

## Do I Know You?

Bryan Singer, *The Assassination of Gianni Versace*, and brushing up on your history

by Zach Barnes '20

Honorable Mention

The most erotic film I've ever seen was made in 1950. It's a silent French film that lasts all of twenty-six minutes. It's very gay.

Does any of that surprise you? It shouldn't, but it might, and understandably so. That we live in an age of widely and instantly accessible information doesn't mean we've escaped the trap of cultural amnesia. The film in question, for instance—Jean Genet's *Un Chant d'Amour* (*A Song of Love*, in English)—was nowhere to be seen on *Out Magazine's* recent list of the “15 Greatest Queer Sex Scenes in Film History,” whose oldest entry, *Gia*, came out in 1998.

I was born in 1998. Read *Out* and you'd think queer cinema was too. But the problem here isn't just a general cultural illiteracy; it's the formulation of a history in which queer representation is endlessly novel, even though nothing could be further from the truth. Look at Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope*, Donna Deitch's *Desert Hearts*, Marlon Riggs' *Tongues Untied*. Hell, there were gay hieroglyphs.

This false history is perilous. Being here and being queer remains an essential political act, and letting touchstones of queer representation slip into the ether of the forgotten past is one step towards queerness itself getting ground to dust and scattered to the winds. If we're not represented, the thinking might go, then we must not exist.

I don't mean to overstate the case. Queerness will survive *Out* leaving Jean Genet off their listicle. But I'm touchy about such negligence because, in denying queerness a past, *Out's* list feels like an infant form (or, more hopefully, a vestige) of driving the queer into the dark and stubbornly insisting it's just a phase. How could something with no history be anything but? The consequences of this kind of denialism have lately been on my mind, thanks mainly to two recent cultural events that crawled under my skin and stayed there, insistent in their ugliness. First was the recent article in *The Atlantic* about Bryan Singer's history of sexual abuse; the director of films such as *The Usual Suspects*, *X-Men*, and, most recently, *Bohemian Rhapsody*, Singer has allegedly been abusing teen boys for decades. And second: the based-on-fact FX miniseries *American Crime Story: The Assassination of Gianni Versace*, Ryan Murphy's hypnotic, disturbing exploration of the linked lives of Andrew Cunanan, a gay serial killer who went on a murderous spree in the late 1990s, and Gianni Versace, the gay Italian fashion designer who would eventually become one of Cunanan's victims. Together, the stories of Singer and *The Assassination of Gianni Versace* point us to a question: what are the dangers of disinterest, disaffiliation, even disgust, towards queer people and their culture?

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“Nobody is going to believe you.” Cesar Sanchez-Guzman remembers Bryan Singer saying the line to him during a yacht party, just after the then seventeen-year-old Sanchez-Guzman tried to tell the yacht’s owner, Seattle tech millionaire Lester Waters, that Singer had raped him. The phrase is hardly unique; it’s the theme upon which many an abuser spins a variation to cow his victims into silence. But in this circumstance, in this instance of awful trauma inflicted by one man onto a teenage boy, the phrase takes on a new register of meaning. To be believed is to be known—to be revealed to the world—and that’s always a scary thing. But it can be especially so in the realm of the queer. Sanchez-Guzman didn’t immediately tell his parents that he had been raped, because he hadn’t yet told them that he was gay. The anxieties here run parallel—who wants to be known as something that the world isn’t prepared to reckon with? Two years after the assault, Sanchez-Guzman married a woman—a childhood friend—and kept up the false front of a relationship for eight years, suffering from anxiety and depression all the while. And a lawsuit he filed against Singer in December 2017 is still churning its way through the system, as Sanchez-Guzman waits for a positive recognition of his experience that may never come. The world remains loath to acknowledge him.

The same might have been said of Andrew Cunanan. Cunanan, the serial killer played by Darren Criss in *The Assassination of Gianni Versace*, is something of an enigma. He lies pathologically. He assumes many different names, and tells many different stories. He wants to be known, but as what? Criss plays him with a Norma Desmond-like desperation for the spotlight that’s churned into something even more chilling by the vigor of youth and relentlessness of sociopathy. “If being a fag means being different, sign me up!” he says at one point. Cunanan delights in his own specialness, but he isn’t special in a way that the culture is eager to reward. He wants to be a star and he wants to be gay, and he wants to be those things at the same time. The show is set in the 90s, when the avenues to such an existence are few. Cunanan finds one—he has, after all, been immortalized in a television show—but it’s streaked with the blood of six men, five of them gay.

