Slippery Subjects: Intersecting Economies of Genre in Gay Male Coming-Out Films, 1995-2015

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This essay documents and explains the frequency of one particular motif – boys or men going swimming – in gay male coming-out films produced between 1995 and 2015. To do so, it develops a methodology (*distant watching*) that allows researchers to arrive at a reasonably accurate estimate of a cinematic motif's frequency within any given genre, without actually having to watch all the films in their corpus. It then explains the frequency of swimming scenes in coming-out films through a set of intersecting reasons – some legal, some economic, and some aesthetic. Finally, the essay demonstrates (a) that a better understanding of generic conventions yields interpretative gains in the discussion of individual cases, and (b) that swimming scenes are particularly frequent in one subgroup of coming-out films: those in which the protagonist is still struggling to establish a non-heterosexual self-identity.

Two casual observations led to the present project. The first was mine, made several years ago, while spending the evening with friends. We were watching a series of short films, many of which revolved around the theme of coming out, and at one point I turned to the others and joked: "If I see one more scene with boys going swimming I'll scream." My friends were perplexed, so I explained that boys or men going for a swim (e.g. Figures 1 and 2) was an oddly frequent motif in gay male coming-out films – including the ones we had just been watching. In early 2015, I repeated the observation during a coffee break at work, to

Figure 1: Though still closeted, Tobi is ready to take the plunge.
(Press still for *Sommersturm*, © X Verleih AG)

Figure 2: For Olivier and Hicham, things are getting wet.
(Screenshot from *Le clan*, © PRO-FUN MEDIA Frankfurt am
Main. Film available on video and in digital form)

a friend and colleague, Sarah Chevalier.[1] It was Sarah who then made a crucial second observation: "What do you mean by 'frequent'? Do you have any figures?" Of course, I did not. A research project was born.[2]

This project consisted of three aims. First, I wanted to develop a methodology for compiling and analyzing a large corpus of films (gay male coming-out films, in this case) – a corpus so large that actually watching all films would be out of the question. The method I eventually adopted – *distant watching* – was inspired by Franco Moretti's concept of *distant reading*, and it can easily be applied to the analysis of other cinematic motifs and genres. Second, I wanted to explain the frequency of one particular motif – boys or men going swimming – in gay male coming-out films. It soon became clear that a mono-causal explanation would not be able to account for the high frequency of "swimming scenes" across the generic corpus. Rather, the frequency of this cinematic motif could best be explained by an intersecting set of reasons – some legal, some economic, and some aesthetic or "artistic." Third, I was hoping to demonstrate that an understanding of the general use of a given motif within a genre would in turn allow one to interpret more precisely what goes on in any individual instance of that motif – in this case, the use of the "swimming scene" in Bavo Defurne's *Noordzee, Texas* (*North Sea, Texas*, 2011). In other words, *distant watching* was not intended to replace the detailed study of individual cases, but rather constituted a means to delineate more clearly the cultural field within which a particular text – here: a gay male coming-out film – needed to be placed.[3]

Before we begin, two comments, or words of caution, are in order concerning the title of this paper. First, the phrase "intersecting economies" should not be misunderstood as an exclusive interest in such issues as marketing and profitability, though these will play a part in the

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[1] In addition to the invaluable input by the colleagues mentioned in the main text, I would like to acknowledge the crucial feedback provided by Nicole Frey Büchel, Rahel Rivera, Nicole Studer, and the students who attended session 9 of my lecture "Twentieth-Century Genres" (University of Zurich, Spring Semester 2015). I would also like to thank the two anonymous reviewers, one of whom especially alerted me to some important gaps in the argument.

[2] Esther Saxey has noted that many protagonists in coming-out novels "swim or surf" (40). However, in this paper, I'm interested not only in films that feature protagonists who *are* surfers or swimmers, but also in those movies in which the protagonist just *happens* to go swimming. To my knowledge, no previous study of this kind exists.

[3] See Matthew Jockers, who suggests that "by exploring the [. . .] record writ large, we will better understand the context in which individual texts exist and thereby better understand those individual texts" (27). For a similar argument, see Bode (4).

argument that follows. Rather, the discussion of more narrowly economic matters will be complemented by a focus on what could be called the "communicative efficiency" of genre: the highly economical way in which, within a given genre, even the sparsest gesture may evoke a wealth of cultural meanings and resources. It is for this reason that, as Mikhail Bakhtin has emphasized, the study of genre allows us to explore the "basic social tone" of cultural phenomena (259) – including that of gay male coming-out films.

