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An Interview with Nick Davis, Author of *The Desiring-Image:
Gilles Deleuze and Contemporary Queer Cinema*

Michael Kramp and Carol Siegel

Interview Transcript

Michael Kramp: My name is Michael Kramp, I'm here with Carol Siegel as part of the Rhizomes Video Book Review Series and today we are interviewing Professor Nick Davis, Associate Professor of English and Gender and Sexuality Studies at Northwestern University. We're here with Nick to discuss his book, *The Desiring-Image: Gilles Deleuze and Contemporary Queer Cinema*, published by Oxford University Press in 2013. We'll be here with Nick discussing his book and his larger academic project as we think with him through a series of questions.

Welcome Nick and thanks so much for joining us today.

Nick Davis: Thank you incredibly much for having me.

Michael Kramp: Carol and I will just go back and forth with you today and please feel free at any point to push us back and think with us in different directions. Most likely, we'll spin off in spontaneous questions as well. We wanted to start by asking you, if you would, to talk a little bit about the origin story of your project, if you can.

Nick Davis: I guess it's a double story. Half of it is the long time encourageable, two or three times a week, movie going habit that I have and so, all through college and then, well into graduate school, that was still at the base line of what I do every week. I was in college and applying to grad school in the late 90's and so, the chronology of the book where I talk so much about what queer cinema and queer cinema discourse were like earlier in that decade and where those conversations had shifted by the end of that decade, meant that a lot of those skeptical or even funereal pronouncements about queer cinema having lost its focus or its mojo or its innovation, were being published in popular and scholarly presses right as I was seeing some movies that were bowling me over in the way they were handling their sexuality and also, just their aesthetics. That was the reason I applied to graduate school was because there was so many movies I felt personally attached to in some way that resonated with my sense of sexual ambiguities or complexities, but weren't always gay or weren't being received that well even by the LGBT press.

That was a huge impetus for it. Then, the exam questions that I filled out half way

through graduate school about Deleuze's cinema books. I hadn't read any film theory and not that much literary theory as an English major in college. I knew that "Theory" was something my advisors were all warning me I was going to have to learn how to engage with, of all the places to start. I did feel like it was actually ... I may say this in the book, I forget if I do, but the copious movie love I felt in his books, which I know are polarizing in lots of other ways, but the sheer number of movies he tries to take on, the amount of spectatorship he must have undertaken to say that much, sometimes in one or two sentences, about so many films of so many varieties, was the buy in for me to try to learn something that I found totally mystifying and I found really sustaining about working with his books as time went on. Those were the two inspirations, really.

Almost all the same things could have been said about David Lynch and Mulholland Drive is probably the movie that was most present in my mind and least present in the book, actually. That and maybe Cronenberg's, Crash, were the two movies that preoccupied me a lot while I was writing it and you wouldn't know that from the book. David Lynch has invited all the same static and disagreement about gender politics and so, the fact that there was this whole loose cadre, I guess, they barely even exist as that, but several filmmakers who I wasn't hearing a lot about when I would read more queer cinema publications, even though when I compared that to my own experience of which movies made me feel like sexuality is mysterious for everybody, there's nobody in any normative or antinormative position who feels like this all arrives to them fully formed and totally transparent and so, it felt like a way to not box myself into the kind of book that would just take issue with a lot of people who really inspired me. It feels like a lot of books can easily fall into that trap, but that there was a whole nother terrain to explore.

Michael Kramp: Nick, I'm wondering, one of the big advantages, it seems to me, of doing book reviews in this video format is that, instead of a reviewer telling you or telling an audience what's so important or smart about your book, you get to tell us. I'm wondering if you can just take a few moments and address what you see as the major contributions of *The Desiring-Image* to contemporary queer cinema studies.

Nick Davis: Wow. I will say, the few reviews that have come out have been incredibly productive for me as much as when they do take issue with parts of it as when they don't. In all the years of writing, my editor, when I finally placed the book, said, "You do have to be ready for the fact that some reports won't like every part of what you did." I said, "I've been writing movie reviews on the web for 15 years, if you think I haven't heard it before, trust me."

The thing I most wanted the book to do and that it's maybe makes me the most happy when I hear that it may have done this for people is, trying to make Deleuzian film theory accessible since it took me forever to make headway that I even felt competent I understood the precepts. Then, once you understand those, trying to understand all the idiosyncrasies and peccadilloes across those. Trying to make that pedagogically open for people was a big goal. These movies, in addition to feeling well matched to that way of thinking, were in fact the things that helped

me crack the books. I would read assertions or categories or codicils in those cinema books or even in the non cinema Deleuze books, *Anti-Oedipus*, *Thousand Plateaus*, where it was thinking about a Cronenberg movie or a Todd Haynes movie that helped me understand what was being asserted.

