**Moderately Queer Programming at an Established LGBTQ Film Festival:
A Case Study of BFI Flare: London LGBT Film Festival**

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**Abstract**Many LGBTQ film festivals have transformed from bottom-up, community-driven events into established, profitable organizations. For some, this change has implied downplaying their activist agenda in favor of a celebratory and homonormative approach. This article demonstrates how BFI Flare: London LGBT Film Festival, a long-running European LGBTQ film festival, has dealt with the turn to homonormativity. Reporting on a qualitative study on the role of programmers and the actual program during BFI Flare’s 30th edition, this article argues that BFI Flare employs programming strategies that are moderately queer. These strategies are used to produce a festival that is both politically engaging and commercially viable, curating a program that is considered as inclusive as possible, attractive to large and heterogeneous audiences, and as striking a balance between celebrating LGBTQ (film) culture and engendering social and political change.

**Keywords:** film festival, LGBTQ representation, programming, homonormativity, BFI Flare, moderately queer, curating

**Running header**: Moderately queer programming

**Introduction**

Within the burgeoning field of film festival studies (De Valck, 2007; Loist, 2011), there has been a notable interest in LGBTQ[[1]](#endnote-1) film festivals (e.g., Andersen, 2012; Damiens, 2020; Perriam & Waldron, 2016; Richards, 2016b; Schoonover, 2015). One reason why scholars are drawn to studying identity-based festivals is that they allow a better understanding of how identity politics are being dealt with in and through film culture. The history of LGBTQ film festivals is a poignant demonstration of this. The early LGBTQ film festivals—organized in the 1970s and, at the time, referred to as lesbian and gay film festivals—were a response to the lack of distribution and exhibition opportunities for LGBTQ filmmakers and a communal desire to actualize diverse and rounded representations of LGBTQ people (Loist & Zielinski, 2012). However, with many LGBTQ film festivals having transformed from bottom-up, community-driven events into established, profitable organizations (Rhyne, 2006, 2007), many festival organizers and programmers now find themselves taking part in a creative industry they initially resisted or provoked. Similar to how LGBTQ grassroots movements gradually moved toward homonormative politics, many LGBTQ film festivals started downplaying their activist agenda in favor of a celebratory discourse and/or privileging or commodifying sexual identities that do not unsettle mainstream heteronormative societies (Gamson, 1996; Rastegar, 2009; Rhyne, 2007; Richards, 2016b).

Against this backdrop, the present article demonstrates how BFI Flare: London LGBT Film Festival (hereafter BFI Flare), a long-running European LGBTQ film festival, has dealt with the turn to homonormativity. The festival, formerly known as the London Lesbian and Gay Film Festival, celebrated its 30th anniversary in 2016 and serves as an excellent example of an established LGBTQ film festival. A total of 25,623 people attended the festival’s screenings and events, which were organized on 16–27 March 2016, a record high for the festival (British Film Institute [BFI], 2016). In their review of the 2014 edition, Schoonover and Galt (2014) maintained that identity politics, the ability to instantaneously voice critiques via social media, and financial limitations prompted the organizers of BFI Flare to negotiate often contradictory demands from stakeholders. I explore how BFI Flare has responded to these changes and demands by reporting on a qualitative study conducted during the 30th edition. The study focused on the role of programmers and the actual program. I interviewed Michael Blythe, Brian Robinson, and Emma Smart, who curated the 30th edition, and I analyzed 30 feature films from all sections of the program. Besides mapping each film’s main themes and narratives, I looked at how they were programmed (e.g., in terms of grouping, scheduling, and screening) and promoted in the festival’s brochure. The interviews sought to understand what the programmers thought should be the artistic, sociocultural, and/or political goals of their festival and how they translated these ideas into practice. The analysis of the actual program aimed to demonstrate the nature of the identity politics dominating the selected films and how they were programmed. By comparing (and reflecting on) the programmers’ discourses on programming for BFI Flare with the actual program, I argue that having acquired the status of an established LGBTQ film festival does not imply renouncing queer identity politics in return for organizing a celebratory, homonormative, and depoliticized event. Rather, I stress that BFI Flare employs programming strategies that I refer to as *moderately queer* (Dhaenens, 2018a). These strategies are used to create a festival that is both politically engaging and commercially viable. Concretely, they curate a program they consider as inclusive as possible, attractive to large and heterogeneous audiences, and as striking a balance between celebrating LGBTQ (film) culture and engendering social and political change.

**LGBTQ film festivals and the homonormative turn**

Forty years after their inception, LGBTQ film festivals have become cherished annual events in many cities and countries around the world. Even though most festivals take place in Western regions, there has been an increase in countries in the Global South since the 2000s—particularly in Asian and South American countries (Dawson & Loist, 2018; Loist, 2018; Rhyne, 2007). The fact that many LGBTQ film festivals are commercially viable and culturally successful institutions may be surprising when we look at the political-economic and sociocultural context in which they are organized. First, considering that many countries have implemented austerity policies and reduced or cut funding for cultural and artistic events, the non-profit organizations that organize festivals are increasingly reliant on private funding, sponsorship, and a creative industry logic (Richards, 2016b; Rhyne, 2007). This implies that many festivals have to appease all stakeholders and meet high standards of professionalization, even though a significant number of staff members are underpaid or not paid at all. Loist (2011) fittingly described the organization of film festivals as precarious cultural work.

