



Yet  
each  
man  
does  
not die.  
by  
tshirt

on *Querelle* and  
transmasculinity

in dialogue with  
Elliott Silverstein

Nono would like you. You're a cute chick-en.

He wouldn't have a chance with me.

And me? Would I have better luck with you?

Cut that shit out!

Querelle listened to the drums and pipes performing for him alone. The offices for the dead. He wrapped himself in prudence, waited for the angel to strike. In a very indistinct way, Querelle sensed that everything was not finished. He still had to accomplish the final formality: his own execution.



*“Watching Querelle in the dark, I also become nothing but desire. Watching the Lieutenant watch Querelle, I am a man watching another man be desirous of men. Somehow this action, this act of looking, interpolates me more deeply into masculinity than a lot of the shit I do on a daily basis to try and shape my appearance into something more aligned with what other people can recognize as masculinity. Because desire? Desire is the lack that constitutes. Desire is how we articulate our own subjectivity.”*

Elliott Silverstein, “Each Man Kills The Thing He Loves”

I watch the Lieutenant watch Querelle. Do I see like a man? Do I want like a man? Do I look like a man?

Nono, we learn from Lysiane, might not. “Sometimes there’s something so female about him, especially when he does one of those silly, sweet gestures.” Cut to Nono, his left hand clasping his right shoulder, the curve of his arm kissing his chest.

I follow that gesture, looking at myself in the mirror. Should I lose my gestures? Or should I take it that every man is a woman?

Querelle loses Nono’s dice game on purpose, and in doing so, allows himself to be fucked. “Death sentence,” he says. Nono rejoins, “What was that?” “Nothing.” Nothing. An absence. A hole. Desire is the lack that constitutes, Elliott writes.

*The Queer Art of Failure* (Halberstam) argues that rather than attempt to live up to heteronormative standards of success, one can embrace alternate queer modes of being.

*Querelle’s* narrator tells us, immediately before this encounter, “He still had to accomplish the final formality: his own execution.” Querelle is winning by losing. This is the suicidal position; this is the queer position.

Who wins in *Querelle*?

I watch Querelle lose. I am learning from him how to die. I am learning from him how to be a man. Each man kills the thing he loves.

Desire is the loss that constitutes.



From the time I fell in love with Querelle, I've become less of a disciplinarian. My love makes me softer. The more I love Querelle, the more gentle and definite, the sadder the woman in myself becomes, because she cannot achieve fulfillment.

During one of these strange revelations defining my relationship with Querelle, I think amidst all these sorrows and inner defeats, "What's the point?"

[...]

There is a masculine passivity, which is expressed in the indifference towards courtship, the completely relaxed anticipation of the body concerning his role in the taking or giving of passion.

[...]

The absence of woman forces the two males to draw a little femininity from within each other, to invent the woman.

*"For the Lieutenant, though, this tape recorder narration serves a primarily erotic function. It's a diaristic accounting of desire, one which postulates the nature of love and its potential. 'Perhaps love is a den of killers,' he says, early in the film, staring at the young sailor through his office window, 'and if this is true, will Querelle draw me into it?'"*

Elliott Silverstein, "Each Man Kills The Thing He Loves"

I am preoccupied with *Querelle's* treatment of femininity. It repeatedly insists that these men have something feminine about them. The Lieutenant explains it simply as resulting from the absence of

women. If woman did not exist, she would be invented.

But I want femininity to exist in more than sexual or ad hoc terms. I want a film that's so centrally fixated on masculine eroticism to have room for me. I don't mean this in a hag sense. I mean this in the sense that "Sometimes there's something so female about [me]," that my silly, sweet gestures doom me. I am far too masculine to be a woman. In passing, I appear male, and viewed longer, ambiguous. I can see the moment, though, when what I am clicks into place for people. Ah, that's what you really were. There was not masculine passivity, but femininity lying underneath.

Each man kills the thing he loves. I am changing. Every day I smear on a little more testosterone. Desire is the lack that constitutes. Desire is when you don't have something so powerfully that its absence becomes a presence. Desire always signifies lack.

In my voice memos, I speak lowly; I speak late at night. All other hours of the day I would write down my thoughts, but at night, words fail me. I have a repository of half-thoughts in a hushed whisper. Because I am speaking quietly, my voice is lower. It is nowhere near a man's voice. I try to make my peace with that.

The Lieutenant watches other men. I watch him. I do not love him; maybe that's the problem, the difference in our spectatorship. Love might soften me, might gentle me, might make me speak in low tones. The narrator explains that Querelle is the same.

*"Querelle understood that love is voluntary. You have to want it. When you don't love men, letting yourself get fucked can give you pleasure, but to fuck men, you have to love them, even if only at the moment you're fucking."*

Querelle can only be fucked, a stance which the Lieutenant believes signifies indifference. If desire signifies lack, does indifference signify presence? Everybody wants Querelle, therein lies the problem .

The two brothers resembled each other more and more. The combat in which they were engaged was more like a lovers' quarrel...

Your similarity does me in. I'm sick of your obscenities... All you ever look at is yourselves. I'm not even there for you. Who am I then? Where do I fit in? You only live in your brother's eyes. Inside your brother and he lives inside of you. There's no room for me in between. I'm at the door.

*Both narrations sketch the figure of a man for whom—and, really, a world in which—faggotry and violence are inextricable.*

*Far from treating this combination with hand-wringing and platitudes, Fassbinder finds it incredibly sexy (as is his right!). He's also, in Querelle, deeply interested in the psychosexual permutations of brotherly love/hate and the way that eroticism is also encoded as violence. Can't fuck your brother? Find a man who only needs a fake mustache to look just like him and bone him instead, then incite him to shoot your lieutenant and flee the city, before you lead the corrupt chief of police (who you're also fucking, boo) right to your not-brother's escape route.*

Elliott Silverstein, "Each Man Kills The Thing He Loves"

Who, if anyone, can Querelle be said to love? There are two answers here: his brother and himself. But as Lysiane teaches us, the two might be one and the same. They are mirrors of each other; Querelle's love for his brother is love for himself.

Psychoanalytically speaking, siblings are often unattended to. This is because, as in *Querelle*, we are preoccupied with vertical hierarchies. Who raises whom; who has power over whom; who fucks whom. But siblinghood is a horizontal relationship. We flatten the Oedipal triangle: you may not fuck or murder your brother, and same to him too.

And yet despite their resemblance, despite their

love, despite their love of their resemblance, the two are not actually related, as we learn in the final seconds of the movie.

Querelle has another expression of his love for himself: Gil.

*"Like himself, Gil had killed. He was a little Querelle for whom Querelle maintained a strange feeling of respect and curiosity. As though he was standing before the fetus of a baby Querelle. He wanted to make love to him because he believed his tenderness would be strengthened by it."*

But here, hierarchy intrudes. He must fuck Gil because he is the adult and Gil is his infant self. He cannot fuck Gil because he will not let himself love Gil. Querelle chooses to place his love beyond himself, in a place where it can never be fulfilled. It is repressed, restrained, bristling; it finds substitutes and proxies; it is finally, ultimately, killed.

Transition implies a start state and an end state. There is my girl child self; there is my adult self; I am somewhere in between. Each man kills the thing he loves. Yet each man does not die. I am a man dead and alive, a strange in-between. I wonder if I will ever "arrive" in some meaningful way, or if the desire that animates me *is* myself. I learn how to make and unmake myself; I learn from Querelle.



