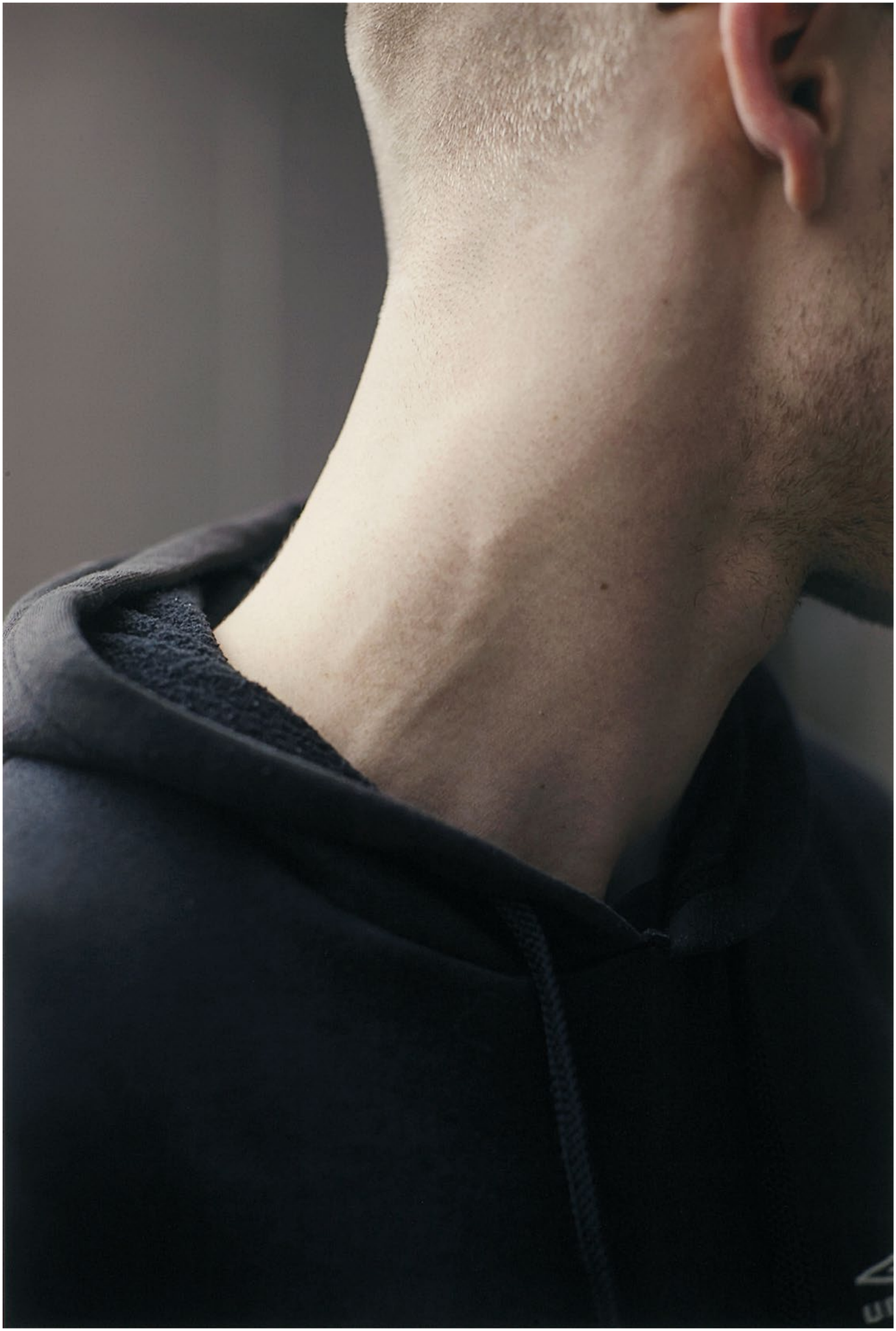


The Loving Cut

Framing landscapes of queer desire

Evan Moffitt

Where can we locate the birth of the queer image, not just in content but in form? Almost upon its invention, photography supplanted painting as the medium of desire. The material of film, Roland Barthes reminds us, preserves some part of the thing it captures—if only a bit of light that once reflected off the surface of a sitter's skin. That tantalizing scientific proximity brought queer photographers, persecuted for their sexuality, ever closer to the objects of their affection. Cinema offered an even tighter bond: not just the image of a lover, but a record of their every gesture. Facing censorship, early queer photographers and filmmakers focused intently on bodies forbidden to them, using the academic tradition of nude portraiture to mask idylls in immersive erotic landscapes. Inspired by the formal experiments of the Surrealists, they captured tender, intimate moments through paradoxically violent cuts and close framing.

