's mind" (Boudreau, *personal interview*, 2008). Richard Dyer describes this utopian impulse, as a "craving for the 'image of "something better" to escape into," as something outside our day-to-day (Dyer, 1992, 18). The idea of identifying with, or against, the screen as a means to extend one's own experience is not by any means specific to queer film and video; quite contrarily, it is at the heart of why people enjoy going to the movies, beyond the appreciation of film craftsmanship and aesthetic considerations.

Boudreau also highlights the difficulty of situating the body-social relationship (Morris 1998[2001]), i.e. the personal within the political or subscribing to the feminist idiom that the personal is, in fact, political[9]. Seemingly aware of this, the festival often refers to more conventional forms of activism: from community groups to government lobbying. *image&nation* in the early '90s, was connected to and connecting with the revival of community activism through DiversCité and the creation of the lobbyist group, *Table de concertation des lesbiennes et des gais du grand Montréal*. 1992 saw the revisiting of *Clause 10* of the *Quebec Charter of Rights*, through hearings with the *Commission des droits de la*

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*personne*, which aimed at making gays and lesbians full and equal citizens under the eyes of the law. The 1993 program guide states, to this effect, an invitation to queer activism: “Please represent yourselves and your communities by supporting this effort and contact your Provincial representative and sign the Petition circulating during the Festival”(3). As gays and lesbians gained legal rights, films began to reflect a more expressly diverse range of topics and subjectivities, moving away from the confessional genre to representing life in narrative, fictional form.

However undefined, the early to mid-'90s festivals mandate saw the notion of diversity take consciousness around gender issues, and marked the passing of AIDS as its single most pressing issue, from which Rich (1992) coined “New Queer Cinema,” (NQC) (Pidduck, 1990[2003]; Pearl, 2004; Waugh, 2006). *image&nation's* 1994 festival showcased the now infamous *Go Fish* (Rose Troche, 1994). The film's popularity, and its place as *image&nation's* 1994 opening film, may have been an indication of the festival's (and broader community's) queer politics in the mid-1990s: “the film is neither a coming out story nor an excruciating drama about recognition and loss [...], but a buoyant, urbane depiction of a few weeks in the lives of a dozen or so avowed young dykes gathered together in the early 1990s lesbian scene” (Henderson, 1999, 40). In its somewhat utopian and shared portrayal of lesbian lives (in a North American context, at least), the film merges lived experience with an idealized version of one's community through the common Hollywood romantic comedy genre. *Go Fish* also marked the festival's first feature full-length film for a lesbian audience. Here, the relationship between queer cinema and identities surfaces: “the lesbian program used to be overwhelmingly made up of short works. In fact, the first few years were relatively hard to program because of the marked lack of films and videos made by dykes,” the guide states, “this festival literally grew up with the explosion of lesbian-made images; allowing us to go from an event that showed the odd feature to this year's 18 feature length film” (Boudreau and Golden, *image&nation program guide*, 1995, 7). [10] While a new kind of “lesbian sensibility” surfaced here, to borrow from Rich (1992), video—for its accessibility—is what put women on the (queer film festival) map, though she questions whether video will ever achieve the

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status reserved for film.

The ten year anniversary edition in 1997 celebrates the festival's position as a cultural institution and situates it as a renown international event and as the most important of its kind in Canada: "in honour of our 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary, we will take the time to look back at the decade, to explore the trends, styles and representational strategies employed by media artists as well as the parallel changes within both popular culture and in our queer cultural communities" (Charlie Boudreau, Yves Lafontaine, Katharine Setzer, *image&nation program guide*, 1997, 10). Interestingly, the use of "strategies" to describe filmmakers' work implies a purposeful and intentional activist stance, alluding vaguely to having an end in sight, or a community-driven goal for determining the ways in which queers should be perceived, inside and out of the festival context. 1997 was the year that the festival became sponsored by Famous Players, allowing *image&nation* to expand their audience by increasing their number of films and of venues (as well as the number of seats in these venues). [11] Needless to say, mainstream venues and feature length films amount to a more conventional conception of the film festival, finally gaining momentum to expand in size and reach.

