The Queer Art of Feeling: Futurity, *Fin de siglo*, and New Queer Realism

ABSTRACT
This article takes Lucio Castro’s *Fin de siglo (End of the Century, 2019)* as a paradigmatic example of broader formal and aesthetic shifts in recent queer world film, most notably towards narrative slowness, a lack of dramatic tension, and an intimate focus on the quotidian realities of queer lives. Through the frameworks of new queer realism and queer futurity, the article contends that the screening of queer lives in a more realistic, observational manner is not a refusal of politics but rather a recalibration of the politics of queer representation for the contemporary period.

Maybe it is stupid. But who fucking cares? Why does it bother you that maybe two people fucking love each other, and they want to get married, and they want a relationship, and they just want to be happy. They just want to be happy.

—*Weekend* (Andrew Haigh, 2011)

Lucio Castro’s *Fin de siglo (End of the Century, 2019)* is a film concerned both thematically and structurally with the passing of time and its unrealized possibilities. The chance encounter of the film’s two protagonists, Ocho and Javi, on a Barcelona beach in 2019 sets into motion the first of the film’s three chapters, which then ends abruptly and unexpectedly with the realization that the men have met—and shared a strikingly similar weekend of sex and
sightseeing—before. The second chapter, which details their initial introduction in 1999, makes little attempt to account for the twenty-year gap in terms of costume, make-up, or mise-en-scène. Instead, this lack of visual shift imbues the scenes with an oneiric quality that gently unsettles linear chronologies, a strategy prioritized in the film’s concluding chapter, in which the narrative flashes forwards—or, perhaps, sidewards—to an alternative, fantasy-driven present in which the men did not part ways in 1999 but rather remained together in the intervening years to build a home and a family. The “dream logic” that pervades the narrative and formal structures of *Fin de siglo* progressively calls into question the normativity of the temporalities we conventionally associate with life and with love—that is, those expectations of “the good life” that Sara Ahmed contends orient us heteronormatively towards “happiness as a form of duty.” *Fin de siglo*, through its temporal twists and turns and via a lens attentive to the quotidian realities of queer lives, instead offers a vision of queer futurity that destabilizes (chrono)normative regimes and opens up a range of affective possibilities traditionally foreclosed to queer cinematic characters.

From the outset, *Fin de siglo* crafts an atmosphere of unhurried contemplation. The twelve-minute-long, dialogue-free opening sequence languidly documents one of the two protagonists’ arrivals in Barcelona, through long sluggish takes that dispel any sense of narrative tension as they chart his touristic flânerie through the city’s distinctive Gothic and modernist architecture. When Ocho and Javi finally encounter each other on a beach, their meeting—though charged with a latent sense of sexual potential thanks to their furtive glances at each other’s unclothed bodies—ends abruptly and anticlimactically. Just as their gazes fail to meet, their paths cross but similarly fail to connect. The cinematic beach, which, as Fiona Handyside remarks, “like the cinema itself, [is] coded as a place of display,” in this instance lays bare not only the toned and conventionally attractive bodies of the two men but also the “social organisation” of gay male cruising. During the sequence, when Ocho follows Javi into the water, the sudden unsteadiness of the camerawork contrasts with the previous static shots of angular architecture and the rigid cityscape, reflecting the uncertainty of a gaze charged with intentionality yet uncertain of reciprocity. The water of the ocean accentuates the men’s athleticism as they dive through the waves and against the tides, a formal strategy of exposure shared by many contemporary queer films, and the refraction of sunlight through the ocean’s spray visually imitates this moment of missed connection between the pair.

3. The following films, among many others, all contain moments in which the directors emphasize the strength and athleticism of the gay male body through formal techniques involving water: Javier Fuentes-León’s *Contracorriente* (*Undertow*, 2009); Marco Berger’s *Ausente* (*Absent*, 2011), *Hawaii* (2013), and *Taekwondo* (2016); Alain Guiraudie’s *L’Inconnu du lac* (*Stranger by the Lake*, 2013); Karim Aïnouz’s *Praia do Futuro* (*Futuro Beach*, 2014); and Jakob M. Erwa’s *Die Mitte der Welt* (*Center of My World*, 2016).
and then the beach separately, each surprised at the other’s apparent disin-
terest, Castro crafts this first instance of dramatic potential into a moment of
quiet frustration, both for the protagonists and for their spectators.

That this moment in the film’s present of 2019 is juxtaposed indirectly
with a more explicit example of gay male cruising in the second chapter of
the film, set in 1999, is significant not only for how the film crafts its narra-
tive arc but also for the argument of this article. While the example above on
the beach is notable for its subdued narrative tension and lack of immediate
sexual resolution, the chronologically earlier episode, by contrast, is more
conventionally dramatic in both diegetic and formal terms. In a wooded area
of the Parc del Laberint d’Horta, an unnoticeably younger Ocho has his first
sexual encounter with a man, after following the stranger along a path and
into some nearby bushes. The camerawork of the scene insists on a sense of
voyeurism and danger, with impartial shots of the men obscured by branches
and leaves (see Figure 1), quite unlike the open horizons of the film’s earlier
beachscape. Moreover, not only does Ocho visibly have second thoughts
about the sexual encounter and try to flee, but the entire experience leaves
him physically ill and psychologically unsettled for days afterwards, able to
leave bed only to search for information about oral HIV transmission on the
internet. These two moments of the film are not only representative in the
most explicit sense of what Castro himself refers to as “el cambio drástico
en la vida de los gais en los últimos veinte años, desde el miedo a VIH hasta
Grindr” (the drastic change in the lives of gay men over the last twenty years,
from the fear of HIV to Grindr).4 They are also emblematic of a broader

4. Lucio Castro, quoted in Mireia Mullor, “Lucio Castro: ‘No hay nada que entender
en el cine, no es una clase de matemáticas’” [Lucio Castro: “There is nothing
to understand in cinema, it is not a mathematics class”], Fotogramas, Novem-
/a29821657/fin-de-siglo-pelicula-gay-filmin-entrevista/. Unless otherwise noted,
all translations are my own.
Cinema in the 1990s, which were “radical, not just in their politics but also in their filmic form” and which “emerged out of the time of and the preoccupations with AIDS,” to a more mundane, realist focus on the everyday experience of queerness in the present.

