

Ah, Look at All the Lonely Queers: Andrew Haigh and Contemporary Gay Subjectivity in *Weekend*

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how the queer film *Weekend* (2011), directed by Andrew Haigh, portrays characters who, through acts of self-narrativization, explore the subjectivity of contemporary white gay men, especially loneliness and isolation. Dissecting how Haigh operates the tools of the realistic drama, the analysis demonstrates how the artistic gesture becomes the instrument to deal with this inherent solitude, working as a mirror of the director's filmic gesture. The investigation makes use of excerpts from interviews with the filmmaker, as well as reflections on realism in contemporary cinema and key concepts from queer theory, to illustrate how the film becomes a window connecting the intimacy of queer existences in private and what is said and shown about them in public.

Keywords: *contemporary queer cinema; queer creative act; Weekend; Andrew Haigh; realism.*

RESUMO

Este artigo examina como o filme queer *Weekend* (2011), dirigido por Andrew Haigh, retrata personagens que, por meio de atos de autonarrativização, exploram a subjetividade do homem gay branco contemporâneo, especialmente a solidão e o isolamento. Ao dissecar como Haigh mobiliza as ferramentas do drama realista, a análise mostra como

o gesto artístico se torna o instrumento para lidar com essa solidão inerente, funcionando como espelho do gesto fílmico do diretor. A investigação utiliza trechos de entrevistas com o cineasta, além de reflexões sobre o realismo no cinema contemporâneo e conceitos-chave da teoria queer, para ilustrar como o filme se torna uma janela entre a intimidade das existências queer privadas e o que se diz e mostra delas em público.

Palavras-chave: *cinema queer contemporâneo; ato de criação queer; Weekend; Andrew Haigh; realismo.*

RESÚMEN

Este artículo examina cómo la película queer *Weekend* (2011), dirigida por Andrew Haigh, retrata personajes que, mediante actos de auto-narrativización, exploran la subjetividad del hombre gay blanco contemporáneo, en especial la soledad y el aislamiento. Al analizar cómo Haigh emplea las herramientas del drama realista, el estudio muestra cómo el gesto artístico se convierte en un instrumento para afrontar esa soledad inherente, actuando como espejo del gesto fílmico del director. La investigación recurre a fragmentos de entrevistas con el cineasta, así como a reflexiones sobre el realismo en el cine contemporáneo y a conceptos clave de la teoría queer, para ilustrar cómo la película se vuelve una ventana que conecta la intimidad de las existencias queer privadas con lo que se dice y muestra de ellas en público.

Palabras clave: *cine queer contemporáneo; acto de creación queer; Weekend; Andrew Haigh; realismo.*

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In an interview given to Richard Goldstein, then editor of *The Village Voice*, in 1984, James Baldwin presented a pertinent reflection on a certain resentment inherent to white gay men and their loss of privileges. According to the novelist, poet, playwright and essayist, “white gay people feel cheated because they were born, in principle, into a society in which they were supposed to be safe. The anomaly of their sexuality puts them in danger, unexpectedly” (Baldwin, 2014, p. 51). For the white male individual, homosexuality represents, in a way, an expulsion from the top of the food chain: from a social place of absolute and complete privilege, he becomes in turn an other – a pariah, potentially threatened and ostracized.

It should be noted that Baldwin's statement was made within the context of the Aids epidemic of the 1980s. However, given his writings, thoughts and politics, it is very likely he would stand by his claim and argue that this remains true today – perhaps even more so. With the achievement of a series of rights and protections in several – mostly western – countries, many white gay men live a neoliberal existence, as “a person that privileges success, consumerism and consumer culture, capitalism and self-improvement; the neoliberal subject is one who honors the self over the many” (Winterton, 2018, p. 47). Even with all these victories, however, the neoliberal white gay individual is still not a white heterosexual man – he is not the king of the jungle, and never will be. At the same time, he does not feel especially connected with the queer community of rejects and outcasts, such as trans people and black gays, who, for having their existences rejected or ignored by society in a more radical and violent manner, are much more compelled to form and live in tribes, in their “communes” on the margins of sociopolitical centers.

The result of this is that a large portion of white gay men lives in an impasse, in a limbo, halfway between white privilege and queer resistance – never fully belonging to one side or the other. Consequently, this white neoliberal homosexual becomes the queer “outsider” in an unusual sense: an individual whose identity exists in this state of transition between here and there, past and future, fight and complacency, defined by this huge void of not-belonging – an emptiness manifested in a solitude that he must somehow try to fulfill.

In *Weekend* (2011), directed by the British filmmaker Andrew Haigh, the protagonists use an artistic gesture as a tool to deal with their inherent loneliness. In the film, the main characters resort to narrative exercises that revisit their own existences, especially the seminal moments that catalyzed their sense of isolation, in order to confront and potentially, although not necessarily, overcome the traumas and demons responsible for a permanent feeling of disconnection from the rest of the world. The purpose of this paper is to examine these acts of self-narrativization enacted by them not as a mere autobiographical mechanism, but as a mirror of the director's own filmic gesture, with both the creative process depicted on screen and cinema itself becoming instruments to explore particular aspects of contemporary white gay men's subjectivity.

