
Queer Sexualities in Early Film: Cinema and Male-Male Intimacy

by Shane Brown

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Reviewed by Ana Maria Sapountzi

The recent intersection of Queer theory with Film Studies has sought to destabilise established notions and representations of gender and sexuality in film, and has allowed for the investigative reading of their structures and boundaries set up by cultural and political hegemony, and for their destruction. This convergence has prompted a retrospective approach to the study of film, where scholars such as Barbara Menzel, Alexander Doty, and Patricia White have revisited earlier cinematic texts with the purpose of exploring the evolution and archaeology of queer aesthetics by tracing its various incarnations. But while such scholars are concerned with identifying “suggested” subversive sexual signifiers to directly contribute to the expansion of current queer studies, scholar Shane Brown’s *Queer Sexualities in Early Film: Cinema and Male-Male Intimacy* (2016) focuses on how gender and sexuality was viewed at the time and culture in which they were made, but also, how information about the period in which these films were produced help the viewer read the films for their initial intention, rather than from a modern perspective. Furthermore, within his examination and re-examination of specific filmic texts, Brown aims to discern the films which have been mistakenly positioned within the queer canon due to their misunderstood depictions of “male-male intimacy”. Brown sets out to organise films which depict “male-male intimacy” from those which portray overt male queerness, whilst giving central focus to their specific cultural and historical contexts.

With *Queer Sexualities* Brown seeks to examine representations of male queerness and male-male intimacy in film. To do so, Brown narrows his research to the period of film history between 1912 and 1934, and centres predominantly on American, British, German, Swedish and Danish cinema. Brown makes the case that the timeframe which comprises the book is significant due to being bracketed at the start by the earliest surviving film from America to contain a queer character (*Algie the Miner*, 1912), and bracketed at the end by the implementation of the Production Code (Hays Code) in Hollywood (1934), and the rise of the Nazi party in Germany which forbade gay culture (1933). Brown argues that his choice to examine American and specific European

cinemas within this period, is due to these cinemas being linked to each other within the larger film production industry at the time. Moreover, these cinemas possess enough relative films which have survived to date to investigate. By looking at films from these cinemas collectively within this spell, Brown strives to understand the difference in representation of *queerness*, why there were differences, and how, why, and when these cinema cultures and representations started influencing the other.

Queer Sexualities consists of five main chapters. The first two chapters: 'Seen But Not Heard: Representations of Gay Men in European Cinema, 1916-28' and 'Laughing at him will do as much to cure him as compulsory football': American Film, the Sissy and the Fop' lay out the cultural and scientific ideology of homosexuality and masculinity in America and Europe, before examining how they were translated on the screen within their respective historical contexts. The final three chapters: 'Romantic Friendships and the College Film,' 'Wonderful Terrible Days': The War Film and Depictions of the Buddy Relationship,' and 'Madmen, Murderers and Monsters: Queerness in the Early Horror Film' comprise of investigations of three types of films to illustrate how European and American cinemas handled specific themes or genres, and discusses what the films reveal about perspectives on sexuality and masculinity at the time. Brown's introduction supplies a coherent and straightforward outline of his thesis, as well as the book's use and definition of the term *queer*.

Shane Brown's *Queer Sexualities in Early Film: Cinema and Male-Male Intimacy* is part of the Library of Gender & Popular Culture by I.B. Tauris.