

Pinkwashing, PACBI, Penguins: John Greyson's *Photo Booth* (2021) and the
Queer Palestine Movement

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Abstract

Pinkwashing, PACBI, Penguins: John Greyson's *Photo Booth* (2021) and the

Horizons of Queer Solidarity

Sophie Moulaison

This thesis considers the work of Toronto-based director and former Queers Against Israeli Apartheid activist John Greyson as a case study for thinking through the methods of criticism, rhetorical strategies, and networks of solidarity that inform the contemporary queer Palestine movement. More specifically, it examines Greyson's 2022 film *Photo Booth*, an agitprop documentary produced for the purpose of promoting Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) initiatives against Israel as an instance of anti-homonationalist criticism. Considering *Photo Booth* alongside the work of theorists like Jasbir Puar and C. Heike Schotten, I argue for an appraisal of *Photo Booth* as a heuristic model for anti-imperialist queer solidarity in the present homonationalist moment. I then consider *Photo Booth*'s often uneasy appropriation of the representational strategies of the earlier New Queer Cinema movement to suggest that the film explores the capacity of queer representational practices to respond to transnational crises under conditions of homonationalist co-optation. More specifically, I argue that what New Queer strategies of parody, pastiche, and irony might be able to offer the queer Palestine movement is a formal language of criticism that is attuned to the discursive construction of popular narratives of the Israeli occupation. Finally, I conclude with some preliminary reflections on the queer Palestine movement, suggesting that it underscores broader concerns about the ambivalent position of queer artistic production, activism, and theory in what Jasbir Puar has called "queer times."

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Introduction:

On July 24, 2024, nearly nine months into Israel’s most recent escalation of its genocide¹ against the Palestinian people, Benjamin Netanyahu delivered a 52-minute long speech to the United States Congress. In what would be his fourth address to Congress since October 7, 2023, the Prime Minister of Israel thanked the Biden administration for its continued support in what he described as a “clash between barbarism and civilization” (“We’re Protecting You”). The visit took place only eleven days after one of Israel’s most deadly offensives in Gaza, where ninety Palestinians were killed in a designated safe zone near Khan Yunis (“At Least 90 killed in Israeli Attack”) and was met with significant protests on Capitol Hill. Midway through his address, Netanyahu slammed these protestors as “Iran’s useful idiots” and, in what would become one of the most commented moments of his visit, addressed pro-Palestinian LGBTQ activists: “It’s amazing, absolutely amazing. Some of these protesters hold up signs proclaiming ‘Gays for Gaza.’ They might as well hold up signs saying ‘Chickens for KFC.’” His speech received multiple standing ovations.

The scope of the present study is not that of geopolitical analysis, nor does it aspire to unpack the logic according to which a convicted war criminal² was warmly welcomed to speak before the highest governing body of the United States (these would be feats too daunting, too disheartening). Rather, I invoke Netanyahu’s address by way of introducing one of the central concerns of my thesis: the rhetorical insolubility of queer solidarity with anti-imperialist struggle. That Netanyahu’s comparison of “Gays for Gaza” with “Chickens for KFC” relies on

¹I use the term “genocide” in the sense defined by international law. See *Gaza Genocide: A Collective Crime* by UN Special Rapporteur Francesca Albanese and the Report of the International Court of Justice, *Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in the Gaza Strip (South Africa v. Israel)*.

² I also the term “war criminal” in accordance with international law. See International Criminal Court, “Situation in the State of Palestine: ICC Pre-Trial Chamber I Rejects the State of Israel’s Challenges to Jurisdiction and Issues Warrants of Arrest for Benjamin Netanyahu and Yoav Gallant.”

Orientalist, Islamophobic tropes that reproduce the Palestinian as a phobogenic object is evident. As Sa'ed Atshan has noted at length, the conflation of Palestinians with homophobia not only ignores the lived experience and activist work of LGBTQ+ communities living in Palestine but also the role of the Zionist occupation in perpetuating what he terms “ethnoheteronormativity” in Palestinian civil society—that is, the “intertwined oppression from dual systems of ethnocracy on one hand and heteronormativity and toxic masculinity on the other” (10). For Atshan, the compulsion towards heteronormativity in Palestinian communities is motivated in no small part by counterinsurgent strategies that directly target LGBTQ Palestinians, such as the Israeli intelligence services’ history of blackmailing LGBTQ Palestinians from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip to pressure them into the role of informant. This, as Atshan notes, has contributed to the “further stigmatization of queerness in Palestinian society because of the subsequent association with betrayal and collaboration with Israel” (5). Such deliberate targeting of LGBTQ Palestinians, combined with the popular circulation of racist portrayals of the Arab male as always already homophobic and aggressive, reproduce the “Orientalist fantasy of homosexuality as taboo” (Puar 139) and functions to justify the continued occupation of Palestinian territories under the false pretense of humanitarian concern.

What is more is that Netanyahu’s equivocation of “gays for Gaza” with “Chickens for KFC” relies on the assumption that queer advocacy against imperialist violence can only ever be an ironic gesture. This assumption is not unique to Netanyahu: indeed, it is the sequestering of anti-imperialist concerns from queer activism that is the logic behind Israeli pinkwashing, defined by Atshan as “a discourse on Israeli LGBTQ rights aimed at detracting attention from violations of Palestinian human rights” (3). The dynamic the term pinkwashing seeks to address, as Atshan suggests, is that “rather than improve its global standing by providing Palestinians

with basic human rights, the Israeli state and its supporters, increasingly moving to the right, seek to market Israel as a state that supports LGBTQ individuals and communities” (3). Among the most notorious of Israel’s pinkwashing strategies is its Brand Israel campaign, which was launched in 2005 to promote Israel’s public image as a liberal, cosmopolitan nation-state and to align the nation “with the consumer values of Western neoliberalism that center on individual freedom rooted in free market consumption” (Kouri-Towe 6). Brand Israel later developed a queer-inclusive marketing strategy to portray Tel Aviv as a global destination for gay tourism, celebrating the nation’s legislated gay rights such as the recognition of same-sex marriage, anti-discrimination legislations, and military inclusion (Asthan 3-4). Shai Doitsch, head of tourism for Israel’s most prominent LGBTQ advocacy group, the Aguda, at the time of Brand Israel’s launch, explains the campaign’s success in bolstering a positive reputation for the city: “Tel Aviv’s image was [previously known for] ‘bombing,’ ‘military’ and ‘people in uniform’ . . . When people realize that Tel Aviv is so open-minded, it can’t be that scary, and automatically it is becoming free, safe, very tolerant, very open-minded and it brought us a lot of other types of tourists” (qtd. in Snellings 34). Similar tendencies toward pinkwashing animated the Aguda’s “Palestinian Rescue Project,” a campaign created by Israeli settler Shaul Ganon to provide humanitarian aid to LGBTQ Palestinians escaping homophobic persecution. As part of this campaign, Ganon and his team worked to produce largely unsubstantiated—and grossly sensationalized—accounts of queer Palestinian persecution. Among the most publicized of these accounts was that of a young Palestinian given the pseudonym of Tayseer who, according to the reportage of American-Israeli journalist Yossi Klein Halevi, was “arrested and hung by his arms from the ceiling....thrown into a dark cell infested with insects...and forced to sit on a Coke bottle” by Palestinian police officers prior to his arrival in Tel Aviv (qtd. in “Queer Theory [on

Joseph Massad]”). The circulation of narratives such as Tayseer’s among Western audiences functions to justify not only the missionary aspirations of the Rescue Project but also “all manner of violence against Palestinians as a result, not of the exclusionary logic of Israeli nationalism or the racist practices of the state, but the ‘backward’ and ‘inferior’ essence of Palestinians” (Ritchie 113–114). On this note, Nikita Dhawan presciently remarks how supposedly emancipatory queer organizations such as the Palestinian Rescue Project often become “occasion[s] to replay colonial constructions of the Orient as a site of regressive gender and sexual oppression, in contrast to the egalitarian Western context.” “Thus,” she continues, “just as the colonial rulers declared the colonized to be unfit for self-rule on account of their ‘barbaric’ attitudes toward women, in queer times, gay and lesbian identities become markers of Western modernity and Oriental repressiveness” (201-202). Resting on an Orientalist binary between the ostensibly progressive, secular West and the regressive, theocratic Arab and Muslim worlds, these instances of Israeli pinkwashing seek to bolster Israel, and Tel Aviv in particular, as a beacon of secular tolerance in the otherwise violently homophobic Middle East.