The notion of working with art – specifically, the artistic and creative gesture – in order to grasp subjectivity comes from what Halperin (2012, p. 15) describes as “the study of social practices, aesthetic practices, styles, tastes, feelings – analyzed so as to disclose their internal structures, formal logic, cultural operation, meaning, and distribution”, which allows for an understanding of “how male homosexual desire connects with specific cultural forms, styles, modes of feeling, and kinds of discourse”. What this means is that – this being an exercise in film analysis, and not psychoanalysis – subjectivity will be dealt with here as the result of these cultural practices and operations, more from the collective and semiotic perspective proposed by Halperin and less as a deep dive into the psychic constitution of a particular individual.

The investigation intends to dissect how Haigh operates the tools of the realistic drama in *Weekend* to peel the layers of artifice inherent to contemporary queer cinema and reveal the melancholy and frailty masked behind them. Far from affirmative politics or simplistic statuses of positive or negative representation, the film offers a brutal look at the mirror, in which the masks of camp irony and empowering discourses fall off, revealing some of the most hidden and emotionally uncomfortable aspects of the contemporary gay existence. Faced with this distressing reality, the artistic creation becomes for both the characters and, potentially, the director an escape valve, a possible way out of this profound sense of isolation. The analysis will show how the film articulates what Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips (2008) call “impersonal intimacy” with sex and self-narrativization to respond to this emotional turmoil – allowing the protagonists to reconfigure their subjectivities in the face of frustrated personal utopias.

In order to carry out this line of inquiry and understand how this happens, the paper will make use of excerpts from interviews in which Haigh elaborates about his filmmaking process. Drawing from his recurring emphasis on wishing to create something “authentic”, this essay will examine how the movie brings forth an idea of authenticity that is based on the summoning of shared queer experiences. This evocation not only invites the viewer to interpret what is on screen, but also to emotionally and sensorially engage with the narrative and, ultimately, to co-construct it.

This examination will be put in dialogue with reflections on realism in contemporary cinema, as well as with key concepts from queer theory. By stitching all these different discourses together, the aim is to explore how, at the director’s hands, cinema becomes not a tool of mere representation,

but of excavation of the intricacies of contemporary gay subjectivity – a true window connecting the intimacy of what queer existences are like in private and what is actually said and shown about them in public.

An authentic queer

This idea of the window as a connecting element between private and public space is established in the first seconds of *Weekend*. The film's first image is a wide shot of Nottingham, followed by the window of the protagonist's apartment framing a view of the same city – and only then do we move on to the hallway and the rest of his place. The notion that the window is what connects these two spaces is made quite clear in this sequence and will be central to the development of the plot.

As per the title, the movie takes place over a weekend. On Friday night, after a dinner at his friend Jamie's (Jonathan Race) house, where Russell (Tom Cullen) feels out of place and seems uncomfortable and unengaged with the party's straight crowd, he decides to stop by a gay bar on his way home. There, while attempting to pick up someone, Russell meets Glen (Chris New), and the two of them end up spending the night. The next morning, the conversation triggered by an artistic project Glen is working on – in which he records testimonies from his partners narrating the sexual encounter they just had – initially causes a mutual estrangement, but ends up bringing them closer together and establishing the beginning of some form of intimacy between them. This makes the couple decide to meet again in the afternoon, after Russell's shift as a swimming pool lifeguard; then once more, in the evening, at a farewell party for Glen, who is leaving England for an artistic residency in the United States the next day; and finally, at the train station on Sunday, for their final goodbye before the departure of the aspiring artist.

In each of these encounters, the duo of protagonists will confess to and confront their different experiences and world views in a series of dialogues, filmed in long takes, rarely interrupted by a very spare use of cuts, with no musical score, and a haptic attention to the mundane and everyday aspects of locations, costumes and gestures that David Forrest (2020, p. 196-197) identifies as part of a "New British Realism", a group of contemporary films that elevate

its everyday subjects through lyrical emphasis on ubiquitous landscapes, domestic interiors, familiar buildings, routines and habits. New realist films evoke the physical and perceptual conditions that constitute and frame our quotidian realities and render these visible and pronounced, and thus poetic. They make clear the political, emotional and cultural forces that shape and determine our lives, and stir the experiences and memories that we deploy to negotiate, interpret and consume them.

Realistic features are a common thread across a large part of contemporary independent cinema all over the world today, usually “characterized by a sensory mode of address based on the protracted inspection of physical reality”, which is “heightened to sensory effect” by “an extreme allegiance to the long take” (De Luca, 2014, p. 1-9). Even though these traits can be traced all the way back to André Bazin’s fascination with the long take in the 1950s, or to Siegfried Kracauer’s description of realism in film as an encounter that allows viewers “the experience of things in their concreteness” (Kracauer, 1997, p. 296) as early as the 1960s, they gain new nuances in the 21st century. Scholars such as Laura Marks, and her theorization of “haptic visuality” as a tool that emphasizes “the tactile and contagious quality of cinema as something we as viewers brush up against like another body” (Marks, 2000, p. xii), or Jennifer Barker, whose “cinema tactility” advocates the possibility of film “as an intimate experience” (Barker, 2009, p. 2), have recently advanced the notion of realism “as a sensory interface between film and viewer” (De Luca, 2014, p. 7).

