

## Building Community Through Queer Learning Disability Amateur Filmmaking: Oska Bright Film Festival and Queer Freedom

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### ABSTRACT

Much has been written on the intersection of disability and sexuality since the publication of *The Sexual Politics of Disability* (Shakespeare et al., 1996), however scant literature refers to these issues as represented on the screen, where it can be argued representations have the most power to shape perceptions. Disabled characters in media narratives are invariably represented as lacking in any sexuality or negation of heteronormative gender and sexual expressions.

In 2017, Brighton-based learning disability film festival Oska Bright (OBFF) launched their Queer Freedom (QF) strand as an intervention in this lack of queer representation within learning disability narratives. In 2017 and 2019, QF featured films made by or featuring queer people with learning disabilities and autism, including Glasgow-based queer femme filmmaker Mattie Kennedy. Devised by OBFF Lead Programmer and queer filmmaker Matthew Hellett after meeting Kennedy at a previous OBFF, Hellett believed he had a responsibility to create a space for these unheard voices.

This article mobilises Bonnie Honig's feminist refusal method of inclination and bell hooks' theory of talking back to explore how OBFF and QF have enabled Kennedy and Hellett to create space and claim their visibility as queer learning-disabled filmmakers through a process of mutual affirmation. Learning-disabled people have historically been segregated from society, so in the spirit of Foucault's heterotopia, by coming together to form a community of people who affirm and encourage other queer learning-disabled people to make their voices heard, they are refusing their assigned societal segregation.

**Keywords:** visual culture, cultural disability studies, queer studies, visual activism, amateur film studies

### INTRODUCTION

In this article, I pose an argument for the radical potential of community building through queer learning-disabled amateur filmmaking. I draw particular attention to the Oska Bright Film Festival (OBFF) and its 'Queer Freedom' (QF) strand, operated by the learning disability arts organisation Carousel. More specifically, I focus on two artists associated with QF; filmmaker and OBFF Lead Programmer Matthew Hellett and filmmaker Mattie Kennedy. Drawing upon Hellett's chapter 'Sparkle and Space' for the edited volume *Made Possible* (2020), and my interviews with Kennedy (2021), and based upon their reflections on their relationship with OBFF, I posit that QF is a radical space in which a global queer learning disability filmmaking community's voice has come into existence (Couldry, 2015: 47). QF has afforded artists such as Kennedy and Hellett, among others, the opportunity to express themes of queer gender and sexuality in a world in which this still carries taboo connotations for people

with learning disabilities. Here, they come together in a refusal of the historical segregation and institutionalisation of learning-disabled people to create art outside the art-as-therapy agenda.

My argument is informed by the relationship between feminist intersectionality and queer theory as well as disability studies, and critical race theory. By synthesising bell hooks's work on the politics of care as preservation and her theory of *talking back* and Bonnie Honig's feminist refusal theory of *inclination*, I will demonstrate how Kennedy and Hellett incline toward each other to talk back through a process of *mutual affirmation*. They work in concert to talk back to the heteroableist attitudes of contemporary society towards learning disability art and learning disability sexuality. In the final section of the article, I draw upon Foucault's (1984) concept of the *heterotopia* to claim OBFF and QF afford this mutual affirmation and extend it to the encouragement of other queer learning-disabled people to join them.

When working at the intersection of queerness and learning disability, it would seem logical to analyse my research through a crip theory lens, so I want to briefly explain its omission from this research. My position on crip theory aligns with Kirsten Marie Bone's critique, which exposes it as continuing 'a cycle of silencing and marginalization that widens the divide between disability studies and the lived experiences of the disabled rather than bridging those critical gaps in meaningful ways' (2017: 1298). Bone notes that a fundamental principle of disability studies is that any research undertaken should strive to improve the living conditions of the people being researched, which she argues crip theory fails to realise (*ibid*). Exploring the theory through multiple frameworks, Bone concludes that the reclamation of the word 'crip' privileges physical disability, noting that Robert McRuer makes no mention of 'intellectual disability' in his writings (2017: 1306). She notes that crip is a term claimed by those to whom the original pejorative use of the word did not refer, exemplified by both Sami Schalk's 'disidentification' with the term as a not-yet-disabled person and McRuer who presented an academic paper wearing a t-shirt with the words 'HIV positive', despite being HIV negative (2017: 1303). Crip theory permits 'claiming an identity that is not one's own' in the name of solidarity (*ibid*). This authorises anyone to speak on behalf of the disabled rather than prioritizing actual disabled voices, Bone argues, which 'limits the types of disabled voices we hear from' (2017: 1308). Like the social model of disability, which focuses on the cultural construction of disability rather than the political marginalization of disabled people, crip theory's claimed radical potential is not realised because it avoids engagement with disability activism (Bone, 2017) and represents what Mike Oliver describes as academic 'chatter' (Oliver quoted in Bone, 2017: 1305). Bone draws on Mark Sherry to posit that those who self-identify (or disidentify) with 'crip' are distinct from the disability community at large who do not use the term 'because it does not focus on the lived experiences of poor and working-class disabled people, and instead represent 'privileged people' who use crip 'in the context of the safety of academia' which 'masks enormous embodied, classed, gendered, sexualized, and racialized privilege' inherently embedded in the act of 'reclaiming' a derogatory term' (Sherry quoted in Bone, 2017: 1304). I therefore suggest that crip theory fails to account for those with learning disabilities and does not contribute to meaningful societal change, so I prioritise what I regard as more productive interpretive frameworks such as queer studies and intersectional feminism.

