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Queer by Luca Guadagnino. A Fremantle North America Production, and a The Apartment and Frenesy Film Company Production, in collaboration with Cinecittà SPA, in collaboration with Frame by Frame 2024. 137 mins.

Opening in Mexico City in the early 1950s, Luca Guadagnino's *Queer* introduces Bill Lee (Daniel Craig) who is a US expatriate evading a drug prosecution back home. His life revolves around alcohol, drugs, and sexual encounters with men against the backdrop of a queer-coded subculture. Adapted from William S. Burroughs's semi-autobiographical novel of the same title—which was written in the 1950s following *Junky* (1953) but remained unpublished until 1985—the film centers on Lee's increasing fascination with Eugene Allerton (Drew Starkey), a much younger man who spends his time playing chess with the peripheral figure, Mary (Andra Ursuta).

The connection between Lee and Allerton is one of asymmetry: Lee has an intense erotic investment, while Allerton remains more resistant and reserved. This imbalance is reinforced by Lee's preoccupation about whether Allerton is queer or not. This tension highlights a dissonance between desire and identity, with Lee's attachment resonating obliquely to more contemporary modes of queer self-expression. This investment complicates any potential readings of Lee's desire as predatory or desperate. Instead, his desire is framed through the fraught negotiation of masculinity, intimacy, and visibility in mid-twentieth-century contexts.

Lee also wants to travel to South America in search of *yagé* (telepathine), the hallucinogenic brew that he believes could grant him telepathic access to others' thoughts and, in particular, reveal to him whether Allerton is queer. Allerton eventually agrees to be travel companion to Lee, which includes him "[being] nice to [him] twice a week." For Allerton, the journey exposes Lee's dependence on drugs—his intense withdrawal symptoms framed as "dysentery" in a manipulative attempt to secure opiates. They eventually reach botanist Dr. Cotter (Lesley Manville) who, once assured that the pair are not there to steal her research, prepares a potent yagé infusion for them. The resulting hallucination fuses abjection, embodiment, and desire: Lee and Allerton vomit up their own hearts before their bodies twist into a hybrid form. When Allerton insists he is "not queer," Lee's calm "I know" gives way to the more unsettling claim, "I'm disembodied." This exchange underscores the instability of both sexual and ontological categories in the text, positioning yagé (as Dr Cotter indicates to Lee before preparing the infusion) less as a final transcendental "high" than as offering a mirror that reflects the ambiguities of self and desire.

This hallucinogenic vision fractures Lee and Allerton's relationship, and they part company the following day. Two years later, Lee re-visits Mexico City and reflects on Allerton who has disappeared from his life entirely. In a dream sequence, Lee imagines Allerton's return, which culminates in a fatal reenactment of the William Tell legend. Lee is William, and Allerton is Walter. The arrow is a gun, and the apple is a glass. Allerton is shot dead, and both figures vanish. This haunting closure entwines desire with violence and the specter of absence, leaving the narrative suspended between memory, fantasy, and loss.

Queer reflects Guadagnino's continued engagement with literary adaptation. His work with Burroughs's text deepens his exploration of queer desire and identity—as seen in *Call Me by Your Name* (2017) and *Bones and All* (2022). However, Guadagnino's *Queer* diverges from Burroughs's text in several notable ways: Dr. Cotter is reimagined as female, with her role significantly expanded; the yagé is ingested, which allows for the elaborate dream sequence; the pivotal utterance—"I'm not queer: I'm disembodied"—is voiced by both Lee and Allerton rather than Lee alone; Joan Vollmer, whom Burroughs killed in 1951 during a failed William Tell re-enactment, resurfaces as a trace of unresolved violence in Lee's articulation of this utterance, her presence subtly drawing attention to the trauma that shadows the work.

Guadagnino's hallucinatory post-yagé sequence, specifically the point at which the respective bodies of Lee and Allerton join and writhe as one, resonates intertextually with a passage in Burroughs's text. In that passage, Lee reflects on the absurdity of "ready-made trousers" so capacious that he and Allerton could inhabit them simultaneously. When Allerton remarks that such a spectacle "wouldn't look right," Lee responds, "People would think we were Siamese twins. Did I ever tell you about the Siamese twin who turned his brother in to the law to get him off the junk?"'[1] Lee's question frames bodily punishment (i.e., drug abuse) as a reflection of moral transgression. The image of the trousers—sent to a tailor only to be ripped apart at the seams, effectively "[disemboweled]," as Lee remarks—offers a striking parallel to Guadagnino's depiction of the vomited hearts. In both texts, the unravelling of bodily and material integrity serves as a powerful allegory of disarticulated identity and corporeal vulnerability.