The primary concern of *Fin de siglo* does not revolve around issues of HIV/AIDS, shame and rejection, homophobic violence, or the need for sexual discretion. Instead, the film focuses on certain aspects of contemporary queer lives that have understandably been absent from earlier cinematic explorations of queerness: the fleeting nature of Grindr hookups, the juncture of same-gender marriage and parenthood, and the practicalities and pitfalls of open relationships. *Fin de siglo*’s focus on the intimate dynamics and everyday experiences of queerness can therefore be read through the framework of what I term *new queer realism*, a cinematic register that embraces slowness over dramatic conflict, the microcosms of individual relationships over broader societal issues, and the realities and practicalities of queer sex over an emphasis on its deviance or overt political potential. New queer realism has become a defining feature of much contemporary queer film from Latin America and beyond, identifiable through a lack of dramatic narrative or a formal insistence on observational camerawork, as with the work of Marco Berger, Albertina Carri, Lucrecia Martel, and Karim Aïnouz. As with queer world film more broadly, the representational power of such work lies not in its engagement with identity politics in the most immediate or explicit sense but rather in its claim to represent in a more realistic and observational manner the lives of characters represented on-screen.

As several critics have noted, *Fin de siglo* shares its narrative accent on the queer quotidian with the British director Andrew Haigh’s *Weekend* (2011), along with an aesthetic emphasis on shots that depict characters against the imposing architectures of their urban environments. Andrew Moor remarks that “*Weekend* is intimate, disarmingly simple, coolly naturalistic and politically astute.” This relaxed embrace of the personal in *Weekend* and its interrogation of the intimate likewise pervade the narrative of *Fin de siglo*, leading several film critics to draw comparisons between the two specifically on the levels of plot and cinematography. The narrative present of *Fin de siglo* unfurls over a

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6. These aspects of new queer realism are present in many contemporary queer films from beyond the Latin American context, such as in the work of Céline Sciamma, Francis Lee, Andrew Haigh, Xavier Dolan, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Yen Tan, and Alain Guiraudie, among many others.


similar timeframe to Haigh’s film, with both productions featuring two men who meet and (re)develop a relationship over the space of a couple of days; both films also feature intimate discussions between their protagonists, which offer an insight not only into gay relationships in the age of social media and the hookup app but also into broader societal issues of gay parenting and same-gender marriage. These films approach the intimate, the ephemeral, and the familiar with a lens attentive to the affective dynamics that lie beneath their seemingly overt refusal to engage in broader social and political issues.

Castro’s experimentation with temporality in *Fin de siglo*, however, stands out as an immediate marker of difference from *Weekend*, one that enables the director and his characters to explore in a more profound sense what José Esteban Muñoz has referred to in *Cruising Utopia* as “a queer temporality, a thing that is not the linearity that many of us have been calling straight time.”

Mirroring the film’s narrative focus on moments of transition, from the sunset backdrops of the pair’s most intimate revelations to the setting of the second chapter at the eponymous end of the twentieth century, this playfulness with non-linear dynamics and temporal porosity is pivotal, left as the characters and their environments are unconcealed by shifts in costume, visual effects, or mise-en-scène. Most suggestively, the fantasy sequence in the final moments of the film, which flashes sidewards to an impossible alternative present, consolidates the film’s preoccupation with time’s junctures and its potentialities. The momentary glimpse of domestic complacency offered in this closing scene, with its contented-but-humdrum routine of childcare and household chores, is far from radical in the futurity that it pictures. However, *Fin de siglo* defends itself from accusations of homonormativity through the very possibility of the future that it envisions, one in which “we can glimpse the worlds proposed and promised by queerness” and through which the film strikes one of its most affectively resonant chords.

In his review of the film, Bilal Qureshi writes, “What these millennial queer masterpieces share is a new kind of creative freedom, a conscious and discernible break from past stories of loss, tragedy, and isolation.” He continues, “Even when such films do not explicitly address the question of civil rights, their politics are central to their deceptively universal story lines and constitute a sort of anthem for dignity and recognition.” *Fin de siglo’s* nostalgic glances backwards, forwards, and sidewards constitute an interrogation of an affective realm formerly foreclosed to queer cinematic characters (and their audiences), one that harnesses the representational power of the everyday as a means of reinscribing queer experience within a broader collective—and socio-political—history. In this sense, and to a greater extent than Qureshi suggests in his review of the film, *Fin de siglo’s* matrix of new queer realism not only engages implicitly with the question of social and political equality, but it also interrogates the scope and substance of queer


10. Muñoz, 10.


12. Qureshi, 81.
happiness, or what Sara Ahmed has referred to in *The Promise of Happiness* as the political potential of being “happily queer.” Ahmed writes, “The queer who is happily queer still encounters the world that is unhappy with queer love but refuses to be made unhappy by that encounter. . . . To be happily queer is to explore the unhappiness of what gets counted as normal. To be happily queer can be to recognise the unhappiness that is concealed by the promotion of happy normativity.”

In its interrogation of the resonances and realities of the contemporary queer experience and, crucially, of their affective range, *Fin de siglo* becomes not only an “anthem for dignity and recognition” but a much more complex questioning of what underpins, restricts, and facilitates queer happiness in the contemporary moment.

In this way, the film can also be understood to reflect a broader theoretical development within queer theory, from anti-social stances towards the heteronormative institutions of marriage, parenthood, and monogamy, à la Leo Bersani and Lee Edelman, to alternatively optimistic modes that recognize the importance of the lived realities of queerness alongside their political and theoretical abstraction. In challenging the pervasive and normalizing nature of society’s “happiness scripts,” which orient us towards both traditional notions of success, fulfillment, and, by proxy, heteronormativity, Ahmed suggests that “rather than reading unhappy endings as a sign of the withholding of moral approval for queer lives, we must consider how unhappiness circulates with and around this archive, and what it allows us to do.”