My second caveat regarding the title concerns the label "gay male." Queer theorists and historians of sexuality alike have emphasized how problematic it is to posit a simple binary between straight and gay men (e.g. Sedgwick 8-9; Hekma 137). Arguably, the assumption that the terms *gay* and *straight* denote two stable, clearly separate entities serves to re-enforce the ghettoization of a normalized gay community within a heteronormative society that continues to sanction most forms of "queer" behavior (see Drucker 230). One example of this is that the gay-vs-straight binary often results in the elision of bisexual identities, with bisexuality at best figuring as a "passing phase" on the path to a "true" homosexual identity (e.g. Alexander and Anderlini-D'Onofrio 2-3). Indeed, the "exclusion of any bisexual potential" may, according to Esther Saxey, be one of the key driving forces of the prototypal coming-out story (10). Coming-out stories tend to present gay male subjectivity as a pre-given truth that merely needs to be revealed in the course of the narrative. In doing so, these stories disavow their own textual work of constructing the very identity they purport to reveal. Accordingly, my use of the label "gay male" should be read as a convenient shorthand, but not as an endorsement of the term as unproblematic. Similarly, the exclusion of lesbian coming-out films should neither be read as an implicit value judgment nor as a theoretical claim for the existence of essential differences between representations of male and female same-sex desire. Rather, the decision to exclude lesbian coming-out films constituted an attempt to keep the corpus of films at a manageable size; it was a question of scope, not of identity politics.

Swimming Boys: Compiling a Corpus and Distant Watching

The first problem when studying a genre like gay male coming-out films is to compile a generic corpus that is not merely random or entirely dependent on personal preferences – and the Internet proved invaluable in resolving this problem. Using the Internet Movie Database (IMDb.com),

I compiled a first, "rough" corpus of feature-length, fictional gay male coming-out films (limited, once again for reasons of scope, to films produced between 1995 and July 2015). An IMDb keyword search ("feature film," "coming out," and "1995-2015 Release year or range," conducted on 4 August 2015) yielded a list of 323 titles. However, I realized that that the list contained some films – e.g. documentaries – that did not fit the criteria outlined above.

To eliminate the films that did not belong, I went through IMDb's basic information for each of the 323 films on the list, and deleted any short film collections, documentaries, and lesbian coming-out films. This left me with a corpus comprising 224 films: a "beta version." Next, I re-examined each of these 224 films in more detail, using the plot summary, synopsis, and other information (from IMDb.com and additional Internet sources, e.g. Wikipedia and online reviews) to determine whether or not a movie ought to be classified as "a coming-out film" (i.e. whether coming out constituted a central plotline), or whether the film in question featured the problem of coming out only incidentally, as a marginal element (e.g. films in which only a minor character comes out, as in Stephen Daldry's *Billy Elliot*).[4] If coming out was only a marginal element, I deleted the film from the list. This left me with a list of 145 films, to which, in a final step, I added 16 gay male coming-out films produced between 1995 and 2015 that I own on DVD or Blu-ray, but that were not tagged as such on IMDb.com. This brought the total to 161 films: my "definitive" corpus of gay male coming-out films.[5]

At this point, however, I began to have doubts. Would others agree that the 16 films I had added to the corpus really were coming-out films? And did the films that I had deleted from the "beta version" of the corpus really not belong there? To get at least some sense of whether or not my classification was reliable, I generated a random sample of 27 films from the "beta version" of the corpus. I then asked a colleague, Magdalena Leitner, to classify the films on her own, using the same categories and sources of information that I had used. This would allow me to come up with a very basic measure of inter-annotator agreement: In how many percent of the cases would Magdalena's cate-

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[4] In terms of plot "logic," *Billy Elliot* (2000) could well be considered a coming-out film, as it tells the story of a working-class boy who has to hide his illicit desire – to become a ballet dancer – from his family. However, in the present context, I am interested only in films that feature coming out in its most common, everyday sense (i.e. coming out as *gay*).

[5] The lists are available on my website: www.es.uzh.ch/en/aboutus/team/mmuehlheim-/bibliography.html.

gorization match mine? It turned out that we agreed in 23 out of 27 —
i.e. in 85.2% — of all cases. Given my lack of experience with such pro-
cedures, I asked Hans-Martin Lehmann, a corpus linguist working in
our department, how this figure was to be interpreted. While Hans-
Martin emphasized that my statistical test would not hold up in court,
he also conceded that the level of agreement made the classification
seem at least reasonably reliable.

However, this still left me with one major problem: How could I
find out whether the 161 films in my "definitive" corpus featured a
swimming scene, without actually having to watch each film (easily over
250 hours)? The solution was a method I termed *distant watching*, inspired
by Franco Moretti's concept of *distant reading*. Moretti explicitly defines
distant reading as a way of dealing with corpora that are too vast for in-
depth study:

> [C]lose reading (in all of its incarnations, from the new criticism to decon-
> struction) [. . .] necessarily depends on an extremely small canon. [. . . W]e
> know how to read texts, now let's learn how not to read them. Distant read-
> ing: where distance [. . .] is a condition of knowledge: it allows you to focus
> on units that are much smaller or much larger than the text: devices,
> themes, tropes — or genres and systems. (Moretti 48-49)

Small tropes: the swimming scene; and larger generic units: gay male
coming-out films. It seemed a perfect match.