Second, mirroring an increased tolerance or acceptance of LGBTQ people in chiefly, though not exclusively, Western countries, films dealing with LGBTQ identities have experienced gradually fewer difficulties in finding cultural appraisal, diverse audiences, or arthouse theatres. Even though a few American and European films exploring same-sex desire gained critical and international acclaim in the 1970s and 1980s (e.g., *Faustrecht der Freiheit* (Rainer Werner Fassbinder, 1975) and *My Beautiful Laundrette* (Stephen Frears, 1985)), it is New Queer Cinema that is often associated with cross-over success (Loist, 2015). Rich (2013) described New Queer Cinema as activist, independent films employing a postmodern style that challenged positive and homonormative narratives (e.g., *My Own Private Idaho* (Gus van Sant, 1991), *The Living End* (Greg Araki, 1992)). In contrast to their critical attitude toward assimilationist politics, these films were all narrative feature films produced mainly by cisgender white men (White, 1999). Yet, because they were able to travel the international film festival circuit, they gave visibility to LGBTQ identities and attracted the attention of film distributors. For LGBTQ film festivals, this implied that, starting from the late 1990s, programmers have had to take into account that a film may be of interest to international film festivals in order to program it in a sidebar that highlights films with LGBTQ sensibilities, to top-tier LGBTQ film festivals aimed at the world premiere, or to distributors who want to skip festivals and aim for a theatrical release (Andersen, 2012; Dhaenens, 2018a; Loist, 2015).

 In spite of precarious working conditions, lack of certainty over finances, conflicts of interest, and increased competition with international film festivals and arthouse theatres, LGBTQ festivals show no signs of abatement. This may be attributed to three reasons. First, while the incorporation of LGBTQ narratives into the larger cinema culture may have resulted in the commercialization of LGBTQ cinema (Rich, 2006), it also led to a diversification of stories, aesthetics, and represented identities (Hart, 2012; Rich, 2013). LGBTQ festivals no longer felt “forced” to program films with LGBTQ themes and were able to curate programs that fit their desired aesthetics and politics. This, in turn, created opportunities for smaller festivals to carve out niche festivals (e.g., TranScreen Amsterdam Trans\*gender Film Festival).

Second, even though many festivals are no longer run like grassroots organizations and have adopted a creative industry logic, they continue to enable the formation and preservation of LGBTQ communities. Despite the ability of LGBTQ people to watch LGBTQ cinema in a variety of ways—ranging from downloading films and using video-on-demand streaming services to watching LGBTQ-themed content on commercial and cable television and in art house theatres or multiplexes—LGBTQ film festivals remain a space where LGBTQ politics are not confined to the screen. As Richards (2016b) demonstrated, attending a festival that, through its focus on minority-identity programming, sets itself apart from international film festivals is a “communally empowering act” (p. 239). Third, Richards (2016a) also invited us to consider a creative industry logic in order to help organizations translate their social and cultural value and status into financially sustainable events. He demonstrated how professionalization and the implementation of certain programming and promotional strategies might increase the profitability of a festival. This does not imply a renunciation of the sociocultural role of identity-based festivals. If both are treated on par, LGBTQ festivals can occupy the “middleground” in addressing communal and neoliberal interests. They create spaces for LGBTQ audiences to come together and introduce debuting or emerging filmmakers to international distributors, and they are not wary of programming commercial and/or homonormative feature films besides art house and/or socially critical work.

Even though not all LGBTQ film festivals implement a creative industry logic—let alone the same commercial strategies—established LGBTQ film festivals do balance financial targets and sociocultural goals, which affects the identity politics of a film festival. Programming and promotional strategies play a major role in determining the dominant identity politics of a festival. Loist (2012) has differentiated between more traditional programming strategies and queer programming strategies. Traditional strategies are concerned with offering positive LGBTQ representations while striving to include work that appeals to various groups within the LGBTQ community. In practice, these festivals tend to create separate identity-based sidebars (e.g., trans-themed short films) while using central programs and timeslots to cater to “a mainstream, homonormative, sponsorship-friendly group–an imagined white, affluent homosexual (male) middle-class” (p. 164). Queer programming strategies, by contrast, are used to create “a truly inclusive and diverse counterpublic” (p. 165). To do so, programmers defy a separatist approach to curating a program and look for work that defies essentialist and homonormative identity politics. Queer theory scholars have demonstrated that LGBTQ politics and culture are increasingly shaped by heteronormative and neoliberal ideals (Halberstam, 2005; Puar, 2007; Warner, 1999). Duggan (2002) described this process as homonormativity. Anticipating that the heteronormative society will tolerate LGBT people if they emulate heteronormative ideals, LGBT individuals and civil rights movements distanced themselves from *queer* politics—characterized by a critical attitude toward heteronormativity and neoliberalism. Instead, they invested in assimilationist politics and were content with privileged civil rights, even when this resulted in new institutionalized social inequalities among LGBTQ people and a sustained refusal to address structural racism and classism. Homonormativity can be characterized by a depoliticized attitude, a return to privatizing, desexualizing, and domesticizing non-normative sexualities, and an emphasis on participating in a neoliberal consumer culture. As the interests of popular media culture are strongly intertwined with those of neoliberalism, we can find ample examples of homonormative characters, tropes, and marketing strategies in popular television, film, and music.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Homonormative cinema emerged with the production of LGBT-themed films that distanced themselves from New Queer Cinema, avant-garde aesthetics, and (radically) queer narratives. Richards (2016b) reflected on this homonormative turn in cinema and argued that three features characterize homonormative cinema. First, it concerns depoliticized films that emphasize consumerism. They are produced in such a way as to ensure that they reach the largest audience possible. They also ignore structural inequalities and ongoing struggles over identity. Second, homonormative films favor the domestic and private. They feature LGBT characters who recreate the nuclear family and who adhere to norms and values that sustain the heterosexual matrix. Same-sex intimacy is confined to the private sphere of the home—not seldom a middle-class home in white suburbia—and represented in mainstream conservative fashion. Third, homonormative films install hierarchies of sexuality, which are governed by patriarchal norms. They privilege fit white gay masculinity as a desirable commodified identity while stereotyping gay and lesbian characters who perform gender in non-normative ways.