While the ending of *Fin de siglo* can certainly not be straightforwardly read as unhappy, not least given that the ambiguity of the film itself rejects any such facile interpretation, this article will nevertheless respond to Ahmed’s encouragement to examine what notions of queer (un)happiness allow us to do. *Fin de siglo*’s treatment of Javi and Ocho’s fleeting weekend reunion through the lens of new queer realism, with its sensitivity towards the affective intensities of the narrative and the observational dynamics of the camera’s gaze, merges with the film’s playful temporalities, figuring a queer domesticity that has both a past and, albeit imagined, a future. As such, in its realist embrace of feeling and through the rejection of any singular model of happiness, the film deals in the future-oriented “glimpses of queerness” that serve as alternatives to the “happiness scripts” imposed and policed by a heteronormative society. In forgoing an explicitly anti-social stance towards the established institutions of marriage, career, and family, *Fin de siglo*’s optimistic exploration of the intimacies of the queer domestic experience thus becomes one of both representational and political significance. The film suggests that these glimpses of the happy queer home need not be real in order to affect us but instead exist simply as realizable possibilities among the many potential paths and futures that time may offer.

SEX AND SINCERITY

Following the unhurried opening sequence of *Fin de siglo* and its moment of missed connection, the two protagonists eventually interact when from his balcony Ocho notices Javi walking on the street and invites him upstairs. The pair’s small talk quickly turns to their recently crossed paths on the beach, and each one reveals that he was indeed aware of the other’s presence but was prevented from acting on any impulse by prevailing social codes: “es muy difícil toda esa ajedrez” (all these chess games make it difficult), remarks Ocho. There is, in the slightly stilted dialogue about Airbnb rentals, Grindr, and reasons for visiting Barcelona, a distinct lack of tension: Javi appears equally as aware as Ocho of the purpose of his visit upstairs, yet the eventuality of sex between the men is rendered mundane both through the script and the cinematography, appearing as the default option rather than a dramatic one. The static nature of the medium full shot of the two men standing in the kitchen curtails a sense of intimacy, emphasized by the clinical hue of the stark lighting against the blue tiles of the kitchen wall. When the pair eventually kiss, Javi’s gibe that Ocho temper the intensity of his passions suggests that this will not be a stereotypical foray into the cinematic sex scene, a tone quickly consolidated in the film’s following moments. Despite Ocho’s assurances that he is taking PrEP, Javi prefers to use protection, meaning that Ocho must leave the apartment—adjusting his noticeable bulge as he enters the street—to go in search of condoms. The realistic nature of both the script and the men’s actions, from the discussion of protection and the adjustments of bulges to the time-consuming unwrapping and donning of the condom itself, offers a subdued, observational tenor to their—finally successful—moment of cruising.

The “measured ordinariness” that some critics have noted in the film’s first chapter as a whole is here woven into the structures of the sex scene itself, which avoids any explicitly pornographic camerawork or full-frontal exposure of genitals yet, it should be said, still maintains a sensual charge despite such narrative and formal discretion. Ocho’s jokes about awkwardly hiding the condoms among other items in his shopping basket at the local store, along with Javi’s pretend dislike at the brand of lubricant that Ocho has bought, imbue the scene with a sense of comic levity. The time taken for Ocho to unwrap the condom and then initially penetrate Javi augments the scene’s formal and narrative emphases on the practicalities of gay sex rather than on its erotic potential: this shot lasts fifty seconds, in comparison to following shot of the pair having sex, which lasts only forty seconds (see Figures 2 and 3). Though Ocho’s facial expression is visible as he reaches climax, the filmic grammar of conventional pornographic sequences is notably absent; the intimate camerawork and explicit money shot so essential to the visuality of male sexuality elsewhere is here replaced by the conspicuously less visceral image of a used condom being wrapped in toilet paper and thrown into a bin.

The camera does permit a sense of sensuality, to be sure, but refrains from what Cüneyt Çakırılar and Gary Needham refer to as either a “monogamous” or “promiscuous optic,” refusing to offer any point-of-view shots and instead opting exclusively for two static medium takes, first from behind as the pair begin to have sex and then from the side as they reach climax.19 While Richard Dyer and Linda Williams point respectively to the “importance of the visual” and the value of “maximum visibility” in representations of male sexuality, *Fin de siglo* instead chooses strategically to foment a sense of intimacy not through the sexual act itself but through its observational approach to the actions that surround it: jokes about Ocho’s shopping spree; the clumsiness of unwrapping a condom; and the breathless discussion immediately afterwards.

of Perro Viejo, a cartoon character, and his inability to be adopted. Though sex is of central importance to the pair’s weekend relationship, these scenes do not exist in a social or narrative vacuum. In this way, Castro recalibrates the intimacy of the erotic by encouraging the spectator not to watch but to observe the relationship that develops, through a realist aesthetic that focalizes the mundane practicalities of sex over its outrightly erotic potential.

In his review of Ira Sachs’s Keep the Lights On (2012), Ben Walters positions the film at the beginning of what he labels a “new-wave queer cinema,” in which “no one comes out or dies, and everything is shown with the same fluid energy.” He writes, “Keep the Lights On is at once very good and conspicuously ordinary. . . . It’s a peculiarly powerful mode that represents a welcome shift in queer cinema—an embrace of the real.” Moor, for his part, astutely notes a sense of what he terms “New Gay Sincerity” in the representation of non-normative sexualities in this recent wave of queer-focused independent film. For Moor, films such as Keep the Lights On, Weekend, and Travis Mathews’s I Want Your Love (2012) all “choose a mode of frank, observational realism and seem to capture everyday lives in ways that ‘feel authentic.’” Moores incisive analysis of Weekend notes a number of discernible formal characteristics that could also be attributed to Fin de siglo, not least the exclusive use of diegetic sound and a “commit[ment], to a mathematically emphatic degree, to a mode of observational realism founded in the long-take.” Indeed, it is precisely Weekend’s “landscape of ordinariness” in its treatment of sex that can also be said to pervade the narrative and aesthetic registers of Fin de siglo. Similarly, in a broader sense, from its long opening shots of Ocho wandering through Barcelona to the numerous sequences of the men against the Catalan sunset, the film tends towards an embrace of shot duration over narration, crafting an authenticity in the men’s interactions that is unbound by conventional narrative pathways. In Fin de siglo, it is more often than not the act of conversing that emerges as meaningful and consequential rather than the content of the conversations themselves.

