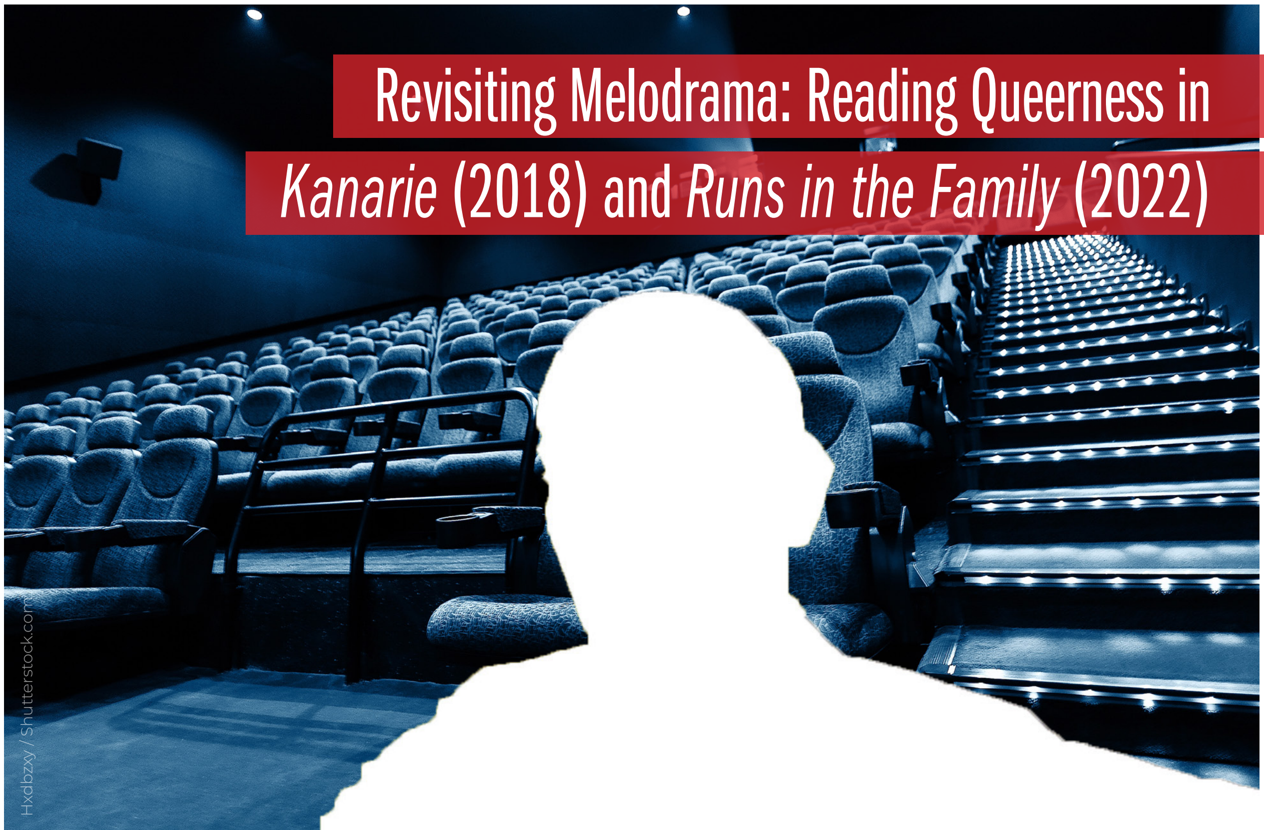

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Revisiting Melodrama: Reading Queerness in *Kanarie* (2018) and *Runs in the Family* (2022)

By Andy Carolin

Abstract

This article focuses on two post-apartheid melodramatic films that engage with the experiences of queer characters. While melodrama is often dismissed as a less serious and less sophisticated cinematic genre, I argue that it can be powerfully used to problematise dominant cultural discourses around gender and sexuality. In this article, I demonstrate that analyses of films that pay close attention to the generic features of melodrama can generate alternative readings of these films. Firstly, I focus on Christiaan Olwagen's Afrikaans film *Kanarie* (Canary) and argue that, despite the hypervisibility of its oppressive context, the film maps the outlines of a utopic queer cultural politics. Secondly, I analyse Ian Gabriel's *Runs in the Family* (2022), a largely neglected film that centres the experiences of its transgender protagonist. While this film initially appears to model a progressive and trans-inclusive worldview, I argue that it ultimately scripts a conservative family drama that inadvertently reinscribes the legitimacy of the dominant gender order.