Regarding language, I use the term 'learning disability' as that is the term Carousel and OBFF use, and this is the term Hellett and Kennedy also use when discussing community contexts. I use the word 'queer' in its widest umbrella sense to connote diverse gender and sexual identities and because 'queer' is the chosen word for the Queer Freedom strand of OBFF under discussion.

This article argues that through QF, filmmakers can take ownership of the learning disability narrative and enact a new (queer) way of being, through the medium of amateur film, which grounds new (queer) normativities for learning-disabled people. It offers an analysis of, and original approach to, queer visual culture which has hitherto been marginalised within queer and disability visual studies. The issues raised engage with current debates on learning-disabled sexuality and demonstrate the radical potential of amateur filmmaking as a tool for building community.

## OSKA BRIGHT FILM FESTIVAL AND QUEER FREEDOM

Learning disability arts organisation Carousel launched in Brighton, UK in 1982 with the aim to offer a creative platform for, and bring together, learning-disabled people in order that they can explore their creativity and learn new art skills. Founded in 2004 by a group of learning-disabled filmmakers, 'frustrated at having nowhere to show their work' (Oska Bright, *Our Story*), OBFF is one of Carousel's largest projects. Hellett (2020: 164) notes that the name Oska Bright is a play on words inspired by the 'Oscars' and 'Brighton' where the festival is predominantly held.

Beginning as a one-day showcase celebrating the work of learning-disabled filmmakers, OBFF has since grown to become 'the world's leading festival for films made by or featuring people with learning disabilities or autism' (Oska Bright, *Our Story*). OBFF runs every two years and, in-between festivals, regularly tours nationally, supported by external funders including the BFI (*Disability And ... Film with Oska Bright*, 2020). The festival is typically

programmed by genre, based on contributors' strengths and as decided by the festival committee as a democratic whole (ibid). Hellett explains the quality of submissions has increased over the years, as well as the geographical reach (ibid), noting the 2019 festival screened 99 films from 15 countries (Oska Bright, *Our Story*).

Hellett entered his first short film, a spoofy cookery session, *Cooking with Matthew* (2006) into the 2007 OBFF and describes in 'Sparkle and Space' (2020) how it felt amazing for him to have a platform to show his first piece of work. The film won the 'Best Overall Film' award at OBFF that year, and by accepting the award, and the accompanying creative recognition, Hellett was inspired to continue his filmmaking practice. Soon after awarding Hellett the prize, Carousel invited him to join the OBFF committee (Hellett, 2020). Hellett has since made a total of six short films with Carousel, receiving a commission from Brighton and Hove City Council for *Unusual Journey* (2007) themed on bus travel, and a surreal portrait of his drag alter ego Mrs Sparkle in *Mrs Sparkle* (2009); the first film by a learning-disabled filmmaker to be funded and commissioned by South-East Dance (Hellett, 2020).

Through OBFF, Hellett has been mentored by Emma Smart, programmer of *Flare*; the LGBTQIA+ strand of the BFI, which Hellett described as a positive experience which paved the way for his promotion to Lead Programmer of OBFF. Emma assists Hellett to organise themes and assess which entries to accept or reject (Disability And ... Film with Oska Bright, 2020). Hellett has acted as Lead Programmer for three festivals as of 2022, which has equipped him with the knowledge and understanding of the creative process of film festival curation.

Hellett describes the ease and confidence with which he now curates the festival programme; 'I don't find it hard choosing which films to include [...] I know in the first five minutes whether something will work or not, if it looks amazing or if it's trash. It's got to grab people and it's about quality, not quantity' (Hellett, 2020: 166). This demonstrates a criticalness to Hellett's curation and a consideration of aesthetics when choosing what to include or exclude; a theme that will be explored in more depth below in the context of his position as gatekeeper and thus insider/outsider of the filmmaking community.