Over the past decade, Israeli pinkwashing has become a central concern of what has become a transnational queer solidarity movement with Palestine. Grassroots organizations such as ACT-UP (founded in New York in 1987), Queers Undermining Israeli Terrorism (San Francisco, 2001), National Queer Asian Pacific Islander Alliance (California, 2007), and Queers Against Israeli Apartheid (Toronto, 2008) have responded to the calls of queer Palestinian organizations like alQaws and Aswat to mobilize against the Israeli occupation by engaging in Palestinian-led initiatives such as Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions and anti-pinkwashing campaigns (Atshan 4). In the years since the Second Intifada, there has also been an increase in scholarship that makes explicit the relationship between Israel’s cynical deployment of LGBTQ

rights discourse and its suppression of Palestinian liberation efforts. In particular, the publication of monographs such as Jasbir Puar's *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* in 2007, Sarah Schulman's *Israel/Palestine and the Queer International* in 2012, and Sa'ed Atshan's *Queer Palestine and the Empire of Critique* in 2020 have inspired an increase in public criticism of Israeli pinkwashing. These scholarly analyses and activist efforts denounce Israel's celebration of LGBTQ rights as it occurs against the backdrop of occupation, apartheid, and genocide—human rights violations that, as anti-pinkwashing activists are quick to point out, actively harm queer people living in Palestine. As former Executive Director of alQaws Haneen Maikey puts it, “I know that there is no pink door through Israel's illegal, racist wall that welcomes queer Palestinians while oppressing others” (“Why We Should Boycott Gay Pride in Tel Aviv”). Emerging as a niche affiliative group across the broader Palestinian solidarity movement, what Natalie Kouri-Towe has termed the “queer Palestine movement” (ii) has widened the terrain of resistance against the Israeli occupation by presenting the struggle for Palestinian rights as one that is deeply connected to contemporary queer issues.

The analysis that follows considers the work of Toronto-based director and former Queers Against Israeli Apartheid activist John Greyson as a case study for thinking through the methods of criticism, rhetorical strategies, and networks of solidarity that inform the contemporary queer Palestine movement. More specifically, it examines Greyson's 2022 film *Photo Booth*, an agitprop documentary produced for the purpose of promoting Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) initiatives against Israel as an instance of anti-homonationalist criticism. My central argument is for an appraisal of *Photo Booth* as a heuristic model for anti-imperialist queer solidarity in the present homonationalist moment. I articulate this claim through three primary means. First, I locate Greyson's work in the context of contemporary

theories of homonationalism such as Jasbir Puar's and C. Heike Schotten's to argue for *Photo Booth* as a praxis-oriented solidarity effort that responds to the specific context of Canadian homonationalism and Canadian complicity with Israeli apartheid. Second, I discuss how *Photo Booth*'s critique of homonationalism is undertaken formally. I read *Photo Booth* alongside *Prisoner of Love*, Jean Genet's 1986 account of his experience living among Palestinian resistance fighters in Lebanon and of which Greyson's film is a loose adaptation to suggest that both Greyson and Genet understand the struggle for Palestinian liberation as one enacted primarily through the field of representation. Here, I suggest that, like *Prisoner of Love*, *Photo Booth* is concerned with how Israel constructs itself discursively to justify the violence of its regime. Further, I examine *Photo Booth*'s often uneasy appropriation of the representational strategies of the earlier New Queer Cinema movement to suggest that the film explores the capacity of queer representational practices to respond to transnational crises under conditions of homonationalist co-optation. More specifically, I argue that what New Queer strategies of parody, pastiche, and irony might be able to offer the queer Palestine movement is a formal language of criticism that is attuned to the discursive construction of popular narratives of the Israeli occupation. Finally, I conclude with some preliminary reflections on the queer Palestine movement, suggesting that it underscores broader concerns about the ambivalent position of queer artistic production, activism, and theory in what Jasbir Puar has called "queer times."

If I may be so bold as to try to distill a premise from a film as narratively dense, politically ambitious, and, frankly, as strange as *Photo Booth*, I would venture to describe it as follows: French author Jean Genet, now a hundred and ten years old and living in an abandoned waterpark in Jericho, has recently finished a shot-for-shot remake of his 1950 film *Un Chant D'Amour* with the help of two Palestinian-Canadian student activists, Walid and Hamza. Now

renamed *Un chant de mort* and starring Buddy and Pedro, the gay penguins from the Toronto Zoo, Genet's film reimagines his original as set in a prison in the West Bank. When the Israeli Intelligence services get hold of Genet's film, Hamza is imprisoned in Jericho, while Genet—much to his juniors' resentment—considers submitting *Un chant de mort* to a film festival in Tel Aviv. As Genet debates the arguments for the contemporary Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement, the city of Jericho prepares for Eurovision 2021, sponsored by Sanguine Books, a publishing house and cybersecurity giant that has recruited Genet's star penguins as its headliners. Interspersed throughout the narrative are interludes that promote the film's pro-BDS message: some, such as interviews with activists and public intellectuals like Executive Director of alQaws Haneen Maikey or queer theorist Judith Butler, work to convince viewers of the arguments for BDS in a more straightforward documentary style, while others, such as Greyson's parody of right-wing Israeli singer Netta Barzilai's 2018 Eurovision-winning song "Toy," use strategies of détournement to appropriate mainstream Zionist media for use in new, interventionist contexts. Blending parody and pedagogy, satire and solidarity, *Photo Booth* is a timely reflection on the stakes of queer activism, aesthetics, and theory in the present homonationalist moment.

I. Theory and Contexts: Homonationalism, BDS, Solidarity

Towards the five-minute mark of *Photo Booth* is an archival clip of a 1985 interview with French author Jean Genet. In this short clip from the author's final interview before his death the next year, Genet addresses his extra-diegetic interlocutor: "Did you say 'love' ('l'amour')? I thought you said 'death' ('la mort')!" This clip, like many others in *Photo Booth*, is an example of what critic Scott MacKenzie has termed Greyson's "archival necrology," where the director

“bring[s] figures from the past back to life, to revivify them, albeit in a radically different light than before” (196). By inserting a “revivi[fied]” version of Genet into *Photo Booth*, Greyson evokes the author’s legacy as a queer outcast who stood at the forefront of anti-imperialist movements. In so doing, the film invites us to situate the present queer Palestinian solidarity movement in the context of a broader historical lineage of queer anti-imperialist struggle, etching a critical counter-memory of queer solidarity against dominant narratives of homonormative complacency.

Furthermore, Genet’s confusion of the French “l’amour” with its near-homophone “la mort” not only evokes phonetic similarities between the two words but also their conceptual resonances. In the context of the film’s exploration of the sexual politics of Israeli apartheid, this clip elicits contemporary debates about the ambivalent position of queer subjects under present regimes of imperialist violence. Genet’s confusion of “love” and “death” signals the convivial relations between queer politics that focus on fostering “good feelings” (Ahmed 1)—those that celebrate, for instance, marriage equality, representation, and, broadly, queer love (or *l’amour*)—and those that are increasingly incorporated into the imperialist necropolitical order by consigning other queered, racialized, and unnationalized populations to death (*la mort*). Read in this light, this moment allows an entry point for thinking through the queer necropolitics of pinkwashing and homonationalism to which *Photo Booth* responds.

Queer necropolitics is an emerging framework that seeks to address “the expansion of liberal gay politics and its complicity with the ‘war on terror’” (Haritaworn et al. 2). Attending to the changes in queer activism that have emerged under regimes of (neo)colonialism, incarceration, eco-racism, and imperial domination, the concept of queer necropolitics understands contemporary queer politics as a necropolitics in the Mbembian sense—that is, as one

that retains the capacity to condemn large swathes of a population to death through means such as state terror, war, the predation of natural resources, or negligence. Necropolitics, for Mbembe, consists in “the power to manufacture an entire crowd of people who specifically live at the edge of life, or even on its outer edge — people for whom living means continually standing up to death” (37). Thus, he continues, necropolitical power operates “by a sort of inversion between life and death, as if life was merely death’s medium” (38). Proceeding from Mbembe’s definition, Jin Haritaworn, Silvia Posocco, and Adi Kunstman explain queer necropolitics as a “concept-metaphor that illuminates and connects a range of spectacular and mundane forms of killing and of ‘letting die’ while simultaneously radically reimagining the meanings, purchase and stakes inherent in ‘queerness’ as a category of analysis and critique” (4). Queer necropolitics thus designate the forms of queer, racialized death that go hand in hand with normative queer claims to life.

Contemporary discussions around queer necropolitics are largely inspired by Jasbir Puar’s work *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Here, Puar traces a shift in queer activism from a focus on combatting AIDS to fighting for gay marriage and other rights-based legislation. On this note, Puar suggests that whereas queers previously figured as a population predominantly subjected to necropolitical control (that is, as a population marked for death by state repression and negligence), they are now recognized as biopolitical subjects (normative queer subjects are increasingly “folded into life,” into the nation and its protections (24)). Yet this shift is not one that has taken place uniformly, and Puar is careful to emphasize that the incorporation of some queers into the nation-state has been “paralleled by a rise in the targeting of queerly raced bodies for dying” (xii). This dual movement of inclusion and exclusion

is determined by the remnants of an ongoing imperial history that dictates that some normative queer lives be valorized while other queerly raced subjects are marked for death.