But what, more specifically, is distant watching? For each of the 161
films from the "definitive" corpus, I conducted a Google image search
and, where available, also watched the official trailer (on Youtube or a
similar platform). If the still images or the trailer contained a swimming
scene, the film went into group A; if they did not, the film went into
group B. Evidently, this meant that some films which in fact do feature
swimming scenes would erroneously end up in group B; screenshots
and trailers are, after all, only excerpts. At the same time, however,
group A would contain only correctly identified films as, in each case, I
had actually seen the swimming scene (either as a still image or in the
trailer). Distant watching thus allowed me to come up with a figure that
would (a) certainly not *over*estimate and (b) possibly *under*estimate the
actual number of gay male coming-out films featuring swimming scenes.
In short, my estimate would be conservative, but otherwise reliable.[6]

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[6] A more technical way of putting this is to say that *recall* might be low, but *precision*
would be very high.

And so, after only a few hours of distant watching, I was finally in a position to meet Sarah's challenge and provide some figures. Swimming scenes, I found, occur in 54 of the 161 films from my "definitive" corpus (i.e. 33.5%). In other words, one out of three gay male coming-out films featured a swimming scene – according to a conservative estimate! Which begs the question: Why?

Afraid of Drowning: Legal and Economic Pressures

I first considered the – potentially difficult – legal and economic context for gay male coming-out films. Like most filmmakers, presumably, the producers of a coming-out film hope to reach a sizeable audience, partly because they want their film to have some meaningful cultural impact, but also, more prosaically, because a larger audience means that the filmmakers are more likely to break even, perhaps even to make a profit. Filmmakers, in other words, want their product to be appealing – and attractive protagonists, preferably naked at some point during the film, are an easy way of achieving this goal: sex sells, as they say.[7]

Some sex sells, that is, for too much (or the wrong type of) sex can lead to prohibitively high age ratings, which in turn may limit the filmmakers' opportunities for legal distribution – in particular, legal distribution to what is arguably one of the core audiences for coming-out films: adolescents. Of course, in the age of illegal downloading, this does not mean that young people will not have access to the film. However, if teenagers download a film illegally – which is more likely in the case of a high age rating – then this translates into a financial loss for the filmmakers, as illegal downloads, by definition, do not generate profits for the copyright owners.

The threat of high age ratings is, moreover, exacerbated in the case of gay male coming-out films by at least two factors: first, the fact that the protagonists are often young, and that sexually explicit scenes featuring young characters are more likely to receive high age ratings than comparable scenes with adult protagonists; and second, the fact that depictions of gay sex tend, on average, to receive higher age ratings than depictions of straight sex (a point made forcefully in Kirby Dick's 2006 documentary *This Film Is Not Yet Rated*, which in one sequence juxtaposes scenes featuring straight sex to comparable scenes featuring gay sex – with the latter

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[7] What supports this idea is the fact that swimmers and swimming scenes feature quite prominently on advertising posters, DVD covers, etc.

consistently receiving the higher age rating by the MPAA).[8] A combination of legal and economic considerations thus provides some relatively strong incentives for the makers of a coming-out film to avoid "overly explicit" depictions of gay sex – particularly in films featuring teenage protagonists.[9]

And yet, suppressing sex and eroticism altogether would be counterproductive, given that the pressure to hide one's sexual orientation is precisely what gay liberationists aimed to combat with the strategy of coming out (e.g. Weeks 79). Filmmakers thus find themselves in need of a suitable compromise between, on the one hand, the juridico-economic pressures associated with age ratings, and, on the other, an unapologetic representation of same-sex attraction on the screen. And this is, precisely, where swimming scenes offer an almost perfect solution: they allow filmmakers to show naked, glistening bodies, but at the same time to hide any "indecencies" below the surface; boys undress, go swimming and, possibly, fool around a little – yet what goes on below the waistline remains demurely out of sight (e.g. Figure 3). It is, to be sure, not the only possible solution – but certainly a simple and elegant one.

Figure 3: What goes on below the waistline remains out of sight.
(Screenshot from *Jongens*, © Salzgeber & Co. Medien GmbH)

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[8] The Motion Picture Association of America is responsible for US age ratings. More recently, the MPAA's rating of the film *Pride* (2014) sparked some controversy (Burrell, "Pride").

[9] On the economics of age ratings, see Dolgin 130 and Driscoll 129.

Murky Depths: Unconscious Desire and Symbolical Rebirth

I had thus found a rather neat juridico-economic explanation for the frequency of swimming scenes. However, I also remembered Janet Staiger's caveat concerning historically grounded analyses of film. According to Staiger, one must always take into account how legal and economic factors overlap with cinematic signifying conventions that, in turn, may also intersect with each other: "This prevents a simplistic assertion that such and such economic practice determined such and such signifying practice and makes the historical representation more complex, mediated and non-linear. Locating single causes also becomes impossible" (153). In addition to juridico-economic constraints, I thus also needed to consider more properly aesthetic or artistic reasons for the frequency of swimming scenes.

