

Fans, Losers, and I FEEL LOVE

Lauren Cornell and Matt Wolf

Matt Wolf is a New York-based writer and filmmaker who has always seemed older than his age. This is funny considering his work is obsessed with comparing his own generation to the experiences and values of earlier ones.

We met in 2001 through the video activist collective Paper Tiger Television where we were both teaching video. Since that time, I have counted him as a close friend and identified firmly as one of his fans.

His most recent film I FEEL LOVE tells the story of Joel Manero, a fictitious acquaintance of Andrew Cunanan—the serial killer whose spree in 1997 left 5 gay men dead and ended in the front door assassination of fashion designer Gianni Versace. Matt imagined the character Joel Manero to be the only one to survive an encounter with Cunanan that year. Consequently, he becomes something of a one-hit wonder as an unwitting gay spokesperson; essentially escaping the killer only to fall victim to his own short-lived media celebrity. Fittingly, Manero's story unfolds in TV idioms—such as the stilted dialogues and sets of daytime dramas—and is elaborated by newsreel footage of Cunanan and snapshots of the larger media backdrop of that time. The entire film is saturated with luxury, excessive color, disco balls, corporate hotel suites: all the things Cunanan allegedly wanted. With Donna Summer's synonymous song returning like the broken promise of an earlier era, I FEEL LOVE recalls the mess that was the liberal '90s and the contradictory formation of gay identity within it.

Lauren Cornell: When did you first come to New York? It seems like you have been here forever.

Matt Wolf: I moved to New York in 2000 to go to college. I went to film school at NYU and I couldn't deal with all of the Hollywood, so I got involved in the polar opposite—Paper Tiger Television, where I met you.

LC: You were pretty charmed then. You had just arrived at film school with a full scholarship. How did you convince people of your merit as a filmmaker at such a young age?

MW: In high school, I made very gay video art. I was lucky enough to get my hands on a video camera and I

painted people's faces red in videos called *Ruby Heat* and *Beautiful Bones*. It occurs to me now that those titles sound pornographic.

LC: They sound like the titles of Danielle Steele novels, and I imagine they are not much like your work now. In *I FEEL LOVE*, and your earlier films, *Smalltown Boys* and *Golden Gums*, you blend contemporary dramas with dated found footage – from your own archives or institutional ones.

MW: I'm into "fictional documentaries" and I also like "fake archival" materials. Those terms make the distinction between documentary and fiction pretty blurry. The archival footage that I use is often appropriated into fictional stories or taken drastically out of context—anything from childhood home movies to home video of the interior of Gianni Versace's bedroom.

LC: *I FEEL LOVE* is based in the 1990s, and integrates TV footage from that time, and also music from the 1970s, specifically Donna Summers' song. A lot of '90s art—specifically independent film and video art—is referential or nostalgic for other eras. I wonder if this has to do partly with the 90s being such an ahistorical time. The context of so many things at that time—from independent film to the gulf war—got obscured by media blitz. Do you think your interest in other generations and archival materials is a reaction to this '90s forgetfulness?

MW: I'm still trying to remember the '90s; I was young and unformed. And I think the era might seem even more ahistorical in retrospect because people haven't started to widely re-create or mythologize such a recent era.

LC: What are you nostalgic for from the '90s?

MW: As a teenager, I was incredibly inspired by the art that you're talking about—New Queer Cinema and video art—which sampled lots of different generational material. I was obsessed with Todd Haynes' films like *Poison* and his banned film *Superstar*, which foreground the 1970s culture of purity through a Barbie doll dramatization of Karen Carpenter's anorexic demise. I felt similarly inspired by Sadie Benning, a young queer video artist, who made incredibly self-aware autobiographical videos with a Pixelvision camera. Both her and Todd's films at that time sampled pop music with purposeful nostalgia. In the short

films that I have made, I wanted to think about cultural material or residue from the '90s, although my recent film makes explicit reference to the '70s, as well.

LC: I can see the influence of Todd Haynes in your work. *Superstar* is a master fake documentary. And his stories—like yours—always unfold on multiple channels with the most visible one being totally artificial. Cunanan's obsession with Versace's glamour literally designs the whole film, and many of the fictionalized scenes (or dramatic re-enactments) have a glitzy or smarmy TV movie or soap opera affect.

MW: That's what I was going for in *I FEEL LOVE*. *Tacky*. I felt that Andrew Cunanan was the tacky fag par excellence. His materialistic, delusional fandom murderously focused on Gianni Versace, who I think of as the rococo Queen of '90s excess. I inflected my film with what I perceived to be the set of aesthetic values that Cunanan possessed: Days of Our Lives, RuPaul, Cooks Champagne at the Holiday Inn, disco balls, and more.