For Puar, necropolitics operate in the context of homonationalism, a term that emerged in the wake of the War on Terror to address how LGBTQ subjects and rights discourse have been increasingly interpolated into the project of U.S. imperialism. I understand the term “homonationalism” in the sense defined by Puar in her 2007 work *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Conceived as a term that would respond, on the one hand, to the dual atrocities of the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the publicization of American war crimes in Abu Ghraib and, on the other, to the increased recognition of queer subjects by mainstream media and politics, Puar’s neologism draws on two related terms. The first of these is homonormativity, initially defined by Lisa Duggan in her 2002 essay “The New Homonormativity” as a particular iteration of queer activism “that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilised gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (179). Understanding homonormativity as a particular “neoliberal sexual politics” (179) ushered in by an emerging fringe of centrist gay commentators and politicians, Duggan’s concept of homonormativity addresses “the sexual politics of neoliberalism – the sexual politics of the upward distribution of wealth, the privatization of public goods and the sovereignty of the market” (Schotten 363). Expanding on Duggan’s concept of homonormativity, Puar offers a minimalist definition of homonationalism as “homonormative nationalism.” The genesis of the second half of “homonationalism” is less clear, though Puar’s focus on the specific historical juncture of Bush-era American imperialism allows for a degree of contextual specificity and for this reason is best understood as a “a collusion between homosexuality and American

nationalism that is generated both by national rhetorics of patriotic inclusion and by gay and queer subjects themselves" (Puar 38-39).

Following Puar, queer theory scholar C. Heike Schotten does well to trace the shifting intellectual trajectory of the term “homonationalism,” beginning with its original sense as defined in *Terrorist Assemblages* (or “homonationalism1”) to what she terms “homonationalism2,” a more contemporary circulation of the term advanced mainly by Puar and Maya Mikdashi in a series of articles in the online journal *Jadaliyya*. For Schotten, homonationalism1 is distinguishable from homonationalism2 mainly by the breadth of the latter’s application, as usage of the term has in recent years shifted from a specific criticism of U.S. imperial projects to a more generalized diagnostic of international geopolitical relations. Since its original formulation in 2007, Schotten writes, the term homonationalism has expanded to become a more “generalized feature of imperialist formations,” losing “its distinctiveness, becoming instead a kind of detailing or contouring of a broader imperial project” (352). Furthermore, whereas homonationalism1 emphasizes the role of queer non-state actors in promoting imperialist agendas, homonationalism2 has largely “abandon[ed] its founding critique of gay complicity with the state,” thus becoming “unable to function as a critical evaluation of activist work or progressive politics” (352). What the later formulation of homonationalism2 fails to retain from its original sense, then, is its specificity as a term meant to critique and respond to the particular context of U.S. imperialism and the process by which LGBTQ individuals are hailed by its expansionist projects. Identifying a “diminished distinctiveness and critical capacity” in Puar and Mikdashi’s more recent iterations of homonationalism (362), Schotten suggests that homonationalism2 fails to live up to the critical acuity of homonationalism1 since the former is “better understood as a contemporary variant on

an old imperial project, a diagnostic statement that cannot necessarily be mustered to serve as a critique of activist agendas” (352). For this reason, Schotten notes that “[i]n rendering homonationalism a feature of modernity and an index of fitness for sovereignty, Puar and Mikdashi explicitly sever any connection between homonationalism² and homonationalism¹ on the issue of gay complicity with the state, abandoning the critique of domestic homonational politics and activism” (361). For Schotten, then, the most forceful criticisms of homonationalism are those that are both specific to the imperial formations in which it arose and duly attentive to queer complicity with these same formations.

To describe John Greyson’s work as a critique of homonationalism, then, can only ever be an imperfect assessment. If we are to take seriously Schotten’s claim that contemporary discourse on homonationalism often ignores its specificity as a term originally intended to critique U.S. imperialism, then any attempt to classify queer artist or activist work as anti-homonationalist must be careful to attend to the contextual specificity in which this criticism is effected. In the Canadian context, there exists a growing body of recent research that seeks to adapt Puar’s term to the context of queer activism in Canada. Writing in 2018, for instance, activist and educator Tim McCaskell offers a genealogical account of queer activism in Toronto, from the early days of the Gay Liberation movement to contemporary queer solidarity efforts with Palestine. Like Puar, McCaskell identifies a shift in queer politics from its once oppositional position towards the nation-state to one that is now included in its nationalist projects. Whereas in the 1970s through the 1990s Canada could be described as homophobic “in a primary sense,” the state now “defends [queer] rights, and the tolerance we [as queers] experience is deployed as proof that Canada is the liberal country it imagines itself to be. We have become complicit in the nation’s forgetting and the ongoing damage that it causes” (556). Similarly, in their introduction

to *Disrupting Queer Inclusion: Canadian Homonationalisms and the Politics of Belonging*, OmriSoore Dryden and Suzanne Lenon introduce the term “queerly Canadian” to address both a subject position and a form of politics that “seeks to ‘queer’ Canada by narrowly challenging grounds of homophobic exclusions while knitting ‘queer’ into the neoliberal multiculturally imagined fabric of Canadian national identity” (4). For these writers, the concept of the “queerly Canadian” extends the terrain of homonationalist criticism to the Canadian context by examining how homonationalism in Canada is sustained by four specific phenomena: “racialization structured by white supremacy; current and ongoing settler colonialism; neoliberalism, which works with white supremacist capitalism to constitute the contemporary Canadian nation-state; and the persistence of imperialist mythologies that continue to position Canada as a peace-keeper, a middle power, and a land of freedom” (8). To this list we might append the function of Canada’s official multiculturalism policy in sustaining homonationalism. On this note, Michael Connors Jackman and Nishant Upadhyay examine how queer politics are absorbed into the discourse of Canadian multiculturalism as gays and lesbians position themselves as equality-seeking minority groups analogous to racial, ethnic, or national minorities (204). Thus the limited forms of recognition and inclusion offered by state-sponsored multiculturalism, which embraces difference only insofar as it is not excessively politically disruptive, “dovetails with the homonationalist order whereby queer liberation movements ultimately validate and recreate the supremacy of the colonial state” at the expense of Indigenous and other racialized communities” (58). Canadian multiculturalism, then, works in tandem with homonationalism to sustain an image of the nation as liberal, tolerant, and friendly to queer and racialized communities while obfuscating its settler-colonial practices domestically and its complicity in imperialist formations abroad.

Greyson's film is therefore careful not to untether its criticism from its specific national context, which is Canadian complicity with, as well as activist resistance to, homonationalism and Israeli apartheid. As with many of Greyson's other projects, the film is at once hyper-local and transnational in both its setting and scope of criticism. Although its principal narrative thread unfolds in the West Bank, it is also concerned with the Canadian context as it exposes the extent to which Canadian political, academic, and cultural institutions provide both funding and ideological support to Israel. In one of the film's opening scenes, for instance, Hamza, imprisoned in the West Bank and communicating with Genet through the screen of a photo booth, shows Genet his most recent short film. An agitprop documentary that examines the politics that informed the decision to host Eurovision in Tel Aviv in 2019, Hamza's film begins by situating Eurovision Tel Aviv in the context of the 2018-2019 Gaza border protests, in which Israel killed a total of 189 Palestinians ("No Justification for Israel to Shoot Protesters with Live Ammunition"). This violence unfurled against the backdrop of an increase in support for Israel both culturally and politically: as the film explains, right-wing Zionist Netta Barzilai's 2018 song "Toy" had won Eurovision for Israel in May 2018, the same month that Donald Trump had moved the U.S. embassy to Israel to Jerusalem. Hamza's short also features a montage parody of "Toy," where images of Netanyahu amicably shaking hands with Western leaders such as Justin Trudeau, Donald Trump, and Hillary Clinton flash in the film's background as Palestinian journalist Ali Abunimah denounces the international community's complacency with Israeli human rights offenses. Arguing against the notion that Israel is singled out for criticism because of unfounded antisemitism, Abunimah explains: "Israel *is* singled out—by the United States, by Canada, by the European Union, by others for very special treatment... Israel is the only country that has been allowed to violate human rights, violate international law on such a massive scale

for decade after decade after decade and you can never think of a single sanction that has been taken against Israel.”

Photo Booth also explores Canadian complicity with Israeli human rights violations in a parody of “Gee, Officer Krupke,” renamed “Gee Officer Bibi” in the film. Piecing together a satire music video using footage from a 2021 adaptation of *West Side Story* by Steven Spielberg (who, at the time of the film’s production, was an ardent supporter of Israel), the music video calls on Western leaders such as Trudeau to impose sanctions on Israel. Following a found-footage clip of Trudeau slamming the BDS movement as “the new antisemitism,” the parody music video denounces the former Prime Minister’s complicity in Israeli apartheid and the suppression of pro-Palestinian activist voices: “Gee Bulldozer Trudeau, your logic’s gone south / Your McCarthy moves are going to stink up the house / You’re Harper-tunistic, a pandering pro / No surprise you’re now a Bibi bro.” Here, as in Hamza’s agitprop parody of “Toy,” the film exploits the digi-activist potential of the pop music parody video to expose a diffuse network of international support for Israel’s human rights violations, evoking Canada as chief among those complicit.