David Forrest, however, argues New British Realism as both geographically and historically contingent. The author sees it as a development of the so-called kitchen-sink social realism, epitomized in British film history by Ken Loach, that distinguishes itself from its predecessor by embracing a sensorial and bodily sensibility that mobilizes “an active participatory mode of spectatorship, predicated on what I have termed a sense of ‘being with’ and ‘being there’” (Forrest, 2020, p. 6)¹. Haigh’s filming style in *Weekend* – which Forrest specifically cites as an example of this New British Realism –, with its preference for long takes and two-shots that seem to invite viewers to share the intimacy being established between his characters, without major extradiegetic interferences such as a musical score or an ultra-stylized use of lighting and sound, is a perfect illustration of this feeling of “being with” and “being there” described by the author.

The director attributes this naturalistic style, and specifically his refusal to cut, to his intention to create something that is, or at least seems to be, “authentic” – one of the most recurring terms in the almost 100 interviews given by Haigh and examined during this research. “Film is fake, so you’re

trying in every way to make it feel authentic" (Haigh, 2018), he summarized in an interview to *Slant Magazine's* reporter Elise Nakhnikian, published on April 2nd 2018. If this idea of authenticity is so essential to the filmmaker, it is important to question – or to queer – the concept of "authentic". Because, as Haigh himself acknowledges in his quote, whether filmed in a 20-minute long take or edited at the pace of a music video, cinema remains "*a lie told at 24 frames per second*", in the famous words of director Rainer Werner Fassbinder. So, in a queer perspective, what could "authentic" mean – what is its relevance – to the British director?

In this regard, it might be interesting to pay some attention to Haigh's personal history, as a gay man who claims to have come out of the closet "quite late, around 24" (Haigh, 2011). What this implies is that, in a way, he considers he might have lived an "inauthentic" existence, or at least one based on a lie or omission, for over 20 years – a rather common circumstance among non-heterosexual individuals. As a result, the idea of creating something that is "authentic", that is not a lie, that exposes, reveals and is based on some form of "truth", can become especially important when an artist subjected to years, or decades, of silencing decides to make a movie – or, in a broader sense, to tell a story.

This summoning of a common – queer – experience brings us back, not coincidentally, to the New British Realism and its feeling of "being with" and "being there". According to Forrest, the sense of authenticity, inherent to realism, is called upon in this group of films precisely through its evocation of these common, lived experiences that "appeal to spectatorial subjectivities, inviting the viewer to bring their narrative to the texts as interpretative resources and frameworks" (Forrest, 2020, p. 6). Authenticity, therefore, becomes not merely a film quality, but a co-construction. On the one hand, viewers are invited to access their memories, feelings, knowledge, opinions and backgrounds. On the other, the films present a series of elements – from the construction of the characters to the feelings they express, the situations they go through and how they respond to them, the places they inhabit, the clothes they wear – that are meant to activate and engage with this personal and collective emotional baggage.

What is specific about these contemporary British movies, Forrest argues, is how this is all filmed and put on screen with a sensorial and bodily sensitivity that establishes a relationship between environment and identity, which evolves "beyond merely a deterministic account of

social, economic and cultural forces – giving shape to the trajectories of the films’ protagonists so that this dynamic is also felt at the experiential level” (Forrest, 2020, p. 2). How Andrew Haigh creates this sensorial experience in the particular case of *Weekend* is what will be analyzed in the next two sections.

Private intimacy, public heteronormativity

In the particular case of *Weekend*, Stephanie Clare (2013, p. 788) claims that, by resorting to this authenticity pact with the viewer, the movie

posits itself as a reflection of the real, and it invites viewers to identify and join in to feel the feelings it portrays. Thus, although I begin by writing about a fictional character, Russell, I am also writing about a figure around whom a public forms, a figure that consists of a type who exists in a historical moment and location beyond the film’s screen and whose feelings the film invites us to share.

The success of this invitation can be ascertained by the critical and historical endurance of the movie, which, since premiering at Austin’s South by Southwest Festival in 2011, where it won the Audience Award, has become an emblematic and recurring title when it comes to contemporary queer cinema.² In its first, essentially narrative, layer, the two protagonists, Russell and Glen, confront their opposing ideas of what it means to be, or not to be, gay – as well as their aspirations of who they think they are, or wish to be – and through this romantic-verbal sparring, the film wonders what being gay, or queer, is today. Beneath this textual clash between Russell’s supposedly homonormative³ domesticity and Glen’s supposedly queer rage, however, *Weekend*’s subtext and mise-en-scène stage two other oppositions – domestic versus public space, and intimacy versus solitude. Put in dialogue with each other, they are as, or more, essential to the discussion about where and how it is possible to be gay/queer today, and in which way the spaces we inhabit inform our notions and experiences of gender and sexuality.