Introduction

There has been a significant number of queer films released in South Africa over the past decade and a half. But many of these, especially those that have received sustained popular and scholarly attention, have tended to adopt realist modes that depict tragedy, in which a protagonist navigates moral quandaries in the context of daily life, often mapping the tragic outcomes that flow from their closeted lives, and thus revealing themselves to be morally flawed (and therefore complex) characters. One thinks, for example, of Francois's attempted rape of Christiaan at the end of Oliver Hemanus's *Skoonheid* (Beauty) (2011), Xolani's murder of Kwanda at the end of John Trengove's *Inxeba: The Wound* (2018), and Janno's apparent suicide at

the end of Etienne Kallos's film *Die Stropers* (The Harvesters) (2018). Realist films focusing on tragic queer characters – itself a long-standing trope in western queer cinema – tend to be privileged over other narrative genres, as somehow more sophisticated works of storytelling, somehow more demonstrative of the difficulties of queer life. This dismissive attitude towards melodrama is not limited to queer films, and is a broader current within South African film studies (Van der Hoven and Arnott 2009). While the genre itself has adapted to new audiences and technologies, it has not lost its connotative marking as lower form of art, somehow easily delineated from high art forms. Being deemed melodramatic is a seemingly uncontested slur in contemporary cultural criticism. For some South African film critics, melodrama might be associated with poor acting that someone unfortunately "laps[es]" into (Evans 2007, p.272) or shorthand for an "improbable" (Philips 2007, p.318) series of plot developments. There is, in this line of criticism, an unmasked and unproblematised disdain for the genre that inevitably obscures its analytical range and impact.

Within South African cultural studies, there is an often-unproblematised disdain for cinematic, dramatic and literary texts that depict moral certainty, binary moralism, and psychologically tropic characters (hero, villain, etc). This resistance can be traced back to Sachs's (1990) and Ndebele's (2006) evocations in the late 1980s to resist the strategic essentialism and liberation imperatives of much of the artistic and creative work being produced in solidarity with the antiapartheid movement. As van der Hoven and Arnott (2009) have shown, there is an equal resistance in South African scholarship to taking melodrama seriously as a narrative mode. However, as I argue in this article, binary arrangements of characters and themes, as so often characterises melodrama, cannot always be easily conflated with a didactic essentialism, nor can the melodramatic film be said to advance a uniformly conservative sexual politics, as has been suggested (Rooney 2015, p.2; Williams 2016, p.54). Instead, the melodrama itself is a malleable form through which various complex imaginings can circulate. It is also a genre that, despite lacking the hero that usually populates tragic films – the protagonists in the films I analyse are far too two-dimensional for such a designation – they nonetheless pose important questions about the politics of queer representation.

The realist thread in queer films (and film criticism more broadly) tends to underestimate the affective and analytical potential of less realist and somehow more playful and experimental narrative modes. This article focuses especially on melodrama as a queer film genre in South Africa, one that eschews realism's investment in a seemingly unvarnished truth value. In particular, I will focus on two South African cinematic melodramas that foreground queer characters. The first of these is Christiaan Olwagen's Afrikaans film *Kanarie* (Canary) which, while receiving considerable scholarly attention, has almost exclusively been analysed in terms of its engagement with post-apartheid depictions of whiteness (Carolin 2021; Gray 2021; Andrews 2022; Ncube 2023), with arguably inadequate attention paid to its aesthetic features. The second film that I will analyse is Ian Gabriel's *Runs in the Family* (2022), a film that has been entirely overlooked by scholars since its release on film festival circuits and on streaming giant Netflix.

Melodrama

Melodrama as a performative mode has its origins as a popular form of entertainment for the undereducated masses that made up the audiences in the French and British public theatres from the seventeenth century onwards. It was, as a result, historically grounded in "spectacle, excessive dramaturgy and narrative simplicity" (Loren and Metelmann 2016, p.15). These characteristics continue today, and the genre is perhaps most often defined in terms of key thematic, narrative and aesthetic features. These include, most notably, moralist binaries between good and evil (Loren and Metelmann 2016, p.11), the clear delineation of victims and villains (Williams 2016, p.58), stunning peripeteia (Brooks 1976, p.12) and the exaggerated use of symbolism (Lahiri 2018, p.304). At its core, perhaps, is its "transformation from sensibility to sentimentality" (Loren and Metlemann 2016, p.16). In his oft-cited 1972 essay, Thomas Elsaesser (1991, p.74) argues that "melodrama is a system of punctuation, giving expressive colour and chromatic contrast to the storyline, by orchestrating the emotional ups and downs of the intrigue". A key mechanism through which the sentimental high points are developed is music, and Rooney

(2015, p.1) explains that the very etymology of melodrama gestures to the centrality of music (*melos*) and action (*drama*) as its constitutive components. However, the inclusion of music is, of course, not strictly speaking necessary, given that characteristics of melodrama might also feature in non-performative modes such as prose (Schurch 2024). The use of melodrama to tell queer stories is itself not unique to Olwagen's and Gabriel's films, of course. There has in recent years been a large number of British and American television shows that deploy melodrama's performative sentimentalism to tell queer stories – one thinks, for example, of *Pose*, *The New Normal* (see Joyrich 2022), *The Politician* (see Himberg 2022) and *It's a Sin* (see Duckels 2023).