Inasmuch as *Photo Booth* is concerned with exposing the role of Canada in the maintenance of Israeli aggression, it is to a greater extent concerned with how this complicity is justified rhetorically through homonationalist strategies of pinkwashing and activist suppression. Perhaps the most cogent representation of Canadian homonationalism in *Photo Booth* is provided by Buddy and Pedro, two penguins inspired by the real-life pair of penguins from the Toronto Zoo who, after zookeepers had discovered their unusually close bond, were marketed by national media as a same-sex couple. As *Photo Booth* notes, Buddy and Pedro’s apparent homosexuality had sparked a global “Penguin Mania,” with international news outlets like *Maclean’s* and the

BBC reporting on the Toronto Zoo’s gay it-couple. For Greyson, marketing Buddy and Pedro as a gay couple worked to bolster an image of Canada as a liberal, tolerant nation—a tolerance it is able to extend even to its zoo animals. Greyson explains his use of the penguins in his shot-for-shot remake of *Un Captif Amoureux* in a 2018 article for *World Records Journal*, tellingly describing Buddy and Pedro as the “gay penguin couple who used to bunk together in the Toronto Zoo, and who were exploited by the zoo for cute anthropo-homonational marketing purposes” (8). Thus Buddy and Pedro appear in Greyson’s film as the emblems of Canadian liberal tolerance and homonormativity *par excellence*: dismissed by Hamza as a couple of “dizzy Canadian queens,” the pair are shown ice skating with their new child, reported to be celebrated by the Christian right for displaying “proper Christian family values,” written into a children’s book by Margaret Atwood, and eventually recruited to work closely with Heather and Gerry, director of Sanguine’s “queer and trans inclusivity division [in] partnership with Brand Israel” and the talent director of the company’s multicultural music and games division respectively.

When Heather and Gerry learn of the penguins’ participation in Genet’s film *Un chant de mort*—a stint that puts them in breach of their contract with Sanguine Books—the two are called into Sanguine Book’s corporate office for a disciplinary meeting. Considering how the company can repair Buddy and Pedro’s public image and boost the company’s sales, Heather proposes that they stage a “big gay wedding” for the penguins complete with penguin-themed merchandise. Described as a “glamorous gala in Tel Aviv’s Gay Independence park,” the wedding is attended by gay IDF soldiers who appear as the couple’s “mates of honour” and the two recite vows drafted by Heather and Gerry: “Our love is a plate of sardines/ A wonder of intelligent design/ A banquet of tasty family values/ I cannot endure another Winter without matrimonial recognition.” Here, *Photo Booth* offers a rather conspicuous critique of homonormativity; Greyson aligns

himself with the anti-assimilationist politics of queer theorists such as Michael Warner and Katherine Franke to position gay marriage as in line with the interests of the market, the heteronormative family unit, and imperialism.

Importantly, *Photo Booth* goes beyond identifying instances of Canadian complicity with Israeli apartheid and homonationalism to promote tangible actions that might be taken in solidarity with Palestinian liberation efforts. The film was conceived with the primary aim of promoting Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions measures, a global movement that began following a 2005 call from Palestinian civil society to implement non-violent initiatives against the Israeli apartheid regime and its complicit academic, sporting, and cultural institutions. Inspired by the anti-Apartheid boycott campaigns against South Africa during the second half of the twentieth century, the BDS movement was launched by 170 Palestinian unions, refugee networks, women's organizations, professional associations, and other groups to demand an end to the Israeli occupation. The movement asks that the nonviolent measures of boycott, divestment, and sanctions be implemented until

Israel meets its obligation to recognize the Palestinian people's inalienable right to self-determination and fully complies with the precepts of international law by:

1. Ending its occupation and colonization of all Arab lands and dismantling of the Wall
2. Recognizing the fundamental rights of the Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel to full equality; and
3. Respecting, protecting and promoting the rights of Palestinian refugees ("BDS Call")

Among the founding bodies of the BDS National Committee is the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI). Launched in 2004 as an early Palestinian BDS initiative, PACBI advocates for an international boycott of Israeli academic and cultural institutions for their complicity in providing both economic funding and ideological support for the maintenance of Israeli apartheid. Thus *Photo Booth* posits BDS and PACBI as central tactics of the queer Palestine movement. AsBDS founder Omar Barghouti notes in an interview featured in the film, “Now with the Palestinian gay community coming out openly supporting BDS saying that ‘this is a call from the gay community in Palestine so queers abroad should get involved more actively and should take a stand.’” Ghadir Shafie, co-director of the queer Palestinian advocacy group Aswat, similarly makes explicit the connection between pro-Palestine efforts such as BDS and queer liberation: global queer support for BDS, she notes, “is very organic. There’s no liberation without queer liberation, there’s no national liberation without gender liberation.” By featuring these interviews in the film, *Photo Booth* emphasizes the responsibility of LGBTQ individuals to take on BDS initiatives in solidarity with Palestinian queer communities.

Among the main preoccupations of Greyson’s pro-BDS agenda is the literary industry, as the film intently and intensively explores how literature—understood at once as a form of artistic production and as a commodity in the global marketplace—provides both economic and ideological support for the maintenance of Israeli apartheid. The film’s allusions to past and present literary histories are evoked in *Photo Booth* to two primary ends. First, by invoking a network of allusions that spans texts as central to the Western canon as the Biblical story of Exodus alongside more contemporary authors like Margaret Atwood and Tony Kushner, *Photo Booth* emphasizes the importance of literature to the maintenance of imperial violence. Thus

Greyson, like Edward Said, understands “[t]he power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging” as “very important to culture and imperialism, [constituting] one of the main connections between them” (*Culture and Imperialism* xiii). Second, explicit references to contemporary literary figures function pragmatically as forms of address. As in earlier BDS video projects such as *Hey Elton* (2011) or *BDS Bieber* (2011), short films that call on pop artists Elton John and Justin Bieber to cancel their upcoming concerts in Tel Aviv, *Photo Booth* evokes the director’s literary contemporaries to publicly demand they adhere to the principles of the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement. By calling on these figures through strategies of direct address, Greyson synthesizes his aesthetic practice with political praxis, using formal techniques of parody, kitsch, and agitprop sloganeering to prompt “action directed at the structures to be transformed” (Freire 126).

The film’s most direct address to the literary industry is its evocation of the fictional Sanguine Books, described in *Photo Booth* as an “Israeli cyber-security giant specializing in entertainment, prisons, weddings, and toasters.” Not incidentally, Sanguine Books figures in *Photo Booth* as an amalgam of the contemporary publishing houses Penguin Random Co. and Indigo Books: the logo for Sanguine is two penguins, a reference to Penguin’s one, and, in a rather unsubtle nod to CEO and director of Indigo Books Heather Reisman and Gerry Schwartz, Sanguine Books is staffed by Heather, director of the “queer and trans inclusivity division [in] partnership with Brand Israel,” and Gerry, the talent director of the company’s multicultural music and games division. As in earlier pro-BDS shorts such as *Hey Elton*, Greyson invokes contemporary figures to emphasize their role in providing financial support for Israeli apartheid: Penguin Random House is co-owned by Bertelsmann, a German media group that operates a journalism school and invests in companies situated in occupied Palestinian territories; while

Heather Reisman and Gerry Schwartz of Indigo Books are open Zionists who in 2005 opened the HESEG Foundation for Lone Soldiers, a charitable organization that offers Canadian citizens inducements to join the Israeli Defense Forces.

In preparation for hosting Eurovision in Jericho, Sanguine begins the process of massive settlement expansion and the erection of a new security wall surrounding the city. “This wall,” the narrator of *Photo Booth* relates, “doubles as a billboard campaign for Buddy and Pedro’s *Gay Classic Library*. Each book weighs 4.33 tonnes.” A fictional expansion of the existing West Bank Barrier, the wall around the city of Jericho is made entirely of books from Sanguine’s new *Buddy and Pedro’s Gay Classics* series and features notable works of queer literature such as James Baldwin’s *Another Country*, Rita May Brown’s *Rubyfruit Violence*, Edward Louis’s *History of Violence*, and Tomson Highway’s *Kiss of the Fur Queen*. Notably, *Photo Booth* does not invoke these texts because they themselves contain some form of latent support for Israeli apartheid—this indeed would be a difficult accusation to level against Black and Indigenous authors like James Baldwin or Tomson Highway. Rather, the film’s evocation of the *Gay Classics* apartheid wall invites us to consider how the celebration of queer representation by Western corporations is often undergirded by imperialist violence.

