

Bisexual erotics, bisexual labor: *Knife+Heart* (2018)

Reviewed by Jacob Engelberg

[p.578]

Yann Gonzalez, the director of *Knife+Heart* (2018), asks “What is cinema if it doesn’t depict a utopia? If it doesn’t depict an isle of possibilities, an isle of love, an isle where desires can be liberated, or sexuality can be totally accepted: plurisexuality, pansexuality?” (Gonzalez, 2018b, para. 33). Filmmakers are prone to such superlative statements about what cinema *is* or *should be* when, more often than not, such statements reveal a director’s understanding of their own work. What Gonzalez calls plurisexuality or pansexuality signals an alternative to monosexuality as a central investment of the director’s auteurist project, an investment in bisexuality.¹ Gonzalez has made films since 2006 and, across his body of work, one can observe routine representations of eroticism that cannot be definitively aligned to heterosexuality or homosexuality.

Behaviorally bisexual characters populate these films and, interestingly, in his shorts *Three Celestial Bodies* (2009) and *We Will Never Be Alone Again* (2012), eroticized screen bodies actually change gender. The former example uses continuity editing, a classical editing pattern that tends to *maintain* coherently gendered bodies; when this screen body seamlessly metamorphoses from one gender to another, Gonzalez subverts this realist esthetic and, simultaneously, transgresses monosexual and cisnormative visual codes. In this way, Gonzalez’s work pulses with what might be termed a transgressive bisexual erotics, in the sense that, as Dean (2011) contends, “transgression involves an experience of sexuality in which the gender of the partner remains secondary, if not altogether irrelevant” (p. 78). This extensible sense of erotics can be observed in Gonzalez’s first feature film, *You and the Night* (2013), a fantastical tale that follows three characters as they facilitate an orgy with participants of different genders. Gonzalez (2013a) declared that the film “extols...a multiplicity of desires, of sexualities, it’s really a pansexual film” (para. 53). Gonzalez, who identifies as gay (2013), has thus explored fantasy in ways that are not limited to man–man desire. Unlike many gay male directors, his erotic tableaux feature desires between women, between women and men, and between characters who resist cisnormative gender signification. With this variegated array of erotic representations, Gonzalez’s films

demonstrate what might be termed a bisexual erotic sensibility, a feature that can also be discerned in his most recent feature, *Knife+Heart*.

Set in 1979 Paris, the film follows gay porn producer Anne (Vanessa Paradis), who is lovelorn over her breakup with her ex-girlfriend Loïs (Kate Moran), a film editor working for Anne. As the film they are making progresses, its actors begin being murdered in what becomes a serial killing spree. Inspired by the murders, Anne's porn film begins to mirror these outside events and she renames it *Le tueur homo*—literally *The Homo Killer* (but translated in the English-subtitled release as *Homocidal*).² As the murders proliferate, and Anne's curiosity with finding the killer intensifies, boundaries between the film we are watching and the film Anne is making begin to blur. Anne's character is based on French porn producer and director Ann-Marie Tensi, a lesbian woman who made 101 straight, gay, and bisexual porn films between 1976 and 1983 (Lebrun, 2018).³ Those films credited Tensi under many different male pseudonyms and were produced through her production company, AMT, an acronym of her name. Similarly, Loïs's character is based on the American director and editor Loïs [p.579] Koenigswerther, who had a relationship with Tensi and worked for AMT in France. Historically, the number of women who have worked in the production of gay porn has been paltry and diffuse, but women have, nonetheless, occupied important spaces in gay porn history. From Annie Sprinkle to Nica Noelle and Mr. Pam, women pornographers have achieved recognition in an industry that is male-dominated and have made porn often assumed to have no interest to women.⁴

Knife+Heart explores the unique dynamic of women's relation to gay porn, foregrounding the desirous gaze of women—Anne and Loïs—in its presentation of sex between men. In her exploration of women's interest in gay porn, Neville (2019) theorizes the idea of a “genderfucked’ gaze—the idea that the imagined ‘self’ has the freedom to mutate into alternative manifestations when viewing or reading pornographic material” (p. 240). This quality of desirous mutability is articulated in Butler's (1990) account of pornographic fantasy, where she argues that “pornographic representations as textualized fantasy do not supply a single point of identification for their viewers... the possibility of a cross-identification spells a kind of gender trouble” (p. 114). Although all pornographic texts might carry this potential of cross-identification, the dynamic of women desiring gay porn is a particularly germane, and gendered, example of how one's lack of reflection in a

pornographic text need not preclude one's "involvement" per se. This quality of fantasy marks the unique dynamic at play in *Knife+Heart*, which is constituted not only by female desire towards gay pornographic fantasy, but also by female *creative mediation* in the production of gay pornographic fantasy.

