

Coming (Out) the Museum: Cinematographic Engagements through the Outfest's LGBTQI+ Arts and Media Virtual Museum

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Introduction

The history of film-museum Web sites and online platforms offers a remarkable perspective on the relationship between media, heritage, the responsible institutions, and the communities involved. The importance of their work on the heritage and culture related to the medium of film, in the context of various technologies, highlights the significance of museums reflecting on communicative practices and digital tools as a means of creating novel contents or new digital heritage, particularly those generated with public participation.

Among the various insights offered by the history of Web sites of online museums of cinema, as we will discuss in the second section, below, the OutMuseum experience, central to this article, has provided an innovative approach. It presents itself as the first “LGBTQI+ arts and media virtual museum.” Its action of “coming out” of the idea of the digital museum appropriates queer approaches, as we will see in the third section. Starting from the recognition of a plurality of subjectivities with respect to gender and sexual issues, the OutMuseum proposes a performative approach that works on the multiplicity and variation of contents, organizational museums’ assets, and strategies of public involvement. In the fourth section, we will analyze which modalities can be outlined by the OutMuseum as general models useful for online heritage communication projects.

This article seeks to understand how the changing of the “closet,” namely the stereotypical and restricted LGBTQI+ conditions of this case study, can enable “coming out performatively” (Sedgwick 1990, 3-4) in the vision and use of digital platforms for people, (film) museums and (queer) cinema.

Cinematographic Heritage and Digital Film Museums

By conducting a search of online sites and technologies adopted by film museums in the broader media landscape, it is possible to reconstruct a

history of distinct “mediated communication environments” (Drotner et al. 2019, 1-3), which helps us to reconsider entanglements across technological, social, and cultural dimensions in the museums, both physical and digital.

The interaction between seven-art museums and the digital dimension began in the mid-1990s but has grown since the 2000s (Santaera 2022, 88-91). The internet spurred two innovations. The move from physical museums to online platforms allowed visitors to explore material, activities, and news of services. As they created very detailed amateur virtual museums, specialists and enthusiasts built bottom-up experiences. Even at that early point, public involvement in film preservation and transmission was achievable.

One of the first museums ever to encourage reflection on the relationship between the advent of the information society and current society was the National Museum of Photography, Film, and Television of Bradford (now the Science and Media Museum) with the Sciences Museum Group in 1995. The idea was that the digital channels of museums should function as platforms to offer personal opportunities to explore digitized collections, gain insights, and engage people in multimedia activities exclusively in the online dimension or interrelated with the physical dimension (National Museum of Science and Industry 1999).

Since 2000, many film-museum Web sites have been built as “window sites” that provide basic information, news, and contacts. Like the OutMuseum, the Web site of the Australian Centre for the Moving Image is an excellent way to integrate history and provide online venues for public participation. Since the start of the third millennium, this has been imagined as a “multiplatform” digital design to connect, support, and develop the knowledge, enjoyment, and representation of diverse subjects (from professional to local and broad audiences) through the screen culture, offering accessible and thoughtful contents, digital activities, and listening to people’s needs and desires. In fact, users have been considered not only as passive receivers but creative partners (Simondson 2009, 119). From 2018, the Web site of the Australian Centre for the Moving Image also enhances the interaction between the physical and online experiences. Every visitor in the museum uses digital cards to store favorite objects and access more accessible and in-depth online contents on the museum Web site at home.

The latest film-museum digital platforms leverage metaverse 3D or VR technologies to create online digital tours. These tours enhance digitally experiencing physical areas and creatively interacting with collections. Due

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to individual involvement, they have difficulties in creating an authentic social and group experience.

In this context, where most museums have focused on sharing information and object data, with some social consideration in the best cases, the OutMuseum stands out as a new model that prioritizes people in cultural heritage preservation and transmission. A similar goal was pursued by the The Media Majlis at Northwestern University in Qatar in the Arab world and the Lratun Mobile Media Museum of the Media Initiative Centre in post-Soviet Armenia.

The Media Queerness of the OutMuseum

The OutMuseum's ability to "come out" in the plurality and range of subjects and content for online digital cultural heritage transmission involves organizational, thematic, and digital-experience design.