In the film, the domestic environment – and, more specifically, Russell’s apartment – is the space of intimacy, where it is possible and safe to be gay. It is the place where there is not only the possibility of sex, but also of an intimate and honest dialogue that allows for closeness, and even love, safe from the threat and dangers of public space. This idea of intimacy, however, must not be read as an outdated form of film romance, much less ownership, in which the protagonists meet someone who will give meaning to their existence and with whom they will spend the rest of their

lives. That is not the point, as the end of the movie will make very clear. The connection that is established in Russell's place can be read as an example of what Bersani and Phillips (2008) call "impersonal intimacy", which is made possible when two people meet and, by being able to see one another better than they see themselves, allow each other to become who they really are. Through this "reciprocal attentiveness to the other's becoming what he potentially is, both partners move beyond what turns out to have been only a provisional distinction between the lover and the beloved" (Bersani; Phillips, 2008, p. 123). More than a mere notion of love, romance or partnership, then, what really matters is the acknowledgement that "to love the other's potential self is a form of self love" (Bersani; Phillips, 2008, p. 124) – in other words, by recognizing, loving and accepting each other for who they really are, Russell and Glen become more able to recognize, love and accept themselves. They eventually become more whole and evolved.

Meanwhile, the street and the outside in general are the domain of heteronormativity and potential homophobia. This is made clear in one of the movie's first moments of intimacy, when Glen's attempt to record Russell's testimony is interrupted by the homophobic yelling of young kids outside the building – the street as a sonic out-of-field invading the domestic queer potential. As someone who wants to exist, and assert himself, in the public space, Glen responds to the insults, but Russell reprehends him and asks him to stop, since he does not want his homely refuge to be discovered and made target of the external violence.

The street and the outdoors, however, do not exist solely out of frame in *Weekend*. They are a fundamental presence in the narrative. If Russell is clearly associated with the domestic environment, the public space is the realm Glen wishes to not only circulate in, but to also make queer – throwing his farewell party, for instance, at a straight bar and talking loudly about anal sex amidst the local regulars. It is not a coincidence that the viewer never gets to see Glen's home – he refuses to keep his existence and his sexuality hidden in a den.

More than simply juxtaposing, or opposing, these two arenas, what Haigh seems to attempt in *Weekend* is to use cinema, and especially editing, to put the different narratives they both set up in contact with each other and show how they coexist, even if in potential friction. In a movie with so many long takes, and such sparse editing, the rare cuts gain a contrasting and shocking power that confront the viewer with the oppositions they create. From the partying and cruising at the gay bar

in the beginning, Haigh cuts straight to the domesticity of Russell making coffee, in his white undies, the next morning. Later, the “bodily and sensorial” shot of the protagonist cleaning the semen from his abdomen after having sex with Glen is followed by the building façade, with the scene of the inner most intimacy juxtaposed with the banality and vigilance of public space – the next shot after that is the image of a surveillance camera outside the building. Finally, the first image following the only sex scene between the two characters that the movie actually allows the viewer to see – a choice that will be analyzed in greater depth further ahead – is that of a window, in a communion between private and public.

It is by using framing and sound, however, that the director shows how each of these spaces configures distinct forms and possibilities of being gay – or, more specifically, intimately gay. With Haigh’s choice of long takes, the dialogue scenes between Russell and Glen are filmed, as a rule, in two-shots in which it is possible to see the relationship happen before our eyes, in the reactions that a character’s line has in the face, the expression, and the behavior of the other. Curiously, the reason for this particular option in mise-en-scène is related to the filmmaker’s previous experience as an assistant editor in Hollywood blockbusters. Before directing his own movies, Haigh worked in the editing of features such as *Gladiator* (2000) and *Black Hawk Down* (2001) and, in an interview with *Indiewire*’s reporter Charlie Schmidlin, published on December 23 2015, he explained how his work in these productions and his rejection to what he noticed about them ended up influencing his directing style:

working on those bigger films, I saw that the emotion is all created within the edit, and I just felt like there’s a lack of truthfulness in that. When I started trying to make my own things, I really thought, “Okay, how do I try and make a moment feel genuinely truthful?” With deciding not to edit as much, that was because, one, you have to do it in the moment within the take and on the day; and two, it means the actors have a lot more freedom to help that moment. Judging the approach, though, I want to see the relationship unfold in front of my eyes. I want the weird, subtle emotional changes to happen within the same frame and shot, rather than the emotion being created by a reaction cutaway (Haigh, 2015).

Once again, the viewer is, then, invited to “be there” and “be with” something that intends to be authentic, engaging in the elaboration of the narrative by scrutinizing the frame and the actors’ performances as an observer – and co-creator, by bringing their experiences, feelings and recognition – of a queer intimacy often restricted to the private domain.

However, if this “impersonal intimacy” between the two characters, and between characters and viewer, is possible in the domestic environment of Russell’s apartment, in the public space it finds some obstacles – as does its mise-en-scène. During Glen’s party, for instance, cinematographer Urszula Pontikos’s camera seems to be constantly trying to reframe this intimacy between the protagonists and to find that two-shot in which it comes to life, but there is always something between her and the characters, or even a potentially homophobic look captured in the depth of field that prevents it from happening in the same way as in Russell’s place. The sound mix plays the same role: if the near silence in the apartment allows for the dialogue between the couple to flow, and for the viewer to be a (listening) part of it, the noise caused by the bar’s other patrons becomes almost literally the deafening fuss of heteronormativity, creating a sort of clash of narratives in which the still prevalent uproar of everyday neighboring homophobia ends up making the two decide to leave. Even on the bus on the way to Russell’s apartment, the same visual obstacles and the same ambient noise keep on interfering with the “authentic” intimacy desired by the protagonists – and by Haigh.

