

Queer

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While Thailand's parliament passed a bill on same-sex marriage in March 2024, same-sex sexual acts have been punishable by death in certain cases in Uganda since May 2023 and the Russian judiciary has imposed a ban on the LGBTQIA+ movement in Russia for extremism. In 2022, Namibia celebrated the sixth Lesbian Festival for more queer visibility, while Zanele Muholi, in their first comprehensive solo exhibition in Germany, showed photographs that deal with anti-queer violence in South Africa despite the country having one of the most advanced constitutions (1996) with regard to LGBTQIA+ rights. A DIY Testosterone workshop took place at the Academy of Fine Arts Leipzig in March 2024 to problematize pathologizing structures of hormone administration to trans*people, whereas in the USA there have never been as many bills to restrict trans* rights as in 2023.

The list goes on. From a global perspective, queer life and love currently take place in the contradiction of never having been so visible or legally equal and never having been so endangered by the pushback of authoritarian, right-wing and conservative forces. The simultaneity of queer emancipation and the existential threat to queer bodies represents a paradox. It is a symptom of the shift in global power relations.

In a global context, the simultaneity of self-determination and endangerment can be seen as a consequence of colonial history. Same-sex love, trans* and non-binary people, lesbian sex and gay parents are occasionally rejected as white Eurocentric concepts in the course of decolonization and in reference to an authentic African culture. In the case of Russia, this rejection is based less on the desire to decolonize than on the aspiration to promote its own colonialism with anti-American resentment – since, after all, queer is seen as the hallmark of a movement driven from the USA. Queerness is also discredited because it is portrayed in the context of right-wing movements in the USA, but also in Germany, France etc. as the incarnation of a left-wing avant-garde, powerful elite and pro-migration politics. At the same time, the rainbow flag becomes a right-wing meme when, for example, it is a matter of demonstrating civilizational progressiveness to allegedly homophobic Arab countries.

Queerness is – one may say – caught in the crossfire of the states of the global majority emancipating themselves from the West, the East opposing the West in the seemingly revived Cold War, and right-wing actors in the Global North who feel threatened by the provincialization of Eurocentric policies. 'Queer' becomes unrecognizable in the process. Various myths circulate freely, just as disconnected from the history of the social movement as they are from its theoretical underpinnings.

Instead of an instrument for analysing heteronormativity or intersectionally interwoven gender politics and a deconstructive critique of power, queer is now only a matter of identity politics – either to be appropriated for racist and anti-Muslim reasons, or to be declared the enemy of national cohesion. The images that are created, the bans that are issued, the criticisms that are circulated in the public sphere do not react to ‘queer as an identity’; instead they create the very narrow identitarian understanding of ‘queer’ against which they defend themselves or on the basis of which they make policy.

Such a reduction to identity politics is in turn countered by the neoliberal-fuelled and – since digitalization at the latest – claimed dissolution of gender markers. From a transhumanist perspective, we are post-gender, and sexuality and reproduction are no longer just a question of gender, but of technological possibilities of intimacy, physical surrogates or hormone production.

Queer therefore appears to be a projection space for different, sometimes opposing interests and a hub of global tensions. What is disconnected with queer as a concept, theorem and social movement converges in queer. Thereby, queer theory itself works with paradoxes and contradictions and cannot be reduced to the common denominator of a universally valid definition. One of the reasons for this is the performative approach, which makes an essentialist idea of gender and sexuality impossible solely due to the temporal dimension of a constant repetition. In the course of my examination of the concept of dis:connectivity, I would therefore like to focus on time and temporality using the medium of film and series, which operates with time and repetition.

The contradictions mentioned briefly cannot only be understood spatially, but are a phenomenon of time and temporality. They arise not only in the spatial tension between expansion and encapsulation, but also in the temporal tension between progress and regression. For example, in order to ‘keep discourse spaces open in a liberal society’ (Herrmann 2024) imagined in the future, prohibition policies reminiscent of past times are used. This is what happened when the Bavarian Council of Ministers passed a ban on gender language on 19 March 2024. The ban, which responds to the conspiracy theory that the present has been infiltrated by a gender ideology in a similar way to the McCarthy era, can be seen as a resistance to a theory mobilized by the right.

In the same breath as such an idea of a liberal society based on the past logic of prohibition, we are experiencing a transhumanist approach that transcends gender identities and is closely linked to the future-oriented time economies of neoliberal interests.

The clash between the politics of prohibition pointing to the past and the fantasies of feasibility looking to the future expresses the question of disconnectedness on a temporal level. At the same time, both forms of the present are two sides

of the same coin of a neoliberal-capitalist, patriarchal and nationalist policy. Past and future are interlinked in this respect, and yet do not map onto each other, are disconnected. This convergence of temporal disconnectedness results in a form of dis:connectivity.