While "hyperbolic visual and aural elements" (Loren and Metelmann 2016, p.11) have been identified as being central aesthetic features of the genre, the melodrama also draws on particular tropic character positionings that are tied to given distributions of virtue and villainy, agency and powerlessness. Although this is most often a triad between victim, villain and hero, this is itself rather flexible. As Loren and Metelmann write in their introduction to *Melodrama after the Tears*:

> Within the victim-villain-hero constellation, the victim and the hero might at times be conflated in one character, and the villain might be embodied in something more abstract than an individual character, such as a social institution or set of conditions. (2016, p.12)

However, the notion of hero that is deployed in discussions of the melodrama are quite different to those that accompany notions of the hero as they take shape in tragedy. As Heilman influentially wrote in *Tragedy and Melodrama*: "In tragedy the conflict is within man; in melodrama, it is between men, or between men and things" (1969, p.72). Williams explains it similarly when she writes that while "tragedy derives from overweening pride, fatal flaws (or at least momentous mistakes), and it depicts divided souls", the heroes within melodramas are "often more wholly victims or villains" (2016, p.58). In other words, while tragedy is "about the conflict within the great soul of the tragic hero" (Williams 2016, p.63) – and one sees this in the agonising and complex descent into rape in *Skoonheid* and murder in *Inxeba* – melodrama is structured around a binary arrangement

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of principles that are embodied by different characters or sets of characters within institutions. Very often, the characters within melodramas "remain flat due to their primary psychic roles or Manichaean coding [in order to] eliminate moral ambiguity and thus to heighten the potential for a sense of injustice, desire for retributive action and, subsequently, viewer identification with the victim" (Loren and Metelmann 2016, p.12).

Given the moral absolutism that often characterises the genre, it is a form that lends itself, at least partially, to fixed imaginings of the present and future. Green-Simms, in her study of West African queer films, explains that melodrama is often "designed to stimulate and provoke reactions in

the audience by sensationally depicting religious, social, and moral transgressions" (2012, p.28). There is an especially prodigious body of such melodramas produced by Nollywood in Nigeria that exploit conservative sexual moralism to tell salacious stories in which normative gender and sexuality are momentarily disrupted and then quickly restored (Green-Simms 2022, p.14). While the binary narrative logic of melodrama often lends itself to a legitimisation of the conservativism of the status quo (Rooney 2015, p.2; Williams 2016, p.54; Green-Simms 2012, p.28) – and the genre itself is often dismissed as being unworthy of serious attention (Van der Hoven and Arnott 2009) – I argue that complex and contested cultural politics inhere within melodramatic cinema in ways that far exceed the narrow binary nature of the narrative form. In my analysis of *Kanarie* and *Runs in the Family*, I am especially interested in the different queer cultural politics that circulate in and through the melodrama as an aesthetic mode. While *Kanarie* might appear to map a rather linear and predictable progression of a gay man's move from secrecy to disclosure within a violently heteronormative context, I argue that the film advances a far more radical utopic queer politics that exceeds the seeming inevitability of apartheid's sexual moralism. In contrast, while *Runs in the Family* appears, at first, to offer an affirming and optimistic account of a transgender character's supportive father and diverse queer community, I argue that the film inadvertently advances a conservative worldview that strictly polices traditional gender norms.

Kanarie (2018) and queer utopia

Christiaan Olwagen's film *Kanarie* focuses on the experiences of a group of young conscripts in the South African Defense Force between 1984 and 1986. The protagonist, Johan Niemand, is among a small group of conscripts who are selected to serve in the army's choir, colloquially referred to as the Canaries, from which the film gets its Afrikaans title. Johan, a devoted fan of British music sensations Boy George and Culture Club, is a gay young man who, through the film, engages in a romantic and sexual relationship with another recruit and tentatively comes to accept his own sexuality. It is clear from the first scenes of the film that Johan is inclined towards a queer disruption of gender. The film opens with his younger sisters dressing him in a makeshift wedding dress as he pretends to be a bride. They then coerce him to walk down the street wearing the wedding dress. However, this walk soon transforms into a music video scene, played to the music of Bronkski Beat's "Smalltown Boy" – with its distinct aural blend of falsetto and what has been called "ominous" notes and an "electro-pop pulse" (Gould 2019). The scene cuts between a realist image of Johan clumsily draped in a wedding dress to a more surrealist image of him in highly stylised makeup, armlength gloves and a 1980s jacket as he and a group of choreographed dancers move down the street. The lyrics of the song that are played at this point foreshadow with remarkable prescience Johan's symbolic and anguished journey away from the predictability of heteronormative apartheid society towards an uncertain future:

> You leave in the morning with
> everything you own in a little black case
>
> Alone on a platform, the wind and the
> rain on a sad and lonely face
>
> Mother will never understand why you
> had to leave
>
> But the answers you seek will never be
> found at home
>
> The love that you need will never be
> found at home
>
> Run away, turn away, run away, turn
> away, run away