Yet *Weekend* is not a defeatist film in the face of this heteronormativity inherent to public space. In the final farewell between its central characters, at the train station, the director shows how cinema can, indeed, be used as this window, this place in which authentic queer intimacy and public space meet. Their goodbye on the platform is filmed in a single shot, initially framed from a distance. There is a fence – another obstacle – between the camera and the protagonists that, along with the noise of the passing trains and the station’s announcements on the loudspeaker, make it difficult for the viewer to see and listen the final dialogue between the two (Img. 1). This time, however, cinema will overcome the neighboring homophobia. From a certain point on, the camera starts to push the viewer closer to the couple through a zoom, and the sound editing enhances their dialogue, bringing it to the foreground and making it intelligible to the audience. Completing this conquering moment, Russell finally overcomes his fear, and his internalized homophobia, kissing Glen in a public space (Img. 2). When a homophobic bark of “*fucking gay boys*” is heard in the distance, this time it is Russell who gets annoyed, and Glen who tells him to ignore them. There is no need to fight because that single moment between them *is* the fight. And after

they part, it is absolutely no coincidence that Haigh cuts to... a shot of the window, where Russell is standing, this place of conciliation and of the possible encounter between domestic intimacy and the freedom of public space.



Images 1 and 2. Frames of the farewell scene between the protagonists in *Weekend*, captured from 1:30:09 (1) and 1:31:37 (2). Reproduced from the Blu-ray copy.

Personal dys/ut/opias

Before reaching this possible conciliation, though, in which Glen accepts that a public love gesture between two men can indeed be an act of rebellion, and Russell feels comfortable enough with himself to initiate it, they both need to confront their differences. Which they do, in a series of sparings throughout the entire film, discussing and clashing on topics such as gay marriage, gay rights, queer riots, and the need (or not) to talk to straight friends about rimming and fisting and anal sex. At a certain point, Glen argues that the US is a better place for him to create his queer art because it is a country where the LGBTQIA+ community took to the streets for their rights, and Russell responds by saying that the only reason Glen is going is because he is running away from his trauma with his ex, John – that, deep down, he also wants a relationship and, as long as he does not process and accept it, he will not be happy, either in the UK or in the US.

When the lifeguard provokes the aspiring artist with this (possible) truth, there is a sudden halt in the couple's biggest argument. It is not that the movie believes or defends that Russell's homonormative view is the final answer – but rather that his line reveals the essence that maybe makes the two protagonists come together: both Russell and Glen are lonely outsiders trying to find a way to

fulfill/reverse their profound solitude. However, the answer sought by each of them is not the same because it is directly determined by their different life stories. As Denilson Lopes (2006, p. 387) points out, being gay or queer is not a fixed unique category, but a series of experiences that are

not only inserted in a socio-historical continuum, but are constituted as the incarnation, the narrativization of identities, moving through them. Identity that must be seen as a matter that is not only logical, formal, philosophical, but above all historical, social and political.⁴

With that in mind, it must be taken into account that Russell is an orphan who never met his parents and decorates his house with second-hand furniture and utensils, imagining personal stories for each object he finds. Investigating this relationship between domesticity and gay subjectivity in the United Kingdom – a country that criminalized sex between men until very late in the 20th century, thus turning public spaces into a potentially unsafe and threatening domain for these individuals –, Matt Cook (2014) elaborates on the concurrent importance and melancholy of this attachment to home. According to him, the specific experience of growing up gay in such a homophobic and heteronormative culture, in which homosexuality was frowned upon and compulsory heterosexuality was part of most households, meant that the idea of having a place of your own once you become an adult was a prospect

saturated with emotion. It was a place infused with desires – for love, sex, intimacy, relationships, for pleasure, for security and comfort. Such desires were often strongly felt because they were unfulfilled, and yet might also be a powerful driving force in seeking changes to home and the domestic set up (Cook, 2014, p. 10).

In the particular case of Russell, though, this collecting of objects with imaginary stories also points to a clear attempt to create some kind of family he never had. Haigh's filmography is punctuated by an epidemic of absent families: like Russell, Adam, the protagonist of *All of Us Strangers* (2023) is also an orphan; Pete, the escort in *Greek Pete* (2009) left his parents in Greece and has no relatives in London; Kate (Charlotte Rampling) and Geoff (Tom Courtenay), the central couple in *45 Years* (2015), have no kids, and no other family member attend their wedding anniversary; all the calvary faced by the protagonist Charley (Charlie Plummer) in *Lean on Pete* (2017) is caused by the loss of his father, his desperate search for his aunt and for a new nuclear family.