This observational and realist approach to the relationship between Javi and Ocho stands in stark contrast to the formal dissonance and aesthetic

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21. André Bazin’s much–quoted dictum still holds true: “There is not one realism, but several realisms. Each period looks for its own, the technique and the aesthetics that will capture, retain, and render best what one wants from reality.” André Bazin, Bazin at Work, trans. Alain Piette and Bert Cardullo, ed. Bert Cardullo (London: Routledge, 1997), 6. The notion of new queer realism I advance in this article is one linked intrinsically to an observational aesthetic, a subdued sense of narrative tension, and a thematic and formal focus on the mundane and the routine. I follow scholars such as Karl Schoonover and Rosalind Galt, who, in their influential study of contemporary queer world film, focus on “queer cinematic temporali-ties through textual operations such as anachronism, asynchrony, slowness, inatten-tion, excision, and ellipsis.” Karl Schoonover and Rosalind Galt, Queer Cinema in the World (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 261. It is strategies such as these, and specifically their relationship to an observational and realist aesthetic, that I explore here through the lens of new queer realism.
23. Walters.
25. Moor, 10.
26. Moor, 10.
experimentation of contemporary queer cinema’s most notable precedent, New Queer Cinema. *Fin de siglo*, as with *Weekend, Leave the Lights On*, and many other recent queer films from around the world, refrains from the “Homo Pomo style” that B. Ruby Rich identifies in films of the New Queer Cinema, a movement defined as much by its “traces of appropriation and pastiche, and irony” as by its “irreverent, energetic, alternately minimalist and excessive” engagement with identity politics.27 Nor can these more recent films be said to “eschew positive imagery” or “give voice to the marginalised,” which Michele Aaron sees as distinctive of New Queer Cinema’s “defiance” and its inescapably critical attitude towards “cinematic convention in terms of form, content and genre.”28 As noted above, the conversations that take place between Javi and Ocho are intimate and often introspective, ranging from the emotional dynamics of fatherhood to the pleasures and pitfalls of loneliness, and at no point could their discussion of sexual preference or practice be considered deviant or subversive, or indeed *defiant*. *Fin de siglo*, in its commitment to new queer realism, is far from well versed in the radical visual and formal language of “the exigency and urgency and drama” of previous waves of queer cinema.29 In this sense, there is a danger inherent to the film’s candid realism—namely, one that sees in the characters’ discussions of marriage, children, and careers an assimilatory value, even a homonormative embrace of what Lee Edelman would call the reproductive futurity of the child.30 At one point in the film, Ocho flirts with such an idea when he talks about the “meaning” that comes from parenthood, though, it must be noted, any such reflection is not naïve on the part of the director, inflected as it is with such intimate detail about Javi’s daughter, a mosquito, and the desire to reproduce away the intolerance of the world. *Fin de siglo* serves as a paradigmatic example of a range of contemporary queer world film that contrasts unambiguously in formal and thematic terms with the defiant, radical nature of their queer cinematic precedents.

These are not, however, films that conservatively supplant the political with the poetic. Moor’s discussion of New Gay Sincerity provides a productive means of approaching contemporary queer cinema’s rejection of an outright sense of political defiance and its less tangible engagement with queer identity politics.31 Taking his corpus of post-2012 films as prime examples of a new, less

29. Pearl, “AIDS and New Queer Cinema,” 34.
31. In his article, Moor defends the use of “gay” in the term “New Gay Sincerity” by arguing that “[g]ayness, here conceived, refers to modes of identity that are figured around same-sex desire. . . . Because New Gay Sincerity acknowledges but tones down the postmodern play associated with New Queer Cinema in favour of a more studied and unblinksing realism, the adjective ‘gay’ is a better fit than ‘queer.’” Moor, “‘New Gay Sincerity,’” 6, 7. This article instead adopts the term “queer” in its discussion of new queer realism for several reasons: first, it refers more broadly to a wave of contemporary queer cinema that adopts the realist modes of representation described herein to depict queer relationships not simply between members of the same gender; second, its analysis of new queer realism expands beyond any exclusive focus on queer thematics or content to encompass queer aspects of film on the levels of style, form, and aesthetic, none of which could straightforwardly be termed as “gay.”
provocative wave of queer representation, he writes, “Rebellion is not within New Gay Sincerity’s frame of reference. Its long takes, its neutral gaze, its avoidance of cliché and gay stereotypes, and its presentation of understated narratives might all sound worthily pious, but in navigating away from the artful provocations of queerness and the performativity of postmodernism, it is not culpably naïve. It risks seeming like it, though.” Indeed, the risk inherent in *Fin de siglo’s* movement away from the Homo Pomo style of the New Queer Cinema is one that not all critics have managed to navigate effectively, drawn as some are to reading in the film’s closing sequence a simultaneous acceptance of homonormative domesticity and a rejection of the observational realism of the film as a whole. “But if *Weekend* progressively inches towards the real, *End of the Century* embraces only fantasy in the end,” writes Ed Gonzalez: “It is a jarring endnote to an initially mysterious film, as the philosophical inquisitiveness of the first two parts is replaced by an indulgence of fiction as wish-fulfillment.” The indulgence that Gonzalez reads in this ending, which he argues “leaves us with the not-so-ambiguous impression that Castro believes that a gay man’s contentment is only possible through the performance of domesticity,” overlooks both the film’s affective deconstruction of the strictures associated with such domesticity and, on a more profound level, its broader queering of temporal frameworks. Read through the lens of New Queer Cinema’s defiance, as implicitly suggested by critics such as Gonzalez, there is indeed a case for arguing that *Fin de siglo* offers a vision of a gay couple that embraces the homonormative institutions of parenthood and monogamy. Read, however, through the lens of new queer realism, a lens attentive to the queer potential of the film’s distinct temporalities and aesthetic textures, *Fin de siglo* becomes a more complex interrogation of the happiness scripts imposed by a heteronormative society and of the affective politics of a domesticity traditionally foreclosed to queer cinematic characters.