LC: Is this some larger criticism of the '90s media?

MW: I think I was trying something different than critique. I was more interested in indulging the aspects or values of gay culture, which on some levels repulse me. I guess you could say, I was camping on camp.

LC: That's nice. How does one camp on camp?

MW: I guess I mean imitate the imitative or excessive postures of foppish gay men. I mean enlarge the already enlarged gestures in gay culture.

LC: Speaking of, one of my favorite moments in the film is your reconstruction of a scene between young Andrew Cunanan and his childhood friend (later to be his fictional almost-victim) Joel Manero. In the faux flashback, Manero gets tied up, and covered with costume jewelry and even bleeds, while young Cunanan sulks in the corner. As I understand, the two were becoming "blood brothers." I really liked how you slowed down the music and rocked the camera back and forth. It conveys a feeling of childhood trauma really well.

MW: The childhood scene is my favorite. I wish I had made a film totally based on these childhood fantasies about

Andrew Cunanan.

LC: Obviously that moment is made up, but I know you did serious homework for this film. Can you talk a little about your research and how you recovered Cunanan's life?

MW: Most of my research drew from a bestselling investigative novel *Vulgar Favors* by a Vanity Fair columnist named Maureen Orth. She very hyperbolically (and homophobically) exposed loads of information about Andrew's childhood, his sadomasochistic proclivities, and the childhood signs of his psychopathological mania. Orth hypothesized that Cunanan's killing spree was a case of "AIDS revenge." To me, the bestselling tabloid novel was an elaborate record of the homophobia and hatred, which inspired the sensational media coverage of the entire incident.

LC: Can you give us an example?

MW: "...Andrew's habits of watching violent pornography and ingesting crystal meth, cocaine, and various other drugs so prevalent in some circles of gay life today ..."

LC: Yeah, but those things are true, right?

MW: Sure, I guess. But her book represented Cunanan's mental illness and materialism as the modus operandi for the "underbelly" of the gay world. And progressively the "underbelly" seemed to represent the *whole* gay world in the depiction of Cunanan's story.

LC: In the film, you make a really harsh contrast between Orth's depiction of this underworld and the smiley faces of gay spokespeople on television. You conduct this sort of roll-call of all the different gay figures who were becoming popularized in the media at the same time: Ellen Degeneres, Rosie O'Donnel, Greg Louganis, etc.

MW: Exactly. I wanted to look back at this particular moment in television history and to unearth the latent homophobia in these early signs of increasing acceptance of homosexuality.

LC: The film ends with a Charlie Rose-ish talk show host asking the young Manero if he is, "Gonna be alright." The Charlie Rose-ish guy has just stepped out of his TV persona and is about to go home for the night. Joel is visibly

awkward, recognizing that he is now dropped from a spotlight that he didn't want to be in the first place. It's my favorite moment in the film because it resonates with the hollowness of Clinton-era liberalism, and sets up the shift into the George W. Bush days. Joel really ends up a loser; he's just a victim of the fickle media, which turns him into a spokesperson and then disses him.

MW: Well, you know that I was a teenage homosexual poster child. I did legislative activism to protect gay kids and I started a Gay-Straight Alliance at my high school. I eventually made appearances on the CBS Morning News; I was in the "Something to Believe In" human-interest spot on the local news, and a television channel even made a short documentary about me. At the height of it all, I met Tony Hawk and 60 Minutes Anchor Ed Brantley, who awarded me a scholarship and Nike shopping spree for making a difference in my community. So I know what you mean about being a gay loser. Or rather, I understand what it feels like to become a rather arbitrary spokesperson for gay people. I FEEL LOVE is about Andrew Cunanan, who in reality is the biggest gay loser ever: An adoring fan of queeny Gianni Versace, a sloppy "imposter" in exclusionary rich circles, and a mentally ill murderer. In the film, I fictionalized a victim of Cunanan to fantasize about crossing paths with such a big loser like Andrew.

LC: See, I was a loser after Nirvana broke. I considered myself indie or something in 1994 and by that time it was cool. I guess being a gay high school student in San Jose in the early '90s didn't connect you to a large scene. Your last film, *Smalltown Boys*, also stars a loser, or rather a young girl who is coming out and feels alienated by the liberal Upper West Side private school she attends. So she finds community on the net with fellow fans of the television program *My So-Called Life*.

MW: Well, one should also know that as a pre-teen I was obsessed with the television program *My So-Called Life*. In *Smalltown Boys* I mixed the stories of a *So-Called Life* fan with one of my idols, David Wojnarowicz. I wondered what would have happened if David Wojnarowicz, a legendary East Village AIDS activist artist and writer, anonymously donated sperm in the 1980s. The fantasy was that David Wojnarowicz produced a privileged teenage lesbian couch potato, who was obsessed with fan websites and message boards. I guess you could say it was a reflection on my generation compared to his.

