

Conference report for ASMCF

120 BPM: Screening and Symposium

10th-11th May

Queen Mary University of London and King's College London

Organised by Alice Pember (QMUL) and Benjamin Dalton (KCL)

This conference brought together interdisciplinary work surrounding Robin Campillo's hit film *120 BPM* (2017), which follows the lives of ACT UP activists in early 90s Paris during the AIDS crisis. We wanted to ask: What does it mean to make a film about the AIDS crisis in 2017? What relationship to queer generations have now with the trauma of the 80s and 90s? How do we process the political, bodily and affective traumas of the crisis today in a time of PEP and PrEP? What responsibility do various artistic forms carry with them in regard to HIV and AIDS representation? Researchers used the film as a springboard to explore broader questions of HIV/AIDS representation and history, as well as the role of screen media and cinema in queer activism, health care, and biomedical research.

The conference began with a screening of *120 BPM* at the Queen Mary University of London Hitchcock cinema on Friday 10th May, attended by 40 people. The film was followed by a roundtable discussion with Ben Walters (a writer who blogs about moving-image, queer and DIY cultures @not_television and recently completed a PhD on nightlife collective Ducki at Queen Mary), Lo Marshall (who works with the UCL Urban Laboratory on a project researching LGBTQI nightlife spaces in London from 1986 to the present) and Jennifer Dhingra (ex-leader of Sexpression UK and Junior Doctor, specializing in sexual health education). The discussion, which lasted for around 40 minutes, explored intersections between medical practice and questions of queer space and fun, and the audience joined in with lively and challenging questions. We ended the screening and roundtable with a wine reception where guests were able to enter a raffle for the charity Positive East in order to win an iconic 'Silence=Death' T-shirt and stickers, as worn by activists in the film.

The main day of panels took place the following day on 11th May at the King's College London Anatomy Lecture Theatre and Museum, which was attended by 50 people. We chose the Anatomy Lecture Theatre as it greatly resembles the amphitheatre used for ACT UP meetings portrayed in the film. The conference welcomed a wide range of international scholars, activists and practitioners from many different fields, from film studies and French studies to geography, technology, and medicine. The first panel, 'Queer Histories and Activisms', featured sociohistorical analyses of HIV/AIDS activism during the 80s and

90s. The first paper of the day, given by Will Nutland from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, was a moving and personal account of Nutland's own memories of his time as an activist during the AIDS crisis. Hunter Capps spoke about how the film failed to deal with some of the messier sides of activist history, whilst Chase Ledin explored modes of 'backwards feeling' involved in post-crisis historiography.

This first panel was followed by the 'ASMCF keynote' by the art historian Dr Fiona Johnstone, whose book *AIDS and Representation: Portraits and Self-Portraits during the AIDS Crisis in America* is forthcoming with I.B.Tauris. Fiona has also recently published her 'Manifesto for a Visual Medical Humanities' in the *British Medical Journal*. Johnstone's keynote was a fascinating and rich exploration of (self-)portraiture during the AIDS crisis, looking at artists from Mark Morrisroe to Félix González-Torres and reflecting on how these photographs and sculptures resonated in the cinematographic engagement with the queer body during the AIDS crisis in *120 BPM*.

In the second panel on 'Colour', Jack Parlett and Jason Hartford both considered how colours work in the film; Parlett focused on the ubiquity of the colour blue as an 'intermediary figure', whilst Hartford argued that the colours of the French tricolour dominate the film in order to 'stake a claim on the French nation, on behalf of Act Up Paris'. Panel three, 'Sound, Dance and Community', focused on the film's interest in rhythms, sounds, heartbeats, and nightlife as a locus of queer politics and relationality. Eleri Anona Watson talked about 'bumping' on the dancefloor as a mode of queer relationality, and Tom Glindhill reflected on the space of the club as 'refuge'. Ilaria Grand's paper considered her own personal response to the film through intersecting rhythms between the film's own soundscape and her heartbeat. Panel four, 'Digital Technologies and Virtual Realities', explored the digital innovations of the film. Gary Needham focused on the use of CGI in the film to portray individual cells with the virus, showing how digital animation intersects with medical imagery in highly political ways. Niloufar Goudarzi reflected on the use of virtual reality technology to promote empathy as a resource for future activisms and politics of resistance. In the final panel, 'Death, Dust, and Plastics', Sarah Wingrove talked about the site of the death bed in the film as a 'malleable' site on which the lines between sex and death become blurred. Loic Bourdeau's paper drew from Michael Marder's philosophy of dust to articulate a queer 'poetics of dust' in *120 BPM*. Finally, Benjamin Dalton read the film through the philosopher Catherine Malabou's concept of plasticity, arguing that Campillo's film makes visible 'plastic residues' which offer grounds upon which to begin a new queer politics. The entire event was live-tweeted on our conference Twitter feed:

@120BPMsymposium and photos will be featured on our website

www.120BPMsymposium.wordpress.com.

Following a rich and exhilarating day of papers and discussions, we moved from the Anatomy Lecture Theatre into the Anatomy Museum for a wine reception, where attendees were again able to enter the Positive East raffle. We then dined together at the restaurant Sagar in Covent Garden between heading to a club night at iconic queer venue *Royal Vauxhall Tavern*, where the DJ played songs by Bronski Beat as featured in *120 BPM* in honour of the conference.

The conference forged connections between a diverse and interdisciplinary community of scholars, activists and medical practitioners, and the conference's website and Twitter feed will continue to be a place for communication and keeping in touch. We plan to edit a journal special edition on *120 BPM* and HIV/AIDS representation and activism in France featuring work from the conference.