Back to *Weekend*, however, Glen has clearly had a formal education and a family structure that allowed him to pursue an Arts degree, and a certain middle (or upper middle) class existence that made it possible for the answer to his non-belonging in Nottingham to be an artistic residency on the other side of the Atlantic. This all points to how Russell is not merely a conformed homonormative, nor Glen is a strongly politicized rebel. The two are simply shaped by their privileges and experiences so far. Based on them, they fabulate what Clare (2013, p. 789) calls their “personal utopias”, a possible future that allows both characters to accept and live with the melancholy that infuses their present:

embedded in this desire is a structure of deferment. It is okay if I am not happy now. It is okay if I am lonely now. I can imagine that in the future I will no longer be. Even more, in this imaginary future, I can imagine that my future will remain happy. It does not matter if this is not actually the case. What matters is that I have access to this imaginary future. I posit a utopia for myself. This utopia makes life in the present and in my imagined future bearable.

Thus, Russell believes that finding a stable, monogamous, lifelong partner with whom he can build a family and share a home will heal his melancholy and perhaps give his life meaning. And Glen, on the other hand, hopes that fueling his rage, indignation and frustration with the world into his art will help change it and possibly make it better and more queer.

Clare adds that the characters’ attachment to these likely unattainable utopias is directly related to what Lauren Berlant identifies in the melodrama as the “female lament” and its consequent “cruel optimism”, which “exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing” (Berlant, 2011, p. 1). Specifically in Russell’s case, his dreams and expectations of finding a certain idea of romantic, everlasting love that will potentially fulfill his solitary life can be traced to what Berlant (2008, p. 7) describes, regarding female romance protagonists, as “the constantly emplotted desire of a complex person to rework the details of her history to become a vague or simpler version of herself, usually in the vicinity of a love plot”. This desire, she argues, is deeply associated with a yearning for social acceptance and belonging, defined by the author as the very principle of normativity – the idea “that a hygienic, morally constrained version of the aspirational good life is always available as an instrument of moral trumping in the political public sphere” (Berlant, 2008, p. 9).

The notion that a particular configuration of love and family is what will make the public arena safer and more accepting is unquestionably embedded in the lifeguard's normative utopia. Whether it comes to his romantic fantasies or Glen's artistic aspirations, though, Berlant argues that no matter how cruel these attachments might be, the idea of letting go of them may be impossible because – for characters within these narrative configurations – “the continuity of its form provides something of the continuity of the subject's sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world” (Berlant, 2011, p. 24). In other words, it makes life more bearable.

If Clare (2013) considers these unattainable utopias to be a form of “queer lament”, a melancholic ever-frustrated anticipation of something that will make life whole and meaningful, Winterton (2018) calls them “personal dystopias”. Identifying in a series of contemporary queer films this recurring theme of melancholic characters who experience some form of erotic and sexual joy, but seem to be thwarted in their expectations of a certain normative idea of love and of a traditional “happily ever after”, he claims that these movies present

a world where happiness and pleasure are only momentary. These films all present “relatively explicit” erotic sex that ultimately leads to a break-up or heartbreak for the protagonists. Utopian sex is often placed centrally within a somewhat dystopian or anti-climactic narrative (Winterton, 2018, p. 51).

It's no coincidence, then, that the viewer is presented with *Weekend's* only on-camera sex scene between Russell and Glen right after their intense argument about their respective utopias – or dystopias. Once they are done with their discussion, the director films the protagonists finding a silent truce by listening to music (where else?) in the window, before going to bed and having sex: after having contemplated the future and the incompatibility of their personal uto/dystopias, the only thing left for the both of them is to experience the ephemeral pleasure of this “utopian sex” described by Winterton.

Despite this possible “utopian” connotation, though, it is worth noting that the sequence features no golden light filters nor a “sensual” musical score that might resemble an idealized Hollywood version of a sex scene. Rather, in the New British Realism tradition of a “reduction to the body” (Jameson, 2013, p. 26), of an attempt to render affect by “activating the body” (Jameson, 2013, p. 128), the sexual encounter is created with just flesh and sound: Pontikos's camera pans over Cullen's and New's naked figures while the viewer hears their kisses and the reactions their touches

and caresses provoke in each other – with the audience being invited to “be with” and “be there” by a haptic mise-en-scène that extends “perception beyond the visual register, in order to expose or engage the body as a total perceptual surface, while deploying other senses/perceptions – notably touch and hearing – as at least equally relevant to the cinematic experience” (Elsaesser, 2009, p. 4).

Stripped of their dys/ut/opias, of their clothes, and of everything else – no music, no extradiegetic enhancements –, the two protagonists can finally see and love each other for who they actually are: their imperfections, frustrations, disconnections. And, most importantly, realize that, despite all these obstacles and impossibilities, they can still feel, and give each other, pleasure, in the present – a pleasure that can be sensed and shared by the viewer in the loud smacking of kisses heard in the sound mix, in their moaning, in the heightened eroticism of their locking eyes as they penetrate each other towards a mutual orgasm. The scene makes it clear that there is actual, palpable and concrete joy, love and shared intimacy in being gay and/or queer.

In other words, through this “authentic” and “unfiltered” encounter of bodies and minds, Russell and Glen, and the viewer, are finally able to fully see and accept who they are – and who they are becoming – in the terms of Bersani’s and Phillips’s (2008) “impersonal intimacy”. And, thus, they can, literally, penetrate each other – not as a means to possess one another, but rather to love and accept their mutual process of becoming themselves. Instead of presenting an idea of romance based on ownership and long-term commitment, *Weekend* and Haigh illustrate what Bersani (2009, p. 108) describes as a “theory of love [...] grounded in the very contradictions, impossibilities, and antagonisms brought to light by any serious genealogy of desire”.