There is, therefore, something distinctly less sincere in *Fin de siglo’s* playfulness with temporalities and in its aesthetic mobilization of the queer quotidian. On the one hand, extended shots of Ocho in the shower, devoid of any narrative importance or erotic function, and those of him scrolling through Grindr or simply reading in bed ensure that the registers of realism remain prominent throughout. The narrative tension that one might ordinarily attribute to acts of masturbation or sex scenes between the pair finds itself instead dissipated through static camerawork, extended takes, a mundanity of dialogue, and an excision of any canonically erotic content. On the other hand, the closing sequence purposefully deviates from this dose of quotidian realism, with its fantasy-driven scenario that precludes a sense of linearity or any discrete division between the imagined and the real. Thus, while Moor sees a tone of sincerity in the corpus of films he analyzes, in which “realistic

32. Moor, 17.
35. Gonzalez.
imagery, where the emphasis is on the content matter and a supposed fidelity to the actual, dominates,” the temporalities of *Fin de siglo* are calibrated precisely to undermine any absolute fidelity to the real or to the sincere. 36 Though the observational impulse of its filmic structures imbues the men’s conversations and sex with a credible sense of intimacy, the temporal frameworks into which they fall demand a more open, future-oriented contemplation through the cinematic registers of new queer realism.

If Moor’s theorization of New Gay Sincerity rests on a filmic commitment to an “aura of authenticity,” *Fin de siglo* instead strategically ruptures any such spectatorial expectation through a reflexive, knowing gesture that confuses and confounds through its temporal recalibration. 37 Not only do we jump back and forth between distinct epochs, with no immediate or discernible difference in visual cues, but the film also ultimately refuses to demarcate the actual from the possible. As Karl Schoonover and Rosalind Galt note in *Queer Cinema in the World*, “[Q]ueer texts are often marked by a troubled temporality in which non-synchronous activity throws a wrench in the gears of heterosynchronics. If heterosynchrony manages dominant forms of narrative pleasure, then queer structures of feeling simmer in less synchronous texts.” 38 *Fin de siglo*’s simultaneous embrace of the real in narrative terms and rejection of a linearity in structure and temporality thus offer a more complex regime of representation. In its refusal of the committed formal and narrative sincerity that Moor notes in earlier queer filmic production from the decade, *Fin de siglo* deploys its “troubled temporalities” alongside an observational realism in order to render its visions of the future both possible and, via its “queer structures of feeling,” politically affective. 39

**THE QUEER ART OF FEELING**

*Fin de siglo*’s playful approach towards temporality is not restricted to its narrative structure but extends through the film’s script and into its mise-en-scène. In a sequence at the Museu Nacional d’Art de Catalunya in the second chapter of the film, when Javi takes Ocho on a tour of the city, their interactions with various pieces from the museum’s collections strike a playful note of irreverence towards history and its artistic mediation. “Me impresiona la cantidad de relatos necesarios para poder pintar algo así, ¿no?” (The number of stories you need to paint something like that is impressive, right?), remarks Ocho, as he and Javi face away from the camera and contemplate the busy landscape of a battle scene, whose image fills the entire screen. 40 He continues, “Porque en esa época no había otro registro. Alguien tuvo que haberle...
contado cómo era la batalla y él la pintó” (There wasn’t any other way to do it back then. Someone must’ve told him what the battle was like, and then he painted it). The faceless figures on the canvas correspond with the spectator’s parallel lack of access to the men’s facial expressions in that moment, quietly reflecting the film’s own mediation of the pair’s developing relationship and, more broadly, the subjectivity and diversity of experience encapsulated within any representation of the past. In the following scene, the pair contrives a genealogy of characters and connections from a series of marble busts before making their way through a room of full-body sculptures, enacting a deliberate choreography that visually likens their own poses to those of the statues they observe (see Figure 4).

While these scenes may be interpreted as evocations of the vitality of the men’s evolving relationship against the static pastness of the historical artifacts before them, or even as markers of institutional subversion through the tongue-in-cheek invention of alternative familial histories, any such reading would fail to appreciate the textures of the film’s broader treatment of temporality. As the men wander through the distinctly demarcated historical periods of the museum’s exhibition rooms, from classical sculptures to Dalí’s modernist Schiaparelli perfume bottles, their frivolity gently mocks the methodical delineation of past and present. Their alternative interpretations of these historical artifacts imitate the film’s broader structural “out-of-timeness,” through which there exists a porosity not simply between 1999 and 2019 but also, via the closing sequence, between reality and fantasy.41 There is, in other words, both a queer vitality to their interactions with the marble busts and a counter-hegemonic subversion of the linearity of the history they represent. This “out-of-timeness,” which Manuel Betancourt explains in his review of the film as a “shuffling of time [that] feels not so much disorienting as dreamlike,” foregrounds the “conexión mágica, no racional” (magic,

41. Betancourt, “Argentine Drama Fin de siglo.”
non-rational connection) that Javi sees in the subject matter of one of his favorite paintings in the museum. Just as the camera allows time for the men to contemplate the pieces of art, so, too, does Castro weave, for us as spectators, an affective resonance across the film’s timeframes that displaces linearity and prioritizes the value of subjective interpretation and experience.

In the scene that follows their trip to the museum, as Javi and Ocho share a carton of Don García wine against the backdrop of a Catalan sunset and discuss Javi’s documentary in progress about the imminent turn of the millennium, their conversation again implicitly insists on the affective importance of individual experience. Ocho contends that the relevance of Javi’s documentary lies not in its capturing of a specific historical moment but rather as a marker of his own personal perspective towards living through it. “Siempre va a ser una impresión de tu experiencia, ¿no?” (It’s always going to be a snapshot of your experience, right?), he says, in defense of Javi’s concerns about releasing the film too long after the turn of the century, once society’s collective anxieties about “el fin del mundo” (the end of the world) have subsided. Ocho’s insistence on the artistic value of subjective experience chimes with his earlier remarks in the museum that it is “mejor ver el cuadro, ver lo que [le] pasa a [él]” (better to see the painting for himself, to see how it makes him feel) than to have “la mirada condicionada” (his gaze conditioned) by another’s interpretation of it. Significantly, in the same sunset scene, Ocho reveals his intentions to switch his studies from business administration to literature, in order to be a writer or rather, as he suggests, “tener una vida de escritor” (to have the life of a writer), one that he connects with flexibility, creativity, and personal freedom. That he then describes his incipient drunkenness moments later as “un equilibrio químico justo, puro presente, perfecto” (just the right chemical balance, pure presentness, perfection) encapsulates the film’s emphasis on the presentness of the men’s experience over the course of the weekend that they share together.

