We’re Here All Week: Public Formation and the Brisbane Queer Film Festival

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The Brisbane Powerhouse was reopening in 2000, an election year for the Brisbane City Council, by then Lord Mayor Councillor Jim Soorley. Built in a decommissioned power station, the ‘Centre for the Arts’ was one of the culminations of Soorley’s $4 billion Urban Renewal Program (‘About Urban Renewal’). It was also a major — $22 million worth, to be precise — addition to the Brisbane arts scene (Buzacott: 11). It is of particular interest, then, that one of the highest profile events of the Brisbane Powerhouse’s inaugural program was the first screening of the Brisbane Queer Film and Video Weekend (now the Brisbane Queer Film Festival or ‘BQFF’). Now in its eighth year, and still screened at the Brisbane Powerhouse, the BQFF continues to be Queensland’s only regular public film festival dedicated to explicitly queer films. But at a time when queer film festivals around the world are under increasing pressure to disband, given claims that ‘queer’ is supposedly such an accepted part of mainstream media that separate events are superfluous, what role — if any — does the BQFF have in Brisbane’s and Queensland’s queer culture (see Rich 2006)?

This paper explores the BQFF as a potential site for the articulation and enactment of a queer Queensland presence. To this extent, I am interested in the BQFF as an event and space, rather than as a collection of individual texts. I explore the BQFF’s queer cultural potential from three angles. First, I look at the BQFF’s spatial context by examining the Brisbane Powerhouse as a socio-sexual space. Second, I develop these spatial readings into an industrial analysis by contextualising the BQFF as part of the international queer film festival circuit. Third, I query the BQFF’s queer potential by discussing its temporality; after all, what kind of queer presence is it really possible to mobilise with an event that lasts less than one week each year? And what might it mean to broader considerations of the BQFF’s attendees or of ‘queer publics’ in Brisbane and Queensland? This paper offers answers to these questions.

In doing this, this paper is loosely framed within public sphere scholarship. This approach is consistent with a wider shift in analyses of queer culture and cultural products. In recent years, public sphere scholarship and associated disciplines like
cultural geography and citizenship studies have increasingly been used as a means of analysing the causes and effects of queer (quasi-)inclusion in public culture, as well as the kinds of cultural work (in Jane Tompkins’ formulation of it) that queer texts can be understood as performing (or attempting to perform) within and on public culture (Tompkins: 200). Of particular influence on this paper is the work of Michael Warner, who is interested not only in the relationships between dominant and marginal publics, but also in how those relationships mediate the very ‘meaning of gender and sexuality in dominant culture’ (Warner: 54). This paper sees the BQFF as an example of precisely such mediation.

**Que(e)rying Spatial Context: The Brisbane Powerhouse**

It is useful to distinguish between ‘space’ and ‘place’ at the outset. Michel de Certeau offers the most poetic, though perhaps not the most useful, distinction between the terms. He suggests that space, when considered ‘in relation to place’, is ‘like the word when it is spoken’ (de Certeau: 117). In other words, while both are always being ‘constructed, negotiated, and contested’ by the people who design and/or use them, place is the ‘naturally formed or constructed’ location whereas space refers to the practices ‘imposed on place, when forms of human activity impose meanings on a given location’ (Leap: 7). It is equally axiomatic to note that space is sexed. Indeed, for more than a decade scholars have emphasised the heteronormativity of everyday public space (see, for example, Bell or Valentine). Of course, it is not simply that bodies occupy sexualised space, but that sexuality is itself ‘a spatial formation’ (Ahmed: 67). This phenomenon has most frequently been recorded in scholarship on queer experiences of public space, which documents how queer practices — that is, practices that breach heteronormativity, like same-sex couples kissing in public — are forcefully, sometimes fatally, policed in public space. This policing, one expression of heterosexual privilege, might range from receiving a disapproving look to being banned from entering a space to being seriously assaulted in a space. Such policing forms a continuum that variously regulates the boundaries of what is and is not deemed acceptable for public enactment and is a phenomenon that leads David Bell and Gill Valentine to describe public space as a result of the ‘hegemony of heterosexual relations’ (Bell and Valentine: 7). Warner similarly argues that ‘lesbians and gay men have found that to challenge the norms of straight culture in public is to disturb deep and unwritten rules about the kinds of behaviour and eroticism that are appropriate to the public’ (Warner: 25).