That this imagined dance sequence is first interrupted by the arrival of the *dominee* (religious minister) and then followed immediately by the arrival of Johan's callup papers for the army highlights, rather obviously, how his failure to conform is punished by the governing system of Christian Nationalism and its statist policing of normative masculinity. The melodramatic mode that is used here at the very outset, in which the character himself transforms into a Boy George caricature and struts down the street, undermines any attempt to read this film as a teleological journey towards gay acceptance, or as Dercksen describes it: "a coming-of-age musical drama set in South Africa in 1985 about a young boy who discovers how [...] the true self can be discovered" (2019). Instead of a neat sense of teleology, this film

marks a stylised juxtaposition and recurring blend of two very different ways of being queer. The film is structured, both thematically and aesthetically, according to a binary logic that distinguishes strictly between a conservative assimilationist white masculine aesthetic, on the one hand – consistent with the "television industry pressures for images of queer life to be simultaneously 'responsible' for sensitive straight audiences and 'respectful' to queer viewers" (Keegan 2016, p.10) – and a far more camp and queer disruptive mode, on the other.

I read the film in terms of Muñoz's work on queer utopia. Writing in *Cruising Utopia*, he argues that queerness offers a way towards a future-orientated utopia that exceeds the narrow normative formulations of the present. In Muñoz's words: "Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present" (2009, p.1). An embrace of queerness offers a space for a more radical queer politics that is built on utopic imaginings of the future and a critique of "the ontological certitude" of what Muñoz criticises as "the politics of presentist and pragmatic gay identity" (2009, p.11). Muñoz draws on Ernst Bloch's distinction between abstract and concrete utopias: whereas an abstract utopia offers a naïve imagining of some idealised place that is untethered to social realities – what Muñoz calls "banal optimism" – concrete utopias are grounded in the realities of the present (2009, p.3). For Muñoz, queer utopias are concretely "relational to historically situated struggles, a collectivity that is actualized or potential". As I argue below, it is within the context of a "historically situated" homophobia that the conditions for a queer utopic imagining of the future becomes visible in Olwagen's film.

The structuring logic of secrecy and disclosure that is so often attendant to narratives of gay characters' identity formation has dominated popular reception of the film (Dercksen 2019; De Barros 2018; Zietsman 2018). However, this is a rather stale and formulaic way of thinking about sexuality that does not quite account for the disruptive ideological work being done by the film. The analytical predominance of the coming out narrative is invested in an assimilationist politics that does not disrupt the normative construction of society itself. After being interrupted during his first clumsy kiss with his love interest, Wolfgang, a look of disgust emerges on Johan's face as the music reaches a dramatic non-diegetic crescendo – itself providing an aural depiction of the character's inner anguish. The scene cuts to the men in the choir standing in church while the chaplain delivers an address to those assembled. True to the melodramatic form, the character's inner turmoil is exteriorised into the chaplain's address itself:

> He [God] declares war between himself and the devil, between light and darkness, between us and them [...] The onslaught is severe. The onslaught is out there. It is in our homes. It is in our streets. It is in this very building. Amongst us.

There is a deliberately ambiguous shift here between two binary worldviews, with Christian Nationalism on the one hand, and the liberation movement on the other. But the visual shifts of the camera onto Johan during this address, which followed on directly from the scene in which Johan and Wolfgang kiss each other, highlights the projection of other moralist binaries in which "the devil", "darkness" and "the onslaught" comes to stand in for non-heteronormative sexualities as well.

This dramatised exteriorisation of the moralist battle between good and evil is again evidenced when the same chaplain, after casually observing a subtle touch between Wolfgang and Johan, takes the young recruits on a drive in his car. The chaplain asks:

> *Chaplain*: Right or wrong? [...] There's a fork in the road, which route should I take? Speak up, boys. There's a fork in the road. Which one do I take?
>
> *Wolfgang*: The one that will take us to our destination.
>
> *Chaplain*: But how do I know which one?
>
> *Johan*: Reverend, we don't know.
>
> *Chaplain*: Choose, men! Right or left? Right or left? Quickly men, otherwise I'll leave it up to God. [*The chaplain starts accelerating quickly*] Dear God. Show these men the right way, Lord.
>
> *Johan*: Reverend, we don't know.
>
> *Chaplain*: Right or left? [*Johan takes the steering wheel to guide the car*]

The chaplain remains vague throughout this encounter, as he maps out a series of binaries,

clearly trying to impress on the young recruits that any same-sex intimacy between them should be considered a complete counterpoint to the path ordained by apartheid nationalism. This scene, the moralistic binaries of the dialogue, and the increasingly dangerous stakes as the chaplain dramatises the urgency of their moral choices, evidences a core aspect of the melodrama that Peter Brooks describes in his classic *The Melodramatic Imagination*. In this, Brooks observes that the melodramatic form stages a clash between erstwhile victims and wrongdoers in which they "confront one another with full expressivity, to fix in large gestures the meaning of their relations and existence" (1976, p.4).

True to form, this scene of rhetorical and psychological violence is soon followed by another scene in which Johan is staying with a host family as the choir travels around the country to perform concerts. One woman, who encourages the boys to flirt and drink alcohol, shows Johan her fashion studio and, after he tries on one of her designs, she says:

> Promise me one thing. [...] As soon as your cage doors open you [must] fly away. Away from this Godforsaken country with all its sirs and madams and rules and regulations and all its hate and its bullies. All its fucking bullies.