It was through Hellett's Lead Programming role at OBFF that he first came into contact with Mattie Kennedy, having programmed their film *Just Me* (2013) for the 2015 festival. Until Kennedy became aware of Hellett through this invitation, they did not know any other queer learning-disabled filmmakers (Matthew and Matthew in Conversation, 2016). This invitation to visit Brighton to screen their film was a 'nerve-wracking' time Kennedy explains, not knowing if they would be awarded the much-needed funding from Creative Scotland to realise the trip (they were). "I was really, really wanting this, I was wanting it so badly [...] it was like, if I don't get this, I don't think I'm going to be able to handle it, 'cause this is important" (Interview with Kennedy, August 2021). Since 2015, Kennedy has made two short films with Carousel; *Enid and Valerie* (2018), a stop-motion animation telling the story of a witch and a spinster, and the documentary *Not Mythmakers* (2022) in which Kennedy shows their work on what they have named the 'Matthew and Matthew Archive'; an archive of ephemera, photographs and collage templates related to the 'Matthew and Matthew' events hosted by OBFF across the UK in which Kennedy and Hellett screen their films together followed by a Q&A session.

Inspired by meeting Kennedy, the first queer learning-disabled filmmaker Hellett had also met, he began formulating the idea for the QF strand. Hellett felt that Kennedy 'really understands what it's like to be me' and meeting them made Hellett 'realise that we need to give the space to more unheard voices. [...] I don't have that many friends in the gay community and it's important for us to come together, support each other and celebrate the work we do as artists' (Hellett, 2020: 165).

The 2017 QF screened four films, *Versions* (2015) by Kennedy; a stop-motion animation exploring issues of re/birth, family and identity, *John and Michael* (dir. Shira Avni, 2004), a stop-motion animation film following the story of two men with Down's syndrome who fall in love, *Life on Two Spectrums* (dir. Elizabeth-Valentina Sutton, 2017), a documentary following UK Drag Queen Tia Anna who has Asperger's, and who Hellett 'really identified' with as a fellow drag artist (Hellett, 2020: 166), and finally *Pili and Me* (dir. Ignacio Garcia-Sanchez, 2016) which explores themes of family and advocacy. QF has become a permanent feature of OBFF, with the 2019 and 2022 strands showing 6 and 4 films respectively. In 2021, in light of social distancing measures, QF took the shape of a virtual Facebook live stream named 'Love Bites' to coincide with Brighton Pride and showed a selection of films from the 2017 and 2019 festivals. Although not intended for 2022 due to its bi-annual scheduling, a festival in 2022 was held to compensate for the virtual format of the 2021 festival.

Hellett was nervous prior to the first QF, fearing it may be 'too controversial' (2020: 166). These fears are not unfounded considering in 2019 Republican US congressional candidate Peter Meijer declined to host the UK Down's syndrome drag troop Drag Syndrome at the arts venue he owns in Grand Rapids, Michigan because he questioned whether the performers could give their 'full and informed consent' (Jacobs, 2019). Referring to their Down's syndrome status, this inability to give consent relates more broadly to the labelling of people with learning disabilities as vulnerable, which Garbutt (2012: 298) states has led to their being 'excluded in many areas of society'. Meijer's refusal to host Drag Syndrome aligns with the issues highlighted in the social model of disability in which disabled people suffer discrimination and exclusion as a result of environmental, institutional and attitudinal

barriers (Oliver, 1990). Davies (2000: 183) notes that ‘people with disabilities are seen as passive, childlike objects/subjects unempowered and disempowered. It is not acceptable in the 21st century that disabled people are still treated like innocent children or fragile flowers’. Not every member of Drag Syndrome identifies as LGBTQ so it is unclear what consent Meijer is specifically alluding to, but it can be presumed it is the association of drag as a performance style to queer gender and sexuality. Relatedly, it is noteworthy that not all the films curated for QF express queer love and sexuality, which suggests that the expression of *any* love and sexuality is almost a queer gesture in itself for learning-disabled people, if queer can be interpreted in its broadest meaning as a non-normative way of being.

While not officially part of the QF strand, the feature-length film *Sanctuary* (dir. Len Collin, 2016) was screened at the same event, which dramatises a story of sexual attraction between Larry with Down’s syndrome and Sophie with severe epilepsy who hatch a plan with their sympathetic carer to have alone time in a hotel room. As the 2017 OBFF programme blurb asks, ‘How do they express a love that dare not speak its name? Are they aware that in Ireland they are about to break the law?’ The law in question refers to Section 5 of the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act, 1993 in Ireland which stated, ‘A person who has or attempts to have sexual intercourse or commits or attempts to commit an act of buggery, with a person who is mentally impaired [...] shall be guilty of an offence’ (Irish Statute Book, n.d.). In February 2017 that law was changed as a result of the work of Inclusion Ireland and other lobbyists, which cited *Sanctuary* as one of the reasons behind that decision (CBC Radio, 2017). The law now states that the ability of a person with mental impairment to consensually engage in sexual intercourse is to be considered on an individual basis. *Sanctuary* therefore marks a significant moment in the history of visual culture where film has been used to confront pervading stereotypes and assumptions and consequently to affect socio-political change.