As Warner suggests, the heteronormativity of public space ultimately emphasises how sexualities are public and private in vastly different ways and with vastly different implications (Warner: 24). Heterosexuality, for example, is publicly sanctioned, not least through its institutionalisation in marriage, which continues to be at the core of social and legal privileges in most countries. Thus heterosexuals also have exponentially increased public privileges in relation to queers, whose own sexualities are marginalised by their relegation to the private sphere. This
relegation is evident in even the most liberal discourses publicly circulating around sexuality, which might emphasise that queers are welcome as ‘equal’ citizens on the rather significant proviso that they practise their queerness ‘behind closed doors’ (the same premise as the US military’s ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ policy). Thus queers are actually granted a partial citizenship, which is grounded in their confinement to the private sphere (Richardson: 89). It is no surprise, then, that many cultural geographers have begun to emphasise the need for queers not only to continue to colonise specifically queer spaces, as in the case of queer ‘ghettoes’, but also to actively reappropriate heterosexual public spaces as a means of challenging the ‘dominant production of space as “straight”’ (Hubbard 2000: 192). These claims, to return to my earlier point, emphasise that the sexualisation of space is always in flux and under negotiation, altered by every interaction that occurs within a space. To apply these ideas to the focus of this paper raises a number of questions, including, most obviously, what kind of socio-sexual spaces are constituted by the Brisbane Powerhouse and its surrounds (before and after their renaissance in the late 1990s)? Were they queer spaces? If not, have they since been reappropriated as queer? And what are the implications for our understanding of the BQFF as a queer cultural site in Brisbane and Queensland?

A potted history by way of (structural and spatial) context: the Brisbane Powerhouse was originally built in 1928 on the edge of the Brisbane River in New Farm, as an addition to the thriving industrial precinct in Newstead and Teneriffe. Designed to be a centralised, and the first publicly owned power, facility in a growing city, it was built to assist the existing Bulimba power plant and to take up the increased requirements of Brisbane’s tramway system, which was being expanded at the time (Allom Lovell Marquis-Kyle: 14). As a publicly owned site, it necessarily formed a part of the city’s identity, visually, functionally and symbolically. It was a site that was predominantly occupied — and thus symbolised in the cultural imaginary — by working-class men and their upper middle-class male supervisors, and was part of the larger mobilisation of industrial masculinity in the Newstead/Teneriffe suburbs at the time. More than four decades later, in 1971, the Brisbane Powerhouse was eventually decommissioned by the Southern Electrical Authority (SEA), although its role in the city’s power requirements had progressively decreased over a number of years. The Brisbane City Council eventually regained ownership of the site almost two decades later, in 1989, via a land exchange with the South East Queensland Electricity Board (SEQEB was the SEA’s successive incarnation). Although the building had been largely dormant for years, it was during the late 1980s and early 1990s that it began to deteriorate significantly, with no official use or maintenance occurring on or around the site. By 1992, three years after regaining ownership, the council assessed the Brisbane Powerhouse as a site of cultural significance, slating it for redevelopment as part of, among other things, its new Urban Renewal Program, one of the first and longest-running initiatives of Jim Soorley’s lord mayoralty.

And here’s where the tale begins to queer. From the beginning of its renovation, the Brisbane Powerhouse was somewhat ‘different’ from the other structures and sites that were also part of the same initiative. Tony Duncan, previously a manager
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of the Urban Renewal Task Force (the group charged with enacting the Urban Renewal program), describes the area as wasted space:

In 1991 Brisbane’s Newstead–Teneriffe waterfront consisted of 4 km of largely derelict industrial land. The surrounding land uses while not derelict certainly were no longer being used for their intended purpose or at their capacity. There was no public access to the waterfront along this stretch of the Brisbane River. (Duncan: n.p.)