The woman's comment about him flying away from the cage – a playful, if obvious, reference to the fact that the group is known as the canaries – marks a counterpoint to the moralism and heteronormativity of the military and its chaplain. This binary works to ensure what Anker refers to as the "moral legibility" that is so central to the genre (2005, p.24). But, unlike the common use of the melodrama to advance conservative sexual moralism and to punish apparent wrongdoers (Rooney 2015, p.2), *Kanarie* evidences an innovative sleight of hand in which it is a moralism predicated on an embrace of queerness and a rejection of heteronormativity – an easily contrasted either/or – that becomes legible to audiences.

After a failed attempt to engage in the typical coming out ritual – Johan is forced to backtrack and withdraw his coming out after his sister says that her husband "would never accept it" – he returns to an empty barracks. But after this failed attempt to perform the ritualistic coming out, the inner conflict within the protagonist becomes exteriorised in a spectacular (in the literal sense of the word) scene of self-harm and exaggerated anguish. After Johan thinks he hears bicycle bells, a sound he has previously established as being a traumatic accompaniment to the bullying he experienced as a child, he puts on the earphones of his Walkman as the sound of Culture Club's "Do You Really Want to Hurt Me?" plays in the background. The strobing light effects produce a series of still images as he engages in a choreographed dance sequence that blends militaristic moves of marching with more aesthetically stylised forms that depict agony. As he dances through their dormitory, the scene shows further stills as the beds and linen in the room are slowly overturned and strewn across the room. Although the director of the film has explained that budgetary constraints resulted in a limited number of small sets – and he notes almost regretfully that this may create a "claustrophobic" effect (Marche Media 2018) – it is the very spatialised intensity of this small and often-used setting that contributes to the affective excess of the scene. When Johan wakes up from the surrealist trance, he notices his own blood streaked across the room, and the scene offers an exemplar of how melodrama "exteriorizes conflict and psychic structure" (Brooks 1976, p.35). This spectacular scene depicts his inner turmoil as he must grapple with his sexuality and non-conforming gender identity. It is an emotional peak in the film and demonstrates Williams's framing of the melodrama genre:

> emotional and moral registers are sounded, [the] work invites us to feel sympathy for the virtues of beset victims, [and] the narrative trajectory is ultimately more concerned with a retrieval and staging of innocence than with the psychological causes of motives and actions. (1998, p.42)

It is clear that what makes Johan's queerness such an affront to his sense of self is its apparent irreconcilability with his Christian faith. After this surrealist trance scene, he appears, covered in his own blood, at the door of the cottage belonging to Dominee Engelbrecht, a younger and much kinder chaplain – whose positioning as a moral counterpoint to the other chaplain is itself closely tied to the narrative simplicity of the genre. After dramatically reading the definition of homosexuality from the dictionary and the

Biblical injunctions against it, Johan breaks down in despair. It is in his own breaking down – and the physical destruction of his intimate and military space – that evidences what Muñoz's might call "the impoverish[ment] and toxic[icity] for queers of the present" (2009, p.27).

However, in a moment of sudden character development, Johan attempts to blur the apparent split between his queerness and his faith when, as part of the programming committee for the choir, he composes a song that blends music from queer sensation Culture Club with Afrikaans hymns:

> The victims we know so well / they shine in your eyes when we kiss and tell / strange places we never see / but it's sink or swim / like it's always been
>
> [*In Afrikaans*:] All the earth, make joyful noise, raise jubilation from the dust.
>
> And I keep on loving you / it's the only thing to do / when the angels / sing for greater things / and I give them all to you
>
> [*Simultaneously in Afrikaans*:] Praise His name and sing for joy!
>
> Pull the strings of emotion / take a ride into unknown pleasure / feel like a child on a dark night / wishing there was some kind of heaven / I could be warm with you smiling / hold out your hands for a while, the victims, we know them, so well
>
> [*Dramatic music with drums and base guitar*]

It is significant that it is the group of boys who were previously agents in the heteronormative bullying and policing of heteronormative masculinity who comprise the choir who join Johan in this highly charged – even blasphemous, to some – musical arrangement. In this, under Johan's guidance, "the suffering victim [is] turned into a righteous action hero" (Williams 2016, p.54) and the choir itself joins him in enacting "the heroic acts of dramatic heroes, presented as a dramatic spectacle" that is so common to the genre (Kappelhoff 2016, p.81). The film's violent depiction and destruction of Johan's dormitory and the ambiguous blending of two seemingly disparate ideological impulses – anachronistic in the Christian Nationalist military – marks a rejection of the "here and now's totalizing rendering of reality" (Muñoz 2009, p.1) in ways that contain traces of Muñoz's utopic assertion that "we must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds" (2009, p.1). In a somewhat comparable vein, Williams argues that "the aspiration for justice [...] is melodrama's own, most important virtue" (2016, p.74). He adds: "What melodrama can offer at its best is thus something that tragedy cannot supply. It's a vision of a better governmentality" (Williams, 2016, p.74). It is in this, then, that the *breaking down* – of the character, of the setting, of ideological coherence itself – is so central to create the spaces from which Muñoz's "new world" and Williams' "better governmentality" can emerge.