That was a goal just on the side of the theory. Then, trying to maybe work against my own incorporated notion. I don't know if anybody ever presented me with this, but it felt, in graduate school when I was starting to work on the project, like it was maybe being intimidated, you could either be a theoretically oriented film scholar or you could close read film texts. Because I felt so well practiced as an English major at the close reading side of things and had a lot invested in that as a methodology and cared a lot about the work that film artists put into their own films and so under versed in theory, there was a big gap for me to make up that I, more and more, felt like other people were also trying to balance those two things in the way they did their work and the fact that each could serve the other mattered quite a bit. As you all have both probably experienced, it's impossible to know what other people get or don't get from your work or what you hope will be useful, but those were the biggest goals, I think.

Then, maybe too, I'll add that I don't think I'm unusual in the fact that when I first started reading or being assigned film theory, it was usually either of a strongly psychoanalytic event and again, because I was so inspired by feminist contributions to film theory in the 70's and 80's, so that had really predominated or their tracks that went back to [Bazin 00:08:01] or tracks that went back to Christian Metz and people who were really influential to me and so much so that some concepts that could easily be seen as just as difficult or just as thorny as these, had started to become easy conversation. I thought that Deleuze's concepts deserved to be promoted in that way.

Again, I liked the promiscuity of them. I don't want to paint any methodology with a broad brush, but the psychoanalytic critics that I was introduced to first, often were gravitating toward filmmakers who seemed to almost overtly be thinking about psychoanalysis when they made their films or would unpack a movie that seemed to exist to reflect some of those ideas. I like the unexpectedness of not knowing which movies were going to answer to this system and which ones weren't. I hoped I could sell people on these as a coherent set of movies, even though, there are a lot of reasons why they shouldn't go together.

Carol Siegel: About my book, but it's about yours. I'll just say, I was delighted to see that, like me, you see *Short Bus*, which is so often acclaimed for its sex radicalism, as, I'm quoting from you now, "Inviting more normative drifts than appear at first glance, "And reinforcing," another quote, "Major cultural definitions of male and female bodies," and then, you declare that, "Even this liberal pluralist tent does not stretch to cover everyone." I want to ask, what do you see as your work's contributions just in general sexuality studies of film outside of the realm of queer studies in film?

Nick Davis: Right. Again, I find that the effects of the book might be most perceptible to me in

terms of how those ideas that come up in my teaching and what I see students picking up and running with. My impressions ... I have not taught all this material to students, but in general, the idea that the sexuality of a film or the sexualities that a film communicates may not be limited to the bodies, much less the genitals, much less whatever we're taking as primary or secondary sex characteristics of characters, that, that's certainly an important ... I hope it's not a book that takes too much away from people as important, but so many of the movies in this book or other movies that I teach that I feel like I could as easily have written about, convey a sexuality or conjure a desire that not only might feel really specific to an object or a scenario, but may even feel specific to that scene that there were ... That sexuality in our own lives could be thought of as totally mutable from one encounter to the next, even if that encounter is with the same person and allowing us to think of ... You were mentioning before that the binarisms of gender or sexuality resurface more than we wish they would and work that sets itself up to challenge those formulations, but maybe also just the body centeredness, in general.

If there's a contribution to sexuality studies, I thought it might be that and again, trying to advocate for a form of close reading films that didn't boil down to only close reading the narratives and in this case, by paying attention to the sounds and the visuals and those kind of aesthetic dimensions of the films, was simultaneously to try to unpack what's erotic about those films because to just tell somebody who hasn't seen [inaudible 00:11:58] or *The Watermelon Woman*, much less *Naked Lunch*, what is arousing or confronting or both of those things about them, would be hard to capture without showing them the images or helping them hear the sound. I think a lot of people have had a lot of sexual experiences or relationships or partnerships or fantasies or whatever it is, where the person or people involved are primary, but don't necessarily overwhelm what the response or the idea was about that place or that configuration or that moment or that color or that whatever it was. That was one thing I was hoping this book might do in the umbrella of sexuality studies.

Michael Kramp: I'm wondering, Nick, if you ... One of the things that's really striking to me about your book is, both in your dedication and your acknowledgment, how you speak about Alex Doty. It's interesting hearing you and Carol talk about the way in which your work is currently contributing to both contemporary and historical work in queer cinema. It's striking to me, I guess, to think about this in relationship to Alex's work. I'm wondering if you can speak about the importance of Alex, perhaps, in the legacy of queer cinema studies and also, perhaps, in terms of your specific work.