As a film that is centrally concerned with the ambivalent relationship of Western queer communities and politics with anti-imperialist struggle, *Photo Booth* thus offers a vantage point for considering the relevance of queer solidarity movements in the present homonationalist moment. At times, *Photo Booth* seems to suggest something of an organic affinity between Western queer communities and Palestinian liberation efforts, hence the decision to feature Genet as the film’s protagonist and its focus on Western queer solidarity movements like the Toronto-based chapter of Queers Against Israeli Apartheid. At others, however, the film seems to

align itself with the sentiments of anti-imperialist scholars like Joseph Massad, who tend to reject Western queer politics (or what Massad terms the “Gay International”) as a mere vector of Western imperialism. In one telling moment from the film, for instance, *Photo Booth* screens a fictitious scene from Steven Spielberg and Tony Kushner’s 2005 film *Munich*, which follows Mossad agents as they assassinate Palestinians suspected to have participated in the 1972 Munich massacre. Greyson introduces a parodic scene into *Munich* where two Mossad agents, dressed in wigs and dresses, go undercover in drag to assassinate Palestinian civilians as part of “Operation Pansy.” Described by the film’s voice-over narrator as “by far the gayest—and the goriest—scene in any of Spielberg’s movies,” Greyson’s drag addendum to *Munich* is perhaps the film’s most forceful indictment of queer complicity with imperialist violence. Implicitly connecting Western queer aesthetic practices with Mossad assassinations, the fictitious “Operation Pansy” scene emphasizes the necropolitical violence that celebrates queer expression while simultaneously condemning “queerly raced bodies for dying” (Puar xii).

In this instance as elsewhere, *Photo Booth* makes explicit the relationship between gestures at homonationalist inclusion (LGBTQ acceptance into the Israeli Defense Forces, for example) and the suppression of Palestinian rights. Thematically linking queer drag practices to Israeli apartheid, *Photo Booth* asks its audience to read Israel’s embrace of queer subjects “sideways,” a method of analysis described by Puar as a way of reading that pieces together “seemingly unrelated and often disjunctively situated moments and their effects, tracing the limits of its juridical legality in the context of indefinite detention, affirmative action, gay marriage, and the May 2004 Abu Ghraib ‘sexual torture scandal.’” *Photo Booth* thus encourages a healthy dose of skepticism amongst its audience with respect to the supposed victories of Western liberal gay politics: making explicit the topographies of cruelty that accompany claims

queer inclusion, the film invites us to consider the moments where “queer livability [and] killability, rescue [and] disposability, protection [and] abandonment and celebration [and] violent erasure” converge (20).

II. Images, Form, Representation

It's not enough just to write down a few anecdotes. What one has to do is create and develop an image or a profusion of images... [An image] is the only message from the past that's managed to get itself projected into the present.

–Jean Genet, *Prisoner of Love*

Up to this point, I have addressed how *Photo Booth* responds to Canadian homonationalism and Israeli pinkwashing while offering cogent political strategies to resist these political formations. Thus Greyson's work, aligned with the efforts of the queer Palestinian movement, offers a model for queer solidarity that, though not explicitly aligned with the protection of gender and sexual minorities, protests the cooptation of queer rights discourse to imperialist ends while also gesturing towards praxis-oriented solidarity initiatives such as the contemporary Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement.

I would be remiss, however, to speak of the work of a director as aesthetically unique and interventionist as Greyson without paying due attention to his formal innovations. *Photo Booth* is first a fictional narrative that follows Genet as he films, submits, and finally protests his inclusion of *Un Chant d'Amour* in an Israeli film festival as well as the attempts of gay penguins Buddy and Pedro to disrupt Jericho's Eurovision concert. It is also, however, a brief overview of the history of the BDS movement, Israeli pinkwashing, and the activist efforts of the Toronto-based chapter of Queers Against Israeli Apartheid. Still also it is an opera, a loose adaptation of Jean Genet's 1950 film *Un captif amoureux*, a split screen found footage film, and a series of shot-for-shot pop music parodies. Above all else, however, *Photo Booth* is a film

about representation—about how popular representations of Israeli progressiveness circulate to normalize the violence of its regime; about how one might give narrative form to anti-imperialist struggles without perpetuating “colonialist representations” (Narayan 45); and about what forms of cinematic representation might not only represent narratives of occupation and struggle but also inspire political mobilization.

Similar questions have been circulating throughout Greyson’s filmography throughout the course of his career. Although Greyson is primarily heralded as a queer Canadian filmmaker, his work has long extended beyond the scope of domestic queer politics. Films like *Manzana por Manzana* (1983), a short and uncharacteristically straightforward documentary charting the reconstruction of Nicaragua after the 1979 Sandinista revolution and *14.3 Seconds* (2008), a nine-minute short that examines the destruction of the Iraq Film Archives during the 2003 invasion of Iraq are examples of Greyson’s lasting interest in transnational solidarity efforts. Here, as in *Photo Booth*, Greyson has had to address the complexities of how to ethically represent narratives of occupation and resistance from the fringe position of a “supportive outsider” (Kleinhans 79).

Yet the question of what forms of cinematic representation are not only most ethical but also most politically efficacious takes on significant weight when speaking of Palestine. Representing the reality of Israel’s genocide of Palestinians has been complicated by the semantic overcharge this violence has accrued to the extent that W. J. T. Mitchell has described Palestine as “freighted with so many associations and conflicting representations that it is a wonder that the earth’s crust does not buckle under their weight” (199). Writing in 1984, for instance, Edward Said notes that in spite of the ample amount of empirical evidence documenting the brutality of Israel’s occupation, popular representations of Israel and Palestine

are overdetermined by imperialist biases. He writes: “never has so much been written and shown of the Palestinians, who were scarcely mentioned fifteen years ago. They are there all right, but the narrative of their present actuality—which stems directly from the story of their existence in and displacement from Palestine, later Israel—that narrative is not” (29-30). On this same note, Marwa Fatafta notes the following in 2021:

Wide-reaching volumes of footage, videos, and testimonies documenting all forms of Palestinian daily struggle under Israel’s military occupation and bouts of vindictive violence flood our screens every day. Yet the problem [...] of Israel’s domineering web of myths in mainstream media—which render the Palestinians not only invisible but deserving of their own death and the violence inflicted upon them—stubbornly persists. Palestinians have been systematically vilified while Israel’s egregious violations and subversions of international law are ignored and even justified under the pretext of self-defense and the war on terrorism... The Israeli occupation is perhaps one of the most well-documented oppressively military regimes in the world. Almost every major media house has reporters on the ground...But the crucial and ever-present question is: from whose lens do you tell the story? (129)

Like Said, Fatafta notes that even well-documented facts emerging from Israel and Palestine are distorted by the confluent influences of Zionism, Islamophobia, and Orientalism. Thus Said is correct to note that in the context of mainstream narratives of the genocide, “[f]acts do not at all speak for themselves, but require a socially acceptable narrative to absorb, sustain, and circulate them” (34). It is therefore unsurprising that much of the literature that tries to foster solidarity with the Palestinian people assumes the mandate of demystifying common misconceptions about Israel, Palestine, or the Palestinian people, such as Ilan Pappé’s *Ten Myths About Israel*, Norman

Finkelstein's *Image and Reality of the Israel-Palestine Conflict*, Ghassan Kanafani's *On Zionist Literature*, or the extensive "Myths Database" provided by the digi-activist website *DecolonizePalestine*.

As a film that aims to intervene in dominant representations of Palestine, John Greyson's *Photo Booth* is concerned with the following questions: What popular images of Palestine are circulated, and by whom? Why do certain images take pre-eminence over others? These are questions the film inherits from Jean Genet, whose 1985 memoir *Prisoner of Love* provides the loose inspiration for *Photo Booth* and whose reflections on images, representation, and history inform Greyson's own. *Prisoner of Love* is a work Genet composed in solidarity with the Palestinian people, documenting his experience living among the Palestinian *fedayeen* in Lebanese refugee camps, reflections on his literary career, and comparative analyses of the Palestinian resistance and the Black Panther movement of the 1970s. Greyson seems to have chosen *Prisoner of Love* as his source text for a few reasons. First, this choice of text allows Greyson to align himself with another auteur-activist, Jean Genet, whose position as a queer outlaw allowed him to integrate himself into the liberation movements of other historically oppressed groups. Second, adapting a text composed nearly half a century ago by a queer author who lived among Palestinians does well to counter often-repeated claims that the contemporary queer Palestine movement is but a naive fantasy of solidarity that rubs up against an immutable and transhistorical Palestinian homophobia. Finally, Genet's *Prisoner of Love*'s attention to how Israel's claims to nationhood are constructed discursively resonates with Greyson's own line of criticism. Like *Photo Booth*, *Prisoner of Love* apprehends the struggle for Palestinian rights as a struggle enacted primarily in the realm of representation. Understanding, like Said, that "nations themselves are narrations" (*Culture and Imperialism* xiii), Genet considers Palestinian and