Runs in the Family **(2022) and the politics of reassurance**

Unlike the queer utopic imaginary that is scripted in *Kanarie*, Ian Gabriel's film *Runs in the Family* employs a melodramatic mode that offers, perhaps inadvertently, a conservative framing of queerness that I am calling a politics of reassurance. Within this mode, normative arrangements of gender and social organisation are shown to be stable and resilient, and audiences are educated as to trans discourses and identities, all the while being *reassured* that trans bodies can be accommodated without any radical disruption of the status quo. In fact, as I discuss below in relation to the end of the film, trans bodies can be sacrificed at the altar of traditional family values. This has echoes of what has been critiqued as transnormativity, in which "some transgender people [are] deemed culturally intelligible and, consequently, offered conditional acceptance within society" (McIntyre 2018, p.10). However, the representational costs of this assimilation invariably depend on the exclusion of those who might not offer a comforting reassurance to cisgender audiences. While critiques of transnormativity tend to centre on the extent to which trans bodies need to conform to specific conditions for legibility, including but not limited to medicalised approaches that see surgery as the *sine qua non* of trans identity (Johnson 2016; McIntyre 2018), I am interested here in a different set of narrative strategies through which a politics of reassurance can be advanced. In this film, these narrative strategies include a textual ghettoisation of queerness, a ridicule and disavowal of ideologi-

> Gabriel's film covers mostly a three-day period in which River, a transman, travels with his father from Cape Town to Eswatini to rescue River's biological mother from a rehabilitation clinic.

cally engaged understandings of gender politics, a didacticism aimed at unassumingly educating cisgender audiences about trans discourses, and grand gestures of self-sacrifice by the trans protagonist in service of the pre-existing gender status quo.

Gabriel's film covers mostly a three-day period in which River, a transman, travels with his father from Cape Town to Eswatini to rescue River's biological mother from a rehabilitation clinic. The dialogue is irreverent, the puns are aplenty, the tone is playful, and the plot itself is fast paced. The film incorporates the key tropes of the road trip genre, including an intimate rapport, both diegetic and non-diegetic musical montages, and a series of unlikely obstacles and mistakes that facilitate emotional connection between two or more characters. Central to the melodramatic narrative logic of the film is the dualistic projection of hero and villain onto River's parents: whereas his father, Varun, is an idealised single father who has uncritically embraced his trans son – and who one characters points out to River "would go to Pollsmoor [Prison] for you" – his biological mother, Monica, abandoned him 23 years earlier as a child, deliberately misgenders him on reuniting, and ultimately steals from him.

True to the genre, the film features "wild swings between pathos and action", with the action often being used to create sustained farcical and sometimes even slapstick comedic exchanges between the two men (Williams 2016, p.56). This action sees them undertake ever-increasingly laborious tasks: this includes climbing over a fence that they mistakenly believe is the national border fence between South Africa and Eswatini, only then to have to mount the actual border fence, all the while clumsily carrying a large old kilim rug that Varun intends to use as a bribe to ensure Monica's release from the rehabilitation centre. The two men meet a woman who is driving past – an assertive woman in the tradition of the sassy sidekick – who drives them to the rehabilitation centre and who is then mistakenly embraced by Monica believing her to be her child. The film continues and sees Monica stealing the money that River has saved for his gender-affirming top surgery, re-abandoning her recently reunited family unit, and is later found having sex with Varun's friend in the backroom of a dingy casino.

Monica is shown to be dismissive towards River's trans identity, and his intention to participate in a drag competition. In one of her initial observations to Varun about River, she says: "You must be fucking joking. We made a girl who thinks she's a boy who dresses like a girl? I mean, give me a fucking break". As the villainous character, it is Monica who drives the affective subtext of loss throughout the film. As Loren and Metelmann explain in relation to the melodrama:

> The plot is typically structured around an agon of loss. The loss may be some combination of the latent, potential, inevitable or already realized. Inter-diegetic tensions that affectively and emotionally engage the viewer are orchestrated through an interplay between initial loss/threat and subsequent action to retrieve or compensate for loss, which is usually accompanied by the further threat of loss. (2016, p.12)

Within the melodrama tradition, Monica's original abandonment of her young child evidences a loss that is "already realized" – and which is almost unforgivable, within dominant constructs of

parenthood. While River and Monica's tentative steps towards relationship building during the road trip after rescuing her are attempts "to retrieve or compensate for loss", this impetus is quickly dispelled and replaced by the "further threat of loss" (through her acts of re-abandonment and theft) that, through selected flashback scenes, audiences are led to believe was "inevitable". Significantly, it is not only that Monica suddenly disappears from her son's life again, but that she steals his savings in the process. These savings have been set aside to partially pay for River's gender-affirming surgery and Monica's villainy thus reaches new heights as she comes to embody the systemic forces that obstruct trans people's access to medical care. True to the genre, the intense emotional ebbs and flows in *Runs in the Family* are caused not by the downfall of a protagonist through his own flaw, as in tragedy, but rather by an externalised and archetypical antagonist who block the protagonist's efforts towards medicalised self-actualisation.