In our present, in which the disparity of politics pointing to the past and the transhumanistically inflated hyper-future combine, many seem to be out of step, are overwhelmed by the signals and no longer feel part of the chronology. This is also reflected in contemporary queer film and TV productions. They react to the disparity, but form at the same time a queer theory, i.e. 1) a critique of the divergence, which only confirms the norm and comes together in heteronational ideas; and 2) an assertion of a different effectiveness of this temporal dis:connectivity. I would therefore like to look at two productions with the aim of asking how dis:connectivity is dealt with from a queer perspective. This means that, based on the two examples, I would like to discuss queer-theoretical formulations of dis:connectivity as a temporal phenomenon, in terms of a critique of the functionality of contradictions for right-wing national, patriarchal and neoliberal politics. I call these queer-theoretical formulations ‘strange temporality’, quoting Elizabeth Freeman (2010).

In my opinion, the film *Blue Jean* (UK 2022, 97 min, Georgia Oakley) speaks to this strange temporality that I am trying to outline. The movie takes the viewer on a journey through time that is not a journey at all. The travel to the 1980s, and specifically the time when Margaret Thatcher passed a series of laws known as Section 28, which banned the ‘promotion of homosexuality’ by local authorities, is a confrontation with the present. The attempt to shut down a school play in Texas in 2023 on the grounds that the content was too vulgar as a pretext to prevent the transgender and non-binary actors appearing on stage (Goodman 2023) is a salute from the past. In this past, Thatcher enacted Section 28 because children were being taught in schools ‘an inalienable right to be gay’ instead of ‘traditional moral values’. (Thatcher 1987) To suppress such a ‘right’, bans were issued and censorship measures developed. Just like today. In 2023, I read the headline ‘Book expelled from US school libraries because it shows a kiss’ (Spiegel Online 2023) where it was reported that a young woman told a school board in Texas that she had become addicted to porn because she could not tolerate the depiction of a kiss in a comic book when she was 13. However, the article continued to state that this woman works for a far-right publishing house whose stated aim is to protect children from ‘sexual obscenities’, which, in view of the publisher’s website and the visual dominance of heteronormative familiarity, means protection from LGBTIQ+ people.

The miniseries *Fellow Travelers* (USA 2023, 8 episodes, Ron Nyswaner) is not only a journey through time based on the viewer’s experience, it also traverses a total of four decades intradiegetically. It links the traumatic incisions of the McCarthy era and the AIDS crisis for Western queer post-war history. Above all, the past

of McCarthyism, made accessible in the series due to current censorship measures, reverberates into the present. The fictional narrative, in which Roy Cohn is accused of being gay himself, is particularly revealing for the present. The background to the accusation made in the 1954 Army-McCarthy hearings that McCarthy's chief legal adviser Roy Cohn had exerted pressure on the army to give G. David Schine preferential treatment is, according to the series, a liaison between Cohn and Schine. This fictionalization makes it possible to understand the extent to which anti-queer measures are also instrumentalized today in order to divert attention from oneself. Without expressing that incorporated homophobia is the motor of censoring policies, the series seems to reveal that then as now, queerness and gender are merely phantasms of authoritarian movements and thus vehicles for shifting fears of losing power (Butler 2024).

The fact that the devastating past of a Britain that suffered under Margaret Thatcher is the vanishing point of *Blue Jean* speaks to the present, in which gender-equitable politics, queer love and non-binary existence are once again experiencing proudly expressed restrictions and reprisals (ntv 2023). *Fellow Travelers* is also characterized by a melancholy prolonged into the present in the face of queer-hostile and racist violence and persecution. *Blue Jean* and *Fellow Travelers* show the extent to which what feels wrong today was not right back then.

Interestingly, film and series do not judge the past, but paradoxically empathize with the moment in which there is nothing right in the wrong, in a way that stirs up longing. In this paradox lies what I see as fruitful for a queer critique of temporal dis:connectivity in the sense of strange temporality.

With its bluish, washed-out images of post-industrial dreariness, the long shots of Rosy McEwen playing, the costume and sound design that revels in the 1980s, *Blue Jean* also seems to me to form a place of longing for a queer feeling that is backward in the sense of Heather Love's now 18-year-old book, and yet seductive (Love 2007). As Love argues in *Feeling Backward*, the loss of queer as depicted in the film due to the self-censorship of the protagonist, who as a sports teacher of pubescent girls tries to stay in the closet due to the passing of Section 28, is not rejected as an intolerable state per se, but is kept open for the possibility of lesbian desire and queer politics.

Fellow Travelers also oscillates between the lie in which the protagonists Hawk Fuller and Skippy Laughlin are forced to settle and the very diverse space of desire that this lie also creates to a certain extent. The sexual act, which is present throughout the series but never repeats itself, takes on a further role, is a plot-driving moment, but also a complex, sometimes convoluted space for negotiating power relations (Romano 2023). The characters appear correspondingly ambiguous, the identity concepts correspondingly queer.