Many LGBTQ film festivals portray an awareness of what homonormative politics entails. Organizers and programmers stress that they try to avoid the exclusive programming of films made in the Global North with gay male characters and/or work by male cisgender directors. They argue that they look for films with queer or transgressive narratives, avant-garde aesthetics, and/or produced in the Global South (Dhaenens, 2018b; Richards, 2016b). This does not imply that many have ceased the programming of homonormative films. Richards (2016a, 2016b) demonstrated that a creative industry logic demands strategies aimed at keeping the festival financially sustainable, such as targeting audiences through gendered programming strategies (e.g., curating a short film program with only lesbian-themed titles and one with only gay-male-themed titles) and programming homonormative films in the main venues of a festival. This echoes Zielinski’s (2008) point that many audiences who attend LGBTQ film festivals do not fit the profile of the queer cinephile and are rather “more appreciative of gay and lesbian narrative forms derived and adapted from popular cinema” (p. 303). Further, programmers and organizers argue that these strategies allow them to program films considered “risky,” “radically queer,” or “difficult” without having to worry that a small turnout for thematically transgressive and/or experimental works would jeopardize the financial health of the festival. Even though it is crucial to question whether this creative industry logic is the only feasible and successful logic for an identity-based film festival,[[3]](#endnote-3) programmers of LGBTQ film festivals indicate that it has kept them running and establishing their mission of showing LGBTQ cinema to LGBTQ audiences and creating and maintaining an LGBTQ community (Dhaenens, 2018b; Richards, 2016b).

In the remainder of this article, I explore how a creative industry logic is articulated in a festival’s programming practices and identity politics. Relying on Loist’s (2011, 2012) and Richards’ (2016a, 2016b) invaluable work on LGBTQ film festivals, I propose that this mode of programming be considered *moderately queer* (cf. infra). To demonstrate my argument, I draw from data collected during the 30th edition of BFI Flare. This festival is run by the BFI, a charity governed by the Royal Charter, which stipulates that the institute’s role is to encourage the development of film and television and promote their use. The Royal Charter status was granted on the BFI’s 50th anniversary in 1983. It honored the institute’s history, as the BFI has, from the beginning, promoted the role of film in education and cultural life (Dupin & Nowell-Smith, 2012). In 2011, the BFI became the government’s leading institution for film, granting it the status of a non-departmental public body sponsored by the Department of Culture, Media & Sport, which ensures the financial viability of the institute. Moreover, the BFI’s income comes from National Lottery funds designated for film as well as self-generated income (sales of cinema tickets, DVDs, books, sponsorships, donations, etc.) (BFI, 2017). Today, the BFI takes on a variety of roles, from managing the BFI National Archive and the Reuben Library over publishing matters to film distribution, exhibition, and education at their own venues and organizing film festivals (BFI, n.d.).

The BFI’s status as a public body has assured the institute a relatively steady income. Nevertheless, taking into account the political-economic climate of austerity policies and cuts to arts funding, it is no surprise that the institute has given increasing prominence to negotiating the creative industry logic in order to continue its operations and secure BFI Flare’s prominent role in the LGBTQ film festival circuit. To this end, I consider BFI Flare an exemplary case for my inquiry into moderately queer programming practices.

**Moderately queer programming at BFI Flare**

*A brief history of BFI Flare*

The first official edition of the film festival was organized in 1986, but its inspiration was drawn from Richard Dyer’s Images of Homosexuality, organized at The National Film Theatre in 1977. Dyer’s program featured films from a variety of periods and genres and three seminars on gay and lesbian representation. In his 1977 overview of the characteristic treatment of gay and lesbian themes, he did not limit the program to positive portrayals or films considered by film critics and cinephiles to have particular cinematic and artistic value, which he considered a one-sided approach that would result in an inaccurate representation of the history of gay and lesbian representation in film.

The film festival began, in earnest, in 1986 when Peter A. Packer curated “Gays’ Own Pictures.” The event was held from 16–22 October and showcased nine feature films. Whereas Dyer’s program was retrospective, Packer presented contemporary work. It included only one lesbian-themed film, Donna Deitch’s *Desert Hearts* (Packer, 1986). In 1987, Packer was joined by Mark Finch. From the third edition on, Penny Ashbrook replaced Packer as curator, and the festival was named The London Lesbian and Gay Film Festival. Over the years, the festival introduced various sections and sidebars and increased the number of films and days—with 19 consecutive days of festival during the 24th edition in 2010. However, the British government’s cuts to arts funding affected the BFI. As a consequence, the festival had to resize its 25th edition to seven days. Despite the setback, the festival regained its strength by increasing the number of days and total number of films showcased. The 30th edition in 2016, for instance, screened 50 feature films and 79 short films, alongside a dozen events, over a period of 12 days.[[4]](#endnote-4)

In 2014, the festival responded to a call for a name change. Voices within the LGBTQ community made it clear that the festival had to make its dedication to the whole community more visible, as the term Lesbian and Gay Film Festival did not cover the whole LGBTQ community. By renaming itself BFI Flare, the festival joined a series of established LGBTQ film festivals that exchanged their sexual identity-based name for a symbolic metaphor. The word “flare” was considered to better represent the content being programmed and to figure as an inclusive and flexible term that allowed emerging identity categories and previously disregarded sexualities to be(come) part of the festival’s scope and audiences (Dhaenens, 2018b; Schoonover & Galt, 2014).[[5]](#endnote-5)

*Moderately queer programming strategies*

Celebrating its 30th edition, the festival reached another momentum. With record-high audiences in 2015 and 2016 (BFI, 2016), the festival organizers confidently branded BFI Flare “one of the longest running and most respected LGBT film festivals in the world, and the UK’s leading LGBT film event” (Stewart & Nevill, 2016, p. 5). The bravado of the editorial affirmed both the BFI’s and BFI Flare’s status as institutions within international cultural circuits, even giving the impression that they rely predominantly on homonormative programming strategies to preserve their status. However, I argue that the festival engages in moderately queer programming. My argument is based on my participation in the festival, conversations with programmers, festival audiences, and accredited film professionals, and an analysis of the discourses of the programmers, the actual program, and the promotional material. To qualify this argument, I unpack what I mean by “moderately queer” and elaborate on three aspects that illustrate how BFI Flare engages in moderately queer programming.