The museum is virtual, yet it is based on a composite institutional structure. It was designed in 2020 as a result of the long experience of the Outfest, a film festival established in 1979 at UCLA (University of California, Los Angeles) and officially registered as a nonprofit organization dedicated to art and entertainment in 1982. However, the museum covers ten LGBTQI+ festivals nowadays (OutMuseum, n.d.; Outfest, n.d.; UCLA LGBTQ Campus Resource Center, n.d). Considering the constellation of realities involved, which also include the partnership with the UCLA Film & Television Archive, the OutMuseum represents a model of digital museum as connector and hub. It operates through a combination of film collections and activities both digital and physical such as talks, meetings, panels, workshops, and user-generated contents. This hybrid organization enhances LGBTQI+ cinema research, digital outputs, and reflective and practice-based training for students, artists, and various publics. These kinds of digital engagements through arts and cultural heritage connect audiences, allowing social institutions to actively participate and co-create value with them (Visser and Richardson 2013).

As an "LGBTQI+ arts and media virtual museum," the OutMuseum overcomes the distinction between the use of LGBTQI+ approaches in mainstream institutions and the establishment of exclusively community-based specific structures, by combining both models (Chantrain and Brulon Soares 2020, 1). Despite growing attention about LGBTQI+ subjects, "his/stories, lives, identities, and issues continue to be largely absent in museums internationally" (Sullivan and Middleton 2020, 1). In

the world of film heritage, where there are no such realities, the case of the OutMuseum seems to fill this need.

Yet the museum's "queering" action embraces even more than addressing marginalisation, visibility, openness, and diversity within the LGBTQI+ community. It challenges conventional norms and assumes a transformative role as "an energy that disrupts traditional binaries, outside or apart from traditional modes of representation, unexpressed or inexpressible through traditional modes of communication" (Levin 2010, 6). In this way, they work especially on short films that draw on films as work of arts as well as the legacy of the artistic, industrial, social, and cultural forms of mediation of the LGBTQI+ cinematographic sphere. Assuming a wider media landscape, OutMuseum also exhibits TV, music or visual-arts videos. The idea of "reframing history for a Queerer future" is truly self-referent. For example, during one of their exhibitions, the museum reexamines the usual LGBTQI+ formula by shifting it towards one that is more intersectional: the QTBIPOC, namely queer, trans, black, indigenous and people of color that reflect the variety of the identities and geographies involved in the films considered and produced.

Indeed, the digital ecosystem of the OutMuseum, analyzed in the next section, suggests "new models of collaboration, interaction, and communication" centered on heritage and culture as a practice that on the one hand fosters "informal learning, interpretation and engagement" and, on the other, becomes an essential component of social mechanisms of inclusion and the transmission of diverse narratives (Giglietto et al. 2023, 1).

The model as created by OutMuseum faces a digital museological change shifting from the core values of the project. Its concept of legacy rather than heritage (which is often associated only with material possessions) focuses on the performative power of all, both objects and people. This notion revolves around the idea that stories and the ways by which we communicate them have a significant impact on our memory, daily experiences, and future opportunities. The contents and activities concern, first of all, themes and issues of identities and experiences. The museum endeavors to place those telling stories into the hands of some of the professionals, individuals, and communities who have made significant contributions in the past, present, and for the future of LGBTQI+'s film narratives. This aims to enhance the visibility of film production associated with the subjects as well as to commemorate and celebrate them through arts and media.

This model can be read as an entangled idea of different forms of mediations as proposed by Jenny Kidd, starting from her definition of "museum media" that involve institutions as "media-makers." Their tools and physi-

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cal and digital relationships form part of the media ecology (or, following Appadurai, of a “mediascape,” namely, the images as visions of the world created by them) and the issues of representation from the media arts to heritage institutions (Kidd 2014, 17).

This idea of mediation aligns with Ruffolo’s “post-queer” approach, which appears to have been implemented by the OutMuseum. This perspective emphasizes the importance of transcending LGBTQI+ subjectivities, discursive forms, and cultural representations to examine the collective and deterritorialized aspects that unite them like new “biovirtualities” (Ruffolo 2009, 171).

In the next section, we will see how the proposed case study helps to understand how physical and digital film “post-museums” can respond today to new challenges and opportunities presented by the digital environment, as advocated by Cere:

Bonomi’s suggested six ways in which the museum can be imagined for the future and for “our growth as contemporary citizens: rapid, self-reflecting, agile, transmitting, receiving, and welcoming” [...], qualities which are not so dissimilar to the ones discussed by Hooper-Greenhill about the post-museum (2000). Whether this approach will specifically help museums of cinema in their increasingly difficult task of competing for visitors and audiences with a powerful and prolific digital cultural industry only time will tell. (Cere 2021, 105.)