In drafting ways to reoccupy the inadequately used land, the initiative was intended to address the anticipated growth of tens of thousands of residents in the city by increasing accommodation in the targeted suburbs of Newstead, Teneriffe and New Farm. The program was also intended to address the ‘interrelationships between employment, housing, public transport and social infrastructure’ (Allom Lovell Marquis-Kyle 38). As Duncan states, this process included the major renovation and redesign of older suburbs and obsolete structures. Presumably, the Brisbane Powerhouse spoke to the goal of increased ‘social infrastructure’, given that it did not address housing, public transport or, in any significant way, employment. Allom Lovell Marquis-Kyle Pty Ltd, a heritage architectural firm which assessed the Brisbane Powerhouse for renovation in the early 1990s, unsurprisingly argued that it was the building’s location that could best speak to the goals of the Urban Renewal initiative, inasmuch as it would provide increased public access to the river’s edge. They also suggested, with stunningly little ambition, that the building would offer ‘additional interest for park users’ (Allom Lovell Marquis-Kyle: 78).

Thus, while the Brisbane Powerhouse did speak to some of the aims of the Urban Renewal Program, its specific role was at best underwhelming. It is possible to argue, then, that the Brisbane Powerhouse occupied, at least initially, quite a marginal space within the broader Urban Renewal Program. What was also mildly curious about the choice of the Brisbane Powerhouse and its redesign into a multi-million-dollar arts centre was that the building was, at the time, considerably isolated. It was not, for example, particularly close to residences, was not part of major public transport routes (and was thus difficult to access), and was not even a popular site among locals, excepting the homeless and otherwise unoccupied teenagers. Indeed, it was the latter two groups who primarily used the Brisbane Powerhouse in the late 1980s and early 1990s, alongside the army, who occasionally used the building as target practice, which explains the graffiti and damage that characterised the building at the time (the former has been preserved as part of its urban/industrial aesthetic) (‘Brisbane Powerhouse’).

Given that the way public space is narrated, policed and inhabited is central to the production and practice of the subject positions possible within it, how could we read the Brisbane Powerhouse as a space? Duncan described the general area of the Brisbane Powerhouse and its surrounds as ‘underutilised and in a state of urban decay’ (Duncan: n.p.). In an ex-industrial landscape, such a site would typically be characterised as occupying a ‘marginal’ social and cultural space; it
would be associated with the ‘margins of society’ and with ‘alternative’ identities and practices (Hetherington: 105–09). That is — though Kevin Hetherington does not use the term — such a space is implicitly *queer*. This is the first symbolic trace of queerness in the space — and, for Christopher Reed, the definitive trace. Reed argues that queer space is ‘imminent: rooted in the Latin *imminere*, to loom over or threaten’; thus queer space is ‘space in the process of literally, taking place, of claiming territory’ (Reed: 64). However, this ‘claiming’ is not about the physical marking of a place. Rather, it is about the ‘accumulation’ of queer traces, which indexes, in the cultural imaginary, the history of queer use (Reed: 66). Thus queer space, at least in this sense, is a negotiation of the symbolic, facilitated by the spatialisation of queer subjectivity. As Reed suggests, the significance of an implicitly queer site is, of course, the ever-present threat that tacit, even explicit, queerness will become manifest. And indeed, there was already ample suggestion of tacit queerness in surrounding spaces. Perhaps most significant was the reputation of New Farm Park, the park that borders the Brisbane Powerhouse, as a long-time pick-up zone for gay men. Even in its earliest stages of redevelopment, then, the Brisbane Powerhouse was an implicitly queer space, just as surrounding parks were, at times, tacitly queer. This is unsurprising: spaces are always dynamic and influence what is and is not possible within them, in large part through their interaction, through their symbolic accumulation of traces, with ‘particular notions of appropriate sexual comportment’ (Hubbard 2001: 51).

From the earliest moments of its renovation, then, the Brisbane Powerhouse was spatially associated with a queer marginality. It is equally true that there was also a similar spatial characterisation articulated in the Brisbane Powerhouse’s earliest programming choices. Indeed, from the moment the renovated Brisbane Powerhouse opened its doors, the emphasis was on introducing a ‘different’ kind of art to Brisbane’s mainstream. Sandra McLean, for example, reports that the Brisbane Powerhouse was designed to support a ‘new breed’ of artist and a range of community-based companies by ‘bringing them into the mainstream after years of frustration on the fringe’ (McLean). Similarly, other commentators — not to mention the Powerhouse’s management team — discussed its inaugural program as ‘riskier’ (Milliner), full of ‘risk and surprise’ (Buzacott) and more reflective of Brisbane’s ‘diversity’ (Heffernan). These characterisations signal that the Brisbane Powerhouse, both before and after its renovation, functioned almost uniquely as a publicly funded but inherently queer site, associated with a postmodern dynamic of centring the margins (at least culturally, if not politically). These programming choices also speak to the increasing accrual of queer traces.