Hellett explains that he was shocked on watching *Sanctuary* and was ‘proud’ to give the film its UK premiere at the 2017 festival. ‘People are being too protective’, he believes, ‘like they don’t want to open up that door to sexuality. There’s just this sad stereotype that means people who have a learning disability get treated like children. But I have a human right to be me’ (Hellett, 2020: 174-75). The infantilisation of learning-disabled people was ironically mocked in *Sanctuary* when one character appears shocked to hear of Larry and Sophie’s sexual chemistry, stating she always thought of them as ‘full of hugs’ (Collin, 2016).

Irony aside, Hellett raises a crucial issue when he notes he has a ‘human right to be me’. ‘Why can’t we just allow people with learning disabilities to be sexual?’ Hellett asks rhetorically (2020: 174). Since the publication of *The Sexual Politics of Disability* (Shakespeare, Gillespie-Sells and Davies, 1996), a wealth of literature has emerged exploring the sexual rights of disabled people, with increasing reference to the intersection of disability and queerness. Like Shakespeare et al. (1996), Schwier (1994) draws on first-hand accounts of people with learning disabilities discussing their sexual lives to challenge barriers and assumptions. In 1997 the journal *Disability and Sexuality* was founded to continue this discussion, and while predominantly publishing articles related to physical disabilities, the journal has published substantial articles related to learning disability. Clare (1999) offered one of the first in-depth personal accounts of disability and queerness, and 2000 saw increasing interest in media representations of people with learning disabilities (Block, 2000; Tepper, 2000), paving the way for further personal accounts and research at this intersection (Kafer, 2013; Gill, 2015; Liddiard, 2018). However, as the cast and crew of *Sanctuary* discussed at a Q&A following the screening at OBFF, public opinion and understandings of these issues take longer to change than any legislation or academic publication, so the stigma attached to recognising people with learning disabilities as sexual beings will likely remain. This is a cynical position, but a justified one, as evidenced by Meijer’s refusal to host Drag Syndrome in 2019 embedded in a discourse of vulnerability.

Hellett’s idea when formulating QF was ‘to champion the voice of every person with learning disabilities. I didn’t want to leave anyone out. The festival is totally committed to pushing the representation of all learning-disabled people, gay or straight. We believe that the stories and films we show are ones that people everywhere should see’ (Hellett, 2020: 166). Hellett is clearly motivated by making the voices of queer learning-disabled people heard through films either by or starring queer people with learning disabilities. Frohlich (2011) notes how ‘a central aim’ of LGBTQ activist work has been to increase visibility in society. During the early years of the gay rights movement in the 1970s, gay politics was predominantly concerned with transparency, with being out and visible and being so with pride (Frohlich, 2011). Similarly, the disability rights movement followed in the footsteps of Gay Liberation and used visibility as its main weapon in the fight for rights (Thomsen, 2015). The 2019 OBFF attracted an audience of 3000 people (Oska Bright, *Archive*) and Hellett points out that 50% of those do not have a learning disability. He believes ‘that’s a really important statistic for me as it shows we’re having a much bigger impact’ (Dimensions, n.d.). Lizzie Banks, Deputy Artistic Director of Carousel, noted during a personal conversation that the QF strand is the most requested and popular of the touring OBFF events, which demonstrates that Hellett has tapped into an increasingly crucial conversation. Hellett’s motivation for ‘pushing the representation’ and for ‘people everywhere’ to see the films is explicitly built upon the foundational principles of the gay and disability rights movements’ interest in the politics of visibility.

## REFUSING THE ART-AS-THERAPY AGENDA

In a similar concern for pushing visibility, Carousel's website describes their intention to 'provide a bridge between people with a learning disability and the wider community'. They point out that funding cuts to UK support services have resulted in people with learning disabilities 'facing greater isolation and alienation than ever before' (Carousel, n.d.), demonstrating a wish to make an intervention to bring learning disabled people together. In *Just Me* (2013) Kennedy speaks of such 'alienation' and similarly reflects in one of our interviews how they found it difficult getting a foot in the filmmaking world, having received the crushing blow in 2015 that the one learning disability arts organisation in Glasgow had its funding pulled, mid-project. This lack of access to funding raises questions over the value of learning disability creativity and relates more broadly to the infantilisation of learning-disabled people, particularly within mainstream art circuits.