Intertextual references to Jean Cocteau's film *Orpheus* (1950) and John O'Hara's novel *Appointment in Samarra* (1934) are especially significant, as both works underscore the entanglement of desire, self-destruction, alienation, mortality, and inevitability that runs through *Queer*. Guadagnino situates the spectator behind Lee and Allerton in the cinema as they watch Cocteau's film, collapsing the distance between audience and characters and implicating both within a tradition of queer spectatorship. The sequence evokes a descent into a liminal, mirrored, and fluid space, where queer desire is inscribed through the spectral imagery of Lee's amoebic, transparent erotic gesture towards Allerton. By contrast, O'Hara's novel—which, unlike *Orpheus*, does not feature in Burroughs's text—introduces a distinctly modernist fatalism: its protagonist's inevitable path to death resonates with the drug taking sequence that foretells Lee's decline. The preparation and injection of heroin function less as habitual practice than as a narrative act of inscription—writing Lee's fate into the very texture of the story.

Yet, if these references mark inevitability at a thematic level, they are equally disruptive at the formal level. This duality continues into the Edward Hopper–style shot of Lee's final return to Mexico City. The heightened color palette and carefully staged composition evoke a more popular visual idiom, one that has the potential to be disorientating and estranging. Rather than offering closure, the saturated image dismantles familiar cinematic codes and suspends the spectator in a space between aesthetic pleasure and narrative disquiet. Thus, the final Mexico sequence aligns with Cocteau and O'Hara in an intertextual network of references and symbols (also note, for example, the centipede and ouroboros) that inscribe fatalism while disrupting conventional realism and illuminating a queer aesthetic of fragmentation and artifice. This disquiet is reinforced by the Cinecittà setting and the juxtaposition of asynchronous music choices, chaptering, and fantastical visual shots, all of which further destabilize narrative continuity.

The film's opening sequence, in which Burroughs' manuscript is reconstructed into delicate paper houses, provides an additional meta-textual gesture that frames these texts from the outset. As fragile constructions, these paper houses function both as materializations of Burroughs' text and as emblems of precarious queer architectures, always vulnerable to collapse. By beginning here, Guadagnino signals a formative stance: that the film is not merely adapting Burroughs but re-assembling his world through a self-conscious layering of literary, cinematic, and visual references.

Guadagnino's reimagining of Burroughs' world both engages with and unsettles artistic and historical traditions. He does this through the refiguring of Dr Cotter, enhancing the role of yagé as a hallucinatory encounter, re-presenting Joan (Burroughs's common-law wife) as a dismembered yet joyful reminder to his story, and re-telling the William Tell episode by replacing Joan with Allerton. These interventions also specifically challenge the positioning of women within the Beat Generation

[1] William S. Burroughs, *Queer* (1985 [1st ed.], London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2010), 42.

(of which Burroughs and Vollmer were a part) as "'experiences' that men might have," though relegated to the periphery of a male-dominated milieu.[2] At the same time they complicate reductive representations of queer identity and reconfigure familiar narratives to produce new affective and interpretive possibilities.

While many reviewers have sought to situate Daniel Craig in relation to his James Bond persona, Guadagnino's casting of Craig resists such reductive readings. Rather than simply evoking Bond, his presence gestures to past portrayals of marginal and queer figures, emphasizing the film's commitment to a poetics of instability, multiplicity, and refusal.[3]

Taken together with Cocteau's spectral poetics, O'Hara's fatalistic modernism, Hopper's disquieting popular aesthetic, and Guadagnino's fragile paper architectures, these intertextual references operate as structuring forces that shape form, affect, and spectatorship. In doing so, Guadagnino stages queer subjectivity as historically embedded yet dynamically present, transmitted intergenerationally through literature, cinema, and visual culture, and it positions the film as a space where past and present, art and life, converge to unsettle tradition and imagine new possibilities for representation.

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[2] Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitments* (Pluto Press, 1983), 171, quoted in Amy L. Friedman, "'Being There as Hard as I Could:' Beat Generation Women Writers." *Discourse (Berkeley, Calif.)* 20, no. 1 (1998): 230-231.

[3] Craig has depicted socially and economically marginalized figures, including Ray, a man with schizophrenia, in *Some Voices* (2000); George Dyer, the often-overlooked partner of Francis Bacon, in *Love Is the Devil: Study for a Portrait of Francis Bacon* (1998); and Perry Smith, whose life of crime and poverty underscores societal marginalization, in *Infamous* (2006).