The visual and narrative parallels that Castro sets up between the sunset conversations in 1999 and 2019, all of which involve wine, intimate exchanges, and a backdrop of Barcelona at dusk, embed Fin de siglo’s affective investment in the intimate realities of the men’s lives within the structure of the film itself. The conversations act, too, not only as moments of revelation but also as turning points that demonstrate how desires and emotions change over time. Ocho’s reflection in 2019 that he no longer wants children contrasts with his earlier aspirations to have a house full of them, perhaps even ocho, eight of them; similarly, their candid discussions of relationships, sex lives (or lack thereof), and feelings of loneliness offer a sense of depth and complexity to the years that have passed in between. Here, the intimate nature of the conversations, the fluid, quasi-improvised tone of the dialogue, and the presentation of the men’s desires as neither linear nor always fulfilled refuse to instill their respective experiences with a sense of universality
or stereotype. Instead, what develops from these interactions is an inherent recognition of the many ways that queer identities can transform, adapt, and exist over time.

In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Jack Halberstam argues that “failing is something queers do and have always done exceptionally well,” noting that “[u]nder certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world.”

There are indeed traces of failure to be found in the film’s sunset exchanges: Ocho’s twenty-year relationship has come to an end, and he describes his desire to be alone with a distinct sense of disillusionment; Javi’s relationship with his husband is no longer a sexual one, despite tangible demonstrations of his erotic appetite over the course of the weekend with Ocho; and both men discuss loneliness, lost friendships, and missed opportunities, with Javi admitting that he had tried to find Ocho on Facebook after their initial hookup but had not succeeded in doing so. Their remarks, moreover, are set into relief by the transience of the dusk scenes behind them, offering a visual and symbolic parallel to their unrealized aspirations of becoming (in Ocho’s case) a writer and a father or (in Javi’s case) a film director. Failure, in this sense, haunts the narrative in a quiet but sustained way, punctuating the pair’s conversations with realistic observations of the complexities of the lives they have both lived and not lived.

We might unravel the significance of such scenes via Halberstam, who argues that while “failure comes accompanied by a host of negative affects, such as disappointment, disillusionment, and despair, it also provides the opportunity to use these negative affects to poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life.”

*Fin de siglo* cannot, of course, be understood to mobilize failure as an explicitly political or anti-normative strategy, as discussed previously in relation to the radical defiance of the New Queer Cinema, which did indeed challenge the “punishing norms that discipline behaviour and manage human development with the goal of delivering us from unruly childhoods to orderly and predictable adulthoods.” Instead, there is in the film’s realist impulses—that is, in its acknowledgment of the inherent unruliness and complexity of lives, in its refusal to dwell melodramatically or melancholically on any single moment, and in its honest confrontation of dashed hopes and failed ambitions—a discreet sense of acceptance that plans do not always go to plan. As Halberstam goes on to suggest, “The queer art of failure turns on the impossible, the improbable, the unlikely, and the unremarkable; it quietly loses, and in losing imagines other goals for life, for love, for art, and for being.” It is in this way that *Fin de siglo* recalibrates the queer art of failure into one of feeling, prioritizing the affective resonances of the men’s relationships and their potential to offer a politics of representation that acknowledges the diverse and changing dynamics of queer lives.

46. Halberstam, 3.
47. Halberstam, 3.
For her part, Ahmed tackles the emotions conventionally associated with failure and their queer potential in *The Promise of Happiness*. Ahmed argues that the political imperative to be happy necessitates the rigorous policing of certain social norms related to the “good life”—that is, those expectations, or “happiness scripts,” of love, careers, marriage, and the future that mediate and condition our relationship to the world and those around us. For Elizabeth Freeman, these “chrononormative” aspects of societal expectations demand that a life be “narrated in a novelistic framework: as event-centred, goal-oriented, intentional, and culminating in epiphanies of major transformations.” There is, correspondingly, a political imperative in Ahmed’s work to “embrace the unhappy queer” as a means of liberating queer subjects from hetero- and chrononormative notions of what constitutes success and fulfillment. She writes, “The freedom to be unhappy is not about being wretched or sad, although it might involve freedom to express such feelings. . . . The freedom to be unhappy would be the freedom to live a life that deviates from the paths of happiness, wherever that deviation takes us. It would thus mean the freedom to cause unhappiness by acts of deviation. . . . To share what deviates from happiness is to open up to possibility, to be alive to possibility.”

*Fin de siglo* carves out a space for the quiet, even speculative, contemplation of contemporary society’s “paths of happiness,” attending to the realities of the queer experience and, through the film’s sustained sense of new queer realism, laying bare an entire spectrum of affective associations within which the two characters’ lives are positioned.

*Fin de siglo* refuses to pathologize the failures of its characters as essentially connected to their sexual orientations or identities. Instead, it dwells in the realm of the affective, moving our focus towards the feelings that drive the men’s discussions of their fears and regrets and of their pasts and futures. The film’s final fantasy sequence can be read as a candid example of the openness “to chance, to chance arrivals, to the perhaps of a happening” that Ahmed sees as requisite for the relinquishing of normative scripts of happiness. But these sunset sequences also exude a nostalgic and aspirational tenor through which a sense of the “happily queer” emerges, a recognition of the “unhappiness that is concealed by the promotion of happy normativity.” In the twists and turns of the men’s lives during the twenty years between their two chance encounters, Javi and Ocho’s intimate discussions gesture towards the fragility of normative conceptions of domesticity as well as to the potential of deviating from these established expectations for life, love, and the pursuit of happiness.

**(UN)HAPPY ENCOUNTERS**

In the final fifteen minutes of *Fin de siglo*, the characters and their storyline slip into an alternative reality, exchanging the weekend-long romance

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53. Ahmed, 117.
between Javi and Ocho for a glimpse of what their lives could have been had they spent the previous twenty years together. At the beginning of the sequence, when Javi leaves the apartment for the final time in the film’s present, making it clear that to stay would flaunt the ground rules that he and his husband have established for their open relationship, Ocho goes to the balcony to watch Javi exit the apartment block. When Javi fails to leave the building, Ocho returns inside and steps on a rubber duck, an index of childhood whose sudden and unexplained presence trips Ocho up both literally and figuratively, enigmatically announcing a rupture in the narrative. As Ocho moves across the threshold between the balcony and the apartment, he enters an alternate, fantasy-driven configuration of reality, which, with the exception of a now fully stocked fridge and a rubber duck, remains visibly unchanged, in keeping with the film’s broader reluctance to signal any jump in temporality through costume or mise-en-scène. Despite the wistful goodbye between the men some moments earlier, Javi is found sleeping in the Airbnb’s bedroom, leaving a noticeably confused Ocho with no other option than to sleep beside him, waking up the following morning to the perplexing sight of Javi feeding their daughter breakfast, followed by her playing with the rubber duck.