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Watching *Gianni Versace* in the wake of the Singer allegations, it occurred to me that Singer and Cunanan both operated with a sociopathic expertise attuned to the distinct vulnerabilities of many gay men, leveraging a culture of shame and repression to sate their own monstrosity. One of Cunanan’s victims was Jeff Trail, a gay naval officer who was discharged in 1996. The show devotes an episode—perhaps its most explicitly political—to Trail’s experience in the Navy during the time of “Don’t ask, don’t tell,” the 1994 policy that barred openly gay, lesbian, and

bisexual people from serving in the United States military while also prohibiting discrimination against closeted service members. You can be gay, it decreed, as long as we never catch you *being* gay. “Don’t ask, don’t tell” remains one of the most astonishingly weird federal policies in American history—not only because its name bore the awkward tonal seriousness of eleven-year-old blood brothers, but also because of the obviousness of its artifice, the way it proudly legislated a nation’s military into sticking its head in the sand. It was a sign of a country refusing to know its people.

In the episode, itself titled “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell,” Trail (Finn Wittrock) meets Cunanan at a gay bar in San Diego. Trail has never been to such a place; he’s still in the Navy, and being gay in public is a dangerous game. Trail, alone at the bar, feels out of place, and soon gets up to leave. Cunanan stops him with two words: “First time?” Criss plays the scene with a finely tuned physicality. His elbow resting on the bar, his head resting on his hand, he looks at Trail intently, his lips drawn into a sly smile as his eyebrows jump up just a bit. Trail stops, his body tight. “That obvious, huh?” “There were a few clues,” Cunanan responds in a queeny drawl. He’s saying to Trail, with every part of his body, “I know you.”

In that knowledge lies power. The thrill and the danger of recognition collide. Tonight, it’s just thrills—Trail tastes freedom, Cunanan his charming steward. But Cunanan knows how to wield that knowledge as a weapon, too. Months after they’ve met, he sends Trail a postcard, bearing a romantic message and signed “Love, Drew,” but he addresses it to Trail’s father, who doesn’t know his son is gay. It’s an implicit threat that only works in the world of “Don’t ask, don’t tell” and the attitudes it represents, where self-knowledge is a secret to be kept and a burden to be borne. Cunanan signals to Trail that by knowing him, he can destroy him. After their first meeting, their relationship gradually becomes more prickly and unsettled, thanks mainly to Cunanan’s increasingly erratic behavior. He eventually spins out of control, and, two years after their initial meeting in San Diego, bludgeons Trail to death in a Minneapolis apartment. But it all started—the potential for that violence opened up—when Cunanan saw him for who he was.

The moment between Cunanan and Trail in the bar echoes an earlier encounter in the episode. Trail finds a closeted gay sailor in his command sitting in the locker room, tending to his wounds after being beaten by his mates. The sailor begs Trail to get him reassigned; he can’t stand the torment any longer. Trail, standing in front of him, moves close, and caresses the sailor’s cheek. It’s a bristlingly erotic gesture of solidarity, a gateway to a desperate hug and a tacit understanding. But it’s also a vision of the safe and sincere compassion Trail himself deserves to find, and that Cunanan will later only appear to offer. That’s the risk you run looking for connection in a world that doesn’t want to know you.

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Almost concurrent with the institution of “Don’t ask, don’t tell” was the development of a new term: the “glass closet.” It refers to the state of being quietly understood as queer without having ever publicly come out, and over the years, the likes of Jodie Foster, George Michael, and Anderson Cooper have occupied the weird, liminal position it represents. Like “Don’t ask, don’t tell,” it’s evidence of straight fragility gone wild, where any explicit acknowledgement of queerness sends hoards of heterosexuals into a pearl-clutching, sometimes violent frenzy. *The Assassination of Gianni Versace* smartly connects the two; in the course of a single episode, it features Jeff Trail’s reckoning with “Don’t ask, don’t tell” and Gianni Versace’s decision to publicly come out as gay, after spending years in the glass closet. “I’ve never said it,” Versace (Edgar Ramirez) plainly states. “I’m gay.” Despite his sister’s concerns about how it will affect the famed fashion house they run together, he resolves to come out in an interview with *The Advocate*. Versace recognizes that the glass closet is still a closet, and that he has both the privilege and the responsibility to step out of it.