Mitchell and Snyder note how disabilities have historically been narrated as individual and private concerns which have been 'banished to the closets or attics of houses or institutions' (2000: 214) and they assert that the danger of such a narrative of disability has resulted in the isolation of people with disabilities from public view outside of a medical discourse. Reflecting on the obstacles they themselves faced when trying to complete their short film documenting a national (US) disability arts community, *VITAL SIGNS: Crip Culture Talks Back* (1998), Mitchell and Snyder explain finding themselves in some sort of catch-22 scenario when describing the issues they faced securing funding to complete the film; the subject matter was not considered 'rehabilitative' or 'practically applicable' to the lives of disabled people (ibid) and, likewise, filmmaking and arts funders did not recognise disability subjects as in line with the goals of experimental filmmaking of the time (2000: 215).

Disability artists are often funded through therapeutic and health agendas which Hadley (2014) argues ignores the experimental and political possibilities of their work. This is a view echoed by Hargrave who regards 'the relationship between art and therapy as highly contentious, since it has, in the case of learning-disabled people, conflated the creative drive with sickness and reinforced a view of such persons as inherently in need of rehabilitation' (2015:35). Hargrave works with British learning disability theatre company Mind the Gap whose aim is to make learning-disabled performers artists in their own right, outside of the therapy agenda. His text, *Theatres of Learning Disability* (2015) is the first scholarly text to focus on the aesthetics of learning disability away from such a therapy agenda.

In an interview with Kennedy (2021), I asked their opinion on the assumption that learning disability art is always in some way 'therapeutic', to which they responded how 'it's the way it's framed [...] it's an isolated term for specific communities, like the learning disability community or just the disabled community in general, I don't like it [...] it smacks of condescension to me [...] We're allowed to express ourselves without having those terms pinned on us' (Interview with Kennedy, August 2021). Likewise, Hellett recounts being questioned on his filmmaking at a conference and was directly asked if he worked on arts projects for therapy. 'This attitude makes me so angry', Hellett states. 'It's not therapy—it's art [...] People think that if we 'do art', it's at a day centre and it's something to keep ourselves busy with or it's some sort of healing or wellbeing treatment. I think it's stereotyping again' (Hellett, 2020: 177).

To borrow a phrase from Nirmal Puwar, artists with learning disabilities carry 'a burden of doubt' regarding their artistic capabilities to measure up, which results in an infantilisation whereby they are assumed to have 'reduced capacities' (2004: 59-60). Because people like Kennedy and Hellett have refused the confinement to the 'closets and attics' (Mitchell and Snyder, 2000: 214), they instead exist as 'anomalies in places where they are not the normative figure of authority', and thus 'their capabilities are viewed suspiciously' (Puwar, 2004: 59). Puwar notes that although anyone can theoretically enter a space, it is the sense of belonging in that space that is restricted to some. Some people have the presumed right to be there, whilst some are 'trespassers', 'space invaders', or 'matter out of place' (2004: 43). The space in question here is the filmmaking world, which Kennedy never felt they had a chance of getting a foot in, and the world of representation where Kennedy and Hellett did not see queer learning disability reflected, where the 'normative figure of authority' has historically been the non-disabled controlling the narrative of disability. QF has given Kennedy, Hellett and others a platform through which to refuse this 'normative figure of authority', to place themselves as the authority on their own narrative in a radical gesture of self-representation and community gathering.

Informed by hooks's understanding of care and recovery, it occurred to me that while I did not want to fall into the trap of considering Kennedy and Hellett's film work in the context of therapy, there was undoubtedly an element of 'care' or 'recovery' for the self in the process of filmmaking for them both. In their film *Just Me* (2013) Kennedy speaks of having anxiety and explains how having a voice as an artist calms that anxiety. The voice is something that Kennedy evokes is something they have had to 'regain,' or 'recover' to use hooks's words; suggesting it was taken away at some point. Similarly, Hellett in their film *Sparkle* (2008) speaks of being a worrier and of having anxiety, but that when he becomes Mrs Sparkle, the frustrations are gone. Hellett has written of his experiences growing up and attending a Catholic comprehensive school in Brighton where he received little

support in core subjects but ‘found solace in the art room’; the only place he felt able to express himself at that time (2020: 167-68). Reflecting on his filmmaking, Hellett explains how his work gives him ‘a voice and a chance to tell people who I am’ (2020: 161). He explains his main aim as having ‘the right space artistically to express myself. I was born with this need to express myself, but I didn’t always have the space to achieve it’ (2020: 181). Reflecting on the early days of Mrs Sparkle, Hellett recalls wanting to dress up in drag as he wanted to forget about his anxieties and worries, to be visually outspoken that ‘this is me, this is who I am’ which ‘felt great’ (Disability And ... Film with Oska Bright, 2020). If the act of filmmaking is giving Kennedy and Hellett the platform to come to voice, then the platform of OBFF and QF as a place to share that with the wider queer learning disability community affords an act of ‘talking back’ to the dominant culture, to use hooks’s (2014: n.p.) phrase. Kennedy and Hellett are doing what can be interpreted as a form of ‘care’, or ‘recovery’, for the self and for their community, not in a clinical rehabilitative ‘recovery’ sense, but a philosophical recovery, a recovery of agency and power as radical care for the wider queer learning-disabled community.