Sex here is, therefore, not what Berlant (2008) points to as the utopia that melodrama’s female protagonists must aspire to in order to endure all the suffering in their films – the Holy Grail at the end that justifies all the pain up to that point. It exists and is fairly accessible, as well as its pleasure. It might be utopian, however, in the sense posited by José Esteban Muñoz (2009, p. 1), who defines queer as a “rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world” – in other words, as a utopia, which can only be very ephemerally glimpsed through some aesthetic experiences. Sex and the impersonal intimacy shared by Russell and Glen within the four walls of the lifeguard’s apartment could, perhaps, be such an experience. Nevertheless, this inherent ephemerality – the sense that maybe people are places, and love is just a time we

spend on them – is the very cause of this dystopic melancholia that lingers afterwards, according to Winterton. How the two characters try to extend this utopic experience through the artistic and the storytelling gesture is what we will investigate in the final section of this paper.

Queer as storytelling

If, as seen before, sex is what allows Russell and Glen to see, become and accept who they truly are, the act of storytelling, on the other hand, is what will allow them to negotiate their frustrated utopias and transcend the boundaries of their limiting realities, reimagining/reconfiguring their subjectivities within a more expansively queer framework. Because the act of storytelling – and, particularly, self-narrativization – is central in *Weekend*.

As the two protagonists are lying in bed after sex, the aspiring artist claims that the lifeguard is obsessed with his partners' coming-out stories because he himself was not given the chance to have one. Glen argues that everybody should have that experience, and offers to pose as Russell's father, inviting his partner to come out of the closet right then and there. The lifeguard is initially reluctant, but eventually gives in. And Glen's response to his confession is beautiful, loving, kind, and encouraging – everything any queer kid would like to, and deserves to, hear.

The sequence not only demonstrates how important storytelling and narrative are in our lives – it also points to how this "impersonal intimacy" between the two protagonists arises not from the sex they have, but from their dialogue and, more specifically, from the act of narrating. The first deep interaction we see between Russell and Glen is not their sex encounter on Friday night, but its recapitulation from the lifeguard's point of view, prompted by Glen's testimonial project. The fact that they spent the night together does not establish an intrinsic intimacy – actually, the two seem quite awkward and stand-offish in the morning. What initiates the couple's rapprochement is the narrative worked out by Russell and recorded by Glen – the sudden memory that, at a certain point, the artist kissed the lifeguard's hand: an unexpected tender gesture amidst the drunken torpor of casual sex.

This importance of the narrative act is central to *Weekend*: thanks to it, not only authentic, impersonal intimacy is born, but the characters also confront, understand and figure out who they are and who they are becoming – realizing, in Glen's words about his project, "*the gap between what*

they are and what they wish or think they are". Narrating is a fundamental part of the construction of the two protagonists. Russell has his blog, where he writes about his sex encounters and his partners' stories. Glen has his recording project for a future work of art. Russell's narrative is domestic, private, almost secret: the blog is not something he publicizes for everyone to read. Glen's one, in turn, intends to occupy the public space, galleries, institutional arenas. At the same time, though, the lifeguard's virtual journal exists, is something concrete, while the aspiring artist's project is an abstract possibility – a "queer utopia", in the words of Muñoz (2009).

In both cases, Haigh's film shows that one of the best ways to interrogate contemporary gay existence – from its attachment to homonormativity to its inherent loneliness – is to narrativize it. They demonstrate how – by telling, recapitulating, revisiting, dissecting and rewriting their own stories – LGBTQIA+ subjects are able to better understand themselves, identify their fissures, where things went wrong, where they got it right, and what still needs to be figured out in order to become who they wish to be. It is not necessarily about defending storytelling as a substitute for living, but rather, through these creative self-narrating queers, understanding how we live – and how we can live. If Silva (2021, p. 104) identifies in contemporary queer production a series of characters who use the narrative and artistic gesture to fabulate their own existences, in order to "express themselves and give meaning to their perpetual instability through artistic production", something he calls a "queer creative act", that is exactly what Russell, Glen – and Andrew Haigh – do.

Faced with the oppression of a heteronormative world, the failure of a homonormative project, and the historical, social, economic and family constraints that suffocate them, the filmmaker and his characters resist and (re)invent their existences by narrativizing them. In other words, they overcome the spatial, temporal and subjective limitations of their realities by channeling and re-signifying them through artistic creation. Even though their bodies may be trapped in a non-ideal context – sometimes oppressive, sometimes violent, sometimes limiting –, their spirits are not. Their ability to interpret the world around them, to find and give new meanings to their place in it, to imagine new ways of being and existing in it – or even to design a new world – extrapolates and conquers this prison. Gibran da Rocha Bento (2008, p. 237) describes this as

the role of art and the artist as an architect of new subjectivities, that is, of new ways to see and interpret the world, new ways of being and existing. It is in art that we find the space for breaking established rules and experimenting with distorting what is automatic and culturally rooted.