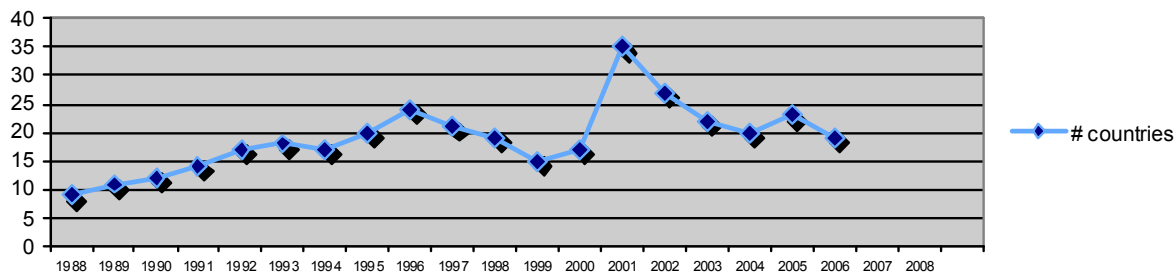
The years following the decade celebration of queer films at *image&nation* saw an increase in corporate sponsorship of the festival, with its Bell Mobility's "audience choice awards," for example, [12] as well as a more overt sense of entitlement to and empowerment of a collective queer identity. The 1999 guide states, "these productions are truly essential and this celluloid affirmation of our sexualities, our identities and of course our egos has been a welcomed and treasured treat," and boasts, "representations of queerness are truly headed for world domination" (*image&nation program guide*, 1999, 5). Ironic in tone, this guide is the first to frame queer identities in an unapologetic and humorous manner, subverting the usual references of gayness to homophobia, AIDS and suicide, among other topics—which Rich conceived of, though much earlier, in the NQC.

Also, further emphasizing the international appeal of queerness in relationship to a "uniquely Québécois and Canadian perspective," (5) the festival claims this era to be the

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most politically and culturally diverse of its history. Arguably, links between the festival's legitimacy, its expansion and corporate sponsorship, is reflected in its representation of itself as an 'international' festival affording a diversity of representation—juggling not only gay and lesbian (bi, trans) films and audiences, but appealing to cultural communities, too.



As depicted in the graph above, the number of countries from which films are submitted represents the festival's international scope over time.

According to queer film theorist, Ger Zielinski (2006), discussing gay and lesbian film festivals is “a challenging linguistic task” (1). The quest for the perfect community umbrella term—which ‘queer’ attempted to be—resulted in an alphabet-soup acronym, with letters being endlessly tacked on for inclusion. What was once representative of gay, lesbian, and later bisexual (GLB), soon grew to include transsexual (T), transgender (another T), two-spirited (2S), questioning (Q), asexual (A), ally, (another A), queer (another Q), with new identity formations continually sprouting up. The result is often a long acronym, self-defeating in terms of the simplicity it means to provide: GLBTT2SQAQetc. *image&nation* guides vacillate between gay and lesbian, and queer, though the festival's respect for bilingualism contributes to this instability of categorizations. Additionally, in 2000, the festival adopted, a graphic “+” symbol, replacing the “&”, which completed the *image et nation* in French, and *image and nation* in English. For Golden, having worked on the festival in the early days, this also proves very symbolically, an important “barometer of change”, in as much as the festival's original title has forever given way to a new, designer-ly designation, which is further

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reflected in the new dimensions of the guides—becoming smaller and thicker booklets. [13]

Tracking title changes in the guides offers an interesting genealogy of the festival, its attempts at both defining itself as queer and distancing itself from identity politics in favour of a focus on cinema. Prior to 1999, the program guides associate *image&nation* with “gay and lesbian,” and post-2000, “gay and lesbian” is linked, rather, to cinema. This is a subtle shift, but an intentional one, as gleaned from the guides. In clearer terms, the GL signifier shifts from its association with the festival to an association with the films presented, arguably distancing the label from the audience onto the content of films, from the real (festival-goers) to the virtual (on-screen representations). In 2004, “gay and lesbian” became “LGBT”, and though “queer” appears nowhere on the program guide covers, it is used in both French and English introductory texts (post-2000).

In the program guide of the 14<sup>th</sup> edition of the festival, the festival describes itself as having reached “maturity”—using the metaphor of a teenage boy breaking from his know-it-all-ness to becoming a rebel. The guide states that GLBT filmmakers are “beginning to look beyond affirmation of our sexual identities on the screen and instead are exploring the multiple aspects and influences in our lives” (Katharine Setzer, *image&nation program guide*, 2001, 5). However vague these “aspects and influences” may be, the festival’s representation of itself and its subjects shifts queer identity away from ideas of sex/sexuality proper, proposing instead a broader exploration of what identity might entail—location, education, class, race, religion, etc. However utopian (or dystopian?) the idea of having a queer or GLBT film festival that does not centre on questions of sexuality and gender (as Boudreau’s earlier quote points to), it necessarily distances the festival from the bodies that inhabit it, off and on screen. So, while rejecting labels (or re-appropriating or reclaiming them) became a useful tool for empowerment, denying the very constituency of the festival raises, in my opinion, serious issues about the festival’s priorities. Countering their own views on the issue, the following year, director of programming, Setzer writes: “this year’s programming reminds