Cinematographic Performative Approaches through the OutMuseum’s Digital Platform

The OutMuseum consists of a digital platform that offers both rotating and permanent exhibitions. These are structured in a traditional manner (each one dedicated to a topic), or they are presented as film collections available for streaming, similar to services like Netflix. Both options include free access, but users can sign up and pay a nominal yearly membership to support the project. This grants entry to previous contents or to make reservations and bookings for Web and/or in-person workshops and events.

Each exhibition assembles a selection of five or six short films, often accompanied by live panels, workshops, roundtables, and user-generated content (such as videos or podcasts). These interactive events involve audiences, artists, media partners, and scholars, and they typically are held in conjunction with various film festivals. Every exhibition is curated by a contributor who possesses expertise in the topic. This person oversees the decision-making process regarding the content, kind of activities, and discussions as outlined in an introduction. The involvement of individu-

als, both ordinary citizens and professionals, motivates them to actively contribute by gathering or creating content. This follows the idea of the use of digital technologies in the field of heritage for a “two-way engagement,” that is, the possibility of co-creating exhibitions based on a personal memory, as well as practical and interactive contributions of the users (Laura King et al. 2016, 78).

Observing the digital environment and the activities I have collected from 2021 to the present, it is evident that the OutMuseum adopts a kind of performative approach in its temporary exhibitions, as shown by the curated list. The museum gives attention to differing subjects at the same time, including individuals, groups, communities, families, workers, artists, and diverse nations (for instance, *Queer Workers of the World, Unite!*; *Black, Queer & Here*; *Brazilian Transrevolutionaries at the Edge of Democracy*; *The Filipinx Edition: Queer and Trans Visions from Women and Non-Binary Artists*, *Pasifika Pride*). Each of them focuses on exploring several intersectional dimensions such as personal aspects (especially about gender and sexual orientations) as well as geographical, social, cultural, economic, political, artistic and professional factors. These structures are constructed based on certain locations and time periods, incorporating historical or daily events such as public or artistic celebrations, seasons, festivals, or political events (for example, *A Queer Holiday*).

Attitudes play a significant role in this context. For instance, there is a shift from negative to positive queer stories, including those related to AIDS (for example, *Positive Impact*, *Manifesting Change*, *Utopias of Desire*). This helps to shed light on cultural changes and real actions, such as activism through arts (for example, *Activism & Art: Celebrating Greetings from Washington D.C.*). It also reinforces awareness and empowerment, moving beyond the “mourning museology” regarding the LGBTQI+ community (Chantrain and Brulon 2020, 1). Last, they explore these topics with the frame of films as communication tools and work of arts, sustaining the processes of production, reception and safeguarding.

All these levels regard issues of social, economic, or artistic expressions in terms of voices, emotions, desires, thoughts, gestures, and relationships. Ongoing series are dedicated to giving spaces, speeches, or spotlights to senior or junior film professionals or to the LGBTQI+ youth generation as lay or artistic people (for example, through *Pulling Focus: Spotlighting Queer Cinematographers*, *OutSet: The Young Filmmakers Project*, *The Spirit of Queer Youth*). Some of the video collections are dedicated to meeting the protagonists of LGBTQI+ TV programs and series through the OutFronts digital festival, which connects the worlds of film and televi-

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sion. The digital platform also includes historical permanent collections, which currently concentrate on a limited number of artists from the UCLA archive (such as Pam Walton, Pat Rocco, and Weston). These, too, follow the same overall style.

Accordingly, we have to note critically that the OutMuseum extensively applies the digital approach to the performativity of the cinematographic heritage, as an intersectional and living entity, and to actual production, responding to the need recognized in the past for attention to the heritage of “unknown” contemporary films (Wengström 2013, 126). Many exhibitions have looked for and recovered materials from the past of the LGBTQI+ movement. Furthermore, it is worth noting that the global concept of this museum appears to focus on social groups outside the United States mainly through how they interface with contemporary American society, while omitting, for instance, the European counterpart.

Conclusions

While waiting for new “coming out” from film museums in digital format, this case study suggests the adoption of the performative power of queer cinema and queer film festivals as worldwide arenas that construct a public sphere capable of traversing various issues, spaces, and temporalities (Schoonover and Galt 2016). Indeed, the approach of the OutMuseum, as a virtual museum for arts and media, shows the possible ways for exhibitions of film heritage to connect various institutions (museums, festival, universities, archives, industries, associations, and so on), audiences, media formats, and modes of expression, thereby shaping possibilities in design and their impact in the future. For as Wengström suggests, and as the case of the OutMuseum demonstrates, access to this heritage in the digital age is absolutely vital to “understanding us and the society we live” in (Wengström 2013, 126).

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