The film effectively draws on the binary logic of the melodrama in its systematic introduction of the challenges of transphobia, on the one hand, and models an unassumingly inclusive gaze that reorientates viewers towards a progressive reframing of these discourses, on the other. Some of the challenges include logistical travel obstacles, transphobic responses by another man when using a public restroom, and overt hostility from service staff. At one point, as River and Varun are trying to convince the receptionist at the rehabilitation centre that at least one of them has the right to authorise Monica's release, the receptionist says:

> Wait, wait, wait, wait. First, you are not married, then you are married. And your child, who says you are not married, is a girl, then a boy. How must I know if I cannot look inside his or her pants.

In this, the film gives voice to two recurring tropes with which trans visibility circulates, namely the idea that trans people are *fraudulently* misrepresenting themselves (akin to Varun presenting a falsified marriage certificate), and that only medicalised genital-centric proof can resolve the question definitively. However, given River's unquestionable likeability, and audiences presumed empathy for his position, this assertion lacks affective traction within the film, and thus simultaneously scripts and disarticulates this very perspective.

While the film evidences the social context of transphobia, it also offers a more expansive criticism of gender norms that may resonate more broadly. He explains:

> Being trans isn't an artform or a hobby. We're literally a different gender to what some doctor prescribed when they saw either a vulva or a penis and decided okay this one better be pretty but not too pretty or she won't be taken seriously and that one can never cry and always has to pay on dates [...] Boys do cry. We should be allowed that much.

These standard criticisms of gender stereotypes would have critical purchase with many audiences. This monologue offers a non-confrontational and accessible trans perspectives. However, it then shifts to a more ideologically laden assertion, made in a voice that clearly suggests this is a commonly repeated refrain, when River adds: "But no, the binary is a colonial, capitalist, patriarchal tool that is violently oppre –". But this deeper and more engaged criticism of the historicity of gender norms, inherently alienating to many audiences, is conveniently interrupted by a mechanical problem in the car. This moment in the film introduces and then, through ridicule, disavows the far more queerly disruptive framing of gender politics. It is not only this speech's soapboxing tone and River's overstated earnestness that results in this very idea being ridiculed, but it is also through the fact that it is interrupted by the slapstick running gag about a front window that keeps falling. Similarly, the father later attempts to mimic this ideological tone, in a naively earnest assertion to the receptionist that "See, the masculine-feminine binary is a colonial tool that – ". But again, this broader ideological critique is interrupted and ridiculed by the receptionist's sassy response. Though this is, of course, consistent with the comedic tone of the film, questions can still be asked about how this simultaneous invocation and disavowal reveals the film's insincere interest in a broader dismantling of gender constructs as it offers up a complex discourse for easy laughs. If indeed "uncomfortable truth-telling constitutes a central tradition in what we have for a while been calling queer culture", as Kurnick (2020, p.349) suggests, then *Runs in the Family* falls short of this, insisting instead on a reassuring aesthetics that disarms any audience discomfort.

Once they have rescued Monica, River decides that he and his father will participate in a drag competition, the prize money for which they hope will be used to complete River's top surgery. In this, the film offers a rich and affirming mapping of a queer drag culture, a site itself known for its parodic and hyperbolic aesthetic. However, this scene in the drag club is ghettoised, textually separated from the rest of the film. If *Runs in the Family* is to be believed, queer culture is flourishing, but it must do so within the non-threatening space of the club, advancing a politics of reassurance. The space is depicted as being rich in drag aesthetic affects – including hyperbolic makeup and dresses and barbed back-and-forth exchanges between the contestants. It is also depicted as being oddly utopian in its depiction of alternative body forms and politics, including artists wearing Xhosa-inspired dress, voluptuous large-bodied performers, and a performer engaging a distinctly intersectional politics by carrying a Palestinian flag. The scene itself is often didactic. When asked by the judge, Her Vajesty the Queen, why he and his father should win the prize money, River explains that "we believe we should win the grand prize because we have both fought very hard to be ourselves in a world that has not always welcomed us". In this, and elsewhere in the film, River draws parallels between his own experiences of transphobia and his Indian father's experiences of racism during apartheid. There is, in this, a commonly invoked yoking of broader human rights discourses to the moral certitude of the antiapartheid movement. As Frenkel explains: "the idea that things can be fought over and changed is so endemic to South African cultural life that it has become a sort of everyday common sense or an afterlife of a successful revolution" (2017, p.279). Varun contributes to the overall didactic mode when he explains that "while he [River] was showing me how to be a woman, he was teaching me how to be a man". In this, an idealised masculinity, built on courage and integrity, is tied to, rather than divorced from, flexible framings of gender and identity. During their performed dance routine, as River goes from being dressed as Whitney Houston to a male-presenting boy in a white suit, the music moves from Shirley Bassey's "Where Do I Begin?" into Whitney Houston's "How Will I Know" to "Gloria Gaynor's "I Will Survive" and ending with Deniece Williams' "Let's Hear It for the Boy" – a line that serves as the repeated refrain at the end of the performance as the volume and pace builds up to a crescendo. The routine not only draws on canonical queer anthems of Western queer culture but also visualises a transition from femaleness to maleness, with an evocative conclusion that, through the confluence of dress and lyrics, reaffirms River's status as a transman.