I see “moderately queer” as a specific articulation of identity politics within the context of popular culture. It applies to cultural products, practices, and events that engage with LGBTQ identities in a way that cannot be described as having been shaped by either depoliticized and homonormative discourses or radically queer and anti-essentialist discourses that aim to provoke and unsettle audiences via transgressive narratives and/or avant-garde aesthetics. Rather, it concerns texts, practices, and events that complicate and challenge norms, values, and practices that support and sustain neoliberal and heteronormative logics in popular culture and society. However, instead of expressing queer identity politics through radical, unsettling, and tenacious narratives and/or imagery, and distributing these via independent DIY organizations, channels, or platforms, moderately queer texts, practices, and events are constitutive of popular culture. Drawing inspiration from Butler’s (1999) conceptualization of subversion, I consider moderate queerness as a way to erode the dominant order from within by exposing, corrupting, or undermining it. I argue that many actors within creative industries turn to “moderate queerness” as a way to be political, subversive, and critical while still creating a product or event that is commercially viable and able to speak to diverse audiences.

For the scope of this article, I differentiate between moderately queer content and moderately queer programming. Moderately queer content refers to work that features “subjects, narratives, style and aesthetics that resonate with the everyday life of ordinary people while inserting subversive storylines, plot elements or audiovisual interventions that subtly unsettle heteronormativity” (Dhaenens, 2018a, p. 801). Moderately queer representations of LGBTQ characters and themes in Western film and television have emerged since the 1990s. For instance, various titles within New Queer Cinema fit the moderately queer profile. In his reflection on New Queer Cinema, Morrison (2006) argued that films associated with New Queer Cinema have resisted Hollywood’s conventional aesthetics and challenged homonormative representations of gay identities without alienating diverse audiences. He pointed at reliance of films on emerging actors with star potential, such as River Phoenix and Keanu Reeves in *My Own Private Idaho* (Gus Van Sant, 1991), or how New Queer Cinema’s films circulated in the international film festival circuit.

Similarly, from the late 1990s on, various American and European television programs have represented rounded LGBTQ characters while paying attention to intersectional identities. Even though these programs have been used to sell subscriptions to cable networks or streaming services, they cannot be regarded as merely homonormative or instrumental in the sustenance of a neoliberal society. From HBO classics such as *Six Feet Under* (2001–2005) and *The Wire* (2002–2008) to Netflix productions such as *Dear White People* (2017–present), *Élite* (2018–present) and *Special* (2019–present), television producers have created programs that give visibility to underrepresented identities within LGBTQ communities and unsettle and question heteronormative mainstays.

Nevertheless, whereas moderately queer content refers to individual films and series, moderately queer programming refers to broader curatorial processes. To explore this, I trace how BFI Flare’s festival practices can be understood as moderately queer.[[6]](#endnote-6)

1. *Striving for inclusivity*

First, moderately queer programming is about ensuring that the program of an LGBTQ film festival represents all people whose sex, gender, and sexual identity do not conform to the heteronormative ideal. Programmers have to demonstrate awareness of ongoing identity debates within the LGBTQ community, acknowledge that LGBTQ identities intersect with other identities (e.g., class, race, ethnicity, religion, and dis/ability), and curate programs with work that respects these principles. This in no way implies that programmers employ quota or curate programs that fully and equally represent the community. Rather, they assemble programs they believe to be as inclusive as possible. In the case of BFI Flare, all three interviewed programmers considered it their role to ensure that the BFI Flare program addressed a broad range of identities, both in front of and behind the camera. As Michael Blythe explained,

It is all about diversity, that is the conversation we constantly have throughout. That’s the country of production, that’s who’s physically represented on screen, that’s who made the film, who’s written the films. All these different kinds of voices contribute to this one thing, I think. We want to make sure that as many voices are represented.

Nevertheless, how diverse and inclusive is BFI Flare’s program? With regard to the program’s feature films, men dominated the 30th edition.[[7]](#endnote-7) First, 35 out of 50 feature films were directed by a male director, or a team of male directors, compared to 13 features directed by a female director or a team of female directors. I emphasize that the assigned gender identity was based on secondary sources and might have included transgender individuals. A few of the included directors were, nonetheless, well known as transmen, such as Silas Howard and Harry Dodge, who directed *By Hook or By Crook* (2001). In terms of main characters and/or themes, 24 films were gay-male-oriented, compared to 13 lesbian-themed films, six trans-themed films, and one film focusing on an intersex person.[[8]](#endnote-8) The remaining films either incorporated diverse LGBTQ identities (e.g., *Coming Out*, Alden Peters, 2015) or addressed an LGBTQ audience, even though they could not be categorized as LGBT-themed. They concerned films with a camp sensibility (e.g., *Calamity Jane*,David Butler, 1953, cf. infra) or those portraying characters and themes that subvert normative ideas regarding people’s sexuality. For instance, the Spanish documentary *Yes, We Fuck* (Antonio Centeno and Raúl de la Morena, 2015) explores the sexual lives and experiences of persons with disabilities through a lens that avoids and challenges an ableist gaze, whereas the Austrian documentary *Femme Brutal* (Liesa Kovacs and Nick Prokesch, 2015) follows a group of queer feminist burlesque performers who use stripping, their naked bodies, and unconventional props (e.g., fake blood, dead animals) to disrupt heteronormative conventions and gendered assumptions.