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us that filmmaking is a tool: a tool of freedom, of identification and of recognition. A tool with the power to both educate and to wildly entertain" (*image&nation program guide*, 2001, 5). Queer cinema finds again, after a brief overlay, its status as both place and tool of resistance, however different this resistance may have been from the festival's early days. Boudreau writes to this effect: "renewing and rearticulating how we see ourselves, again this year, legions of emerging and established filmmakers challenge us with provocative and forward-looking perspectives on what it means to be queer in 2005" (Setzer, *image&nation program guide*, 15, 2005). Creating a culture to call one's own, to identify with and appeal to, suggest that the goal set out in 1987, however unclear or undefined at the time, may have been met: "giving evidence to the fact that what were hopeful whispers about the emergence of a queer cinema culture in 1987, today is a full-blown discourse", creating, "a vibrant cinema culture of our own" (Setzer, *image&nation program guide*, 2007, 13). The goal of queer activism in cinema may not be simply a matter of gaining equality through social and legal reform, not to be "equal", "accepted" or "tolerated", but to exist, differently and diversely, to expand and redefine ourselves, and yet to persist through these changes through paradoxical positionings: "collective identities" with "collective memories". What stands out in these guides, as I have demonstrated so far, is the festival's tendency to distance itself from the embodied queer subject, while simultaneously legitimizing itself as a film festival *about* the queer subject, thus privileging queerness as a cinematic theme over the queer cinematic experience.

The queer film festival, having grown out of a need for queer (self-) representation, remains a site of resistance in so much as it allows a predominantly queer audience the freedom from this marginal position, and/or the distance to critically engage with issues around representation. As a (queer) habitus, the cinematic experience accounts for embodied experiences through queer spectatorship, and is always positioned against *and* within a larger heteronormative context. That said, it would be an overstatement to imply that all films featured at *image&nation* are in and of themselves counter-normative. Or, that there are no queer films outside of queer film festival circuits. In fact, as Boudreau declares, the ambiguity of the queer festival remains for both creators and

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audiences: there has been a growing trend by queer filmmakers to feel more accomplished as artists by showing their work outside of the queer film festival context as if to imply that queer audiences are a niche market defined exclusively by topics relating to sex, sexuality, and gender, and more importantly, that this is no longer a sufficient, important, or necessary window through which to present work. Perhaps the most flagrant example of this is the one alluded to in the 2008 festival guide, where Setzer and Boudreau write of their disappointment and frustration when *image&nation* was turned down from showing the “gay-written and gay-directed” film about “a gay man who dedicated his life to the recognition of queer equal rights” (2008, 13). While Boudreau and Setzer refrain from naming the film, they are referring to *Milk*, which has since received eight Academy Award nominations. [14] Apparently, screening in queer venues was not part of *Milk*’s “release strategy,” which is an insult to Boudreau, Setzer, and the *image&nation* community at large, who for more than two decades have ensured and encouraged a place for queer cinema to be showcased and accessed, rooted itself in political struggle. In continuing their metaphor with the body, in 2008, *image&nation* reaches the age of majority, it is simultaneously old and young, reflective on two decades of struggle and eager to explore newfound possibilities.

\* \* \*

A careful exploration of *image&nation*’s trajectory demonstrates that terms like “resistance” and “legitimacy” are not givens, and cannot be simply measured against one another. Nor, more importantly, can queer resistance be understood only as a thing of the past, or in terms of the AIDS crisis, overt homophobia and violence, or feminist struggles against misogyny, representations of disability, racism on and off screen, and so on. Resistance, as a concept, presents new opportunities for looking at queer culture as acquiring its due recognition, preserving a distinct queer culture, and allowing for queer culture to be dynamic all the while retaining a political function as made obvious in the festival’s political trajectory. This should be done, as it has been through *image&nation*, by paying tribute to past struggles, celebrating victories, and acknowledging that some parts of the world are

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indeed, a better and safer place for gays and lesbians than they were 20 years ago. However, to have an oversimplified, if not nostalgic view of resistance, in my opinion, undermines both the work left to be done, and the power of cinematic images to continue to shape and reflect diversity in flux.