The paranoia staged in *Blue Jean* with fearful glances out of the window, seeing all the neighbours as spies, but also the apparent naivety of thinking that not everything is political, as well as the refusal to show public solidarity with a student at the moment of her forced outing suggests – as in *Fellow Travelers* using the example of Hawk – an only slightly courageous political subject or refers to the entanglements in power relations. Nevertheless, the melancholy of the character (which grows into tragedy when her friend Vivian breaks up with her out of disappointment in the face of Jean's supposed inability to act), hinted at by the title *Blue Jean*, creates a space that makes queer understandable as something that does not follow a singular instruction of political subjectivity. In the end, we learn how essential it is for those in the closet to create the (economic) freedom to (financially) support queer, left-wing politics. And Hawk, who lives the lie of the heteronormative family all his life in *Fellow Travelers*, is also the one who, at the end of the series, uses his rather modest means of political diplomacy compared to Skippy's fearless activism to support the fight against the state-induced neglect of people with AIDS in a decisive way.

I also understand the everyday-ness of intimacy and lust in a time full of repression as this queer feeling that works with fear without being less intense in the sense of queer desire and/or politics. On the contrary, it almost seems to me that the scene in *Blue Jean* where Jean has to break off sex with Vivian because she feels oppressed by social fears in private is a key scene for both productions. Jean sneaks out of bed, goes to the kitchen to make herself something to eat and reads Radclyffe Hall's novel *The Well of Loneliness* (1928). The book, often criticized for its backward-looking approach, becomes the refuge of a desire that turns to the gravity and complexity of queer history as a history of loss and – as Love claims in *Feeling Backward* in her examination of the novel – is all the more urgent as a contribution to the present. That is how I feel about the movie and the series. They show a possibility for queer politics in a time of its impossibility. In conclusion, I would like to summarize that this is particularly related to a specific way of dealing with the past and is at the centre of a queer theory of temporal dis:connectivity, I would like to suggest here.

What seems to characterize the film and series is that they are connected to the horrors of the past without limiting the past to the narrative of the impossibility of queer life. According to Judith Butler, this represents a mode of responsibility whose ethics are based on being connected to a past that implies moments of ambiguity due to its performativity. For the shaping of the present, this reference to the past means an opening towards a state of ambiguity (Butler 2023, 119–36). Following queer theories of time, I would like to refer to this as a strange temporality of dis:connectivity. Here I refer to the concept of temporal drag developed by Elizabeth Freeman following Judith Butler (Freeman 2010). The queer historiography

developed by Heather Love based on Walter Benjamin's Angel of History is also instructive for my argument (Love 2007). The decisive factor here is a reassessment of the significance of the past from the perspective of temporality, which did not yet play a prominent role in Butler's early work (Freeman 2010, 62–3), but which emerges more clearly in the readings of Freeman and Love.

Elizabeth Freeman derives the term 'temporal drag' from Butler's theory of performativity in *Gender Trouble* (Butler 1990), but makes it clear that, unlike Butler, it is not the innovation in the repetition alone that is of interest for a queer critique of power, but the anachronism (Freeman 2010, 63) – that is, the memory of the violence of history and what we thought we had overcome that bursts into the present. While Butler in *Gender Trouble* is oriented towards a change in the future with regard to the difference that occurs in repetition, Freeman is interested in the transgressive potential of this past, 'the interesting threat that the genuine pastness of the past – its opacity and illegibility [. . .] – sometimes make to the political present' (Freeman 2010).

The connection to a past that is characterized by a form of disconnectedness, because it sometimes remains incomprehensible from the perspective of the present or – because it has supposedly been overcome – is no longer legible, is the potential of a memory that folds itself into the present as a factor of social changeability. Freeman's example at this point is not to reject the history of lesbian feminists, which has become incomprehensible from a queer perspective, as an anachronism, but to affirm its unrealized future, its performative openness. Heather Love makes a similar argument in *Feeling Backwards*. She, too, is concerned not with rejecting the past, which mostly meant a history of loss with regard to queer worlds of experience, but rather with keeping it open as a possibility for queer politics.

It is important to emphasize that Freeman speaks of the potential and Love of the possibility and not the guarantee of a solution necessarily resulting from the history of loss and violence. Thus, as with Benjamin's Angel of History, it is a matter of refusing to turn the losses of the past into the material of progress (Love 2007, 148). In this sense, memory is not understood as an imperative that must necessarily be followed in the future, but rather as a commandment whose enforceability remains fragile, risky and open (Butler 2013, 128). It is therefore important for the argument of a strange temporality of dis:connectivity to recognize the reference to anachronism for a critique of progressive thinking (Butler 2013, 112, 119). This also means that the violence of the past inserts itself into the present (Butler 2013, 127) without unfolding in it as self-identical with the past. The leeway created by this performative disconnectedness of touching temporalities is – without guarantee – an offer for queer connections in the present.

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