In Man Ray's photographs, bodies appear so queer they are barely recognizable as human—a fragmentation that in turn destabilizes the viewer's own sense of physical embodiment. Man Ray's photographs of his muse Lee Miller are particularly

Wolfgang Tillmans, *Collum*, 2011
Courtesy Maureen Paley, London

George Platt Lynes,
***Tex Smutney and Buddy Stanley*, 1941**
Courtesy the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

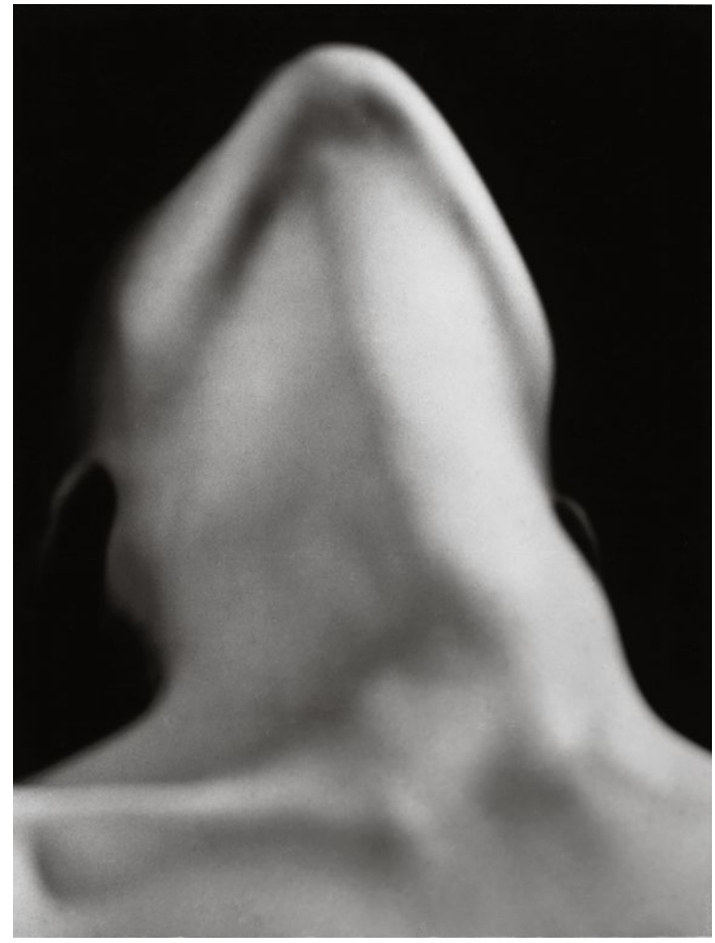
illuminating: in one, *Anatomies* (1929), he frames Miller's chin, pointed skyward, like a mountain peak, and, in a sly elision of physiology and gender, the nape of her neck has become the underside of a circumcised penis. For their creators, such scopophilic pictures were almost certainly heterosexual; Man Ray's models were usually female. But they are also queer images: strange, bodily affecting, erotic without necessary reference to gender or sex. In them, the gaze can construct its own fantasy, unencumbered by the artist's preferences. Persecuted by government censors, queer photographers and filmmakers would seize on this possibility. If the Surrealists made familiar objects strange, their queer counterparts did so to expose repressed sexual desires, applying the camera's cut to radical ends.

Like many of his lusciously textured, homoerotic novels, Jean Genet's only film, *Un chant d'amour* (A song of love, 1950), is set within the walls of a prison. Two men, separated in their cells, find inspired ways to contact each other, relishing simulacra of touch. As a recurring motif, two hands appear, first in darkness, then jutting out of barred windows: one swings a spray of flowers, while the other attempts blindly to catch it. (Bouquets for Genet were a symbol for genitalia, or semen.) Throughout, the lovers' bodies appear in intimate sections, as the camera lingers on a crotch, a sweaty palm, a naked collarbone. The sensual depths of an individual body part—even one that can't be accessed—again unfold here as whole landscapes of desire that extend far beyond the confines of their cells.