It was entirely consistent, then, when the Brisbane Powerhouse became one of the first publicly funded Brisbane arts venues to host a series of explicitly queer events, including the BQFF, which eventually led to the venue’s implicit queerness being made explicit. Indeed, in its eight years of operation, the Brisbane Powerhouse went from being suspiciously associated with ‘encouraging’ queer ‘lifestyles’, to being labelled a ‘gay venue’ for its exhibition of queer events by protestors, to being claimed as a ‘gay venue’ by queers for the purposes of queer tourism (for the latter, see ‘Gay Brisbane’). This progressive ‘queering’ of the
Brisbane Powerhouse is not only evidence of the spatial mediation of identity, based on an increasing public recognition of the site’s mounting accretion of queer traces. It is also evidence of the broader negotiation of Brisbane’s cultural identity, including the place of queerness within it. I return to some of these points later, when I discuss a telling example of the BQFF’s media reception and contextualise the Brisbane Powerhouse’s characterisation as part of the broader fragmentation of public culture; however, for now what of the BQFF itself and its relationship to the larger queer film festival circuit?

**Industrial Con/text: The Festival Circuit and the BQFF**

Film festivals have always served particular functions for the communities within which they are located. For example, the very first film festival — the Venice Film Festival (Mostra Internazionale d’Arte Cinematografica di Venezia), which opened in 1932 — was added to the existing program of the Venice Biennale (Biennale di Venezia) to extend the ‘tourist season’ (‘Terra Media’; see also McNab). Kenneth Turan argues that most film festivals have one of three agendas: a business agenda (as in Venice, Cannes and Sundance); a geopolitical agenda (as in Sarajevo and Havana); or an aesthetic agenda (as in Telluride and Lone Pine). But how well do these agendas characterise most queer film festivals? None of those agendas is, for instance, consistent with the mission of San Francisco’s Frameline, which opened in 1977 and was the world’s first (and now largest) queer film festival. Frameline actually aimed to raise ‘gay and lesbian’ visibility and promote a sense of non-heteronormative sexual diversity — which perhaps correlates to an identity-based civic or socio-political agenda. Indeed, the growth of the queer film festival circuit was facilitated by, and ran parallel to, the emergence of a post-Stonewall gay and lesbian identity-based rights movement in the 1960s and 1970s (see Olson). However, it was the mainstreaming of independent cinema in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and the development of niche marketing to queers (particularly gay men) throughout the 1990s, that most significantly influenced the relative explosion in the number of queer film festivals now operating around the world. The PopcornQ website, for instance, lists more than 140 queer film festivals, but it is by no means an exhaustive list (for example, the BQFF is not listed).³

The first Australian queer film festival emerged in the midst of this cultural and industrial momentum in the early 1990s: the Melbourne Queer Film Festival (MQFF) opened in 1991. It is now Australia’s oldest and, after Sydney’s Mardi Gras Film Festival, the second largest in the Southern Hemisphere (‘Melbourne Queer Film Festival’). The MQFF’s mission is also civic-minded, but less overtly so: it aims to exhibit ‘innovative, diverse, accessible and entertaining’ films that also ‘promote/stimulate and support queer cultures’ (‘Melbourne Queer Film Festival’). Presumably, one effect of this mission is that queer films which are, say, not deemed ‘accessible’ are excluded from the MQFF’s programming, on the basis that it will decrease their ability to bring in a broad enough demographic. This is more consistent with the programming agendas of (non-queer) capital city-
based film festivals, which typically aim to showcase a range of ‘important’ and/or otherwise interesting films from around the world, positioning them as ‘hallmark events’ for their respective city.