Nick Davis: Sure. Two things that I think of immediately whenever anybody says Alex's work, even as separate from Alex himself, are his complete refusal of any binary between feminist work and queer work and commitment throughout all of his scholarship to, not only working in both of those traditions, but seeing them as deeply the same tradition. It doesn't mean that precepts of one don't often contest the other and there aren't values in exploring the frictions, but that was really important to me and continues to factor into, at some level, probably all of the projects that I've

done.

Then, when I read *Flaming Classics* in graduate school and just seeing that somebody who was also trained primarily as a English major, literary critic, starting from a narrative analysis and then, over time, thinking more about how the cinematic coaxes different things out of you in terms of how you react, that was certainly my track as well and reading his pieces and finding out that films we think we know like the backs of our hands, may have all kinds of strata of sensation or ideology or potential politics or self critique, that are not only hardly obvious, but those readings don't then, by default, become marginal or peripheral readings and that what may make them ... I think Alex was such a beautiful writer about how the things that may make a film last in your mind, may not be the things that, as you were saying Carol, about movies people tell you you'll be interested in and predict your responses badly, that what you love about a movie, even if it seems like the obvious hook should be A, you might be much more fixated on B or C. That, I also found to be a big release to find that in his work.

It does bare saying that Alex's personal contribution to this book was so in excess of the influence of his own work. I didn't, frankly, know him that well until what turned out to be the last year of his life and met him in the real way of meeting him, getting to know him really well. Right after, every press I submitted this manuscript to had turned it down. He, unbeknownst to me ... We were at the SCMS Conference and spending quite a bit of time together and went to see a film and went and had dinner and just talked for an Eric Rohmer style day, I guess. He didn't, at any point, admit that my book was sitting on his desk at home to evaluate for Oxford when he got there or when he came back.

He was the positive vote. Even at Oxford, this was a split decision book initially, with one thumb up and one down. His was the thumb up and he gave a lot of suggestions about how to cut it back, which it desperately needed. That glossary, which was one of my favorite things to write in the whole book, of the Deleuzian terms, was his suggestion that I think about how to do that and I had about three weeks to make the book two thirds as long as it used to be and add that glossary and attend to all kinds of other things that was going to have to do to stay alive at the press with the tenure clock counting down by the second at this point.

His mentorship at that incredible moment meant everything. I sent the book back off in this new and improved version, to Oxford with fingers crossed. We knew it was going to go to two different readers than had read it the first time. He was on his vacation and when he came back, we were going to celebrate that the book had gone off and that was the vacation we all know about. There was no way it wasn't going to be dedicated to him and it's impossible to even look at it without thinking about him.

Michael Kramp: I just want to add that one thing that really strikes me about your book in relation to Alex is how reading your book makes me think of Alex in that it really resonates in the same love of going to see movies, that I think Alex had. Even movies you're

quite critical of, I think there's still a sense that, enjoy watching this movie.
[inaudible 00:17:47]

Nick Davis: That was why we spent that whole day together at SCMS, we learned that about each other in conversations that were really about us both being in the conversation because we both knew somebody else who was standing there, but then, we'd seen all these movies that came out that year that everybody else is saying, "How do you have time to go to the movies?" We're saying, "I'd rather get four hours of sleep if it means I get to see it." Absolutely, that sense of just ingrained movie love and Alex's commitment to pedagogy, that he was always a teacher even on the page and still is that. I went to grad school to be a teacher and would do the research as the way to pay the piper. The teaching was the thing that got me into this whole gig, so again, if I could teach Deleuze on the page and connect it to classroom practice and feel like I was doing a service for somebody, that was what I wanted the book to feel like and he was a fantastic mentor for that kind of project.

Carol Siegel: What would you tell people who would ask that? Why is it necessary to come back to Deleuze for this?

Nick Davis: That's a hard one because I felt like my own encounter with Deleuze and then, my protracted affinity for these books were so unexpected, from my point of view, and completely shocking to my graduate mentors who were worried about introducing me to theory at all and then I show up saying, these are my favorites.

Again, I think that it's just an incredible feat I'm never going to get over on their parts to articulate a series of convictions and precepts that simultaneously explain so much about the world as I could increasingly recognize it across plains of experience that are easy to treat as separate like, economic structures, histories of power, possibilities of collective formation, whether that's interpersonal or institutional, sexuality, language. That the ideas they had, allow you to see how those things are connected, how they're not rigidly connected, the connections can change or have all these different dimensions to them, but that in all of that articulation, in all that sense, I felt like they had of just seeing whole constellations that I could not have seen, that it, none the less, is constantly undercutting itself and saying, don't take this as gospel, this is not a secret decoder ring, this is not meant to create a class of people who will get it in opposition to the people who need help.