Writer and filmmaker Juliet Jacques notes the concept of self-care emerged after the decline in Europe and North America of the principle of dying for an idea or sacrificing one’s life in confrontation of a political ideology. Jacques (2020) determines how self-care can be considered a ‘critical part of long-term radical engagement’ and is something that has primarily been done by those from marginalised communities who experience discrimination. Jacques quotes Audre Lorde who explains that self-care is self-preservation and that in itself ‘is an act of political warfare’ (Lorde in Jacques, 2020). This is why Hellett’s creation of QF represents such a radical gesture of ‘political warfare’ because, as queer disabled writer Jamie Hale (2021) notes, ‘disability’ is still considered a political word ‘because disabled people still face barriers.’ By making artistic films outside of the therapy or rehabilitative agenda, and by showing them in public contexts such as at OBFF, Kennedy and Hellett refuse the ‘dictates of a culturally-imposed isolation’ (Mitchell and Snyder, 2000: 201), and defy the cultural barriers and attitudes which have dominated disability filmmaking as therapeutic. Kennedy and Hellett, and the queer learning-disabled filmmakers and performers associated with QF, are deviating from their expected role. But not only do they ‘invade space’ to draw on Puwar, they actively create and construct *new* spaces within which to nurture community.

For hooks (2014a), self-care, self-preservation and self-recovery are inextricably linked to the resistance of exploited and oppressed people, and ultimately their liberation and revolutionary transformation. The term self-care has been reclaimed by queer and disabled communities from its bastardisation in neo-liberal capitalist contexts of guilt-free leisure and the purchase of pampering products. For hooks and Lorde, self-care meant looking out for the self and other exploited people in oppressive societies, to work towards a more equitable future and to value one’s self/ves when others are not, to imagine new ways of being and seeing oneself and one’s community in more affirming ways.

In a radical act of affirmation, and just two months after the Drag Syndrome show being cancelled by Meijer, the 2019 QF screened *Born to Dance with an Extra Chromosome* (dir. Nikolay Nikolov, 2019), a documentary following Drag Syndrome, followed by a Q&A session with the performers. Going one better at the 2022 event, Hellett programmed Drag Syndrome to perform live. Hellett consistently and defiantly confronts timely issues and debates related to (queer) sexuality and learning disability through his programming. Vocalising this refusal, he understands that people ‘might not like my drag act or my films. They might not understand my learning disability or the fact I’m gay. But I reckon you either like it or you get lost’ (2020: 181).

Kennedy describes Hellett as ‘a history-maker’ due to his creation of QF which has given a platform to Kennedy and other queer learning-disabled filmmakers’ narratives ‘to be seen and [...] to be valid and allowing them to have some sort of dialogue within the film festival circuit [...] that was a big deal within our community’ (Interview with Kennedy, August 2021). In addition to confronting timely issues and championing the sexual rights of people with learning disabilities through art, Hellett is also building a community through his programming and curation. ‘I’ve learned that the best way to change things is through positive action’, Hellett told the charity Dimensions in 2019. By inviting Kennedy to deliver a keynote speech at the 2017 QF, and by regularly programming Q&As, Hellett is driving this ‘dialogue’ Kennedy mentions and allows others within the community to contribute. They refuse their isolation and alienation by talking back to the dominant culture through the medium of film; they are putting forward their voice and their narrative.

## AMATEUR FILMMAKING AND CURATION AS MUTUAL AFFIRMATION

In *Talking Back* (2014b [1989]), hooks discussed the notion of ‘the personal is political’, noting that real transformation happens when personal experience or ‘radical self-awareness’ (108) is linked to collective struggle. In our interview, when Kennedy states that they are just ‘one piece of the puzzle’, and when Hellett curated Kennedy’s film *Just Me* in 2015, they both acknowledged that the political certainly starts with the personal gesture (of making or programming a film), but it does not end there, it must reach out. For hooks, to be critical, to think wider, deeper, as to why the oppression exists, which includes both the personal and the collective experience and

interrogates the structures of domination which allow the oppression to exist, to talk back to the dominant culture - that is when real transformation happens. Kennedy and Hellett can be seen to gravitate towards each other, to think critically together, to *incline* toward one another to talk back to and refuse their position as isolated therapeutic artists who are thought to not express non-conforming gender or sexuality.