LC: So your fascination with this character Sarah Rosenberg—and also Andrew Cunanan—has to do with their status as fans and how they displaced their feelings onto their idols?

MW: Yes, fandom was really my interest, specifically in *Smalltown Boys*. In that film, I wanted to look at Sarah as a case study for my generation. She was television saturated, clinically depressed, and openly gay. The way she channeled those feelings of isolation was through identification with television characters, who conveniently enough in 1994, were openly gay. I was interested in how teenagers during the *My So-Called Life* fad really built a community and alliances through Internet fan sites, which contained thousands of images, fan fiction, message boards, and gossip. These websites were places where gay kids could meet each other and also amazing archives. They are like archives of feelings that are projected onto television characters.

LC: This reminds me of how you depict Andrew Cunanan.

MW: Exactly. I would argue that Andrew Cunanan's murder of Gianni Versace was a psychotically misplaced expression of fan-based love.

LC: Heavy. The title obviously refers to that iconic Donna Summer disco song, "I Feel Love." Do you feel love?

MW: Yes I currently do feel love. But even in times of desperation or total despair, I feel love. I think "I feel love" is a very powerful expression that can be historically associated with disco and gay liberation or that can have an even broader resonance. I think Andrew Cunanan was in love with Versace.

LC: In times of depression or total despair, I feel depressed and despairing. But I see what you mean—Love so often involves identification and it can be a higher calling. Maybe people in this country should re-focus their love of god into a different kind of fandom.

MW: Fandom for me represents adoration misplaced. In the film I made a fake answering machine recording of Cunanan desperately whimpering, "*I love you Mr. Versace. Mr. Versace, I LOVE YOU—I love your house, your clothes and you, Mr. Versace, I love you Mr. Versace.*" Cunanan

displaced a complex tornado of feelings onto Versace.

LC: So why did you choose to title your film after the Summer song?

MW: I was thinking about how complicated her statement was. "I FEEL LOVE." She was describing a feeling that was about transformation. Feeling disco was about being in a space where gay sexuality was acceptable and abundant. Inside that intimate, public, and dark space was a feeling of love. I really think that Donna Summer's wildly popular pop anthem was describing the feeling of being somewhere that was outside of mainstream culture. Do you think those spaces still exist?

LC: Yeah, I think those spaces still do exist. I wouldn't say outside of mainstream culture, but perhaps not assimilated within it. Genuinely new or different things sometimes don't look sexy or romantic to the general public until after they are over. Right now there are spaces where queerness is still totally unacceptable. Lots of people still haven't found the high-profile visibility that, say, the guys on *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* have.

MW: Definitely gay people in the media are almost exclusively white. The liberation-era cliché that the disco was some sort of utopia seems falsely idealistic. However racially diverse '70s discos like Paradise Garage in New York were, there have been clear racial and class divisions in gay culture, now perhaps even more pronounced. Andrew Cunanan was a particularly compelling example of somebody who internalized these divisions.

LC: Well he actually pretended to be white and Jewish, right?

MW: Yes, he quite successfully feigned various racial identities. He claimed most often that he was Jewish, not biracial or Filipino. He was constantly inventing myths about his whiteness to access an exclusive sect of rich gay men. And the media very carelessly represented him as a gay white man. Often the homophobic news coverage of Cunanan seemed to suggest that all gay culture is white, rich, and urban. In reality, Cunanan grew up in working class National City, California and his parents were Filipino and Italian.

LC: I liked how you had your Cunanan character perform all

of these Jewish rituals in the hotel room. Wearing a cucumber facial mask in a silk bathrobe with a satin blue yarmulke, Cunanan lights two Shabbat candles and says a prayer.

MW: This was how I fantasized that Andrew sloppily re-invented himself. Cunanan's obsession with Versace's ostentatious wealthy gay culture seemed to self-destructively trigger his own self-hatred, internalized racism and his shame about his family's class.

LC: This is a far cry from the happy vibe of the Donna Summers song. What was the connection you were making between the '70s disco and the 90's mainstream?

MW: 1970s gay liberation offered an incredibly promising vision for the future. In the wake of widespread visibility at the height of Clinton-era liberalism, were gay people really liberated?

LC: I guess it depends.

MW: I think that there is lots of lingering homophobia, particularly exemplified by those gay clowns on *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. And in the '90s, although people loved Rosie O'Donnell, they hated Andrew Cunanan.

LC: You seem seriously invested in gay culture, or understanding it at least.

MW: Yeah, sure, why not?

LC: So at the end of the day, do you still feel love, Matt?

MW: I think sometimes when we feel love, we also feel hate.