This is a sequence shot through with temporal dislocation. Not only does it stage an alternative present for the two men, which sits parallel—or, as Elizabeth Freeman might say, “aslan”—to the reality of the weekend they spent together, but Ocho also insists that he ever-so-faintly remembers the life he did actually lead, the twenty-year life in New York that we are told about in an earlier chapter of the film.54 “Pasábamos veinte años juntos, vivíamos en Nueva York” (I spent twenty years with someone, and we lived in New York), Ocho says to Javi, while the pair stands on the balcony, “Lo único de que estoy seguro es que no eras vos. Estoy seguro de eso: no eras vos” (The only thing I’m sure of is that it wasn’t you. I’m sure about that: it wasn’t you). Moreover, Javi’s ex-girlfriend, Sonia, who we learn had passed away in a road traffic accident, appears singing in a secluded Barcelona plaza, materialized as a spectral presence that both troubles the film’s linearity and calls into question how our choices come to affect the lives of others. Castro again refuses to offer any explicit narrative marker of rupture to the sequence, over and above a rubber duck, submerging Ocho—and us—into the uncanniness of a reality-turned-dream or, perhaps, a dream-turned-reality.

The momentary glimpse of domestic complacency offered in this closing scene is far from radical in the futurity that it pictures. Javi, for instance, insists on clearing out the men’s wardrobe, injecting the sequence with the humdrum reality of lives that are twenty years entwined. His suggestion that they get rid of the Kiss T-shirt that played such a pivotal role in their relationship also gestures towards how our connections to objects and people shift as time marches on. A thirty-second sex scene between the pair, filmed through a single static shot as earlier in the film, is directly bookended by discussions that dissipate any of its erotic charge, with Javi first offering to “hacer el esfuerzo” (make the effort) despite not being in the mood to have sex, followed by Ocho’s vague memories of leading a life in New York that

resolutely did not include Javi. That this latter discussion takes place on the balcony is significant. It is a space that initially serves as the vantage point that facilitates the men’s first verbal interaction, but here it also functions as a space in the margins of the domestic sphere where the boundaries between reality and fiction blur. Moments later, when Ocho stands alone on the balcony and the film returns—again unprompted and with no discernible cut—to the present, Javi can be seen leaving the apartment block wearing the Kiss T-shirt, an emblem now recalibrated as a testament both to the serendipity of their chance encounters in 1999 and 2019 and, thanks to this closing scene, to the possibilities of paths not taken and of lives unlived.

In the contemplative, ten-second shots of Barcelona that herald the close of the film, temporalities also visibly collide via the images of old plaças, modernist architecture, palm trees, and lampposts, with the twilight setting evocatively acting as a coda to the film’s sustained investment in moments of transition and change. That Castro intersperses two twenty-second images of the sea within this closing montage is crucial: the beach is the space where the men’s weekend (re-)encounter began, after all, and the water reflects the fluidity of the film’s approach to temporality, matched as these two shots are by the minor key of a soundtrack that tonally implies a sense of the unresolved. The fireworks in the closing shot, which appear alongside the film’s title, suggest that the impending millennium of the film’s second chapter has arrived, condensing and compressing the film’s timeframes in an uncanny manner befitting of the film’s broader treatment of time’s divisions and deviations.

In *The Promise of Happiness*, Ahmed discusses the challenges posed by queer temporalities to the linear logics of heteronormativity, locating in their destabilizing thrust the potential for a happiness based not on the present but on “the future of the perhaps.” She writes, “Such a happiness would be alive to chance, to chance arrivals, to the perhaps of a happening. . . . A happening is an encounter, the chance of an encounter, or even a chance encounter. Such encounters recreate the ground on which things do happen. To recreate a ground is to deviate from a past that has not been given up. When things go astray, other things can happen. We have a future, perhaps.” Just as the entire narrative of *Fin de siglo* revolves around the chance re-encounter of Javi and Ocho on a Barcelona beach twenty years after their first meeting, the temporal disjuncture of this closing sequence can also be read as another “chance encounter,” as an overt rendering of Ahmed’s “future of the perhaps.” The routine complacency of a twenty-year-old relationship may not immediately resemble an explicitly happy future; nor may the matter-of-factness of the pair’s lackluster sex drive offer a positive image of their relationship, especially when contrasted with their more energetic carnal desires in the film’s present. If we read this final sequence through Ahmed’s lens of the happy queer, however, it is the very possibility of visualizing such domestic complacency that surfaces as a counter to the hegemonic scripts traditionally attributed to queer characters. “In imagining what is
possible, in imagining what does not yet exist, we say yes to the future,” writes Ahmed: “It is not that the future is imagined as the overcoming of misery; nor is the future imagined as being happy. The future is kept open as the possibility of things not staying as they are, or being as they stay.”

*Fin de siglo’s* final sideward flash to an alternative present is steeped in the optimism of queer futurity, offering a reconciliation—though specifically not a conclusion—of the intimate details that Javi and Ocho have shared with each other over the course of their weekend together: their desires (or not) to have children; the development (or not) of their respective relationships; and their aspirations for their own lives, careers, and futures. Indeed, in what could serve as a critical summary of the film itself, Ahmed concludes in her discussion of futurity and queer happiness that “[p]ossibilities have to be recognized as possibilities to become possible. . . . Embracing possibility involves returning to the past, recognizing what one has, as well as what one has lost, what one has given, as well as what one has given up. To learn about possibility is to do genealogy, to wonder about the present by wondering about the how of its arrival. To learn about possibility thus involves a certain estrangement from the present.” In the cinematic excavation of the genealogy of Ocho’s and Javi’s relationships, whether with others or with each other, *Fin de siglo* carves out a space for its queer characters in which there presides “a certain kind of openness to the possibility of an encounter.” It is a film of wandering and wondering, of returning to the past and arriving in the present, and of embodying possibilities. Castro explores the conventional routes of happiness and, by estranging the men from their present, imag(in)es how they inhabit—or, at least, might be permitted to inhabit—such scripts. *Fin de siglo* locates happiness not in domestic bliss or in heteronormative notions of success and fulfillment but instead through the film’s temporal twists and turns, in the possibilities thereof.