Israeli claims to nationhood as discursive constructions. He writes: “What I saw at once was that every ‘nation’, the better to justify its rebellion in the present, sought proof of its own singularity in the distant past. Every uprising revealed some deep genealogy whose strength was not in its almost non-existent branches but in its roots” (27). For Genet, it is this genealogy of images that constructs a national history: “From Greece to the [Black] Panthers,” he writes, “history has been made out of man’s need to detach and project fabulous images, to send them as delegates into the future” (303). Importantly, Genet does not remark on the constructed nature of both Palestinian and Israeli claims to nationhood to equate them, either in terms of validity under International Law or in moral terms. Condemning how Israel has weaponized Jewish suffering to justify the persecution of Palestinians, Genet writes: “Very smart of Israel to carry the war right into the heart of vocabulary, and annex the words holocaust and genocide... Words are terrible, and Israel is a terrifying manipulator of signs. Sentence doesn’t necessarily precede execution; if an execution has already been carried out, a sentence will gradually justify it” (374). According to Genet, the task of the Palestinians and their allies is to compose a counter-iconography in order to resist Israel’s manipulation of signs. Thus, Genet writes, “What one has to do is create and develop an image or a profusion of images... [An image] is the only message from the past that’s managed to get itself projected into the present” (302). As Duy Lap Nguyen notes, for Genet the Palestinian struggle is not solely a battle over lost territories; rather, it is a struggle over images “in which a revolutionary consciousness emerges in the attempt to realise a revolutionary image” it has created for itself (70). Fashioning itself after *Prisoner of Love*, *Photo Booth* shares Genet’s concern with how Israel and Palestine are constructed by popular narratives.

Throughout the film, this question is framed by the film’s main conceit to which it owes its title: the photo booth strip. Formally, the photo booth strip operates as a visual conceit that

facilitates the juxtaposition of multiple contradictory images. In an intra-diegetic short film titled “A Quick Video About Pinkwashing,” for instance, interviews from prominent pro-Palestinian scholars such as Dean Spade, Angela Davis, Haseen Maikey, and Judith Butler play in the background while in the foreground, a four-paneled photo booth strip displays images from Tel Aviv’s Pride parade side-by-side with images of drone strikes hitting Gaza. Here, the four-paneled format of the photo booth strip allows Greyson to bring together four seemingly conflicting images of celebration and massacre in order to emphasize their interrelatedness through juxtaposition. Placing images of queer pride alongside those of imperialist destruction in this context underscores the forms of death “that accompany and condition queer claims to life, visibility, and protection” (Haritaworn et al. 19). In so doing, the film is able to contest homonationalist representations of Israel, offering instead a “contrapuntal reading” (*Culture and Imperialism* 78) that makes explicit the structural dependency that exists between queer claims to life and necropolitical regimes of domination.

The photo booth also functions as a conceit that emphasizes how popular forms of representation are predetermined by existing relations of exploitation. In one of the film’s opening scenes, for instance, Hamza invites Genet to meet at a Photo Me photo booth in Jericho, while the film’s voice-over narration explains that Photo Me was founded by prominent Israeli businessman Dan David and had recently been acquired by Sanguine Books. When Genet inserts a Canadian toonie into the photo booth—a nod to how Canadian funds sustain the Israeli technology industry, whether it produces photography apparati or weapons or war—he is able to connect with Hamza. Imprisoned in the West Bank, Hamza explains that he was only able to share his anti-Eurovision short documentary by hacking into the photo booth in the Sanguine prison. Here, the film emphasizes how even the forms of representation that attempt to subvert

dominant narratives about Palestine are always already framed by existing structures of domination, as Hamza's anti-occupation film is only accessible through technologies founded by companies that support Israeli apartheid. Significantly, the film also positions photo booths as central to the history of queer artistic production. As the film's voice-over narration explains, "Queer artists have always been drawn to the photo booth... My first queer blow job was in a photo booth." Here, Greyson invokes the photo booth as a privileged space for queer artistic expression: indeed, the photo booth has historically allowed a private space for queer couples to produce intimate portraits and figured predominantly in the experimental portraiture of queer artists like Keith Haring and Andy Warhol. By framing the photo booth as a technology frequently used by queer artists that is also owned by an Israeli security firm, the film emphasizes how historically queer representational strategies have become increasingly appropriated by imperialist agendas.

It is partially in response to such anxieties over representation that the film opts for a more didactic and directly pedagogical tone. If *Photo Booth* can be faulted at all for its frequent didacticism and lack of both aesthetic and political subtlety, this perhaps may be forgiven by the urgency of its political intervention. The film was produced in 2022, the year the United Nations had termed the deadliest for Palestinians in the West Bank since the end of the Second Intifada sixteen years prior ("With 2022 Deadliest Year in Israel-Palestine Conflict"), and was released with the purpose of supporting PACBI and other BDS initiatives. *Photo Booth* was also undoubtedly motivated by a sense of personal investment in the dual projects of BDS and Palestinian liberation. The director has been involved with pro-Palestinian activism since the Second Intifada, when he joined the The Olive Project, a Toronto-based media collective that produced short films in solidarity with Palestinian olive farmers. In 2009, Greyson, alongside

prominent figures from Canada's arts and culture communities like Richard Fung, Naomi Klein, and Elle Flanders, published an open letter to Toronto's International Film Festival titled "The Toronto Declaration: No Pride in Occupation." The letter, which protests TIFF's decision to host a celebratory spotlight on Tel Aviv, condemned the festival's complicity in the "Israeli propaganda machine" and was signed by nearly eighty public activists, artists, and intellectuals, including Judith Butler, and John Berger. Moreover, *Photo Booth* was released over ten years after the director's first attempted visit to Gaza in 2011 as part of the "Freedom Flotilla II – Stay Human," where Greyson boarded as part of the Canadian ship the *Tahrir*. (Ultimately, the *Tahrir* was intercepted by the Greek Coast Guard, whereupon its passengers were arrested and deported back to Canada, Greyson among them.) Two years later, the director made a second attempt at breaking the humanitarian blockade alongside Canadian doctor Tarek Loubani, though this attempt was also intercepted when the pair were arrested en route to Gaza in Cairo, whereupon they were detained without charge for seven weeks. Thus *Photo Booth*, along with its formal strategies of direct address, sloganeering, and journalistic exposé ought to be understood as some only a few among many of the director's activist efforts to support the Palestinian cause.

Photo Booth's didacticism may also be explained by its generic affiliations. The film was produced in the tradition of agitprop, a form of didactic political theatre that "presents urgent social issues from a partisan viewpoint by means of bold rhetorical techniques" (Mumford). Emerging from the Soviet Union's Department of Agitation and Propaganda in the 1920s, of which the genre's name is a portmanteau, agitprop prioritizes the effective propagation of information over rhetorical subtlety in order to mobilize its audience. The generic hallmarks of agitprop include experimental techniques that emphasize direct communication and address, such as "sloganic banners, songs, mass chants, heroic tableaux, stereotyped or satirical

characterizations, emblematic props and costumes...and audience participation” (Mumford). Although the prevalence of Soviet and Western European Marxist agitprop theatre troupes substantively declined in the interwar period due to the rise of fascism, tightening censorship laws, and increasing economic destabilization, the genre was later revitalized in the mid-century by activists and artists who appropriated the genre in service of the anti-Vietnam war and civil rights movements, the feminist campaigns of the 1970s, and, later, queer activism during the AIDS crisis. Thus many of Greyson’s earliest interventions into popular representations of the AIDS crisis are agitprop documentaries that use techniques of exaggerated characterization, pedagogical sloganeering, and snappy pop music parodies (see *The ADS Epidemic* (1987) and *The World is Sick [sic]* (1989)) to foster political education and to inspire action against widespread government negligence.

Since his early forays into the genre, Greyson has continued to produce films in the register of agitprop. In recent years, he has disseminated a series of short videos on YouTube and Vimeo to denounce the violence of the Israeli apartheid regime and advocate for BDS. Short videos like *Hey Elton* (2011), *Vuvuzela* (2011), and *QuAIA Deputation* (2011) aspire to an explicitly political agenda: *Hey Elton* and *Vuvuzela* call on specific artist like Elton John, Rihanna, and Metallica to cancel upcoming shows in Tel Aviv. *QuAIA Deputation*, meanwhile, was presented at a 2011 Toronto City Council Executive Committee meeting organized to discuss whether the Toronto chapter of Queers Against Israeli Apartheid (QuAIA)’s use of the term “Israeli Apartheid” in its Pride demonstration violated the city’s anti-discrimination policy, and aimed to clarify the group’s agenda against charges of anti-semitism and hate speech. In each of these instances, the political agenda of the film is closely linked to both its formal presentation and to its method of circulation: capitalizing on the mobilizing forces of agitprop aesthetics and

the popular reach of video-sharing platforms and public meetings, these films are oriented both towards public pedagogy and political action. Cindy Patton writes of Greyson's pro-BDS shorts:

Greyson adroitly exploits the potential of video-sharing websites YouTube and Vimeo to access transnational viewers who would otherwise never come across his work. While the videos are playful and campy – and unambiguously Greysonian – the clear organization and pacing of ideas and arguments, prominence of facts and figures, legible fonts, and illustrative images make them unapologetically pedagogical and instrumental compared to Greyson's overall body of work, which stresses complexity and even ambivalence. (138-9)

Photo Booth embraces a similar register of didacticism, moving away from an earlier filmography that prioritized sensuous imagery and intimate plotlines (see *Lilies* (1996) or *Proteus* (2003), for instance) in order to more explicitly align his film's aesthetics and politics with contemporary movements acting urgently against imperialist violence. As a film that aims to support BDS initiatives such as PACBI, *Photo Booth* is unabashedly propagandistic, employing agitprop techniques like pop-music slogans, the presentation of facts and figures related to Israeli violence, and strategies of direct address to mobilize public opinion in support of the Palestinian cause.

