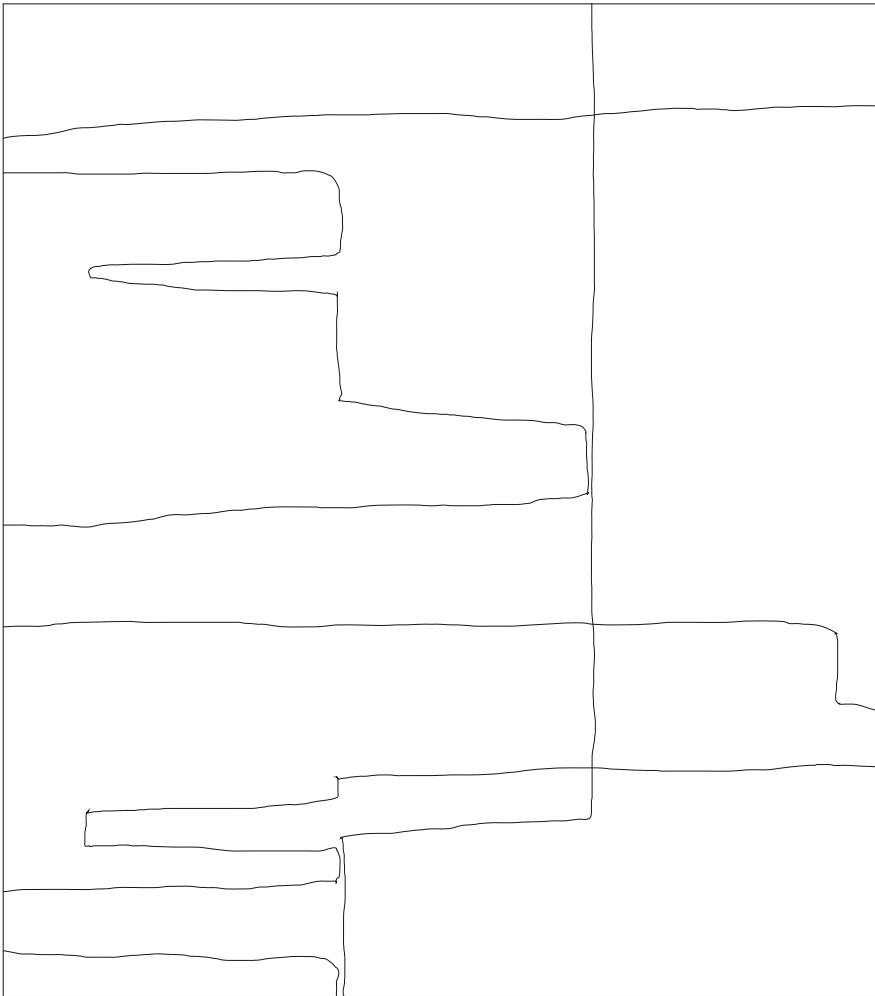


# I Desire Something?

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If I'm not wrong, the word 'gay' only comes up once in Guiraudie's films, in *Stranger by the Lake*. Beyond that, he never names or categorises desire – perhaps because there's always the feeling that someone's desires can mutate at any time, which produces a sense of both unpredictability and urgency.

That's what's ultimately so transgressive and forward-looking about his conception of sexuality. Nearly all his films centre on men who sleep with men, but all of them could potentially sleep with women, too. Léo in *Staying Vertical*, for example, fathers a child before penetrating a much older man, while Armand in *The King of Escape* is linked with three different men before falling in love and sleeping with a girl of sixteen. The ways people in his films relate to one another never settle down into one fixed pattern, sexual or otherwise.

There's that amazing scene in *No Rest for the Brave* that, like a lot of the film, could be a dream sequence. At the bar, Basile/Hector gets chatting to a woman and starts fucking her on the side of a snooker table, before approaching an older man on the other side of the table and fondling his crotch. Then he leaves, and when he looks back into the room through a window, the woman and older man are now fucking! It's an overt example of what is basically true of all his films: any coupling is as possible as it is unstable, and it can feed into new couplings at will.

It sounds very much like Georges Bataille; sexuality as a field wherein life can be lived differently.

And that, in turn, generates a sense of community that resists generalisation, whether a community of workers, a family, or a community of men who sleep with men.

We might call them gatherings of discrete particularities, or, as a certain French philosopher would say, being singular plural. I think a lot of his films try to show moments when we can be whatever, together.

Even in *Stranger by the Lake*, where not a single woman appears, where we have an obvious community of men who sleep with men, it's still never that straightforward. There's a brief conversation between Franck and one of the guys cruising there who asks him if he's seen a woman because that's who he wants to sleep with at that moment. Franck says there aren't any women, and the guy counters that women do indeed cruise there. Every community is more complicated than it seems.

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Space is articulated in two main ways in his films. There are those self-enclosed, almost self-sufficient spaces like the factory in

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*That Old Dream That Moves* or the lake and its surroundings in *Stranger by the Lake*. And then there are the processions of different locations that we wander through, returning to some of them at times, as in *No Rest for the Brave*, *Time Has Come*, *The King of Escape* and *Staying Vertical*.