Jeff Trail also feels the pull of political responsibility. His experience with the gay sailor in his command drives Trail to do a TV news interview (with his face in shadow) about his experience as a gay man in the military. Cunanan urges him not to do it. “You’re not famous,” he says. “Nothing’s gonna change.” But Trail won’t be dissuaded: “It’s something I need to do. I can’t explain it any better than that.” He feels compelled to resist “Don’t ask, don’t tell,” and, more broadly, to participate in the political project of making queerness known.

Cunanan is a sociopath; making the world a better place doesn’t much move him. But he does care about the politics of celebrity and what they might offer him, and it’s for that reason that he has Gianni Versace’s *Advocate* interview taped to the wall of his closet. As a character explains late in the season, Cunanan’s fascination with Versace stems from the tantalizing prospect of what the designer represents: being “so rich and so powerful that it doesn’t matter that you’re gay.” That’s what Cunanan wants—to be an exception to the world’s rules. He has no interest, as Trail does, in doing the hard work of changing them.

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The necessity of that work persists today; the case of Bryan Singer makes this clear enough. The article in *The Atlantic* was published online on January 23, 2019, though it was a long time coming. Rumours and lawsuits have dogged his career for years. For now, though, it remains basically intact—*Bohemian Rhapsody*, for which he is the credited director despite being fired three-quarters of the way through production for reasons unrelated to the sexual abuse allegations, is nominated for five Oscars. There’s a bitter irony to the fact that Singer directed one of the highest-grossing films ever made about a real-life queer person (in this case, Freddie

Mercury), but the film has also been widely criticized as being fundamentally uncomfortable with its protagonist's sexuality. Plenty of people still thought it worth the price of admission, though—it has cleared more than \$200 million domestic—and that's usually what matters most in Hollywood. When *The Atlantic* first released its exposé, Singer was slated to direct the comic-book adaptation *Red Sonja*, and producer Avi Lerner rejected calls to remove him from the film for weeks afterward. The whole project was quietly shelved in mid-February.

Meanwhile, Singer himself responded to the article in *The Atlantic* by calling it a “homophobic smear piece.” It's a nifty trick that activates the anxieties of straight people for whom queer culture remains a complete unknown. It seems likely that somewhere in that morass of ignorance, gay sex remains inextricably linked to pederasty, and that people are reluctant to act in condemnation of the latter for fear of slipping in a judgement of the former. Singer benefits from that anxiety, but it pervades the culture beyond him. Just look at the recent news about a wealthy white gay man, Ed Buck, in whose Los Angeles apartment two black men recently died of drug overdoses under mysterious and under-reported circumstances. A West Hollywood councilman told the *Los Angeles Times* that the story “says a lot about the dark underbelly of gay culture.” But the more acute problem may be the lingering perception of all gay culture as a “dark underbelly,” where the behavior of people like Andrew Cunanan, Bryan Singer, and Ed Buck shocks and surprises less than it does confirm lingering suspicions, the tragedies they create maelstroms of deranged and violent fuckery that's only to be expected from those goddamn disgusting queers.

Of course, “queer” as a category expands far beyond cisgender gay men; deflating its definition to just that one population is antithetical to what the word represents. Those at the margins, like queers of color and trans and nonbinary people, are most vulnerable to the malevolent ignorance here described, and any queer political project that doesn't highlight them can be summarily tossed into the trash. And while I'm in the business of late-in-the-game stipulations, here's another: visibility isn't power. Being “known” will not by itself relieve queerness from the weight of deeply entrenched oppression, and carries with it its own perils. But I've harped on “knowing the queer” because the stories of Singer and Cunanan seem to point to the particular dangers of keeping the queer unknown and at a distance. I want these stories to point us to a practice of bringing queerness, in all of its forms, out of the shadows.

Which brings me back to Jean Genet. Though complete knowledge of other people is, in truth, impossible to ascertain, knowing the queer can still be a meaningful political horizon. It's something to strive for, and Genet can help. In *Un Chant d'Amour*, two prisoners occupy adjacent cells, separated by a thick concrete wall. They are gay, bored, and horny, and devise a delicate but powerful method of connection: after feeding a straw through a hole in the wall between them, one of them blows cigarette smoke through it as the other sits open-mouthed on the other side, drinking in the smoky kisses. It's an erotic connection between two men as

brehtaking as I've ever seen on screen. The film was banned for years after its production; now, it's streaming on Kanopy. Don't watch it, and it might as well still be censored. So go give it a look. Know thyself—or begin to know what queer can be. Some of us are counting on it.