This multipositional fantasy network is evident in *Knife+Heart*'s opening moments, in which Loïs is editing a gay porn scene. In this scene, two topless young men kiss and caress each other in a woodland clearing, though a male voyeur lingers behind some trees; he watches them as they proceed to have sex. The dynamics of desire here are multifaceted. In the porn film, the two young men desire one another and the voyeur desires them both. All three are perceived by an omniscient, desubjectivized camera, a shooting style notably deployed in pornographic and slasher genres. These images are intermittently revealed to be relayed by an analog preview screen, on which the images are manipulated through editing. We then see the hands of the manipulator, whose face is not shown. These hands pause, rewind, and fast-forward the film, cutting and splicing the celluloid, turning raw footage into pornographic fantasy. As a spectator watching *Knife+Heart*, we watch as various layers of creative mediation unfurl and the creative process of editorial mediation is revealed. This textual layering works to multiply a spectator's positional possibilities: the two young men, their voyeur, and Loïs herself might be figures one would like to embody—what Mulvey (1981) calls "screen surrogates"—as, equally, they might be objects one desires.⁵

In her discussion of cinematic spectatorship, Pramaggiore (1996) writes that reading bisexually involves recognizing that "any character is a potential ego-ideal as well as a sexual object for other characters and for spectators" (p. 282). With the sprawling network of positions and desires at play in this sequence we might, following Pramaggiore, understand its dynamics as expressing a bisexual range of positional possibilities, inviting a protean approach to spectatorial desire. Furthermore, the gendered dynamics of this arrangement introduce two specific kinds of transgression: the desirous transgression of a woman imbibing images of sex between men, and the creative transgression of a woman mediating those images. Loïs's desire, in concert with her editorial mediation, thus constitutes female interpolation of a gay pornographic space, opening up bisexual possibilities.

[p.580] It is interesting that, in a film set in a world of hardcore porn production, *Knife+Heart*'s treatment of sex is nonexplicit, especially given that other queer films from

France, such as *Stranger by the Lake* (Guiraudie, 2013) and *Theo & Hugo* (Ducastel & Martineau, 2016), have integrated unsimulated sex into expressly nonpornographic texts. One interpretation of *Knife+Heart*'s withholding of unsimulated sex and (male) nudity could be that this decision challenges spectatorial assumptions regarding what a queer film set in the gay porn industry should look like.⁶ In the wider cinematic landscape, the prevalence of female nudity and the comparative dearth of male nudity have been rightly linked to the heteropatriarchal treatment of gendered bodies (Lehman, 1993). However, in a film like *Knife+Heart*, which takes place in a milieu that champions naked male bodies and sex between men, having Anne and Lois's bodies be the film's only naked ones signifies a kind of bisexual troubling of expectations: eroticized female bodies where one least expects them.

In their review of *Knife+Heart*, Redmond Smith (2019) argues that the film possesses a pornographic style or form, calling it "a tonally pornographic film that redesigns the architecture of the non-pornographic text" (para. 2). Following Redmond Smith, it would seem that the film's turn away from unsimulated sex signals an engagement with the pornographic which, rather than being defined by nonsimulation or explicitness, is esthetic in nature.⁷ Redmond Smith highlights a way in which *Knife+Heart* occasions such an engagement when they suggest that Anne's adaptation of the film's diegetic plot into her own porn film evokes an intertextual relationship between the two, demonstrating what they call "the symbiotic relationship between pornographic and non-pornographic texts throughout history" (para. 6). Building on Redmond Smith, I would argue that this sense of stylistic and formal mutability can be seen to mirror or homologize the film's mutable approach to desire. Just as the boundaries between straight and gay are precarious, and bisexual transgression thereof disruptive, so too are the boundaries between the pornographic and nonpornographic text.⁸

A blurring of the boundaries between straight and gay worlds is also apparent on a narrative level. In one scene, Anne visits a building site to scout male performers and finds Nans (Khaled Alouach), an ephobic, curly haired Maghrebi boy with whom she flirts in the hopes of convincing him to work for her as a performer. After telling him how much money he could make, Anne discloses that the job would also involve "guys on guys." Nans retorts that he is not a fag (*une tante*) and turns to leave before Anne pulls him back, saying, "I'm disappointed. I had you down as a modern boy. No one will know, so what are you risking? A

little pleasure, at worst? And then you'll die less stupid." Certain aspects of Anne's rhetorical strategy will be familiar to those who have watched porn featuring predictable guarantees made to convince straight men to perform gay sex: the promise of large amounts of money; the reassurance that no one will see it. What is notable here, however, is the way in which such a transgression of heterosexuality is framed by Anne. Bisexuality is conceived of as something to which a "modern boy" would be amenable; she reassures him that he will experience pleasure and, superlatively, characterizes bisexuality as a kind of enlightenment.