Genet was a friend and contemporary of Jean Cocteau, the queer Surrealist filmmaker whose own work employs a moody brew of mythology and magic to fold bodies into one another. The use of mirrored surfaces in *Orpheus* (1950), aside from indulging the director's lust for the handsome Jean Marais, suggests a Greek tragic hero infatuated with himself, Narcissus-like, or perhaps in failed pursuit of "same love." In these reflections, the object of desire—Orpheus/Marais's face—appears in close-up, partially cut off or occluded. The image recalls an earlier photograph by another of Genet and Cocteau's circle, the American photographer George Platt Lynes, whose homoerotic portraits of nude men employed many favorite Surrealist tropes: in *Tex Smutney and Buddy Stanley* (1941), two men, so close in resemblance they could be brothers, fall atop each other to form a soft slope that peaks at a lifted knee. A board has been cut to hide the lower half of Stanley's body, and its grain resembles the surface of a still lake. There the men rest like felled twin giants, their mirrored beauty forming yet another landscape of desire.

If Lynes was one of the first Surrealist photographers to give his works an overtly homoerotic bent, fellow American Kenneth Anger was a parallel pioneer in cinema. One of Anger's earliest surviving films, *Fireworks* (1947), is a wet dream–cum–nightmare, in which a young man is brutally beaten by sailors. In one of the film's most startling moments, a seaman sticks two fingers into the protagonist's nostrils, rupturing them in a phallic reprisal of the iconic eye-slice in Luis Buñuel's *Un Chien Andalou* (1929). As milk pours over the man's bloodied skin, the camera carves his body up even further. Its intense focus heightens the simultaneous sense of pain and pleasure, enacting what Leo Bersani has described as a "self-shattering" in formal terms. The queer body is fragmented from the very start; this has probably never been truer than during Genet and Anger's time, when homosexuality was psychologically dissected and criminalized.

After the Stonewall riots of 1969, queer photographers and filmmakers could be more overt in their homoeroticism. And while photographers like Peter Hujar and Robert Mapplethorpe excelled in portraiture—the latter borrowing wholesale from the Surrealists, close-cropping and abstracting bodies—many turned away from individual subjects and out toward the growing gay world.



Man Ray, *Anatomies*, 1929

If the Surrealists made familiar objects strange, their queer counterparts did so to explore repressed sexual desires.

Clockwise from top left: Still from Jean Genet's *Un chant d'amour* (A song of love), 1949–50
Photograph by Hervé Veronese © CNAC/MNAM and courtesy RMN-Grand Palais and Art Resource, New York

Still from William Friedkin's *Cruising*, 1980
© Shutterstock

Still from Alain Guiraudie's *Stranger by the Lake*, 2013
© Pierre Deladonchamps and courtesy Strand Releasing

Still from Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Querelle*, 1982
© Gaumont, France/Dres. Göring, Germany

The preliberation queer image had to be hidden in plain view. Freed from the closet, photographers and filmmakers began instead depicting the landscapes in which desiring bodies could now find one another. An obsession with skin and surface became a penetration of social space, as new works examined the ways gay sex could test notions of public and private.

Out of this moment, cruising photography was born. While much of it was taken for private purposes, photographers like Alvin Baltrop and Leonard Fink have been the subjects of renewed attention for their images of men seeking pleasure on New York's crumbling West Side piers. Formally, their best photographs capture not just the new sexual culture of the 1970s, but also the atmospheric conditions of gay sex, in dark corners of buildings that veer on the edge of collapse. Often Baltrop pointed his lens at couples fornicating in dense thickets of wood and steel, heightening his pictures' sense of voyeurism along with the drama of their erotic environment. When felled beams or upturned floorboards intrude on these trysts, they signal not the illicit nature of gay desire but the precarity of the physical, social, and political conditions in which it is enacted.

A voyeuristic thrill also animates Miguel Ángel Rojas's 1970s series *Faenza*, photographs of sexual encounters between men in the Faenza Theater, a crumbling art deco cinema in Bogotá, Colombia. Shooting furtively from within his coat, Rojas snapped each picture without looking through the viewfinder; the focus often blurs, while figures disappear into the shadows. Like Baltrop's and Fink's work, Rojas's photographs capture an unfolding sexual subculture as part of the urban fabric. In them, the queer gaze

actively cruises in semipublic space, rather than fixating on an object of affection, devoid of context.

Films, too, turned their gaze outward, setting sex loose in the city. William Friedkin's much-maligned thriller *Cruising* (1980) was perhaps the first wide-release film in the United States to explicitly depict a gay sexual subculture. It first introduces the "gay underground" in a slow, waist-level pan of the crowd at a New York leather bar: a gaggle of jockstraps and chaps that seem culled from Hal Fischer's classic photographic series *Gay Semiotics* (1977). As its plot progresses and the straight detective hero, played by Al Pacino, learns to navigate the world of gay kink, Friedkin's lens widens from a study of individual gestures to a brazen exploration of space: Pacino hunts a "homo-killer" through dark Central Park hedges, where bodies are devoured by shadows and dense overgrowth. A man follows the slasher's disembodied voice into the woods, cruised—and then murdered—by a spectral presence, a victim of the landscape itself.