The most obvious artistic reason I could think of for filmmakers to include such scenes is that water has long been regarded as a symbol of the unconscious (e.g. Cirlot 364-365; Ferber 172). Of course, water potentially has a vast range of subtly different meanings, but when focusing on the coming-out genre as a whole, seen through the lens of distant watching, it seemed best to concentrate on the dominant association (for some "secondary symbolic meanings," see Cirlot 366). Water as a symbol of the unconscious, then: the realm of the drives, providing the impetus for sexual desire. In swimming scenes, filmmakers can, in other words, be said symbolically to immerse their closeted protagonists in the waters of – as of yet – unconscious desires: an image of sexual awakening.

It was time to look at one particular example, to examine the range of symbolical meanings associated with a protagonist's immersion in water in more detail. In many religious and mythological traditions, for example, immersion in water carries strong resonances of annihilation and regeneration – i.e. symbolical death and rebirth (cf. the motif of baptism; e.g. Cirlot 365; Ferber 180-181). This, I suspected, might tie in nicely with the theme of coming out: an old, heterosexual identity is symbolically killed off, and a new, gay identity emerges. Were there any films that brought this kind of symbolism to the fore?

One film that came to my mind was Malgorzata Szumokswa's *W imię. . . (In the Name of. . .)*.[10] Szumokswa's film tells the story of a Catholic priest responsible for a group of youths with behavior prob-

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[10] Two other films in which the symbolism of death and rebirth is particularly marked are Gaël Morel's *Le clan* (2004) and Marco Kreuzpaintner's *Sommersturm* (2006).

lems. While taking care of the injuries that one of his protégés sustained in a fight, the priest becomes aware of his attraction to youth (Figure 4). From here, the film cuts directly to a scene in which the group of young men take a swim in a lake (Figure 5). The youth whom the priest desires jumps into the water but fails to reemerge, and the priest ultimately has to rescue him from drowning (Figure 6). Back on land, the youth remains unconscious, so that the priest is "forced" to revive him through mouth-to-mouth resuscitation (Figure 7) – a symbolical kiss of life, leading to rebirth. Of course, strictly speaking, the symbolism is off here: after all, the sequence is pivotal for the *priest*, not for the youth (though later in the film we learn that the youth does in fact reciprocate the priest's feelings); it is thus the priest who is "reborn." This, however, need not disconcert us, as symbolism does not follow the strict laws of

Figure 4: A priest becomes aware of his attraction to a youth.
(Screenshot from *W imię. . .*, © Salzgeber & Co. Medien GmbH)

Figure 5: The film then cuts to a typical swimming scene.
(Screenshot from *W imię. . .*, © Salzgeber & Co. Medien GmbH)

Figure 6: The youth almost drowns, but the priest rescues him.
(Screenshot from *W imię. . .*, © Salzgeber & Co. Medien GmbH)

Figure 7: Mouth-to-mouth resuscitation: a symbolical kiss, leading to rebirth.
(Screenshot from *W imię. . .*, © Salzgeber & Co. Medien GmbH)

reason, but rather the more labyrinthine logic of dreams. The symbolism of death and rebirth thus appears in displaced form in *W imię. . .*, projected away from the priest, onto the object of his desire.

A priest, water, death and rebirth: Szumokswa's film provides a good opportunity for a brief detour on how scenes of "sexual baptism" may relate to the coming-out genre's intriguing structural kinship with Christian narratives of conversion. As Norman W. Jones suggests, "[s]exual desire often plays a similar narrative role in gay and lesbian coming-out stories" as the experience of conversion does in Christian life narratives; just like the non-believer's encounter with Christ, sexual desire in coming-out narratives "impinges on the protagonist's will and helps lead to a personal transformation" (114). In both narrative traditions, those who "receive the call" can try and refuse it, or struggle against it; moreover, in both cases, "converts" retrospectively reassess their previous lives in the light of a startling new truth – new, that is, to their conscious lives,

for they now believe that this truth had always been there, unrevealed, just waiting for them to discover it (114-115). The "baptismal" symbolism of immersion in water in films like *W imię. . .* could thus be said to highlight the parallel between coming out and spiritual conversion, in order to emphasize the emotional profundity of the coming-out experience. (This, however, is not to say that symbolical immersion in water occurs only in films from predominantly Christian cultures – witness the ending of Ryosuke Hashiguchi's *Nagisa no Shindobaddo*, 1995.)

Returning to swimming scenes more generally, when thinking about the coming-out films I had seen I also realized that they took place in two different types of setting. While some swimming scenes are located in an urban environment (e.g. a public pool), quite a few are set in remote, isolated places somewhere "out in nature." Seen from a realist perspective, the latter of course makes perfect sense: the closeted protagonists need to hide their non-normative desires, and so they end up in isolated places, far away from prying glances. Read symbolically, however, the association of swimming scenes with natural surroundings can be read, more specifically, as a neo-pastoral rhetoric of innocence – particularly when it is during this scene that the protagonists' sexual longings first erupt. According to this logic, the boys on the screen are not engaging in sexual corruption, but merely discovering their supposedly natural self: who they really are, and whom society ought to allow them to be. Whether or not one finds such a rhetoric of "natural innocence" convincing, the ease with which pastoral surroundings can be combined with swimming scenes provides us with yet another reason why the latter are an appealing visual trope for the makers of gay male coming-out films.[11]

So far, I have thus isolated five interrelated factors – two "economic" and two "artistic" ones – that, *together*, provide us with a plausible way of explaining the frequency of swimming scenes in gay male coming-out films:

(1) a positive economic incentive: naked skin on the screen is appealing ("sex sells");
(2) a negative economic incentive, arising from the existence of age ratings (leading filmmakers to avoid "overly explicit" sex scenes, particularly in movies aimed at younger audiences and featuring adolescent protagonists);

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[11] The term *pastoral* has a long and complex history, and it would be misleading to reduce the genre generally to a rhetoric of innocence (see Gifford 1-12; Garrard 33-58).

