

Rules of the Game: A Documentary About Queer Youth of Color in New York City

As its final event of the academic year, the CRE screened a documentary film about queer youth of color growing up on the streets of New York City in the 1990's. Facilitated by CRE Graduate Assistant Liz Reich of the English Department, this event featured a live conversation with the film's director and two of the youth whose stories were told in the film. A number of key themes emerged, including silence, vulnerability and the power of performing self-expression and self-determination.



About the Director:

Jörg Fockele is an award winning director, writer and producer. His works have won many awards worldwide, including two Emmys and a special prize from the International Film Festival in Berlin. In addition to being a founding member of the directors collective "3D" in New York City and a New York Foundation for the Arts sponsored artist, Jörg is also the recipient of a number of distinctions such as a NYFA Fellowship and retrospectives in New York, San Francisco, Chicago and Mexico City.



On Thursday, April 14th, students, faculty and queer activists gathered to watch *Rules of the Game*, an award-winning documentary directed and produced in 1997 by Jörg Fockele. Though more than a decade old, the film spoke to many issues queer youth of color continue to struggle with today—from finding affordable housing, to living in safety and searching for a sense of community. The documentary features the stories of four young people in New York City: Max, Charly, Angel and Peachy. In the film, the interviewees described gay-bashings, assaults from teachers and students in their schools as well as abandonment by their parents. Drawing an audience of over 40, the film screening was followed by a discussion facilitated by Center for Race and Ethnicity's graduate assistant, Elizabeth Reich. Two of the film's subjects, Max and Charly, as well as the Director, Jörg Fockele, attended the screening and answered questions during the conversation that followed.

Created to provoke discussion and educate viewers about the experiences of young, marginal queer people in New York City, *Rules of the Game* deftly weaves together interviews and fantasy sequences directed by the young people themselves. Though it doesn't directly depict its subjects' economic and physical hardships, the film nonetheless provides a haunting depiction of the pain and violence queer youth face

daily. In its brief fantasy sequences, *Rules of the Game* invites its audience to look and listen beyond its subjects' stories to their imaginative, vibrant hopes for self-expression and self-determination.

The discussion began by examining the prevalence of silences in the film. One audience member said that what she found most powerful about the documentary was the silence that seemed to dominate even the most detailed interviews. Max and Charly both described how, in their teens, they felt unable to talk about the hardships they were going through. As Charly related, "I couldn't discuss the hardships because in those days, being gay was something you didn't talk about." Max added that "back then, you needed a crowbar and jars of life to get these stories out because they were so painful."

As the discussion progressed, audience members began to

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-Charly

explore how the silences were shaped by the film subjects' vulnerability to violence. Both men felt that they have been—and remain—more vulnerable to violence because of what one audience member described as their "intersectionality"—their membership in multiple marginalized communities. For Max and Charly, this meant that their vulnerability was shaped by their intersecting Latino, queer, adolescent and working class identities. This vulnerability created an overarching atmosphere of fear which made it difficult to really open up. Coming from a Puerto Rican family, Max felt that the idea of a "traditional family"



L-R: Director Jörg Fockele, Maxx Santiago, Charly Joaquin Dominguez, CRE Graduate Assistant Liz Reich

defined by Puerto Rican culture may have made him reluctant to fully disclose his experiences as he knew his family would watch the documentary after it was completed. An audience member agreed, explaining how the existence of *machismo* in Latino families makes it very difficult for queer Latino adolescent males to find support from family members. Max explained that because he was both a racial minority and identified as queer, he was at greater risk of being forced out of his home. Indeed, throughout his life, he has needed to rely on services like those provided by Hetrick Martin, a center of queer youth in downtown Manhattan. Charly, who grew up and still lives in a predominantly Dominican neighborhood, described similar experiences and the way in which occupying vulnerable intersectional positions created a culture of silence for many queer youth of color.

The audience discussed the way in which the fantasy sequences in *Rules of the Game* aided in breaking the silences. Charly, for instance, dances on the now defunct Christopher Street Piers as a woman and Angel performs the role of monster in a heavy metal music video. Fockele explained that he chose to include the fantasy sequences in the film—in which each of the subjects filmed worked with a production team to film him or herself as he or she wished to be seen—in hopes of combating this silence. “It

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was a way to reveal something about them that you wouldn’t get otherwise,” Jörg said. Max agreed, explaining, “So much does not get said because of the pain, but performance is the ability to live out the fantasy. The performance was like stepping out.”

A professor from Goddard College asked the director how he felt about his decision to film poor youth of color and build a career based on their uncompensated presence in his work. Jörg Fockele, a white, middle class man, was able to use his class and racial privilege to produce a film on queer youth of color when members of the community themselves seemed encapsulated by their victimization. Fockele responded that, indeed, there is an inherent problem in documentary film work: those who have the means to film are not generally those who need most to tell their stories. “I could have stayed in my own little bubble, and made films about my bubble,” Jörg said, “but I felt I had something more important to do.” Charly also responded, saying that he felt it was possible that in some way he could have been exploited, but that he was also incredibly grateful for the opportunity to express himself. “If I don’t make it someday,” Charly said, “at least I’ll have told my story in this film.”

Unfortunately, the continued discrimination and vulnerability of queer youth of color truly make it seem as if nothing has changed. Director Jörg Fockele asked audience members if the film seemed current to them today. One woman responded that she too had many of the experiences the subjects in the film described. Max added that the hate crime against two queer youth of color and a thirty-year old man in the

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Bronx in October, 2010 makes it seem as if little has changed for queer youth of color in New York City. In fact, both Max and Charly relayed that their lives today are even more restricted by racism and homophobia than they were in 1997. Both men live in the Bronx, in what’s called “scattered site housing,” apartments subsidized by the New York City Department of Social Services and located in low-income, underserved neighborhoods where crime rates are high and police presence is low. Only a day before the screening of *Rules of the Game*, Charly was attacked and spent the night in the hospital with two broken facial bones. He went so far as to describe himself as “liv[ing] in the center of a zoo with animals about to attack.” If you are poor and live in a less tolerant neighborhood, Max elaborated, things have become worse than ever.

These realities faced by queer youth of color make apparent the continued need for education and activism. To protect himself, and help others, Max has started a martial arts queer combat group in the Bronx. Charly also explained that he best protects himself and his community by being an educator. “You get tired,” he said, “but you can’t stop.”

The Center for Race and Ethnicity’s screening of *Rules of the Game* provided a space to educate those unfamiliar with the issues queer youth of color continue to face. Through events such as these, Charly, Max, Angel and Peachy can continue to tell their stories and educate audiences on the vulnerable social positions faced by queer youth of color today.

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CRE’s Mission Statement:

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- *To promote collaborations and foster cross-disciplinary seminars and discussions on topics from immigration and work, to ethnic politics and racial classification, from preservation of cultural identity to its transformation, and including questions of poverty, discrimination, advancement, integration, and privilege*
- *To identify critical areas for future research and support race and ethnicity research and policy development*