The programmers of BFI Flare were very much aware of the male dominance in their program. They argued that while more LGBTQ-themed films were made and submitted to the festival, there was a continuing imbalance between male and female directors and gay-male- and lesbian-themed films. They assumed that female filmmakers still experienced difficulty gaining access to funds or networks that could aid in producing and distributing their work. To demonstrate their awareness, the programmers pointed out that the 30th edition was assembled by a team of five programmers with different sexual and gender identities, including one programmer from the QTIPoC community (queer, trans, and intersex people of color). The diversity within the team was used to designate each programmer’s “area of expertise” in correspondence with their own identities. First, the approach has had a pragmatic advantage (e.g., making it easier to distribute open submissions among themselves). Second, the programmers emphasized that being part of diverse communities—which for some also implied active engagement, such as co-running a trans youth organization—allowed them to gain an awareness of emerging debates and find work that deals with these timely issues. Blythe and Smart did underscore that the process was much more nuanced, emphasizing ongoing dialogues regarding titles, exchanging films with one another, or being allowed to program films that might focus on another identity than their own gender or sexual identities.

The festival also promotes itself as international, yet more than half of the 50 feature films were produced by English-speaking Western countries (21 American, 3 Canadian, 2 Australian, and 2 British). The USA was involved in five other films, the UK in three others, and Canada in two others. Only five feature films were produced in countries from the Global South, with another set in China and produced in the Netherlands. These figures demonstrate that the symbolic and institutional power of American popular culture is still very much intact. BFI Flare programmers have underscored their intent on challenging this state of affairs. Smart considered it “really important to champion non-Anglophone film because that is where the story is, which is not the exact replica of your own, which is what the audiences want to see.” Smart positioned the programming of films from the Global South as valuable and enriching, but she assumed that audiences were looking for some form of recognition or identification, consequently restricting the range of non-Western films that could be considered “programmable.” Following Schoonover and Galt (2016), this implies that many films are not considered because of a Eurocentric approach to what qualifies as LGBTQ cinema. Queer cinema in the world demands that programmers go beyond the rhetoric of visibility. Instead of looking exclusively for historical and contemporary work by LGBTQ directors or films that deal with unequivocal LGBTQ characters, programmers should try to understand queerness within the world’s diverse sociocultural contexts. This will lead them to work that would have otherwise been considered unsuitable for an LGBTQ film festival.

Nonetheless, when BFI Flare programmers encounter disparities or thematic gaps in their program, they employ counterprogramming strategies. For the 30th edition, they included a work-in-progress screening of *Rebel Dykes*, directed by Harri Shanahan and Sian Williams. While the documentary was unfinished at the time, because of its theme, BFI Flare decided to screen takes from the film and host a panel discussion. The documentary focuses on a group of lesbian women in London in the 1980s, who organized protests, published feminist magazines, and ran sex-positive clubs. Another example is the programming of the aforementioned *By Hook or By Crook*, a queer classic about two friends who become partners in crime. The film is presented together with an event that revolves around director Silas Howard, during which the director is given the floor to present his work and discuss how filmmaking may have changed for queer and trans filmmakers. Finally, despite only featuring a few feature films from the Global South, the presence of Indian directors Jayan Cherian (*KA Bodyscapes*, 2016) and Sudhanshu Saria (*LOEV*, 2015) helped broaden and question what is assumed to be knowledge about LGBTQ lives and LGBTQ filmmaking in India through interactive Q&As.

1. *Something for everyone*

Moderately queer programming is about creating a program with a multiplicity of stories, tropes, and aesthetics. There are two distinctive practices: including moderately queer films and catering to a large and heterogeneous audience. The first practice concerns the politics of representation in the curated films. Moderately queer films rely on well-known genre conventions and employ narrative and aesthetic means to facilitate identification. They create a symbolic environment that feels familiar and resonates with the everyday lives of their audiences. Familiar and ordinary spaces encourage audiences to identify with the main characters. Audiences are invited to experience queer desires and question or challenge homonormative assumptions and heteronormative institutions. A good example is *Beautiful Thing* (Hettie Macdonald, 1996), a film about two working-class boys from a housing estate in East London, who fall in love. For Jennings (2006), this feature may not have fit the New Queer Cinema transgressive aesthetics or disruptive themes; nonetheless, it was politically significant. She argued that the film uses a “positive unoriginality” to address various audiences and represent optimism and positive imagery as crucial to LGBTQ identity formation. This mode of address is articulated through its reliance on British television aesthetics, use of dialogue and regional accents, an “average-looking cast,” and its emphasis on the positive storytelling characterizing the precarious living conditions of LGBTQ individuals.

BFI Flare’s program features an array of films that qualify as moderately queer. For instance, in *Naz & Maalik* (Jay Dockendorf, 2015), we join two black teenage Muslim boys in Brooklyn, New York. They spend their free time selling lottery tickets and potions to earn money for college. The boys are in a relationship but have to hide it from their families. However, their mysterious behavior is interpreted by a spying FBI agent as a sign that they may be potentially dangerous to society. The film recounts how the boys are met with prejudice, misunderstanding, and sociocultural hierarchies in the various communities and environments in which they navigate. The film invites us to identify with Naz in his attempts at reconciling his sexual and religious identities while dealing with racism and being sexually objectified by white men. In making structural and everyday forms of racism and homophobia tangible, the film raises awareness of white privilege while offering subject positions to queer Muslim youth whose lived experiences are rarely depicted. The film’s ending—where Naz ends the relationship after Maalik decides to come out to his parents—may leave audiences with the idea that there is little hope for an openly queer Muslim life. I argue, however, that the value of the film lies in its depiction of the relationship between the boys as a safe, cherished, and intimate space, which was only disrupted because of fear, confusion, and presumed rejection by family and friends. Such representations are small acts of subversion. The film represents same-sex desire between Muslim boys as non-stereotyped, mutual, and rewarding and, at the same time, avoids dismissing or blaming religion and the role of family altogether.