Again, that balance of something that has laws, that has structures, that has, at least, tendencies, but also is completely variable and changes so much depending on the position from which you're looking at it, that felt to me, among its many other boons, to be an incredibly productive and fair way to think of sexuality, as not utterly entropic, not totally chaotic, these patterns are not unpredictable, individually or collectively, but that doesn't mean that they harden into templates and certainly not into one or two of them. That, to me, was the biggest reason to keep trusting even when people were telling me, take the Deleuze out of a project

or you have to become versed in the whole corpus to talk responsibly about any of it. Those things that I just said, were what gave me faith and to even see this much of it and try to hold onto that much of it and convey it on the page, would be a contribution.

Carol Siegel: Yes and I think it is.

Michael Kramp: Maybe we can just ask you one final question, which is, as you move on from *The Desiring-Image*, where do you see the future of contemporary queer cinema?

Nick Davis: There's so many futures. One of them is the future that even the queer films that are "Hits" are not hits at the level that they used to be, that it's true that audiences don't seem to turn out for them in the way that they did. There's that ... I understand the pessimisms about what has been the fate of a self conscious, self naming, queer cinema in the most publicly visible parts of film culture. Also, I feel like I go to so many queer film festivals over the years, see shorts, see what my students are making, see if things that maybe didn't light the box office on fire, but zillions of people wind up seeing it on Netflix and it does seep into the culture, that it feels to me like there's quite a bit of vitality that's happening at all kinds of levels of maybe a culture that we're still learning how to talk about or how to track.

I think there are so many films like these that come out where there's a real argument to be made about the queerness of that film, but it's not the only or obvious argument to make about it, so thinking of a stable set or a greatest hits or there was a ... The BFI just put out a list of the 30 greatest LGBT movies of all time according to *Sight and Sound*, I think two days ago. Carol is already, by the way, the best LGBT movie ever made as of the last three months, but you realize that we're suddenly in ... That there's so much being made and so many different ways people are understanding terms like gay and lesbian and queer and trans and LGBT and that's even just the English language words and that's not even all of them, that I don't worry about the trajectory or the sustainability of queer cinema as a discourse even though I do sometimes ... I understand the hankering for the rebelheartedness or the sense when it really was running totally ...

I got to talk to Todd Haynes about this book and about Carol a couple months ago on a press tour and just listening to him talk about what it really felt like to genuinely be working outside of things and really asserting something that no structure, political or artistic, existed to try to support and the kinds of personal and political payoff that came from that level, not only of counter cultural work and activist work, but then from unexpected visibility all of a sudden and who suddenly came out of the woodwork saying, "Thank God, somebody's finally making these." It's easy to feel nostalgic or pine a little bit for that and it sometimes makes me a little sad that movies that come out now that I think deserve that kind of response aren't always engendering it, but we'll see I guess. There's no one real easy answer to give.

Michael Kramp: Again-

Nick Davis: I said nothing about television or any of the other media that are doing a lot of heavy water bearing right now in these ways.

Michael Kramp: Thank you very much. We really appreciate the opportunity to talk with you at Rhizomes. It's a great opportunity. This is Nick Davis, Associate Professor of English at Northwestern University, the author of, *The Desiring-Image*. I'm going to now stop the recording.

Nick Davis is an Associate Professor of English and Gender & Sexuality Studies at Northwestern University, where his research and teaching focus on LGBTQ and feminist approaches to popular narrative film. His book *The Desiring-Image: Gilles Deleuze and Contemporary Queer Cinema* (2013) theorizes a new model of queer cinema based more on unique formal principles than pre-set identity politics, drawing heavily on Deleuzian philosophies of film and desire. He has published essays on Julie Dash's *Illusions*, Alfonso Cuarón's *Y tu mamá también*, John Cameron Mitchell's *Shortbus*, William Friedkin's *The Boys in the Band*, James Baldwin's *Blues for Mister Charlie*, and the politically radicalized actresses Julie Christie and Vanessa Redgrave. Forthcoming work includes essays on Todd Haynes's *I'm Not There* and Leos Carax's *Holy Motors*, plus a developing book project on ambiguous scenarios of sexual consent in recent global cinema. He regularly teaches coursework on popular film history, queer theory, cinematic adaptations, science fiction and speculative cinema, and the evolving genre of the film review. He is also a Contributing Editor at *Film Comment* magazine and the author of the film reviews at www.NicksFlickPicks.com.

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