In her chapter on inclination in *A Feminist Theory of Refusal* (2021), Bonnie Honig disorients Adriana Cavarero's understanding of the refusal concept of inclination. For Cavarero, inclination is theorised in relation to da Vinci's *The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne*; the Virgin mother's inclination can be found in her maternal and caring relationship with the child, rather than as patriarchal expectation and subordination to motherhood and unpaid care labour (Honig, 2021). Honig interprets Cavarero's inclination as pacifist, and instead calls for an agonistic inclination, locating mutuality not in maternal kinship but in the sorority of the bacchantes in Euripides's *Bacchae*.

In the *Bacchae*, when the bacchantes realise they are being watched by Pentheus, they try to attack the voyeur by individually pelting him with stones and using branches of fir trees as javelins. Realising the limitations of their individual strength, they incline towards each other and act in concert to force the tree down upon which Pentheus is hiding; "Come, my maenads, gather round this tree and *all take hold...*" and with that, *countless hands* pulled and pushed' (Honig, 2021: 46, emphasis in original). Instead of merely reorienting the sororal relationship from lone working to group working, the agonistic turn of the bacchantes in their attack on Pentheus is more akin to Sara Ahmed's concept of disorientation, which Honig draws upon; a more agonistic interpretation. If to be oriented is to be in one's rightful place, it can be said Cavarero's subversion of the maternal role is a reorientation. Therefore, as Honig argues, to be disoriented is to actively reject that space and refuse the concept of having a rightful place at all, thus going beyond subversion.

For Honig, the expected role of women as passive, non-violent and non-confrontational is disoriented in the *Bacchae* and the women reject their maternal duties by leaving their children in the city of Thebes, retreating to their own heterotopia of sorority in the mountain range of Cithaeron. Here they take on a more assertive, violent and confrontational position. Inclination becomes 'generative and caring, violent and murderous' (2021: 59) and is a continuation of the challenge to 'sovereign power' (2021: 58) which keeps things and people (women) in their place (passivity). The point at which new normativities are grounded and old ones unlearned, inclination poses questions and confronts stereotypes and, as Honig has clearly outlined, requires some form of agonism to be powerful.

Inclination is present in OBFF through Hellett's formation of QF. Refusing the ableist gaze of a society which has worked to isolate and alienate people with learning disabilities, preventing access to arts funding and valuing art through the therapy agenda, for closing the door to expressions of sexuality and non-conforming gender presentations through a discourse of vulnerability, the filmmakers associated with QF represent Honig's (and Ahmed's) disorientation. As Puwar (2004) argues, while the ableist gaze fixes learning-disabled and neurodiverse bodies, the ableist gaze is also disoriented by the presence of learning-disabled bodies in a space in which they are not meant to be, the world of filmmaking. QF is Hellett, Kennedy and their wider queer learning disability community's Cithaeron, it is a space in which lone filmmakers come together and act in concert to enact symbolic violence on the dominant culture, through both the smashing of stereotypes by self-representing and through the refusal of status by the invasion of the medium of film with new narratives. This is the agonism of QF's inclination; 'the latent categories and boundaries that tacitly inform who has the right to look, judge and represent start, ever so slightly, to falter' (Puwar, 2004: 46). Honig suggests there is an element of metaphorical care and agonism inherent in all inclinational practices. If the above represents the agonism of QF, the mutual empowerment (hooks, 2014a) of Kennedy and Hellett represents the care.

hooks (2014a: 129-130) notes how a 'mirrored recognition' enables the defining of a community's own reality set 'apart from the reality imposed upon them by structures of domination'. This mirrored recognition, hooks suggests, reinforces solidarity, which offers a new potential audience for each other's films where queer learning-disabled subjectivity will be the narrative focus. This mirrored recognition can be envisaged when Kennedy recounts seeing Hellett for the first time; reflecting how they were both sat in the auditorium of the 2015 OBFF watching one of the strands, how Hellett came and sat down beside Kennedy, 'and I think that was it', Kennedy explains, 'we just looked up at each other and we just smiled at each other. We didn't even need to say anything, we just looked at each other and it was like "you know what, we see each other"' (Interview with Kennedy, August 2021). In her study of the concept of staring, Garland-Thomson (2009: 185) notes how a 'stare is a response to someone's distinctiveness, and a staring exchange can thus beget mutual recognition, however fleeting'. This mutual recognition has been key to Kennedy and Hellett's mutual affirmation. Kennedy explains the importance of such mutuality as 'when you're *that* marginalised and there's only two of you that you can see, it's like we need to band around each other, take a hold of each other and just be like, "I see you, I see you and you see me"' (Interview with Kennedy, August 2021), a sentiment Hellett and Kennedy later elaborate on: 'because being LGBT and learning-disabled is such a specific identity there's not many spaces for us as artists to carve out or be a part of [...] I feel it is a rare occurrence for LGBT learning-disabled folk to meet in arts spaces. As a community we

need to uplift each other and we can't forget that and we need to support each other' (Matthew and Matthew in Conversation, 2016).