Two years later, Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Querelle* (1982) brought Genet's tale of a murderous, sexually passive sailor to life, similarly inscribing sex and death in the setting of each scene. Instead of cutting up his subjects like the Surrealists, Fassbinder positions his lens within a landscape simmering with violence. Figures are seen from a distance embedded in a sensual panorama saturated with lurid colors—orange battlements, purple pissoirs—and partially occluded by signifiers of masculinity: motorbikes, the deck of a ship. Lacy patterns on the brothel window at once reveal and conceal different modes of desire, depending on who is looking and who is being seen. Subjects are often captured from the vantage of secondary characters, who are present but do not participate. The voyeur's perspective implicates the audience in an ambivalent homoeroticism, making the very consumption of cinema a queer act.

The exploratory optimism of postliberation gay life was shattered by the arrival of AIDS. Sex became newly taboo as the virus wiped out a generation of artists, many of whom made overtly erotic work. The camera was used to document the effects of

Miguel Ángel Rojas, *Antropofagia #9, El chico de la camisa de rayas* (Anthropophagy #9, The boy in the striped shirt), ca. 1970s
Courtesy the artist

Rojas's photographs capture an unfolding sexual subculture as part of the urban fabric.

This page:
Stills from Barry Jenkins's *Moonlight*, 2016
Photographs by David Bornfriend. Courtesy A24

Opposite:
Viviane Sassen, *Totem*, 2007, from the series *Flamboya*
© the artist and courtesy Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg

disease and the efforts of queer activists, often supplanting sexual desire with social anger. In recent years, as HIV has become more manageable, explicit depictions of queer intimacy have returned in photography and film, though often complicated by questions of community that grew more central to life during the crisis. Perhaps no images better illustrate the ambivalence of contemporary queer experience, adrift between gay monoculture and the shoals of neoliberal individualism, than those of Wolfgang Tillmans. In the 1990s, Tillmans became known for close-up snapshots of sweaty men in gay clubs, as well as portraits of couples, gay and straight, roaming naked in the woods. Throughout his work, male bodies appear intimately cropped—such as the elegantly stretched neck in *Collum* (2011)—or embedded in environments of their own making, from New York nightclubs to the frolics of Fire Island. Tillmans captures queer desire in all its messy and conflicted beauty.

But in Alain Guiraudie's *Stranger by the Lake* (2013), a noirish film set at a gay lakeside cruising spot in rural France, the idylls of Tillmans's Fire Island photographs take on another cast. At the lake, men meet for sex, though discretion prevents them from seeking any substantive sense of community. In wide-angle shots, they are seen sitting far apart on a beach, approaching each other only to disappear into the forest. Over several repetitive afternoons, foliage or water envelop various characters, shrouding their identities and intentions. The beach is framed as simultaneously liberating and dangerous: it allows men to freely express their sexuality, and find each other, but also leaves them physically vulnerable. In this sense, *Stranger by the Lake* is a postliberation story that celebrates the furtive pleasures of gay life, but, as the murder plot unspools, it also condemns the selfish secrecy they breed.

On another waterfront and in another social world altogether, Barry Jenkins's *Moonlight* (2016), a singular elegy to black queer experience, frames intimacy in terms of visibility—both the closeted sexuality of two young male characters and the glow that illumines them on a dark beach. The camera closes in on sensitive points of touch: a hand on a neck, fingers sinking into sand. At another, earlier point, an older male friend teaches the film's central character, Chiron, to swim, dipping him gently in the ocean; the intertwining of their bodies resembles the embracing beachside men in Viviane Sassen's *Totem* (2007). Jenkins was inspired, in part, by Sassen's series *Flamboya* (2005–8), with its saturated color portraits and black skin shot in high contrast.

No single view can communicate a "universal" vision of queer life. But *Moonlight* is one of many recent films to capture the identities of its characters through a wide range of angles and formal devices that crucially decenter our gaze. Jenkins, for his part, is never myopic: even the most intimate moments in *Moonlight* are framed in a broader context, so that we sense not just what Chiron desires, but how the culture in which he lives channels its repressions. Miami ripples with sensual delirium. Its eroticism only deepens Chiron's isolation, and also, for a few minutes on the beach, his sense of possibility.

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