Hallmark events, usually associated with larger cities like Melbourne and Sydney, are all about tourism. They ‘promote cities as international tourist destinations, attract capital … and contribute to the image of the city as being the site of pleasure, fun and conspicuous consumption’ (Stevenson, Rowe and Markwell: 449). In the case of film festivals, they are about constructing a sense of cultural capital, which is then used as evidence of the city’s cosmopolitan desirability. This is interesting for a number of reasons, not least because the BQFF initially opened as a travelling exhibition of the MQFF. However, unlike the MQFF, the BQFF was linked to existing (and explicitly queer) events from its inception. The original travelling MQFF/BQFF exhibition, for instance, was part of that year’s Brisbane Pride program. Hence, in its earliest moments, the BQFF had a civic or socio-political agenda more akin to Frameline, if only because of its ‘embeddedness’ within Pride. It aimed to promote non-heteronormative sexual diversity in Brisbane and Queensland as part of the established Pride festival, thus constructing a queer cultural mass. It also contributed, representing the first shift from implicit to explicit, to the increasing ‘taking place’ or ‘claiming territory’ of queerness in the spaces in and around the Brisbane Powerhouse (Reed: 64).

The emphasis on queerness in the BQFF’s publicity is also part of a larger articulation: the BQFF not only bolsters queer culture and provides a structured audience for it; it also disrupts the heteronormativity of dominant culture. In doing so, the BQFF represents one of the few moments when ‘queerness’ is allowed to enter into the city’s and state’s public culture in politically sanctioned ways. However, while the BQFF first enters public culture through pre-event advertising in a range of mostly local media, one of the first ‘agencies of publicity’ that begins the ‘symbolic production’ of the event (Jancovich: 36), it is its reception in the mainstream media that is most revealing. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the BQFF was initially the site of some controversy. For example, months before the BQFF was first launched in 2000, the Australian Christian Coalition expressed ‘outrage’ at the festival’s apparently ‘blatant promotion of gay and lesbian lifestyles’ (Riggert: 4). These criticisms were reported in a number of local papers and extended to the building itself, with suggestions that the Brisbane Powerhouse’s exhibition of programs like the BQFF necessarily made it a ‘gay venue’ (see Heffernan). The eager coverage of the Australian Christian Coalition’s homophobic diatribe meant that the dominant discourse surrounding the BQFF and the opening of the new Brisbane Powerhouse was an explicit questioning of the place of queerness within Brisbane’s public culture. Further, the Coalition’s assumption that a queer event actually queered the venue in which it was held was also a public recognition of the influence of queer traces in public space.

Thus the homophobic ‘outrage’ demonstrated the substantial power of the BQFF, and the Brisbane Powerhouse as the physical space in which it was sited, to challenge and disrupt the heteronormativity not only of Queensland public culture, but also — quite literally — of inner-city space. After all, the BQFF
does not simply exhibit queer films; beyond the accumulation of queer traces, the BQFF amasses queers by calling into being ‘queer publics’. What the Australian Christian Coalition presumably found most threatening, then, was the BQFF’s potential to make the Brisbane Powerhouse’s — and, by extension, Brisbane’s — tacit queerness explicit or to bring queerness out of the private sphere and into the public sphere. In the months preceding the BQFF’s opening in 2000, the early (and ultimately underwhelming) homophobic outrage developed into a public debate that was played out across a range of (mostly newspaper-based) media. Many key commentators challenged the heteronormativity of the Christian right — Sandra McLean’s comment that Christians should practise the tolerant values they preached was typical (see ‘If Thine Eye’) — and instead articulated ‘diversity’ as an ideal for Brisbane and Queensland cultural citizenship. In other words, the BQFF — and here I mean both the BQFF itself and the public discourse that emerged around it — came to contest the available spaces and paradigms for representing and enacting queerness in relation to the city and state.