The factory and the lake are interesting in that they're pre-existing spaces on the one hand, but on the other they're highly constructed, they function almost like a stage for the plot to play out on. I like how you describe that sort of movement through a series of different locations, which is also always a movement between the rural and the urban. To steal a term of yours, Guiraudie seems to work at the urban-rural interface.

The only big city he shows is in *Staying Vertical*, but even that one is strangely fragmented; we just see an underpass, a main street, parts of the port. His way of conceiving space produces a singular experience: we can stumble across any type of place at any given moment. Perhaps that's why he favours these locations between the urban and rural, because they're less clearly defined, more likely to slide into something else, while the city remains unambiguously a city.

Whether literal or figurative, the liminal is always important for him. We're never quite comfortably in the town, we're never quite comfortably in the country – we're constantly in the zone between them, and perhaps things can happen differently there than if we were firmly in one or the other. His spaces have their own laws and rules.

This points to his vision of sexuality, to the way sexual encounters take place in his films. There's a fair amount of sex in beds, but when I think about his work the first place I see sex is in these liminal spaces.

And those spaces themselves are constructed to encourage that. I'm thinking here of the end of *The King of Escape*, the cabin in the woods. In a sense, the cabin is the ultimate expression of all the action the film's been revolving around up to this point; it's like all its different couplings, relationship constellations, permutations of desire have been leading us here – it's the centre of the film, its core. Armand finally gets together with the older guy with whom there's been tension the entire film, and they begin to articulate feelings that express disdain for standard categories. There's talk of sleeping with both men and women, of whether to come or not come, of the evolution in how one physically relates to people over time. And then it ends with two further men entering the cabin and them all sleeping together – a perfectly utopian image.

When I think of his films, I don't see any centre. The spaces in meandering films like *No Rest for the Brave* or *The King of Escape* or *Staying Vertical*, they function more like a succession of interconnected rooms.

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We move from one to another, sometimes we return to rooms we visited before, but no single room is the final or central one where everything comes together, there's always another door, perhaps also the one through which we entered. And the characters remain open and unfinished as they pass through them, too. Then at some point each film just stops.

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The typical Guiraudie body is similar to the liminal spaces he chooses to film. The bodies he shows obviously fall outside of the standard, hugely normative approach to how bodies should look and move; I think it's one of the most daring things about his films. Although we live in a time of so much alleged freedom, people, and gay men in particular, tend to look more and more alike every day.

I agree to an extent. There's certainly a wide range of bodies on display in his films: bodies covered in hair, of different sizes, marked by age. But I would describe Léo from *Staying Vertical*, Fogo from *Time Has Come*, Basile/Hector from *No Rest for the Brave* and Franck from *Stranger by the Lake* as relatively classic leading men, in French cinema at least. The types they enter into contact with are far more unconventional, but I wouldn't say Guiraudie totally transcends a conventional body ideal. I think it's got more to do with pluralism, which can include stereotypes but is always balanced out with others.

It follows from the idea that anyone can find anyone attractive in his films. I mean, some characters aren't attracted to other characters at certain points, but their rejection's never based on conventional ideas of beauty.

There's that scene in *That Old Dream That Moves* where one of the older factory workers wants to understand why the young guy doesn't find him attractive, and it's telling that his reason is almost impossible to articulate, the attraction just isn't there for some reason. It reinforces the idea that bodies actually exist outside of types and that each one is singular.

He grasps sexuality as pansexuality, and almost every encounter carries a sexual potential. It would hardly be surprising if someone slept with a plant or an animal. The way Léo is drawn to wolves can be read as a form of attraction that moves in that direction.

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It's interesting to think about the spaces in his films in terms of France itself, because the places he chooses to film exclude the

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major centres, most notably Paris. As far as the 'gay experience' is concerned, which doesn't even feel like a sufficient term, his films are very different to those set in the French capital or other cities. And that ties his depictions of gay realities to a period in time that's typically indeterminate.

This also has a very clear political component, the idea of allowing homosexual experience to exist outside of urbanity. If you remember the first images of queerness, they always had the streets of a big city as their backdrop, a street at night. His films are shot in fields, in landscapes, by the side of roads, in broad daylight; he often favours wider, more distant shots, which embed this experience within a set of other complex connections.

There's also a temporal dimension to this idea of sexuality as specifically conducted or performed in non-urban areas, in the provinces. In Europe at least, the defining shift in gay experience over the last fifteen years or so has been how chat platforms and apps have replaced the traditional places where men used to meet men to sleep together, whether actual cruising grounds or wherever.

Dating apps are always breaking people down into discrete sets of characteristics and thus implicitly encouraging users to gravitate towards those who possess them and reject those who don't, the idea being everyone must have a type. His films are an active riposte to that kind of contemporary gay reality, which also emerged from the city and then spread out.

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There's something utopian about the way Guiraudie harks back to a previous era, where homosexuality, or sexuality in general, was conducted in a way that was perhaps less about anonymity and had more to do with community. If we look at *Time Has Come*, his one feature that doesn't take place in the present, its setting is some imagined version of the past where the fluidity of couplings is a given, and no one ever references the sort of labelling that is prevalent in today's mainstream gay culture.