The previous example also illustrates how moderately queer films can use particular narrative, visual, and genre devices to ease an audience’s identification with an identity or experience that is unfamiliar to the majority of audiences. *Naz & Maalik* employs “realistic” settings and naturalistic, documentary-like modes of representation, but this practice does not preclude the use of science fiction or fantasy elements as long as the audiences are able to make sense of the universes created on screen. In *Girls Lost* (*Pojkarna*, Alexandra-Therese Keining, 2015), for instance, three teenage girls discover that they can turn into boys for a day if they drink the nectar of a giant black flower. What starts as an empowering game turns into an identity crisis for Kim. She discovers that she feels much more at ease in a male body. The film uses fantasy and charmed transformation to help audiences grasp the differences between gendered role-play and transgender identity formation.

Another popular trope within moderately queer films is the revalorization of the affective role that domesticity plays in the life of LGBTQ individuals. Rudy (2000) criticized queer theory for associating queerness with attributes connoted as “masculine” (e.g., publicness, an “in-your-face” attitude) while disregarding “feminine” attributes (e.g., privacy, emotionality, and caretaking). She challenged the assumption that when LGBTQ people desire these “feminine” values and practices—often associated with and experienced within the domestic—they are pursuing a homonormative way of homemaking. Drawing on Clare (2013), films may use emotional and affective appeal of domestic bliss and romance to convey homonormative ideas, as well as to question these ideas, or even to propose or imagine a viable alternative to homonormative happiness. An example from BFI Flare’s 30th edition is Barbara Hammer’s *Welcome to this House* (2015). This documentary recreates the private life of poet Elizabeth Bishop by means of the various houses in which she lived and the various lovers and women in whom she had an interest. Intertwined with excerpts of her poetry, the film explores houses as sources of inspiration and intimacy for her as well as difficult spaces that forced her to move from time to time.

The second practice concerns the curation of a program with a large and heterogeneous audience in mind. In contrast to film festivals curating programs that expand and challenge normative storytelling and filmmaking through radically queer narratives and aesthetics (e.g., XPOSED Queer Film Festival in Berlin), moderately queer LGBTQ festivals avoid grand statements that emphasize the kind of identity politics they represent or the kind of cinema they aim to promote. Instead, they ensure that there is something for everyone. The program typically includes mainstream coming-out films, romantic comedies, fan favorites, as well as smaller critical and transgressive films. This implies that not all curated films qualify as “moderately queer,” as the program includes films that predominantly and uncritically feature homonormative tropes as well as work that articulates queer identity politics in a radical and resolute manner. The editorial by Clare Stewart, BFI Head of Festivals, and Amanda Nevill, BFI Chief Executive, in the brochure of the 30th edition aptly summarizes the reach and diversity that the festival aimed to include in the program. Reflecting on 2015, they stressed,

[t]he breadth and scale of queer cinema had great visibility this last year, from major stars like Cate Blanchett, Rooney Mara and Eddie Radmayne playing LGBT characters to moments of great discovery, like the wonderful *Tangerine*, shot on iPhone 5s with unknown trans actors. (Stewart & Nevill, 2016, p. 5)

As the 30th edition included both *Carol* (Todd Haynes, 2015), in which Blanchett and Mara star, and *Tangerine* (Sean Baker, 2015), this statement reveals that the festival was categorically aware of the large appeal of well-known heterosexual actors as well as its role in representing creative and innovative films about “underrepresented” people. It affirmed what Richards (2016a, 2016b) described as a creative industry logic employed by other established LGBTQ film festivals. To be commercially viable and ensure that niche or transgressive films can be exhibited at a film festival, festivals include and advertise crowd-pleasing, mainstream films that may reiterate worn-out tropes. As Blythe explained,

I think there’s a certain type of queer filmgoer that isn’t interested in seeing another coming out story, isn’t interested in another coming-of-age story we’ve seen a million times before. But for every one person like that, there’s at least five who love them […] if we do screen the coming-of-age type films, they sell straight away and the more challenging ones, we have to find audiences for them, be more creative about how we write about these films.

Blythe’s response reveals the duality he experiences. He is aware of the political and artistic necessity of programming films that go beyond homonormative tropes and/or mainstream aesthetics but also alludes to the financial risks and extra effort that such films seem to demand of the programming team.

Practicing the art of compromise, BFI Flare programmers have been successful at curating a varied program—in terms of aesthetics, identities, themes, and identity politics—without alienating regular or mainstream audiences. They organized and presented the program in such a way that audiences might have known what to expect. A key process was the allocation of films to the different screening rooms. Although almost all feature films were screened at BFI Southbank, the size of the screening rooms differed significantly. The largest theatre, NFT1, sat 450 people, whereas the other venues, NFT2, NFT3, and STUDIO, had 134, 125, and 40 seats, respectively. Commercial logics and a keen interpretation of the most likely audiences to attend drove decisions on which films were screened in the larger venues. As Robinson put it,

It’s a huge risk to put a film in NFT1 […] because we have financial budget targets. If we make a mistake on three or four films that are half-full in NFT1… Many festivals would be happy but we need to have almost every screening sold out.