The relationship between space and identity in this context was made explicit by Councillor David Hinchliffe, the member for Central Ward (which includes New Farm and Newstead), who in 2000 described the Brisbane Powerhouse as being ‘about the way we perceive ourselves. It is about self-identification and about identifying ourselves to the rest of the world.’ (McLean) Hinchliffe positioned the BQFF as Brisbane’s ‘competitive edge’ in ‘becoming an attractive, vibrant, cohesive, creative city’ (in McLean). Significantly, his framing of the BQFF as the city’s ‘competitive edge’ (note the marketing rhetoric) is much more in line with the MQFF, which is publicised as both cause and effect of Melbourne’s vibrant diversity as a cultural destination. One of the interesting features of the BQFF’s reception, then, is the way that queerness, as a discourse, changes as it migrates away from describing a community-specific event in Brisbane to being a marketing device for Brisbane. That is, the BQFF’s initial association with Pride and Hinchliffe’s entry into public debates about the BQFF actually demonstrate a shift away from the BQFF’s initial community-based rights/visibility agenda for queers to a civic/marketing-based agenda that employs the event as a marker of the city’s cultural sophistication. The BQFF, quite simply, becomes a version of queer tourism which, as Rob Cover notes, is ‘based in a middle-class urban fascination for the other’ (Cover: 75). While this shift does not demonstrate a simplistic shift from ‘good’ to ‘bad’ politics, it does show — in an adaptation of a comment by Judith Mayne — the ‘extent to which’ queerness has ‘been managed and negotiated rather than simply obliterated’ in and by dominant culture (Mayne: 169).

However, the appropriation of the event by the civic/marketing agenda does not reflect the event’s significance to Brisbane queers. Indeed, outside of the negotiations of the place of queerness in Brisbane’s public culture, the BQFF’s most important function is precisely that it is one of the few local forums available for queers (and queer-friendly folk) to collectively view queer representations. As Martha Gever reminds us, queer ‘identities are constituted as much in the event[s we attend] as in the images we watch’ (Gever: 201). And this is precisely the counter-argument to critics who are increasingly calling for the disbanding of queer film festivals.
Consider Des Partridge’s ridiculous concern that the BQFF, as a ‘Queer Film Festival celebrating sexual differences’, is now ‘an anachronism, with the mainstream having already embraced gay themes in popular culture, particularly film’ (Partridge: 33). Partridge, the long-time film critic of the *Courier-Mail*, fails to consider at least three reasons that continue to make the BQFF a compelling cultural event. First, queer film festivals like the BQFF are the primary distributors of queer films; Rich estimates that up to 90 per cent of queer films are never seen beyond the queer film festival circuit (Rich 1999: 82). Second, as the primary distribution mechanism of queer films, queer film festivals also produce the ‘economic conditions that enable their production’ (Rhyne: 618). That is, queer films are often produced because there is a queer film festival circuit that has the potential to distribute them. Third, queer film festivals offer a range of incentives to queer filmmakers, to make creating queer films financially viable (or at least to lesson the financial burden). For example, in 2006 Frameline contributed more than $40,000 to assist filmmakers to complete their (queer) films. BQFF is also developing a range of incentives. In 2007, for instance, the BQFF ran a competition for the best queer Queensland short films; the winners received industry and local attention by being awarded a special screening at the festival. So to call an end to queer film festivals, as Partridge suggests, would quite simply call an end to queer film.

Beyond these rather decisive roles in facilitating the creation and distribution of queer film, Partridge also fails to acknowledge that queer self-representation in a heteronormative culture remains a vastly different phenomenon — textually, ideologically and politically — than the mainstream representation of queers. There is similarly an experiential privilege, which heterosexuals have as a matter of course, of queers viewing queer images in the company of other queers, which removes the ‘sideward gaze that we feel watching us as we watch’ when queers share a screening with a ‘disapproving heterosexual audience’ (Straayer: 213). For Jenni Olson, at least, there is simply ‘nothing’ that compares to such a rare and ‘unforgettable experience’. Thus, while the BQFF is evidence of the increasing fragmentation of the public sphere, and the global development of queer ‘niche’ markets at a time when queerness has (however problematically) become a part of mainstream media, the event continues to play a central role in sustaining queer film culture in Brisbane and Queensland (and sustaining queers through queer film culture). But for all its queer potential, how significant can it really be if it runs only once a year and lasts for less than a week?