This idyllic portrait of bisexuality is redolent of the tendency that du Plessis (1996) observes for bisexuality to carry extreme values as "a panacea, a fantasy, a promised land" (p. 19). This idealism can be seen in the perspective of Gonzalez, which celebrates cinema's potential for creating a pansexual utopia. It is apt, therefore, that Eisner (2013) terms this discursive trend "bisexual utopianism" (p. 134). But to exalt bisexuality as such poses two risks. First, as Eisner posits, it erases bisexuality's critical [p.581] difference to other sexualities, thus failing to challenge monosexual normativity. Second, the notion that bisexuality describes a sexuality that is primal, untrammelled by discourse, or unaffected by social convention and categorization will always fail to deliver on its promise—no sexuality in a social, semiotic, and discursive world can evade these contingencies.⁹ Instead, what we witness in Nans's narrative journey is a character who, through his relinquishing of homophobic heterosexual masculinity, is able to embrace his desire towards men. Nans is not simply "trade";¹⁰ instead, he becomes a willful queer community member. Like his colleagues, François (Bertrand Mandico) and Rabah (Jules Ritmanic)—two men in a nonmonogamous relationship who both have sex with women—Nans's sexuality is given space to be explored extensively. Tensi's own sets were, according to *Knife+Heart's* historical consultant, Hervé Joseph Lebrun, similarly populated by bisexual men, including Benoît Archenoul, Carmelo Petix, Claude Loir, and Manu Pluton (personal communication, July 31, 2019). The queer community we see on-screen, inspired by Tensi's own troupe, is therefore not simply a bisexual utopia but, more accurately, a model of queer community not constrained by monosexual hegemony, a professional and community milieu in which multiple sexual desires are permitted to flourish.

Similarly, the sexualities of Anne and Loïs are given space, both figuratively and cinematically, to diverge from monosexual normativity. After Anne recruits Nans, she

remarks to her colleague, “I found a gem. A fawn among wolves.... He’s gonna blow Lois away” (Gonzalez, 2018a, 2018b). Here, Anne’s desire towards Nans is interestingly refracted into her desire towards Lois: watching him perform in gay porn, Nans represents a point of shared desire through which she and Lois might reconnect. One is reminded of the much-discussed scene from Lisa Cholodenko’s *The Kids Are All Right* (2010) in which Jules (Julianne Moore) performs cunnilingus on her partner Nic (Annette Bening) though Nic watches gay porn. The possibility of sex between men serving as shared erotic fantasy in a sexual relation between two women opens up bisexual erotic possibilities that resist standard monosexual alignments between gendered subjects and gendered objects.

This extensive characterization of desire can also be observed after Anne enters what appears to be a lesbian bar with an all-female clientele. A woman invites Anne to dance, but Anne rejects her, saying that she is “taken.” On the bar’s stage, an extravagant musical performance takes place involving a blonde middle-aged woman wearing a fishnet body stocking (Els Deceukelier, credited as The Queen) and a woman wearing a bear costume with fishnet tights (Ingrid Bourgoin, credited as Mummy She-Bear).¹¹ Mummy She-Bear mounts The Queen and begins to scratch her, whereupon fake blood spatters across The Queen’s body. Seeing this display, Anne is turned off and she leaves the bar. The offerings of the lesbian bar—both its clientele and its theatrical performance—are of no interest to her. Obviously, dissatisfaction with a lesbian bar need not signify a “nonlesbianness”; however, this scene functions to reveal Anne’s displeasure in the film’s only lesbian-coded space. Furthermore, the performance’s bloody ending invites parallels with other diegetic murders, both within Anne’s film and in *Knife+Heart*. Although Anne is fascinated by murders between men and draws upon these murders as a creative influence, she is not excited by this presentation of eroticized violence.

This scene can thus be understood as communicating a kind of sexual heterogeneity on the part of Anne. She is not fully aligned with a lesbian subculture, yet she is consumed by her desire towards Lois and charged by erotic fantasies involving only men. This compositeness is what positions Anne against—or, perhaps more accurately, awry—lesbian signification. In Anne’s porn film, the murderer is revealed to be a woman played by Anne herself. In a gesture of hermeneutic closure within the porn [p.582] text, a dominatrix character remarks, “She saw so many gay flicks, she thought she was a fag [*un pédé*].” For a

woman to be *un pédé* marks a sexual and gendered transgression, an identification that defies what Butler (1990/2007) terms the heterosexual matrix in which sex, gender expression, and sexuality correlate with one another. We are invited to interpret the dominatrix's discursive diagnosis of the female murderer character as a diagnosis of her performer, Anne. Anne's sexuality does not possess the gendered situatedness nor the monosexual linearity that would invite a univocal interpretation. Her gendered and sexual self is partial, protean, and, as suggested by her alignment with the serial killer, potentially pernicious.