Thus, through their self-narratives, Haigh and his protagonists refuse outdated ideas of fixed identities and categories, associated with a homogenizing external gaze that can only see an indistinct group, rather than individuals, moving toward what Sibilia (2008) considers a process of subjectivation. According to her, “using words and images is to act: thanks to them, we are able to create universes, and with them we build our own subjectivities, nourishing the world with a rich collection of meanings” (Sibilia, 2008, p. 31) – once again, the idea of subjectivity through cultural, social and aesthetic practices proposed by Halperin (2012). Less concerned with an idea of identity than with that of subjectivity, these characters seek, through these new meanings, to

clarify moments and paths leading to certain acts that they contest; to question identities created for them by others, and to define themselves as multiple subjects – as individuals and families, of feelings and attitudes, doubts and certainties, images and texts (Pereira, 2019, p. 180).

What is most curious about the film analyzed here is that, perhaps counterintuitively for a narrative centered around protagonists trying to create or imagine these new ways of being in the world, one of its most striking aspects – as previously established – is their pronounced realistic tone. If the characters eventually realize the need to fabulate new existences, Haigh seems to make a point of placing these individuals and their creative needs within a seemingly naturalistic, everyday context, using a filmic approach that invites the viewer to “be with” and “be there”, sharing the same diegetic universe. The purpose of this realism, however, is not to make his movie a simple – resigned, acquiescent – mirror of reality. What it does convey is that these protagonists’ desire to create stories and craft their own new utopias is born precisely from being situated in this imperfect reality – the same as the viewer’s. As stated by Bento (2008, p. 241):

film is not and should not be seen as the representation of a real world, but rather as a model of a possible world, open to being experienced [...] The viewer may, then, create fictions through interruptions, fissures or discontinuities that break the movie’s linear narrative. Cinema allows the communication and participation in multiple experiences through the invention of forms of space and time that are different from the rules of the real world.

It is no coincidence that a recurring image in *Weekend* is that of the main characters facing their own reflection – in the mirror, in a window, or any other surface. Through this act of looking at themselves – of seeing who they are, their imperfections –, the protagonists realize the gap between what they are and what they wish to be. From this self-recognition arises the will and the need to reinvent themselves. If the world around does not meet their expectations, if *they* do not meet their expectations, it is up to them – and only them – to come up with a new narrative.

By refusing the idea of realism as mere mimesis, the film's notion of everyday life as the foundation for subjective (re)invention is reminiscent of Muñoz's conceptualization of queer as a futurity that must always be pursued – as well as Halberstam's (2005) definition of queer as a series of new spacetime logics. In their theories, both scholars understand queer as a mandate to break away from the millennia-old heteronormative configuration, predicated on being born, marrying, reproducing, and dying, and envision new ways of existing and relating to time and space. And by opening himself to the self-narrativizing gesture performed by his protagonists, and by constructing his film in dialogue with it, both in the conduction of the narrative and in its mise-en-scène, Haigh enables his film to become itself a glimpse of these new spatio-temporal logics and of this queer futurity. Cinema, situated somewhere between photographic realism and the potential for imagining new worlds, thus becomes an instrument that amplifies the queer tensioning and destabilization enacted by these dissident bodies.

Within this framework, film abandons the mere status of representation and becomes this queer creative act itself. It is not about reproducing or imitating reality, but using cinema – and art – to supplant it with something that, by being not necessarily true, but authentic, can be better, more compelling, more honest, more queer, while inviting the viewer to “be there” and “be with” the characters and their experience.⁵

In *Weekend's* final sequence, Russell returns home after Glen's departure. Standing by his window, he listens to the tape with his testimony, which Glen gifted him before leaving. With the failure of his homonormative utopia, all the protagonist is left with is the narrative of what happened as a way of filling his loneliness. “*Just start from the beginning, from when you saw me for the first time*”, Glen says in the recording. If it did not work this once, let us try to understand what transpired in order to, perhaps, try again. Only, next time, different. And, who knows, maybe better.

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NOTAS

1 While it is not within the purpose and scope of this paper to reproduce the same effort here, in his book Forrest presents a comprehensive, didactic and commendable summary of realism in British film, going back to literature and other arts. Among other filmmakers listed by the scholar as part of the New British Realism are names such as Duane Hopkins, Joanna Hogg, Andrea Arnold, Shane Meadows, and Clio Barnard.

2 See, for example: Clare (2013), Richards (2016), Silva (2021), Winterton (2018).

3 According to Lisa Duggan (2016, p. 179), who coined the term, homonormativity is a mode of queer existence “that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption”.

4 All quotes not originally in English were translated by the author.

5 It must be noted that *Weekend* is part of a significant wave of contemporary British queer cinema, which also includes films such as *Lilting* (2014), *God's Own Country* (2017), *Ammonite* (2020), *Blue Jean* (2022) and even Andrew Haigh's more recent *All of Us Strangers* (2023). While the analysis and the statements made in this paper do not apply categorically to this filmography as a whole, it is an interesting prospect for future research to examine parallels, commonalities and divergences among this production, as well as their alignment or not with the New British Realism.