In a way that might, again, be attributed directly to the film itself, Freeman considers in *Time Binds* how artistic representations of queer temporalities often “invent possibilities for moving through and with time, encountering pasts, speculating futures, and interpenetrating the two in ways that counter the common sense of the present tense.” Though *Fin de siglo* does not, it must be noted, explicitly correspond with the radical potential Freeman sees in “living aslant to dominant forms of object-choice, coupledom, family, marriage, sociability, and self-presentation,” there is a crucial and critical significance to the film’s momentary engagement with the affective politics of the conventional domestic unit. While Gonzalez perceives in the film’s ending an acquiescence to “the performance of domesticity” on the part of Javi and Ocho, this article has instead argued that the ambiguous location of this domestic vision in the future, or rather in an alternative present, belies a more complex queering of the film’s temporal structures, which works to expose the affective and political significance of its cinematic interrogation of queer (un)happiness.

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58. Ahmed, 197.
60. Ahmed, 220.
62. Freeman, xv.
63. Gonzalez, “Review.”
The film actualizes the plane on which its politics of representation unfold, allowing the space—and time—for an exploration of a queer domesticity that breaks free from the “common sense of the present tense.”

In her discussion of homonormativity and Haigh’s *Weekend*, Stephanie Deborah Clare argues that critiques of homonormativity often “posit overly strategic subjects who make decisions about how to navigate the social world” and thus overlook “homonormativity’s affective and emotional pull.” I have argued here that *Fin de siglo* sidesteps an endorsement of the homonormative politics associated with domesticity through both its parallel interrogation of the affective dynamics associated with any such eventuality for the men as well as its setting of this eventuality in the realm of the ephemeral and the oneiric. Clare’s discussion is, however, imperative, not least in terms of how she argues that “homonormativity’s allures lie in sensibilities, affect, desire and sentiments such as love, happiness and hope, and queer studies cannot imagine a viable otherwise unless we attend to these feelings.” Far from the radical rejection of family, monogamy, children, and success that we might associate with the New Queer Cinema and with certain strands of anti-social queer thought, *Fin de siglo* instead focalizes the emotional pull of these “happiness scripts,” locating them within an ambiguous temporality that mobilizes a sense of optimism for its queer characters. As Michael Snediker argues, “Queer optimism doesn’t ask that some future time make good on its own hopes. Rather, queer optimism asks that optimism, embedded in its own immanent present, be interesting.” *Fin de siglo’s* alternative visions of the future through the lens of new queer realism lay bare the imaginative inhabiting of certain aspirations and desires as well as the more complex interrogation of their affective implications. The film asks not that Ocho and Javi get their happy ending but that they be allowed to envision the possibility of sharing one and that such an openness to an encounter be possible more broadly for both queer characters and their cinematic spectators.

**FUTURITY, PERHAPS**

Both at the beginning and at the end of *Fin de siglo*, Ocho is to be found in his Airbnb apartment alone. The film avoids a conventionally happy ending, yet it also represents a broader, revitalizing shift in contemporary queer cinema away from spectacles of tragedy, homophobic violence, or the melodrama of coming out. Instead, *Fin de siglo* delves into the micro-dynamics of queer relationships and into the aesthetic and affective textures of queerness in the contemporary moment. It moves away, as this article has demonstrated, from the radical offensive of anti-social failure and defiance, associated with previous waves of queer cinema and theory, to one that embraces the optimism and political potential of feeling. In doing so, the film offers a counter-critique to allegations of homonormativity; it deconstructs the

64. Freeman, *Time Binds*, xv.
66. Clare, 786.
happiness scripts that regulate contemporary society, laying bare their fictions but refusing to deny their affective draw. *Fin de siglo* allows Ocho and Javi to revel in the realms of fantasy and uncertainty and to experiment with time and space as dimensions replete with queer potential.

In a scene during the second chapter of the film, when Ocho leaves Javi the morning after their first sexual encounter in 1999, the words from a passage of David Wojnarowicz’s *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* scroll across the screen: “I’m getting closer to the coast and realise how much I hate arriving at a destination. Transition is always a relief. Destination means death to me. If I could figure out a way to remain forever in transition, in the disconnected and unfamiliar, I could remain in a state of perpetual freedom.” While, admittedly, this superimposed text announces a pivotal turning point of the film in a way that feels somewhat heavy-handed, its testimonial construction of freedom is one that chimes with the theoretical concerns of queer futurity, as explored in this article through theorists such as Ahmed, Freeman, and Muñoz. For the latter, “Queerness is a longing that propels us forward, . . . that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing. . . . Queerness is not simply a being but a doing for and toward the future.”

*Fin de siglo* deploys its temporal playfulness and observational realism to explore the nature of open relationships, queer parenthood, Grindr hookups, chance encounters, and the affective registers of gay life in the twenty-first century, but there also exists a future-oriented impulse that asks us to imagine the realm of possibility available for its queer cinematic characters.

New queer realism in *Fin de siglo* circulates not through narrative linearity or via a sense of documentary realism but through a futurity that emphasizes the lived realities and imagined possibilities of the queer experience. It offers us the affective politics of a domesticity routinely foreclosed to queer cinematic characters and, in doing so, provides glimpses of “an anticipatory illumination of a queer world, a sign of an actually existing queer reality, a kernel of political possibility within a stifling heterosexual present.” From the reflexive knowingness of its art gallery scenes to the authenticity of its sunset discussions of parenthood and marriage, *Fin de siglo* locates happiness not in inhabiting the normative strictures of the traditional domestic unit but, through its temporal dislocations and affective realism, in the potential to imagine futures in which this might be possible. Ultimately, the film permits us—and indeed affectively urges us—to glimpse queer (un)happiness in the futurity of the perhaps.

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70. Muñoz, 49.