(3) a general symbolic meaning: the association of water with the uncon-
scious and, therefore, desire;

(4) a more specific symbolic meaning: death and rebirth;

(5) a neo-pastoral rhetoric of innocence aimed at emphasizing that the
protagonists' same-sex desires are entirely natural.

In any given individual film, only one, or several, or even all of these
factors may – consciously or unconsciously – have prompted filmmak-
ers to include a swimming scene.

And yet, when thinking about this list, it occurred to me that there
was at least one additional factor – one I decided to term *intrageneric am-
plification*. What this means is that, as soon as a particular motif becomes
frequent in a given genre, audiences and filmmakers are likely to pick up
on it, and ultimately to respond to it: in the case of the audience, to ex-
pect, savor, or dread it; in the case of filmmakers, to quote, play with,
possibly critique it. In other words, once a particular motif has become a
recognizable genre convention – recognizable to connoisseurs, at least –
this motif is likely to be used again and again, in an intrageneric dialogue
that amplifies the motif's frequency.

Lost at Sea: Lotman's Minus Device, Noordzee, Texas, *and Sex vs. Maturity*

As soon as a generic motif becomes widely recognized, filmmakers can
thus start toying with audience expectations: they can include the usual
cues, provide the usual set-up – and then refuse to deliver the expected
motif. This constitutes what Yuri (a.k.a. Jurji) Lotman has called a *minus
device*: "cases where the non-utilization of some element, its meaningful
absence," becomes part and parcel of the text's "artistic message" (51).
Given that swimming scenes are frequent in gay male coming-out films,
they might, therefore, be used by filmmakers as a minus device.

And indeed, against the backdrop of the general genre convention, I
was now able to recognize such a minus device – used not once, but twice
– in Bavo Defurne's *Noordzee, Texas*, one of the films from my corpus.
Pim, Defurne's protagonist, has long had a crush on Gino, and when
the latter tells his mother that he would like to spend the night with
Pim, in a tent on the beach, savvy audience members can see where this
might be going: two boys on a beach, a swimming scene; then, possibly,
an erotic adventure. Such expectations will, however, not be fulfilled:
the camera cuts directly to the interior of the tent, and the two protago-
nists evidently do not need a symbolical swimming scene to awaken un-

conscious desires (Figure 8). Later in the film, we encounter Pim and Gino driving out to the countryside on Gino's motorbike, in what looks like a neo-pastoral escapade; they stop in a suitably remote place, right next to a pond: the prototypical set-up for a swimming scene. Yet, once again, it doesn't happen. Rather than going for a swim, the protagonists start making out right then and there, on the very edge of the pond (Figure 9).

Figure 8: No swimming, Part I – Pim and Gino know exactly what they desire. (Screenshot from *Noordzee, Texas*, © Salzgeber & Co. Medien GmbH)
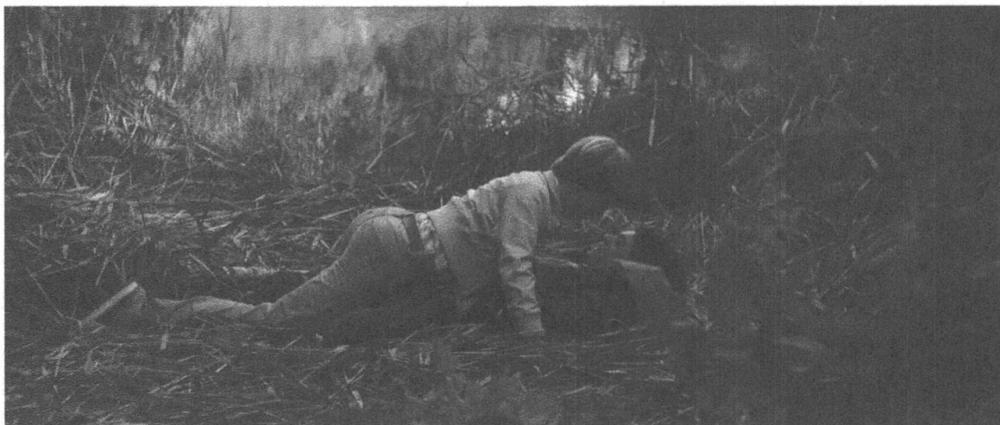

Figure 9: No swimming, Part II – Pim and Gino make out right on the edge of a pond. (Screenshot from *Noordzee, Texas*, © Salzgeber & Co. Medien GmbH)