As shown in this paper, in the festival context, legitimacy implies “quality” through a capacity to find and showcase rare films, to promote artists’ work, feature “firsts”, reward filmmakers with prizes and awards, and to present works in a manner that appeals to cinephiles and cultural theorists more broadly. Unlike queer festivals, like MixNYC, [15] for example, that attempt to dismantle the GLBT festival apparatus by opting, instead, for underground avant-garde works, often highly erotic and abject in nature, *image&nation*’s trajectory suggests a move from showing strictly “provocative” works of these kinds, to include feature films, often from big production studios in the United States. In this sense, the quest for legitimacy seems to be equated, at least in part, to its capacity to show big budget works on the queer film festival circuit.

Thwarting the object/abject of early queer representation by privileging high-cost films and fancy venues that heightened the festival’s status among festivals, *image&nation* might be seen as losing its edge, appealing to a more mainstream gay and lesbian audience, and succumbing to market-driven incentives. However, a more nuanced assessment of the festival must be made, taking into account the links between festival and activism, both implicit and explicit, and the changing political environment and audiences of the festival: Pidduck suggests, “‘ordinary’ lesbian/gay characters can contribute to the necessary liberal project of visibility, diffusing the social stigma of homosexuality” (1990[2003], p.273). Queers and non-queers have, more than ever, access to images of gays and lesbians, as well as a language by which to both describe and exchange ideas about gender and sexuality—and this has been successful almost to the detriment of the festival’s *raison d’être*. Perhaps the question of activism needs to be reframed to ask who is expected to make ‘political’ films, in which there is an implicit role of “educating” from the margins, and more importantly, how the personal—the bodily and the sexual—remains at the

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nexus of queer politics, two decades later. By placing sexuality as both the centre-point and counterpoint to politics, the festival's self-conception highlights one of the tensions in culture at large—where the community ends and the individual begins.

As illustrated in my brief survey of the festival's twenty-one years, its quest for legitimacy happened in a linear way, while resistance weaves itself in and out, oftentimes becoming almost invisible from within the festival's imagination of itself. Arguably then, the festival reinstates the importance of sexuality as a basis for both identity and culture (or cultural reference points), and suggests that rather than always being pitted against a homophobic mainstream, *image&nation* can resist the more general idea that marginal voices, once "accepted" and "tolerated," should become subsumed into the mainstream that is said to embrace it, as Patricia Rozema claimed at *image&nation's* 2006 conference based on Tom Waugh's *The Romance of Transgression in Canada* (2006). [16] Celebrating diversity, expanding the very notion of what it constitutes, and continually challenging how diversity is represented on screen, positions LGBT/queer culture as critical point within cultural studies as it serves to explore the tensions between structure and experience, and culture and identity.

This vision continues to this day, with feature films playing at the Imperial, documentaries at the NFB, and a range of films playing at the deSève cinema, at Concordia, for example. As such, the festival can be seen as occupying many political and social spaces—from abstract repertoire art films, to films exploring the relationship between homosexuality and citizenship worldwide, to sexy amateur shorts, to large-scale productions with somewhat formulaic storylines. In response, *image&nation* could seek out more underground venues, incorporate local initiatives and artists in the festival's programming, and broaden their idea of what constitutes cinema by including various media works, as means of re-establishing their artistic and activist foundation, to counterbalance the growing corporatization of the queer film industry, and as a way of creating scarcity to compensate for the web's mass distribution of queer film and video. In fact, it

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may have to do so in order to survive.

With more and more queer characters in mainstream films, as well as on television, *image&nation* programmers fear the worst, with attendance dwindling, and with fewer and fewer works presented at festivals worldwide or submitted by artists and filmmakers internationally. The simultaneous growth (in the mainstream) and diminishing of the queer film (in queer contexts) is affecting the festival's popularity. [17] In the past few years, works are released on DVD by major distributors prior to being shown at *image&nation*. This may mean that the overall circulation of queer images continues to increase, but has become more removed from a large-scale collective viewing experience—ironically fulfilling Boudreau's wish that queer cinema be more about film than "the social."