"... film offers a rich and queerly inclusive imagining of drag culture, this aspect remains textually segregated from the politics and aesthetics of the rest of the film – a momentarily abstract utopic place."

While the film offers a rich and queerly inclusive imagining of drag culture, this aspect remains textually segregated from the politics and aesthetics of the rest of the film – a momentarily abstract utopic place. After the drag show, River realises that Monica has stolen all the money that

he had saved to pay for the top surgery. Monica thus confirms her place as the villain in the film, not only the woman who abandoned her son as a child but who now has stalled his progress towards gender-affirming surgery. Varun panickily drives around the city looking for her. While Green-Simms argues that melodrama in West Africa often relies on an "aesthetics of outrage", it is important to note that it in the case of *Runs in the Family*, it is Monica's blocking of River's progress that is most generative of outrage, rather than his being transgender (2012, p.28).

The clash between the two binary positions reaches its crescendo when Varun confronts Monica about the theft, and the dialogue between the characters cements her villainy:

> *Monica*: I said I didn't want to be a mother [years ago]. But you kept pushing. [...] I hated the thought of being a mother. But guess what: I'm fucking allowed that. [...]
>
> *Varun*: But why didn't you stay away. Why come back just to steal from him?
>
> *Monica*: I was stolen from first! You imagine carrying someone in your body for nine months, okay? No one fucking pays you for it. And you know what, fuck you!

In this, Monica rejects the codes of compulsory motherhood imposed on women. And for this, she is punished. She is last seen walking down the dark street, alone and maligned. In this, the film engages the "cycles of victimization and retributive violence" (Williams 2016, p.56) that is so central to cinematic melodrama. Within the genre's "dualistic scheme of good and evil" (Loren and Metelmann 2016, p.11) that is projected on to River's parents, the film functions as a "legitimation of retributive action to restore virtue" (Loren and Metelmann 2016, p.11). But, despite the filmmaker's best intentions, the virtue being restored here is not that of a queer affirming narrative but rather the conservative codes of motherhood imposed onto women. This bifurcated approach to punishing evildoers and rewarding heroes is further extended when River decides to delay his top surgery in order to stock, decorate and open a new store where his father, a tailor, can make and sell garments. In doing so, River's gender-affirming surgery is subordinated in favour of rewarding a good parent. Audiences are *reassured* that, when it comes to it, the acceptable trans character will substitute their own desires (suddenly recast here as merely nice-to-haves) in favour of a respectful submission to the needs of his parents. River, as the victim-hero, in Loren and Metelmann's (2016, p.12) formulation that I discuss above, thus draws on a conservative logic to win over audiences: the film ends with River's near-perfect father being rewarded, his villainous mother being punished, and the apparent urgency of his own gender-affirming medical care being recast. Unlike *Kanarie*, which might more accurately embody Keegan's praise that queer melodrama reveals "other ways that the world might be, and [how] we might be queer in it", Gabriel's film forecloses on this very potentiality (2016, p.11).

Conclusion

If indeed "melodrama [is] an elastic system that redistributes the visibility of suffering in a community", as Zarzosa suggests, it is also a system that conditions the very terms of that visibility (2012, p.9). Analyses of the films that foreground their melodramatic aesthetics reveal perhaps counterintuitive readings. While *Kanarie* has been read as a teleological narrative that facilitates a bland sense of "self-acceptance" by one reviewer (Zietsman 2018) and as a generic account of "coming of age and coming out" by another (De Barros 2018), I argue that the film invites a far more radical reading that celebrates a disruptive – even destructive – breaking of the "prison house" of the "here and now" in favour of a speculatively indefinite queer utopia (Muñoz 2009, p.1). Similarly, though *Runs in the Family* has been read as "unexpectedly wholesome" and "a sweet little gem" (IMDb 2023) by one reviewer and as "incredibly pleasant" by another (Lipsett 2023), my reading of the film within the conventions of the genre highlights a far more problematic subordination of queerness in favour of an assimilationist narrative of reassurance. Of course, I am not arguing here that all queer films advance *either* queer utopia *or* a politics of reassurance. Such a binary reading would be antithetical to the analytical impulses of queer theory itself. Rather, this article aims to map the alternative readings that come into view if we shift our attention to issues of narrative form, and what implications this may have for thinking through contemporary queer cultural politics.

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