What renders this twofold inclusion of the minus device in *Noordzee, Texas* particularly interesting is that Defurne's film does feature a swimming scene later on – one that emphasizes the problematic of maturity or coming-of-age, rather than that of desire and coming out. In this later scene, Pim is disillusioned with life in general and, in particular, with Gino, who pretends that his feelings for Pim were just some sort of adolescent foolishness. Pim decides to burn all the treasured mementoes he has collected since early childhood, including a portrait of Gino he once drew (Figure 10). Pim then undresses, runs toward the sea, and immerses himself in its cold, dark waters (Figure 11). After a while, the camera loses sight of the boy, showing us some rolling waves and then a glimpse of the sky (Figure 12) before cutting away to a funeral procession (Figure 13). There is thus more than a hint that Pim, in his sorrow, may have committed suicide – that it is his funeral we are now watching. This, however, turns out not to be the case, which renders the sequence a perfect example of "merely" symbolical death, followed by spiritual regeneration. In other words, the two sequences in which Pim "acts out" his desire both employ the minus device. By contrast, the swimming scene that does occur is emphatically *not* linked to awakening desire; instead, it focuses on Pim's rejection of "childish illusions."

Figure 10: Pim symbolically burns the illusions that remain from his childhood. (Screenshot from *Noordzee, Texas*, © Salzgeber & Co. Medien GmbH)

Noordzee, Texas may thus implicitly critique the swimming scenes in other coming-out films, which tend to conflate sexual awakening with the achievement of maturity ("coming of age"). Defurne's film, by contrast, suggests that growing up is a more complex phenomenon; it certainly involves understanding the nature of one's desire, but this in itself

Figure 11: Disillusioned, Pim immerses himself in the sea's cold waters.
(Screenshot from *Noordzee, Texas*, © Salzgeber & Co. Medien GmbH)

Figure 12: The camera loses sight of Pim and shows us a glimpse of the sky.
(Screenshot from *Noordzee, Texas*, © Salzgeber & Co. Medien GmbH)

will not be enough. It also requires the rejection of infantile views as a pre-condition for mature behavior. In short, having recognized the swimming scene's general importance for the gay male coming-out genre, we can now read *Noordzee, Texas* as strategically modifying the convention in order to express artistic dissent from the ideological implications of a formal device.

Figure 13: The camera then cuts to a funeral – is it Pim's?
(Screenshot from *Noordzee, Texas,* © Salzgeber & Co. Medien GmbH)

Parting the Waters: Coming out to Oneself vs. Coming out to Others

At this point, I had completed my initial three tasks: I had developed a methodology that allowed me to document the frequency of swimming scenes in coming-out films; I had provided a set of explanations; and I had found a nice example illustrating the interpretive gains. And yet, in the course of my research, a fourth question occurred to me and refused to go away: What if there were different types of coming-out films – distinct generic subgroups, each with its own, characteristic relation to the swimming scene?

After giving the matter some thought, I settled on a tripartite division. First, there were some films in my corpus – Simon Shore's *Get Real,* for example – in which the focus lies on a protagonist who is only just becoming aware of his same-sex desires: an experience that triggers intense self-scrutiny and, more often than not, an identity crisis. For Esther Saxey, this type of plot is synonymous to the coming-out story *tout court*:

> The coming out story describes *an individual's path to lesbian, gay or bisexual identity.* Its protagonist is most likely to be a troubled teenager whose insistent desires drag him or her through a minefield of social and sexual dramas. *The protagonist gathers clues to make sense of the situation,* but the reader is often sure well in advance where the protagonist is headed. (1; my emphasis)

However, while coming out to oneself is certainly crucial, sociologists tend to regard this as only one of four, frequently interrelated, steps in a longer, more convoluted process: (1) coming out to oneself; (2) meeting and getting to know other lesbian and gay people; (3) telling friends and relatives; and (4) publicly acknowledging that one is lesbian or gay (Zastrow 239-240). The four steps do not necessarily have to occur in this order (e.g. one may tell one's friends first and only then decide to meet other gays and lesbians), and the process may remain incomplete (e.g. one may be hindered from coming out publicly because gay sex is a capital offence in one's country of residence). Nevertheless, the four-part model highlights that coming out is not usually one single event, but a process with various, potentially overlapping phases.

And yet, in the present context, we can simplify the model and note that, in addition to films focusing on coming out *to oneself*, a second subgroup is concerned with the issue of coming out *to others*. Such films – Ivan Silvestrini's *Come non detto* or Harmage Singh Kalirai's *Chicken Tikka Masala*, for example – deal with protagonists who have already established a gay identity when the movie opens, but who have not yet told all their family or friends. If the first subgroup involves the problem of self-scrutiny and the development of a new self-image, in other words, the second revolves around the impact that coming out to others will have on the protagonist's life, while taking his sexual identity as a given.