Photo Booth is also centrally concerned about the extent to which once subversive, interventionist modes of queer representation can remain politically effective in the present homonationalist moment. To be sure, the film retains many of the cinematic practices that had established Greyson as a queer *auteur* director: in the same manner as earlier feature films like *Zero Patience* (1993) and *Fig Trees* (2013), *Photo Booth* makes frequent use of allusion, historical anachronism, and camp aesthetics, cinematic techniques that have come to be

associated with the New Queer Cinema movement of the 1980s and 1990s (Rich xv). Alternatively referred to as “Homo Pomo” (or “homosexual postmodernism”), New Queer Cinema is a cinematic movement first named by B. Ruby Rich to describe a wave of formally radical and politically acute films produced at the onset of the AIDS crisis in Britain and North America. The avant-garde aesthetics of the New Queer Cinema movement allowed for new forms of representation that were better able to respond to the “epistemic shift in gay culture” produced by the AIDS crisis (Arroyo 95). As Monica Pearl writes, as a cataclysmic public health crisis that targeted already vulnerable communities, AIDS disrupted individual lives, communities, and “the ways that things could be thought of or said or expressed” (24). Thus New Queer Cinema not only created films that were about the AIDS crisis but, as Pearl suggests, “*is* AIDS cinema: not only because the films... emerge out of the time and the preoccupations with AIDS, but because their narratives and also their formal discontinuities and disruptions, are AIDS-related” (23). Importantly, in the decades since its initial inception as a fringe, avant-garde queer video and film practice, New Queer Cinema has become increasingly incorporated into mainstream cinema. Critics such as Joanne Juett, David Jones, and B. Ruby Rich have noted how the political and artistic potential of the New Queer Cinema has waned as the movement became increasingly “absorbed into conventional mainstream fare that reinforced the ideological project of neoliberal multiculturalism, neutralized the radical potential of independent queer cinema, and mollified straight audiences with unthreatening characters and stories, that lodged queerness within the hegemonic logic of compulsory heterosexuality and global capitalism” (Juett and Jones x).

If *Photo Booth* makes use of the generic hallmarks and innovations of New Queer Cinema, it is only anxiously that it appropriates these forms. In the same manner that the film

questions whether queer politics, under present conditions of homonationalist co-optation, are able to retain their formerly subversive, anti-hegemonic agenda, it is also concerned with whether previously radical forms of queer filmmaking have been neutralised – or fatally disarmed–by mainstream inclusion. Greyson addresses this issue at length in a 2018 article titled “Other People’s Words: Karaoke, Stereoscopy, and the (Ir)resistible Rise of the Shot-for-Shot Remake.” Here, he opts for the “slightly sideways” metaphors of karaoke and stereoscopy (2) in order to explain his use of cinematic parody throughout earlier short films like *BDS Bieber* (2011), *Vuvuzela* (2011), and *Captifs d’Amour* (2010), the shot-for-shot remake of Genet’s 1950 film *Un captif amoureux* that features as Genet’s own in *Photo Booth*. Throughout, Greyson invokes both stereoscopy and karaoke as concept-metaphors for forms of cinematic mimicry that include pop music parodies, split screen video, and shot-for-shot remakes in order to “better argue with [the] dynamic duos of master and copy, original and remake” (2). Addressing whether or not these cinematic forms can “transcend their status as mere symptoms of our junk culture epidemic” in order to respond to contemporary global crises like the decimation of the Gaza strip, Greyson asks:

Can split screen offer us more than repetitive, circular parlor games? Can the Roulettes and the Tweets and the ’grams function as more than wan echo chambers? In this homo-national moment, has the formerly radical, queer-camp potential of karaoke, formerly the subversive fiefdom of lip-syncing drag queens, been fatally defanged by mainstream inclusion? (4)

For Greyson, then, the question is whether or not hallmark forms of queer aesthetic production are able to retain their formerly subversive status under present conditions of mainstream co-optation. This is a question he addresses, albeit somewhat irresolutely, in *Photo Booth*.

Although, as I have suggested above, the film makes use of some earlier techniques of the New Queer Cinema, it is simultaneously aware of how these techniques are increasingly co-opted not only by mainstream inclusion but also by imperialist regimes. It is not coincidental, for instance, that the film's primary antagonists, Heather and Gerry from Sanguine Books, are dressed in high-camp costumes, employ drag queens as their attendants, and toss around terms associated with queer cinematic practices like "camp," "culture jamming," and "satire" to describe their practices. By depicting the hallmarks of queer artistic expression as appropriated by the benefactors of Israeli apartheid, *Photo Booth* emphasizes the ambivalent position of formerly subversive forms of queer representation in homonationalist times.

Considered alongside the film's overarching critique of homonationalism, *Photo Booth's* uneasy appropriation of queer aesthetic practices allows a vantage point for considering the following questions: What might queer forms of aesthetic intervention such as pastiche, parody, or camp offer to transnational solidarity efforts? Or—to borrow Greyson's own terms: can queer aesthetic practices remain subversive in homonationalist times, or have they been "fatally defanged by mainstream inclusion"?

Here, it remains important to note that *Photo Booth* does not represent a complete rejection of the director's earlier queer cinematic practices in favour of strict agitprop didacticism. *Photo Booth* retains from Greyson's earlier AIDS films a commitment to deconstructive criticism, applying the critical acuity of what Gregory Piggford has termed "AIDS theory" (169) to the context of Israeli occupation. In the wake of the AIDS crisis, an emerging group of AIDS theorists such as Paula Treichler, Thomas Yingling, and Lee Edelman sought to uncover how AIDS could not be understood as an illness in the empirical sense of the term but served instead as a site of competing, often injurious discourses. Paula Treichler, calling

AIDS “an epidemic of meanings or signification” (11), calls attention to the ways in which our social constructions of AIDS are “based not on objective, scientifically determined ‘reality’ but upon what we are told about this reality: that is, upon *prior* social constructions routinely produced within the discourses of biomedical science” (15). Similarly, Lee Edelman suggests that the onset of AIDS saw to the concurrent emergence of what he refers to as a “plague of discourse” (Edelman 312), while Thomas Yingling sets out to critique the “discursive universes” created about AIDS by biomedical, political, and sociocultural institutions (45). For these theorists, AIDS cannot be understood as a disease in the strictly empirical sense of the term but as a site of overlapping discourses. Keeping with the tradition of these thinkers, Greyson’s earlier AIDS films are primarily concerned with how meaning, especially as it is related to the AIDS crisis, is constructed by a nexus of cultural, political, and biomedical narratives. His breakthrough feature *Zero Patience* is exemplary in this respect: the film, which follows Victorian sexologist Sir Richard Francis Burton as he tries to uncover the “true” etiology of the virus—an endeavour which ultimately proves fruitless—is an adamant refutation of mainstream representations of the epidemic that seek to generate meaning about AIDS according to pre-determined discursive structures. Similarly, *The AIDS Epidemic* operates in the same register of deconstructive criticism as *Zero Patience*: calling into question public paranoia about AIDS transmission, the film addresses the moral panic that accompanies media narratives about AIDS.