His films try to capture something that is about to disappear, to preserve what's about to vanish. *That Old Dream That Moves* is set in a factory about to be shut down, and the ways of living shown in *Stranger by the Lake* or *The King of Escape* are equally in jeopardy. All his films resist the contemporary to a certain extent, but even the ones set in the present day feel as if they're looking back at things from five, ten, twenty years ago in order to preserve them – the communities and lifestyles they entail – as a cinematic trace. He's very attentive towards forms that will soon no longer be.

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Even though the urban scenes in *Staying Vertical* seem very much anchored in the now, so much of that film could also be a fable referencing a past era, a previous existence with all the different approaches, traditions and modes of being that implies.

*Staying Vertical* is a very particular film in his filmography. Perhaps what's about to disappear there is this meandering quality, the feeling that Léo is no longer sure of what he desires. And that's something one hardly ever encounters today. Now people are supposed to be very outspoken about what they want, rather than uncertain of where their desire will take them. Perhaps that's what links that film to the others.

I mean, all his protagonists are looking for something they're relatively uncertain about; they're always trying out different things along the way rather than actively pursuing a particular goal. Their capacity to be seduced by some sort of digression, by some sort of encounter, is massive. And this is another reflection of the de-centred quality we talked about, the idea that there is never one main path, because new paths are always presenting themselves.

Perhaps *No Rest for the Brave* is the film that goes furthest in this regard. It's a film whose own form and 'body' changes as it is seduced once and then a second time by the flow of the story and the path Basile/Hector takes. It's entirely fitting that the character even has two names.

That's what sets Guiraudie apart in the end, both in the context of queer cinema and more generally, the idea that his characters are allowed to be lost. And that's where the queerness of his films becomes transgressive. *The King of Escape* is a good example, as the whole film is about following one path your whole life and then making a U-turn. If queer cinema tends to articulate 'I desire something I cannot have', Guiraudie's work inserts a question mark halfway: 'I desire something?' His films are liberating precisely because they reveal the transformative potential of desire, which is something seen so seldom.

When we talk about queer cinema, we're often just talking about films merely interested in depicting queer experiences, as few of them actually try to find a queer approach to narrative. If, once again, narrative is a path or a road, it's about leaving the straight one behind. And I think he's actually one of the rare filmmakers who manage to forge an alternative, a different approach.

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Even defining sexuality in his films is tricky, because it contains the idea of desire and the idea of companionship in almost equal measure; those two needs seldom coincide in the same person, and there's

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a considerable push and pull between them when they do. And then there's the question of how or whether those two concepts and their respective combinations might come together to produce a word called love.

There's a scene in *Time Has Come* where Fogo talks about the two men he's involved with, one of whom he's sleeping with, one of whom he isn't. Speaking about the second, he concedes it's "not about love", while wondering if that in itself isn't love, in the sense that the person you're *not* sleeping with is the person you love.

Love isn't something that necessarily falls outside of his films, but there's the question of whether they show it directly, beyond just a feeling or a sensation or anticipation. They definitely show camaraderie, but even when a character has formed a more traditional relationship – like Basile/Hector from *No Rest for the Brave*, who lives with an older man – I'm not sure it's meant to be a portrayal of love.

Rather, love is just one more force constantly in flux; if love is the combination of desire and companionship and Guiraudie already depicts desire as being entirely free-flowing, it only follows that love must possess the same quality. Love can be there at any given time, but in the next moment have turned into something else.

I suppose Armand and Curly do fall in love in *The King of Escape*.

And in *Stranger by the Lake* Franck says he's falling in love with Michel. The word love certainly appears in his work, even if it often feels just as insufficient as all the other terms one might bring to bear on his films. And what about *That Old Dream That Moves*? What is the precise connection between Jacques and the factory boss? Nothing physical happens between them and companionship would imply–

I mean, there's the beginning of a hand job.

There is the beginning of a hand job, sure, but it's fleeting. Companionship implies duration and shared experience, whereas their connection or attraction is neither physical nor based on shared experience. And yet it's undeniably there. I don't know whether I would call that love, though...

Maybe that's the point, that his films are more about the potentiality of love than love itself? Love as something always yet to come.

I think he just regards love as something very diffuse. In traditional narratives, two people meet and form a connection and at some point that connection is termed love. Yet, as we mentioned, in *The King of Escape* Armand has intense feelings for four different people over the course of the film – the singular love that would normally be

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lavished on one person is spread out, which obviously makes it much harder to pin down.

Most of Guiraudie's films include some variant of this. In *Stranger by the Lake*, it's broken down into more of a binary: Franck has both Henri, who is a companion, a person to spend time with and confide in; and Michel, whom he is hugely drawn to, but who is otherwise unknowable, threatening, dangerous, and certainly disinterested in him beyond their mutual physical attraction. And so love, or perhaps its possibility, actually lies in a combination of the two, a combination that in this case proves impossible.

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