While these first two subgroups differ in terms of *content* – i.e. the type of coming out involved – there is, moreover, a third subgroup comprising a *structurally* distinct set of movies that I decided to call "episodic/multi-protagonist films." These are films that feature several, equally important plotlines – either as distinct episodes (as in Sergio Tovar Velarde's *Cuatro lunas*), or as important individual plotlines that run parallel to a central "group plotline" (as in Matthew Warchus's *Pride*, which focuses on an activist group supporting a community of striking miners). In the episodic/multi-protagonist films from my corpus, the problem of coming out – to oneself or to others – is thus not *the central* plotline (as in the other two subgroups), but only *central to one* of the various plotlines.

Now, the question was: Would swimming scenes be distributed equally across the subgroups, or would there be any notable differences? I once again went through my "definitive" corpus, using IMDb.com plot summaries and other information from the Internet to re-categorize all 161 films into the three subgroups. The figures I ended up with were:

(1) 94 films about coming out to oneself;
(2) 41 films about coming out to others;
(3) 26 episodic/multi-protagonist films.

Predictably, inter-annotator agreement was lower this time, with Magdalena and myself agreeing in only 19 out of 27, or 70.4% of all cases. This level of agreement was – once again according to Hans-Martin, my expert on such matters – just about acceptable, though evidently no longer particularly impressive. Nevertheless, I couldn't resist calculating the percentage of swimming scenes for each of the three subgroups – and the results were remarkable indeed:

(1) swimming scenes in films about coming out to oneself: 46.8%
(2) in films about coming out to others: 9.8%
(3) in episodic/multi-protagonist films: 23.1%

Leaving aside for the moment the episodic/multi-protagonist subgroup, one thing was readily apparent: swimming scenes were associated especially with the problem of coming out to oneself – they occur in almost half of these films! – but were not exceptionally frequent in films focusing on protagonists who already self-identify as gay and "merely" have to come out to others.

This result, I eventually realized, tied in nicely with the juridico-economic reasons I had provided for the frequency of the motif. For one thing, given that films focusing on coming out to oneself are more likely to feature adolescent protagonists, the problem of age ratings is particularly acute in this subgroup, rendering the compromise solution of swimming scenes – naked skin without "overly explicit" sex – all the more appealing. By contrast, films focusing on coming out to others are more likely to feature characters who are slightly older: protagonists who already know they're gay, and whose problems – re-negotiating their relationships with friends, co-workers, and family – are arguably more appealing to a slightly older audience. This, in turn, means that films from this second subgroup can treat age ratings more cavalierly and be somewhat more daring in depicting gay sex – which renders the need for "euphemistic" swimming scenes much less pressing.

Moreover, the more artistic or symbolical dimensions of swimming scenes that I had identified also worked well to explain the marked difference in frequency between the two first subgroups. First, water as a symbol of unconscious desire is evidently more appropriate for characters who have yet to discover their sexual orientation, as opposed to

those who already know. Second, while symbolical death and rebirth are obvious metaphors for the process of coming out to oneself – one emerges, as it were, into a new life – such imagery is not particularly suitable for a character who is already "fully formed." Third, a neo-pastoral rhetoric of innocence is more to the point whenever the sexual identity of a character is still in question: the protagonist is faced with an ethical decision concerning his same-sex desires, and the pastoral scene suggests that these desires are not deviant or abnormal, but perfectly natural. By contrast, if a character has already accepted his sexual orientation, the question of "naturalness" or "innocence" may not exactly be settled, but it is certainly less urgent (i.e. the protagonist has, for better or worse, already made his ethical choice). Finally, if for all these reasons swimming scenes are not particularly frequent in films about coming out to others, then there will also not be any intrageneric amplification in this second subgroup, as such amplification depends on a motif's pre-existing, "base level" frequency. In other words, intrageneric amplification only occurs when a given motif is already frequent – as is the case with swimming scenes in subgroup one, but not in subgroup two.

Which left me with the episodic/multi-protagonist films, where matters were somewhat less clear, and more complex. At 23.1%, swimming scenes are still quite frequent in this group. Could it be that most of the episodes or plotlines concerned with coming out in these films are about the problem of coming out to oneself, rather than about coming out to others only? It is difficult to tell, based solely on distant watching: each of these films features several plotlines, which means that plot summaries, trailers, etc., provide comparatively little information on the individual plotlines. My impression – and it is no more than that – is that the majority of the relevant plotlines indeed deal with coming out to oneself, rather than with coming out to others – which would explain why the percentage in this group is higher than the percentage for films about coming out to others.

But why would the percentage for the episodic/multi-protagonist films be so much lower than for the coming-out-to-oneself subgroup (23.1% vs. 46.8%)? One reason may have to do with narrative economy: several distinct plotlines are crammed into one single feature film, which means that there is only limited time per individual plotline, and hence not enough time to include leisurely swimming scenes. A second factor, moreover, could be that symbolism in episodic/multi-protagonist films is chosen with a view to the entire movie, as a way of providing symbolical coherence across the film's various plotlines. This would mean that the set of "incentives" to include a swimming scene in the coming-

out plotline might sometimes be counteracted by the symbolical design envisioned for the film as a whole (i.e. a swimming scene might simply not fit into the overall design). A third factor, finally, might be that distant watching is even more likely than usual to miss some swimming scenes because, in episodic/multi-protagonist films, they only appear in one of several plotlines (i.e. the details of that one plotline may not feature very prominently in trailers or still images).[12] These explanations are tentative, to be sure, and less compelling than the ones for the other two subgroups. Perhaps it would be better to treat episodic/multi-protagonist films as a different genre entirely? At any rate, it was clear that my investigation had reached an end.