In terms of themes and identities, NFT1 was the place where we could find conventional films that dealt with gay-male- or lesbian-themed content. The gender disparity was less pronounced in NFT1, with 16 gay-male-themed films and 11 lesbian-themed films. Films with transgender characters or themes were less likely to be screened in the biggest venue. Furthermore, most of the feature films programmed in NFT1 were Anglophone. A few European films with subtitles were programmed in the main venue, such as *Théo and Hugo* (Olivier Ducastel and Jacques Martineau, 2016) and the closing film *Summertime* (*La Belle Saison*, Catherine Corsini, 2015). However, there was a perception that films from the Global South were incapable of attracting large audiences and, therefore, ought to have been screened in the smaller screening rooms. A similar argument could be made about films that aimed to unsettle audiences or that could result in discord, such as *Nasty Baby* (Sebastián Silva, 2015). This film—which tackles issues such as gentrification, white privilege, and non-normative families and includes a brutal and unexpected murder scene—has received positive reviews and stars the relatively well-known American actress Kristen Wiig. However, it was programmed in NFT2 on weekdays and was accompanied by an event entitled We Need to Talk About Nasty Baby, organized in the BFI Reuben Library. The event was described as a discussion where audiences could talk about the film if they felt the need to. This illustrates the will to program outside the box, albeit in a cautious and subdued manner so as not to upset audiences.

1. *The festive and the political*

Third, moderately queer film festivals seek a balance between pleasure and politics. Every LGBTQ film festival engages in some way with identity politics. Even LGBTQ film festivals that purport to be apolitical are articulated through a selection of films that showcase their political perspectives on particular identities, ideas, norms, and values with regard to gender, sexuality, and society at large. However, they often downplay the “political” in favor of creating a crowd-pleasing and affirmative event with aesthetically pleasing films. In contrast, a few festivals do explicitly articulate their politics. They use LGBTQ cinema to start a society-wide debate about LGBTQ rights and program work that potentially challenge audiences’ assumptions and expand their knowledge and experiences. Films that do not meet a festival’s cinematic and artistic quality standards[[9]](#endnote-9) can be selected if they tackle issues or identities that remain underrepresented (Dhaenens, 2018b). LGBTQ film festivals situated in the “middleground” (Richards, 2016b), however, look for ways to balance political engagement and celebration. Even more, they demonstrate that politics can be pleasurable. Programmers seem to understand the emotional value of celebration and of appreciating progress, despite political and sociocultural setbacks. They do not disguise the fact that there is money to be made of pleasure and celebration—arguably essential to the sustainability of the festival—but their strategies do reveal that festiveness does not preclude critical, political, and emancipatory messaging.

An obvious strategy is the appropriation of the red carpet event. Opening and closing films—often presented at “galas”—tap into the showbiz logic and represent a particular event as exclusive. This strategy can be considered homonormative, as it installs hierarchies among audiences by higher ticket prices and assumed dress codes. At BFI Flare, the 30th edition opened with *The Pass* (Ben A. Williams, 2016), a British drama about two football players who were each dealing differently with their homosexual desires. It closed with *Summertime*, a French film set in the 1970s that explores a same-sex relationship between a countrywoman and a metropolitan woman. The events were organized according to the principles of a true gala event: The ticket prices were higher than those of standard tickets; the events were given more attention and promotion than other films; they featured invited guests, including producers, directors, and actors; they were used as moments to officially open and close the festival through interviews with the festival’s organizers and programmers. The opening night gala was turned into a one-night-only event, organized at Odeon Leicester Square instead of at Southbank. However, despite such practices, which evoke homonormativity, the films at the center of these events qualified as moderately queer. They relied on conventional aesthetics, featured well-known actors, told a story about sexual awakening, and portrayed the characters as moving toward an acceptance of their identities as respectively gay and lesbian rather than bisexual or queer. At the same time, the works paid attention to intersectional identities and challenged prejudices by portraying a black male character in *The Pass* and a rural female character, who grew up in a farming village, in *Summertime* as characters who were confident about their sexual identity. Furthermore, *The Pass* featured the openly gay actor Russell Tovey as a closeted gay character, while *Summertime* was the work of out director Cathérine Corsini, who wrote the scenario together with her partner Laurette Polmans. Being celebrities in the UK and France, respectively, these out film professionals—who attended the gala events—generate publicity while their personal sexualities lend credibility to the films’ politics of representation.

Besides strategies of glamorization, film festivals create festive events around films that relive or remember the past. By reprogramming work from the history of LGBTQ cinema, festivals can underscore sociocultural and political gains and help audiences relate their own experiences to history. BFI Flare has provided a few occasions that revolve around nostalgia, remembering, and rereading. Promoted under the label “from the archives,” BFI Flare has put the spotlight on a few LGBTQ classics that are worth revisiting. Noteworthy is the inclusion of *Desert Hearts* (Donna Deitch, 1985), an adaptation of *Desert of the Heart* (Rule, 1964), which explores sexual and romantic attraction between two very different women who met in Reno, Nevada. There are many reasons why it is a classical LGBTQ film: It was one of the first lesbian-themed feature films to be made by a woman, to feature an explicit sex scene and a happy romantic ending, and to receive mainstream success (Stacey, 1995). Moreover, it was the only lesbian-themed film in the festival’s first edition. By programming the film in NFT1, the festival gave the classical film the stage it deserved and reminded audiences of the structural issues (in terms of production and curation)—that they had stalled and hampered the production, distribution, and exhibition of lesbian-themed feature films.