Hellett's radical gesture of mutual affirmation can be seen in his QF curation and Kennedy's can be seen in their Matthew and Matthew archive, the subject of their 2022 film *Not Mythmakers*, which was started as an attempt to assert both their roles in learning disability arts history. Their care can also be seen through their encouragement of others to make films and join the visual dialogue.

As part of Carousel's commitment to encouraging participation and developing the skills of learning-disabled artists, OBFF regularly tours the UK and holds masterclasses and workshops for basic film training meaning 'now the films entered into the festival are of a much higher quality', Hellett states (2020: 165). In 2011 Hellett received funding to accompany Carousel to deliver a six-week workshop in Adelaide, Australia teaching people with learning disabilities the basics of film. The workshop participants have since set up their own film festival, Sit Down, Shutup and Watch!, delivered by Tutti Arts, (*Disability And ... Film with Oska Bright*, 2020), demonstrating the impact of their satellite activities on the building of community.

Hellett makes a point of programming films by young people in support of the next generation of filmmakers, to inspire their creativity and develop their filmmaking skills. As he found his own self-confidence through his recognition for *Cooking with Matthew* by OBFF, he pays this forward by scouting for new talent and generally flying the OBFF flag to encourage submissions. 'I think my work's ground-breaking', Hellett states, 'so I hope it makes it easier for younger people to do what I'm doing. If I can do it, they can too' (2020: 167).

Hellett reflects that he would not be where he is today if not for the creative work of Carousel who helped him 'try all sorts of different things, from dance to singing and film [...] I became more confident, almost like I got to know myself better [...] it's like I was a little caterpillar before I started on this creative journey, and now I'm like a butterfly' (2020: 172). Similarly, Kennedy states how learning disability arts organisations carve out space for people like themselves and Hellett and how OBFF in particular is working hard to make space for them as their culture is largely invisible (Matthew and Matthew in Conversation, 2016). These comments highlight the importance of creative organisations and festivals as not just platforms for exhibiting creative work, but also for the support and encouragement they offer through recognition and the communities and networks they foster. If Cithaeron represents the bacchants' heterotopia in Honig's feminist re-reading of the *Bacchae*, OBFF and QF more specifically can be understood as a queer heterotopia in which creativity and community are nurtured.

In his positioning of the heterotopia, Foucault defines it as 'a space that is other' which acts as 'the greatest reserve of the imagination' (1984: n.p.). The heterotopia provides a means of movement, migration, escape and adventure and represents the rejection of repression in search of new ways of being. QF can be viewed as a great 'reserve of the imagination' whereby filmmakers can explore such movement and escapism and can imagine new ways of being. Refusing art-as-therapy in favour of art-as-art, refusing infantilisation in favour of gender and sexual (queer) expression, and refusing invisibility in favour of visibility, QF becomes a space that affords other ways of being, other narratives that have been excluded, other communities flourish which have until then been invisible. In an age saturated by mass self-publication, film festival spaces like QF allows voices to be heard which can be transformed by the collective process of showing work. What emerges is a community of subjects with a voice, each seeing, listening, speaking, recognising each other, in mutual affirmation.

## CONCLUSION

Reflecting on their involvement with OBFF, Kennedy does not think OBFF 'even realises how much space they had given us and how important that was, they actually gave us a space to create a dialogue that hadn't really been heard before within film festival spaces [...] there was also that sense that we were creating our own history through this film festival circuit, we're creating our own narrative' (Interview with Kennedy, August 2021). As part of OBFF, Kennedy believes they and the QF community are 'setting a dialogue that needs to be continued [...] these guys are setting the standard and they're championing underheard voices and basically bringing them out of the darkness and into some sort of visible realm' (ibid). Like the film *VITALSIGNS*, and others like it (from *When Billy Broke His Head* [1995] to *Crip Camp* [2020]), whose voices 'contributed to the creation of a disability ensemble' (Fenton, 2016: 210), OBFF and QF are continuing to add to this ensemble by nurturing a collective queer learning-disabled voice. As Claire Johnston highlights in her pivotal 1973 essay 'Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema', collective working and skill sharing provide 'the real possibility of examining how cinema works and how we can best interrogate and demystify the workings of ideology' (2014 [1973]: n.p.). The collective approach and skill sharing practiced by OBFF therefore challenges ableist privilege within the film industry and works as a site of mediation of queer learning-disabled images that have not been seen before.



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