Conclusion: Charting the Crosscurrents of Genre

There are some obvious limits to the results I have presented in this essay. For one thing, as noted throughout, none of the figures are absolutely reliable in any strict, statistical sense. Genre categorization will always be, to some extent, subjective, and there are bound to be films in my corpus that, according to others, ought not to be included. Moreover, in addition to contenting myself with very basic statistical tests, I have refrained from even asking some evident follow-up questions: Were swimming scenes equally frequent in coming-out films produced before 1995? Are they becoming less frequent now that images of gay sex are, supposedly, more widely accepted? When in a film do these scenes typically occur (i.e. early, middle, or towards the end)? How frequent are swimming scenes set "in nature" (e.g. in a forest), as opposed to those set in a densely populated area or even indoors (e.g. on a crowded beach, or in a public pool)? Are swimming scenes set indoors more likely to occur in a particular type of coming-out film and, if so, why? In short, it would be possible to analyze the device more carefully, and thus to refine the results of my distant watching.[13]

Finally, my initial decision to exclude lesbian coming-out films makes it impossible to say whether swimming scenes are comparably frequent in this parallel corpus – or, for that matter, in heterosexual coming-of-

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[12] In other words, *recall* may be lower for subgroup three than for the other two groups.

[13] I would like to thank Franco Moretti, who, in his comments on a late draft of this essay, suggested some of these follow-up questions to emphasize that "there is a trap in the idea that all attentive reading is CR [i.e. close reading]" (e-mail, 21 March 2016). The example of swimming scenes set in different locations (e.g. indoors vs. outdoors) was suggested, in conversation, by Misha Kavka (29 March 2016).

age movies. If I had to venture a guess, I would say that swimming scenes are not *in*frequent in straight coming-of-age films, but perhaps quite a bit *less* frequent than in gay male – and, possibly, lesbian – coming-out films. As we have seen, stories focusing on coming out to oneself have a structural affinity to conversion narratives, thus rendering the symbolism of death and rebirth associated with swimming scenes particularly appropriate. By contrast, while straight coming-of-age tales often do focus on sexual awakening as well, they seem to me far more likely to echo a different Christian narrative, namely, that of a traumatic fall from grace (i.e. not rebirth, but expulsion from the "paradise of childhood innocence"). In addition, euphemistic self-censorship, too, may be somewhat less imperative when depicting straight sexuality, thus lowering the pressure for the compromise solution provided by the swimming scene. But these are speculations.

What I have shown, however, is that swimming scenes are frequent in gay male coming-out films in general, and very frequent in one subgenre in particular: those films that focus mainly on a protagonist's struggle with his emerging awareness of same-sex desires (i.e. coming out to oneself). There are various intersecting reasons for this – legal and economic, symbolic and intertextual – which *together* explain the frequency of swimming scenes *across* the corpus, though not necessarily such scenes' presence in any given individual film. Having shown that the motif is frequent, moreover, I was able to explain why even the absence of swimming scenes can – for a genre aficionado, at least – become a source of meaning: a film like *Noordzee, Texas* may play on generic expectations, and then break or frustrate these expectations in order to engage in a critical dialogue with the established genre convention (Lotman's minus device). More generally speaking, the essay provides insight into how gay male subjectivity is constructed by zooming in on one seemingly incidental motif that turns out to be a surprisingly central component of the "gay male imaginary" – at least in the cinematic field.

Beyond any findings relating to coming-out films and swimming scenes in particular, I would like to highlight the general, methodological implications of my paper: (a) that distant watching allows us to chart at least the outlines of a large corpus of films that would otherwise be almost impossible to navigate; (b) that the findings generated through distant watching (or, in the case of literary texts, distant reading) do not replace, but in fact help us situate more precisely – and thus enhance – the close analysis of individual cases (as I tried to demonstrate with the example of *Noordzee, Texas*, and as Franco Moretti himself has pointed

out);[14] and (c) that elements which are frequent across a given genre are likely to be so, not because of one single factor, but due to various inter-related reasons ("likely to be so": it is by no means inconceivable that, every once in a while, a mono-causal explanation happens to be correct). Methods like distant reading/watching, in short, provide us with powerful tools to better understand the construction of even such slippery subjects as boys and men swimming – perhaps even kissing – in the genre of coming-out films.

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[14] For instance, in a recent talk entitled "Where Is the Humanities in the Digital Humanities?" (Cabaret Voltaire, Zurich, 29 February 2016), Moretti argued that the stylistic uniqueness of Joyce's *Ulysses* could be described with a much greater degree of precision if we had a better understanding of sentence structures across the novelistic corpus.

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