Considering Greyson’s earlier filmography alongside his later transnational solidarity efforts such as *Photo Booth* offers an entry point for considering what queer modes of representation and criticism are able to offer anti-imperialist struggle. Though *Photo Booth* sheds some of the director’s ambivalence in favour of agitprop didacticism, it retains from his earlier

work an interest in interrogating the discursive construction of meaning. In the same manner that Greyson's earlier AIDS-related films use parody, pastiche, and irony to offer a poststructuralist critique of homophobic narratives of the AIDS crisis, *Photo Booth* employs the aesthetic strategies of New Queer Cinema to underscore the constructed nature of popular narratives about the Israeli occupation. Thus, despite the gravity of its cause, *Photo Booth* does not aspire to strict documentary realism or militant agitprop sloganeering but is rather rife with moments of irony, parody, and meaninglessness that work thematically to emphasize the constructed, tenuous nature of Israeli claims to nationhood, queer inclusion, and tolerance. We may note here the film's ironic appropriation of Zionist composer Arnold Schoenberg's twelve-tone message as the film's soundtrack or its frequent use of musical parodies that rewrite the lyrics of mainstream pop songs to promote the director's pro-BDS message. The film's libretto is also exemplary in this respect: featuring lyrics comprised of French excerpts chosen at random from Jean Genet's *Prisoner of Love*, the libretto of French non-sequiturs comprises the majority of the film's sung dialogue, with accompanying mis-translated English subtitles to reveal a coherent script. As the film's voiceover narrator explains:

The libretto for *Photo Booth* is composed of phrases selected at random from Jean Genet's memoir *Un captif amoureux*, which recorded his experiences living with the Palestinian *fedayeen* in 1970. Set to music derived from Schoenberg's 12 tone method, the libretto is purposely subtitled with the wrong English words which poetically transgress and subvert the meaning of Genet's French original. This pinprick method is inspired by Genet's own poetic experiments with form: documentary surrealism, chants, radical juxtaposition, free association, even a print version of split screen.

By integrating *Prisoner of Love* into his own work through this pinprick method, Greyson adapts Jean Genet's formal innovations for the screen. Dubbing the phrases from Genet's memoir with the incorrect English words and presenting the film's dialogue as mis-translated non-sequiturs, the film asks us to consider how words and images can be manipulated to suit particular narratives and encourages a critical skepticism among its audience towards established narratives. Greyson's pinprick method thus evokes the idea of puncturing a text to elicit arbitrary meaning and so emphasizes meaning as unstable, tenuous, and arbitrary. Here as elsewhere, Greyson applies queer theory's poststructuralist method to the context of the Israeli occupation to emphasize the constructed nature of its narratives.

Focussing on how Israel constructs itself discursively to justify its violence against Palestinians, *Photo Booth* articulates a model of solidarity that moves beyond a parochial focus on the protection of gender and sexual minorities to praxis-oriented interventions that contest the co-optation of queer rights to imperialist ends. In this respect, interventionist solidarity efforts like *Photo Booth* contribute to the broader Palestinian solidarity movement a critical attention to how Israeli apartheid justifies itself through strategies of pinkwashing and homonationalism. In so doing, the film aligns itself with the transnational solidarity efforts of the queer Palestine movement which, as Natalie Kouri-Towe has noted at length, is unique for its focus on the discursive. As she notes, the queer Palestine movement's attention to Israel's strategies of pinkwashing and homonationalism is representative of a "new terrain of political contestation that shifts the terms of transnational solidarity," moving from a model that emphasizes common oppression across queer identifications to a model of solidarity supported by queer analysis and critique (87). For Kouri-Towe, by promoting praxis-oriented initiatives such as pinkwatching or BDS strategies, the queer Palestine movement achieves "an articulation of solidarity rooted in

critique and intervention, rather than identification – the call is not ‘to liberate queers in Palestine’ but to expose state practices, promote BDS strategies, and build networks” (87). Thus the queer Palestine movement and activist interventions like *Photo Booth* can be considered “queer” not because of an exclusive interest in the rights of LGBTQ Palestinians but because they borrow from queer activism and theory a suspicion towards normative representations and the discursive construction of meaning. As Nadia Elia frames it, “By exposing and denouncing pinkwashing and homonormativity, queers are also maintaining their own defiant rejection of binaries, borders, citizenship, and inclusion that can only ever come at the cost of the exclusion of others” (Elia 143). If we are to understand “queer” to designate a method of critique based on queer deconstructive strategies rather than an identity, then queer poststructural critiques of sexuality, identity, and belonging offer to transnational solidarity efforts a critical framework for exposing the dominant narratives that sustain imperial violence.

III. Implications + Conclusion

Palestine isn't just another cause for queer movements—it's a litmus test.

—Alexander Stoffel, qtd. in Salfitis

“For queer politics, it is the best of times, and it is the worst of times”: thus begins Nikita Dhawan’s 2013 article “The Empire Prays Back: Religion, Secularity, and Queer Critique” (191). Here, Dhawan is referring on the one hand to the unprecedented social and legal gains achieved by the gay rights movement and on the other, to recent criticisms of queer racism and of the homonationalist agenda of global queer movements. Dhawan’s provocative adage invokes field-wide concerns about the ambivalent position of queer theory in the present moment. Contemporary critics of queer theory invoke the discipline’s attempts at the universalization of

Western conceptions of gender and sexuality alongside the missionary function of Western queer politics. In a controversial 2002 piece, for instance, Joseph Massad introduces what he calls the “Gay International,” a term he coins to designate the universalizing discourse of Western gay and lesbian human rights organizations. Focusing on human rights organizations “dominated by white Western males” such as the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGQA) and the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC), Massad’s work criticizes the hegemonic function of contemporary Western queer discourse. He writes: “It is the discourse of the Gay International that both produces homosexuals, as well as gays and lesbians, where they do not exist, and represses same-sex desires and practices that refuse to be assimilated into its sexual epistemology” (363). Similarly, writing in 2016, Jasbir Puar and Maya Mikdash note that “queer theory is itself deeply invested in, and in part produced out of... imperial, colonial, and settler colonial contexts and conversations” and therefore ask whether “queer theory in the United States [is] indeed homonationalist, indebted to an uninterrogated nationalism in order to further its capacitation, its (imperial) reach? (217). These interventions raise the following question: Have queer theory, movements, and aesthetics become, to borrow Greyson’s words, “fatally defanged” by homonationalist distortions?

In the introduction to his 2018 monograph *Queer Progress: From Homophobia to Homonationalism*, Tim McCaskell asks the following question: “How did we get from here to there?” (10). As evidenced by the genealogical account of queer activism in Canada he undertakes in the following pages, the “here” to which McCaskell is referring is the experience of brutal state repression and explicit homophobia that faced queer communities in the period between the post-Stonewall era and the millennium, while the “there” refers to the present moment, where queer subjects are increasingly incorporated into the homonationalist state and

rendered complicit with its imperialist projects. Critics of homonationalism such as Jasbir Puar understand the shift from “here” to “there” as a phenomenon that occurs primarily through a process of external recuperation. Though Puar pays due attention to how queer activist groups become complicit with homonationalist projects, she primarily understands this complicity as occurring through a kind of ideological interpellation. Writing about those queer subjects who are “interpellated by or aspire to the tight inclusiveness of homonormativity offered in this moment” (10), Puar’s work explores how homonationalist discourse “incorporates” the queer subject into national sentiment(3), “fold[s]...homosexuality” into “the “us” of the “us-versus-them” nationalist rhetoric” (43) and into “collusion with contemporary U.S. expansionism” (140). Similarly, Omri Soore Dryden and Suzanne Lenon understand this shift as one that occurs through the processes of “interpellat[ion of] a normatively raced, gendered, sexed, and classed Canadian (homo)sexual subjectivity” into the white settler nation-state (5), as “incorporation into (sexual) citizenship” (7), or as a “fold[ing] into settler colonialism” (7).

In each of these examples, the movement from the “here” of homophobia to the “there” of homonationalism is described primarily through metaphors of external recuperation: queer subjects and activism are alternatively folded or incorporated into, or interpellated or co-opted by homonationalist discourse. What these metaphors convey—though perhaps unwittingly—is that homonationalism is something that exists primarily *outside* queer theory and activism, with some queer subjects and activist projects being brought under its domain with varying degrees of complacency. While these frameworks are useful for conceiving of the movement in queer subjects towards homonormative complacency, I am interested in how conceiving of queer complicity with homonationalism and pinkwashing primarily as processes of external recuperation posits these phenomena as originating outside of queer activism and theory.

Contrarily, I would suggest that re-evaluating the central epistemic claims of queer theory and activism would allow us to better consider how they establish the grounds for homonationalism.

The queer Palestine movement provides an important reference point for sifting through which integral tenets of queer theory, aesthetics, and activism are compatible with anti-imperialist solidarity movements. As I have argued above, John Greyson's *Photo Booth* addresses the ambivalent position of Western queerness to anti-imperialist struggle, while also demonstrating the relevance of queer theory's poststructuralist approach to interrogating imperial authority. Considering *Photo Booth* metonymically as a representation of the queer Palestine movement in North America allows us to understand the plight of queer solidarity in the present homonationalist moment. What the film argues is for a movement away from an insular, minoritizing queer politics that focuses solely on the promotion of LGBTQ rights towards one that recognizes the centrality of sexual politics to present imperialist formations and builds solidarity across targeted oppressions. As the queer pro-Palestinian effort continues to develop, it will remain important to trace which undisputed values of queer theory and activism threaten to reproduce the missionary and universalizing trends of homonationalism and which are most conducive to universal emancipation.

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