Over the last twenty-one years, festival-goers have witnessed the presentation of rare and eclectic works in a context in which queer dominates. While today's lesbian and queer women's visibility in the mainstream is certainly greater with popular television shows like *The L Word* and *Sugar Rush*, and the wide dissemination of queer content over the internet, it remains that the festival is a venue which both stakes claim to a distinct culture and asserts its power over a place through time. In whatever ways *image&nation* may continue change, its struggle only highlights those of the community at large: finding a way to retain a radical queer identity both through and against the notions of tolerance, acceptance and alliances allowed

*Thank you to Anne Golden, Jules Pidduck, Gabriel Chagnon, Charlie Boudreau, Iain Blair at les archives gais du Québec, Charles Acland, and Line Chamberland for your time, your insights, your suggestions, and your stories.*

**Notes:**

[1] (no specified author) image+nation Le festival international de cinéma gai et lesbien de Montréal (historique). These statistics were kindly provided to me by Boudreau.

[2] There are very few accessible copies of the programs for the early years of the festival. While I was able to obtain the guides spanning from 1991 to 2008 from Gabriel Chagnon—an avid festival-

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goer who did the translation for the festival's publicity for many years—obtaining a copy of the first three programs proved a greater challenge. There are no copies available through the image&nation office because, presumably, early festival organizers did not foresee their own cultural significance or the importance of the guides as potentially momentous archival artifacts. At the local archives, les archives gaies du Québec, I was able to locate the 1989 and 1990 guides. The 1988 guide was by far the most difficult to track down; it was kindly copied for me by Université de Montréal professor and film theorist, Julianne Pidduck.

[3] A full collection of the festival program guides was surprisingly difficult to locate given the current prominence and visibility of the festival to queer Montréalers. Just who keeps these printed guides and in what way the festival is being archived is an important question for researchers, and highlights, in some ways, the gap between the festival's current visibility and the question of access for posterity.

[4] The film *Gendercator* (15 mins, Super 8mm & Mini DV, 2006) is an example of programming “controversy,” screened at Image & Nation in 2007 despite being cut at San Francisco's Frameline Festival, resulting from resistance from the trans community. See: [http://transgroublog.blogspot.com/2007/05/gendercator\\_31.html](http://transgroublog.blogspot.com/2007/05/gendercator_31.html) [Accessed June 1, 2008] and <http://www.catherinecrouch.com/mainwebsite.html/filmsDetail.php?pageID=gendercator> [Accessed June 1, 2008]

[5] This kind of activist video is also sometimes classified as “agit prop” (Pidduck, 2003, 270).

[6] By my count, in 1988, 47% of the films were in French. Randomly selected, the years 1991, 1995 and 2002 featured less than 1% in the original French version. In 2007, 16% are in French, and in 2008, 13%. Most international films are subtitled in English, as they tend to be part of a global festival circuit that privileges English.

[7] Pidduck (2003) argues that Onodera's work is part of a “porous ‘lesbian continuum’ of art cinema. She sites various other films that fit this profile on p. 290.

[8] I should point out here that *Desert Hearts* was actually also celebrated as a popular feature directed by a lesbian, recalling the question about just what of queer cinema queers cinema.

[9] Or as stated by Dyer, “to recover the heart may be a way out from under patriarchal consciousness” (in Pidduck 1990[2003], p.171).

[10] By my count, only one of the eighteen feature length films is a French-language film. The others are English-language films.

[11] *Image&nation* showed a record high, 282 films in 1997, the year they gained corporate backing. In 1988, they showed 48 films, and in 2006, 115. Attendance, which has increased steadily throughout the last two decades, was at 2000 participants in 1988, 11 500 participants in 1997, and 37 5000 participants in 2006. (This is based



on statistics given to me by Boudreau).

[12] Bell Mobility offered 1000\$ cash prize to the winner, and also offered viewers an 'infoline' for up-to-the-minute program information.

[13] For this paper I retain the original *image&nation*. The 2002 guide uses both the "&" and the "+". Also, the website uses image-nation.org, where the "-" can be seen a playful counterpart to the "+".

[14] Milk (2008) Gus Van Sant 128 mins. United States. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1013753/> [Accessed Feb 12, 2009]

[15] <http://www.mixnyc.org/> [Accessed March 30, 2008]

[16] see *image&nation* 19: *NATION ET TRANSGRESSION : COLLOQUE SUR LE CINÉMA LGBT AU CANADA ET AU QUÉBEC*. Transgression in Canadian and Québec Queer Cinemas Online: <http://www.image-nation.org/2006/even.php> [Accessed Feb 12 2009]

[17] This may be in part a result of being able to easily access, download and/or buy 'mainstream' queer films and videos online. The festival could forge new grounds by bringing cinema to non-cinematic contexts—or adding new media works and performance to what is traditionally reserved for screenings. There is no end in sight, really, for how space can be queered.

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