Interpreting film culture more broadly, BFI Flare also organized the event “We have rather been invaded.” It was based on an ongoing project of Ed Webb-Ingall, together with Studio Voltaire, the BFI, and Metro City, and consisted of a screening of audiovisual material that recounted the tabling and passing of Section 28 in 1988—which forbade local authorities from intentionally promoting homosexuality—and a discussion with activists, public sector workers, and audiences. With this event, BFI Flare used film as a catalyst to initiate a political conversation about the past and present conditions of LGBTQ civil rights.

However, even light entertainment, such as a sing-a-long screening of *Calamity Jane* (David Butler, 1953), can have a political dimension. The musical featuring Doris Day as Calamity Jane has been described as a favorite among LGBTQ audiences. Although the event started from the outdated assumption that gay men have a soft spot for musicals, the genre’s ability to escape the everyday life and its potential to subvert established gender roles resonated well with LGBTQ audiences. The screening allowed contemporary audiences to engage in their own queer readings of the musical and, through the collective experience of singing, share in the pleasure of queer nostalgia. Padva (2014) cautioned against considering this form of nostalgia as a longing for past times or an assumption that everything was better before. Rather, it is a way of looking at the past through an optimistic lens, to re-appreciate those personal moments of achievement, pleasure, awakening desire, and be inspired by collective fights, heroes, or events in dealing with present-day struggles. Watching and singing along to *Calamity Jane* arguably, at an affective level, best exemplifies how the political and festive may come together.

**Conclusion**

In demonstrating how BFI Flare engages in moderately queer programming, I argued against the impression that its institutionalized context implies a homonormative ideology. Even though the festival boasts an image of being established and a household name in the festival circuit, it remains reflexive with regard to its sociocultural role. In both the program and the programmers’ discourses, I found an acknowledgement of being political and critical as geared toward the emancipation of the whole LGBTQ community. However, the adoption of a creative industry logic resulted in an identity politics that only partially and subversively criticizes the hegemony of heteronormativity. BFI Flare motivates its broad and diversified program—which incorporates films that qualify as homonormative, moderately queer, or radically queer—as a means to avoid alienating large and diverse audiences and allow the creation of a common ground through the use of narratives, tropes, and aesthetics that resonate with people’s everyday lives.

Further, it is important to highlight that what qualifies as moderately queer cinema or moderately queer programming is context-dependent. Even though it concerns a particular set of texts and practices that balance homonormative and queer identity politics, what constitutes as “homonormative” and “queer” depends on particular temporal and spatial contexts. Thus, even though some films or events may come across as depoliticized and docile, it is essential to assess their identity politics in relation to the context in which they were produced or organized and explore the extent to which the films or festivals engage in a queer critique of established normative frameworks on gender, sexuality, and identity.

To conclude, BFI Flare’s use of moderately queer programming may come across as a “best practice” of how to curate an LGBTQ film festival today. Based on the festival’s ongoing commercial and critical success, it seems to have found a formula that allows it to meet its financial goals without losing sight of its sociocultural role as an LGBTQ film festival. However, such an approach implies that compromises have been made regarding the festival’s content. Depending on the criteria used by the curators and how the festival imagines its artistic, sociocultural, and/or political goals, various types of audiovisual content will probably not be eligible for selection. Such programming decisions are not without consequences. For instance, using recognizability as a criterion to include LGBTQ cinema from the Global South may hamper the possibilities for non-Western LGBTQ filmmakers to find funding or distribution opportunities. Last, the question remains whether a creative industry logic would continue to allow a balanced approach to programming LGBTQ culture when financial targets are unmet.

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1. **Notes**

 “LGBTQ” is used as an umbrella term. It encompasses anyone who is identified and/or

self-identifies as gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans\*, or queer. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Ng (2013), for instance, discussed the gaystreaming practices of Logo, a US television network launched to provide content for LGBT audiences. Rebranding their network programming strategies to draw in larger audiences, the network started investing in programming content with a gay sensibility, though not necessarily focused on LGBTQ issues. With gay men and heterosexual women as the target audience, the network programs content that celebrates a consumption culture and lifestyle. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. I refer to entzaubert, Leeds Queer Film Festival, or Wotever DIY Film Festival, to name a few festivals that operate outside of a creative industry logic. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. This brief history is based on information retrieved from the program brochures of all prior editions of the festival, which were consulted at the BFI Reuben Library. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. BFI Flare was not the only LGBTQ film festival to change its name. Various established LGBTQ film festivals decided to remove identity markers from their name. For instance, CGLFF-Copenhagen Gay & Lesbian Film Festival changed its name to MIX Copenhagen in 2010, and Skeive Filmer (Norwegian for Queer Films) became Oslo/Fusion International Film Festival in 2015. Using metaphors rather than identity markers allows many persons with non-normative gender and sexual identities to feel acknowledged by festivals that aim to be inclusive and represent them (Dhaenens, 2018b). However, it is crucial to look into the content of these festivals to see whether the symbolic turn to inclusivity by using a new name is more an act of window dressing or a profound investment in programming diversity. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Despite not being the focus of this article, I want to highlight that various scholars who wrote about LGBTQ festivals have discussed programming practices that can be understood as moderately queer. For instance, Zielinski (2008) explored how various taste cultures come together in LGBTQ film festivals aimed at addressing their various audiences, including cinephiles interested in films by established queer auteurs and non-cinephiles who choose films based on topic (e.g., coming out) rather than for their artistic or cinematic values. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. I decided to focus on the festival’s feature films. Even though the festival offers a broad range of short film programs, feature films remain the most emphasized and popular format of BFI Flare. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. This does not imply that the characters in these features self-identify as such. However, it is the most likely interpretation of the main characters and/or themes. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. LGBTQ film festivals seem to make use of divergent criteria to assess a film’s cinematic and artistic qualities, such as high production values, professional acting, or an innovative or creative approach to filmmaking (Dhaenens, 2018b). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)