**Public Formation at the BQFF**

For Rich, the audiences of queer film festivals constitute ‘visible communities, if only for a brief time each year’ (Rich 2006: 620). But it is a significant ‘if only’. How much queer impact can the event really claim to have, given its duration? Is queerness, for example, always an explicit and sanctioned part of Brisbane cultural identity or just in the moments that precede and occur during the BQFF and similar events? The event’s initial reception would seem to point to the
latter. Even so, perhaps the most useful way of thinking through these questions is by considering them in relation to the public sphere and to public formation. For example, one of the most significant public sphere functions of the BQFF is its ability to call into being queer counter-publics. Here, the BQFF becomes a space of circulation that interpolates attendees into a presumptive queerness. Thus the BQFF reverses the closet so, where the viewing context at your local multiplex is almost certainly heteronormative, the BQFF becomes a site where its attendees (correctly or otherwise) are presumed to be queer. Hence, where queerness typically circulates in mainstream culture ‘up to a point’ before meeting ‘intense resistance’ — and the BQFF’s initial reception is again a useful example of this — the BQFF itself is a space where heteronormative cultural conventions are suspended (Warner: 120). In this context, the BQFF is more than a cultural event. It is equally a socio-political act of consumption.

But the BQFF is more than this again. By reading the BQFF as an event that calls into being a queer counter-public, it becomes possible, by extension, to see the BQFF as part of a much larger queer project, namely a queer counter-public sphere. A queer counter-public sphere is at once both ‘oppositional and public’ (Hansen: xvi). Defined by its tension with mainstream culture, a queer counter-public sphere refers to the institutions, spaces and/or practices where queer counter-publics ‘come together for collective exchange and expression of opinion, aiming both for coherent enunciation and the transmission of messages onward to parallel or superordinate bodies, whether these are a state, some other institutional locus of authority, or simply a dominant culture’ (Eley: 224; see also Warner: 56). In this reading, the BQFF becomes one site among many within a queer counter-public sphere, operating alongside queer newspapers, cafes, sex clubs, and the like. The value in offering this reading of the event is that it removes the burden of queer representation in the city and state from the shoulders of the BQFF, and instead proposes a more nuanced reading of it as one part of Brisbane’s, and Queensland’s, greater queer culture. By reading it as one part of the city’s and state’s queer whole, it also becomes less significant that the BQFF is ultimately a short, annual event, because there are, quite simply, other spaces and moments in which to contribute to a collective articulation and enactment of queerness in Brisbane and Queensland.

Conclusion

The BQFF is unquestionably an important site for the articulation and enactment of queerness in Brisbane and Queensland. It is an active participant in the maintenance of queer film culture, and the queer counter-publics that form around it, as well as a space that challenges and suspends the heteronormativity of the mainstream culture that contextualises it. It equally challenges the way people experience the spaces in and around the Brisbane Powerhouse. Like the implicit and tacit queerness that occurred in those spaces well before 2000, the BQFF adds to the accumulation of queer traces at the site (and to the ongoing mythologising
of the Brisbane Powerhouse as a ‘gay venue’). But it is not only queer during queer events. Queer traces ‘remain to mark certain spaces for others’ and it is this ‘constitutive potential’ that is important in terms of the event’s ability to affect Brisbane and Queensland in the weeks and months of the year that it is not open (Reed: 64). So, while heterosexuality is certainly, in Valentine’s words, ‘powerfully expressed in space’ and culture (Valentine: 395), it is equally true that queerness is too. And if this paper is to contribute to only one project, then it is as a reminder that events like the BQFF are not just annual moments of queer community formation, but are also always part of a larger, vibrant and ambitious queer counter-public sphere.

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Notes

1 One possible exception is Tropical Alternatives: A Very Queer Cairns Film Festival, held for the first time in April 2007. However, because it only screened material over its two nights that had, by and large, been released years earlier, it seems unlikely that Tropical Alternatives will come to rival the BQFF in any significant way.

2 For more on the Brisbane City Council’s Urban Renewal Program, see Duncan.

3 See the PopcornQ list of film festivals: www.planetout.com/popcornq/fests. Incidentally, while more than 140 queer film festivals seems quite significant, this is considerably less than the international circuit of film festivals per se. However, because of the nature of film festivals and their sometimes shaky independent financing, there are not any consistently reliable figures on how many festivals are actually in operation. As Turan notes, ‘no one seems to be exactly sure how many festivals there are in the world, not even books created specifically to keep track of them’; he goes on to suggest that there are somewhere between 400 and 500 film festivals currently operating (Turan: 2).

4 2007 is the first year that the BQFF was not simply a travelling exhibition of a selection of the MQFF’s films. Instead, 2007 saw curator Sarah Neal independently program the BQFF for the first time in the event’s history.

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