This review has purposefully avoided analysis of *Knife+Heart*'s central plot: a serial killing spree and the mystery thereof regarding the identity of the killer. No doubt, there could be potentially formative analysis to be had regarding the gender and sexuality of the killer, whose identity is concealed for most of the film by a leather gimp mask and who uses a dildo-cum-knife to have sex with and then murder his victims. In prioritizing the film's treatment of sexual desire and sexual labor, I have foregrounded the ways in which Gonzalez resists monosexual cinematic frameworks on both esthetic and narrative levels.

These elements, when considered in the context of the director's other output, mark Gonzalez as a director whose work espouses a bisexual erotic sensibility and occasions bisexual theoretical enquiry. *Knife+Heart*'s engagement with pornographic esthetics and porn history also marks the fruitfulness of these areas, more broadly, for bisexual engagements with visual culture.¹² As Hall (2009) argues, in relation to porn spectatorship, "We should never define 'sexuality'...as solely that which involves genital or bodily contact...My sexual hermeneutic response as I encounter images, narratives, or data on the screen is an active response" (pp. 124–125). In *Knife+Heart*, we find an appreciation of the ways in which sexuality can be experienced with, mediated through, and troubled by screens. Just as the film opens up queer diegetic spaces that permit bisexual desire, so too does it proffer the possibility of spectatorship constituting sexuality. Bisexual people often face biphobia characterized by interrogations around "real life experience" with one or another gender and, often, it seems that no "proof" is sufficient. To posit screen fantasy as coextensive with sexuality, as *constitutive of* sexuality, troubles the monosexist dogma of "experiential validation." In foregrounding screen fantasy as pertinent to explorations of sexuality, *Knife+Heart* offers a potential space beyond monosexuality's limiting contingencies, a space where extensible bisexual erotics might flourish.

¹ My use of bisexual is akin to the terms bisexual umbrella, bi+, or bisexual*, a strategic collective term to discuss nonmonosexuality.

² *Le Tueur Homo* is, in fact, a gay porn film from 1979, directed by Francis Scalveau within the production company of Anne-Marie Tensi. *Homocidal* is [p.583] perhaps a reference to William Castle's *Homicidal* (1961), an American horror film that plays with expectations around its killer's gender, in similar ways to Anne's film.

³ I am using these pornographic taxonomies in their colloquial and common forms. Accordingly, "gay porn" features sex between cisgender men, "straight porn" features sex between cisgender women and cisgender women, and "bisexual porn" features cisgender men and cisgender women specifically in scenarios in which the men interact physically. The problems with these terms are glaringly apparent; nonetheless, I am deploying them to reflect the taxonomies within which hardcore porn has tended to circulate.

⁴ These women pornographers' filmic output has not been limited to gay porn.

⁵ It is notable that feminist film theorists of the 1980s and 1990s—many inspired by Laplanche and Pontalis (1968) article on fantasy and sexuality—approached film spectatorship as a form of fantasy in which a female spectator's identifications could transgress gender positions (Cowie, 1984; Mulvey, 1981; Williams, 1990, 1991).

⁶ In Gonzalez's short film *Intermission* (2007), Salvatore (Salvatore Viviano) says, "When I see a dick in a film, I get hard, I jack off, I lose the plot," suggesting another potential interpretation for Gonzalez's concealment of male nudity and explicit sex.

⁷ In response to a question about this aspect of the film, Gonzalez & UniFrance (2018) explains, "I didn't want the sexuality to veil Anne's tragedy, her adventure.... We kept all the imagery and the substance... without showing the coarsest of images" (p. 4).

⁸ *Knife+Heart's* treatment of sex might equally be said to mirror softcore, a less explicit pornographic esthetic that experienced its heyday in the 1960s (Gorfinkel, 2018).

⁹ Here, we might remember Butler's (1990/2007) critique of the idea of bisexual primacy: "To presume the primacy of bisexuality... is still not to account of the construction of [this 'primacy']" (p. 69).

¹⁰ "Trade" is defined by Needham (2018) as "a term for a 'straight' male hustler who has sex with men for money rather than pleasure. His masculinity, his virility, that which he apparently possesses and defines him as a 'straight man', is something that has economic value and can be traded as a form of sexual labour" (p. 129).

¹¹ As an erotic performance that incorporates an animal suit, this sequence perhaps calls to mind Marlene Dietrich's performance in a gorilla costume in *Blonde Venus* (Josef von Sternberg, 1932).

¹² Strub (2019) advocates for a more bisexual approach in porn scholarship, lamenting how "Porn studies itself remains overly bifurcated in its straight/queer divisions of focus, indeed to a greater degree than the industry itself, where participants have regularly crossed that divide in numerous capacities" (p. 25).

[p.584] References

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