

In Plainspeak

A digital magazine on sexuality in the Global South

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BODY AND SEXUALITY CATEGORIES REEL REVIEW
 REVIEW

FILMS OF DESIRE/BODIES OF DESIRE

June 1, 2015 · Geetanjali Misra

SEARCH IN PLAINSPEAK



THEMES



In Plainspeak publishes two issues with a theme every month.

THIS ISSUE:

December 2016

People's Movements and Sexuality

UPCOMING ISSUES:



The Church says: the body is a sin
 Science says: the body is a machine
 Advertising says: the body is a business
 The Body says: I am a fiesta

– *Eduardo Galeano in Walking Words*

Bodies are central to human beings. And the way we experience our bodies is closely linked to how we experience desire. The desiring body has been the subject of human (and perhaps non-human) imaginings throughout time, and has been explored endlessly in books, songs, films and a variety of popular culture.



As a part of my own interest in sexuality, I

tend to watch many films that engage with these subjects. Here, I'd like to take you on a journey of watching two such films: *The Imitation Game*, which I saw at the Telluride Film Festival and *Margarita with a Straw*, which I saw more recently in India. In taking you on this journey, I invite you into the world of films and film festivals, which play rich roles in how we understand and mediate bodies and desire.

The Telluride Film Festival takes place every year during the first weekend of September in the unbeatable location of Telluride, Colorado. For four days, even if the weather is beautiful and the sun is shining down on the surrounding craggy mountaintops, film lovers spend entire days – and a good part of the nights – holed up inside darkened movie theatres. Each year the Telluride

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Film Festival showcases an average of 25 feature films and 25 shorts and student films. The program is kept secret and there is no competition, no red carpets, no dress code, no business-making deals, and no restriction on taking food into the theatres. It is nothing like most other film festivals; nothing short of a magical weekend – a celebration of film, community, and creativity.

Steve Wasserman writes in *The Los Angeles Times*, “The films at Telluride, like the fresh mountain air, provide a kind of oxygen, renewing one’s faith in the idea that movies, like all great art, can still turn us inside out and make us see the world with fresh eyes.” And because the films that [Telluride](#) hosts so often deal with those essential human experiences – bodies and desire – it is this subject that the festival asks me to see anew, over and over again.

The Imitation Game follows the life of Alan Turing (today considered the father of modern computer science), a brilliant idiosyncratic British mathematician who was tasked with decoding Nazi Germany’s encrypted military messages during the Second World War. During this time, Turing cracked the Nazis’ ‘enigma code’ and made, what Winston Churchill called, “the single biggest contribution to the allied victory.” That is perhaps why, while watching the film, I mistakenly assumed that nothing bad could happen to Turing because he had done so much for his country in breaking the code. I forgot that he was living in a time



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when loving the wrong person could land one in jail.

Jail? Yes. Because aside from being a World War II hero, Turing was also homosexual. Convicted of ‘gross indecency’ in 1952 after admitting in court to having a relationship with his friend Arnold Murray, Turing was offered the choice between a prison term and undergoing a course of drug treatments aimed at ‘controlling his libido’. Following his conviction, Turing was chemically castrated, and took his own life in 1954 at the age of 42.

The one scene that stays with me from the film is when Joan Clarke (played by Keira Knightley) suggests to Turing that they marry each other and he then discloses to her that he is homosexual. Her reaction? “So what?” She herself is a bit of an oddball for those times, a brilliant crypto analyst, a peculiarity in a world inhabited by men, and it is in their ‘oddness’ that they are kindred spirits, a fact that she holds more important than his sexual orientation.

What did not matter to Joan Clarke, however, mattered very much to other people. It was only in 2014, decades after his death, that Turing received an official pardon from the Queen. Now, [Benedict Cumberbatch](#) – who portrayed Turing in the film – has joined more than 40,000 people and added his name to an open letter urging the British government to pardon thousands of gay men convicted of gross indecency. The letter demands that the royal family support a campaign to

and transgender) persons in four cities open up in a candid manner to offer an inside view into their lives, views and accomplishments.

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pardon 15,000 living men who had been convicted of a crime because of their sexuality. The letter states, “The UK’s homophobic laws made the lives of generations of gay and bisexual men intolerable.” At one level, so much has changed for the lives of queer people, and at another, nothing has. Their lives continue to be criminalised, stigmatised and marginalised, and the 15,000 British men awaiting pardon are only the tip of the iceberg. And in India, we continue to have the relic of what was done away with in Britain, and same-sex sexual acts are still criminalised.

Jump across continents and oceans, to a movie theatre in New Delhi, where I watched *Margarita with a Straw*. Starring Kalki Koechlin, Margarita follows the life of Laila, a teenager with cerebral palsy. Like any other teenager, Laila has crushes, surfs the Internet for erotica, and is totally unabashed about her sexuality – much to the horror of her conservative mother. Laila falls in love, has her heart broken, falls in love and lust again, explores her sexuality with a man and with a woman, comes out to her mother (who is initially horrified), and gets on with the business of feistily living her life and sipping her margaritas, like many of us do. Only, most of us do not accord the same privileges to someone who uses a wheelchair. Someone who uses a wheelchair *and* wants to have sex.

So rarely are the words disability and sexuality put together, let alone an entire mainstream movie dedicated to the theme, that *Margarita* stands as a proud

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anomaly. In a [review](#) of the film, Shubra Gupta (April 17, 2015, *The Indian Express*) asks, “Do the disabled ‘also’ desire? Do they, in other words which I will not mince, dream and drowse and long for sexual exploration and intimacy? Hell, yeah. Of course they do. There is no ‘also’, which all of us so-called ‘able’ people add into the mix.

People with
disabilities

[mws](#)

are people like everyone else, and, like everyone else, have feelings. But this isn’t something we publicly acknowledge, even if we are informed. There may be some dreary discourse about ‘these things’ in seminars and institutions which are run for ‘those people’, but the movies almost never frontline a challenged person unless they are to be put on pedestals and made into heroes who struggle against monumental odds to, mostly, win sporting trophies.”

Filmmaker Shonali Bose, who identifies as bisexual, says the film is based on a combination of her own experiences and that of her cousin, Malini Chib, who lives with cerebral palsy. Bose has publicly stated that she hopes that the film contributes towards the debate over Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, which criminalises homosexual sex.

Both *The Imitation Game* and *Margarita*, released in the last year but set in times more than 50 years apart, address the fear of forbidden sexual desire. In *The*



Imitation Game, Alan Turing is not seen as a sexual being – but once his sexuality is discovered, he is crucified for it. Similarly, in *Margarita*, we see how the queer, disabled body can be stripped of desire, but in the case of *Laila*, we see her fighting back.

Ultimately, for me, films offer new ways of seeing things. I have learnt a lot about bodies and desire from cinema – that pain can be pain for some but pleasure for others, that transactional sex for money isn't a crime, that *all* people can and do feel pleasure. Most of all, films have changed the way I think about and judge sex and sexual desire. They have helped me look at the human body with fresh eyes, and by presenting bodies and sexualities in all their multiplicity and diversity, films have helped me, as author Arundhati Roy writes, to imagine “another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing”.

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