

## Magical Faggot as Cinematic Study (1900 - Present)

**Table 1.0. Film Reference.**

	Does the magical faggot...		
	Help someone learn about themselves?	Help someone find love?	Find love, themselves?
Cupid and the Comet (1911)	Y	Y	N
The Leather Boys (1964)	Y	N	N
The Producers (1968)	Y	N	N, though they already have it
Mannequin (1987)	Y	Y	N
Boogie Nights (1997)	Y	Y, in a way	N
Will & Grace (1998)	Y	Y	Y, but it takes 11 seasons
American Beauty (1999)	Y	N	Y, but they are objects of anger
Billy Elliot (2000)	Y	Y	N
Hedwig & The Angry Inch (2001) (later subverted)	Y	Y	Y, but only in discarding the main, queer character
Bend it Like Beckham (2002)	Y	Y	N
Latter Days (2003)	Y	Y	N
Mean Girls (2004)	Y	Y	N
Star Appeal (2004)	Y	Y	Kind of. A woman tries to fuck him while he is comatose.
Cold Showers (2005)	Y	Y	N
The Producers (2005)	Y	N	N, though they already have it
V for Vendetta (2005)	Y	N	N
Brokeback Mountain (2005)	Y	Y	Y, but it is fleeting, and they die
The Architect (2006)	Y	Y	N
Little Miss Sunshine (2006)	Y	Y, kind of - affirmation	N, they lose it. It's why they appear.

[Post-2006: an eruption of the same pattern. Post-2012, a galaxy.]

*Faggots Almighty (2019)*

The same group that sponsors my queer soccer league wants to start a queer e-sports league. My soccer team plans to form another team for this second league, but cannot find a game to compete in, since all of us only want to play healers. There is a brief fight about who could heal the most, who would look the best in Mercy drag. In an online game of *Dungeons and Dragons*, we experiment with a party of six clerics. It works until our church breaks.

*I Dream in Another Faggot (2014)*

Part of counseling in California is befriending translators. They are almost as young as the high schoolers I am supposed to conceal from the jaws of crisis who work, undoubtedly, harder than I do, coordinating meetings, SAT classes, college essays, and hard talks about alcohol that both I and my students could recite from memory. They also conspire, talk to parents who appear, message me about how difficult they imagine each family will be. In my first few months, the messages remain mechanical: *he has Bs and they want him to have As, they caught him growing pot and now they're not talking to each other, they worry she is too boy-crazy*. But soon, they meander into encouragement. *They asked for you specifically*, goes a message I get one day. The translator knocks on my open office door, between a series of cards my mom sent me to hang up after I'd moved across the country, and asks if I read what she'd sent.

"You're famous," she says. "This family heard so many good things about you, that they actually decided to return to counseling." She winks, and walks them over, whispering, "bully?" back and forth with the parents. I mark this on a notepad hidden behind a fake plant. Each meeting with new parents is another performance. Having references makes it easier.

They are pleasant, wrinkled. They ask me if I watch any TV, if I know who Beyoncé is, why I am in a school if I have an engineering degree. I tell them I was bored in front of a computer, wanted to help people. I do not say that if I fail or stagnate in one place, I move immediately toward a reflexive, outward compassion. Of course I can teach, I thought, coming here. Of course I can provide emotional support. They leave me with a persimmon, bright and thick between their son and me. He is sixteen, breathes through his mouth, shows me his phone charms and asks if I know what his parents had been saying in Chinese.

"Is it okay if I swear?" he asks. "In English. You have to promise you won't get mad." And when I give him permission, he says, "They were excited about you because they heard from another kid's parents that you're a faggot."

Bólí, in Mandarin, means glass, and originally described a woman in the novel *Dream of the*

*Red Chamber* who was so pure of heart she was emotionally translucent. When directed at a male, it transforms into a gay slur—“he is effeminate,” it implies, “he will break.” But this student tells me, a few meetings later, that it’s a compliment, sort of. “They think that you’re so devoted to helping kids, because you’ll never find love.” He assures me this is not what he thinks, that he has heard what San Francisco is like and hopes I end up with a nice man who I can force into signing up for SAT testing.

“Yes,” says the translator when I ask her later, “People here are very liberal. They love you. They know you’ll give them so much, that you’ll reach your breaking point. And then you’ll keep giving, because that’s just who you are. We’re all so happy you’re here. We are better for it.”

*The Faggot of St. Francis (2018)*

In “Sanctify,” the first single from Years & Years’ 2018 album *Palo Santo*, Olly Alexander sings to a man that is not yet out, asking him for confessions, promising a togetherness that will heal, acknowledging a hurt before it happens. Over the course of the song, the promises Alexander makes become greater, place his body in more danger. “You don’t have to be straight with me,” he affirms to the other man, before volunteering to ache instead of him. “Don’t break / Sanctify my body with pain.” “Palo santo,” itself, means “holy wood,” which is both a South American plant rumored to ward off demons and disease, and slang for an enormous, well-proportioned penis.

A new employee tells me she read this fun fact, that she wants to talk more about it, that all of the other queers at my job in Chicago love her and it’s only a matter of time before I do, too. She’s only been there a week, and she’s already worked her learned magic. During lunch, it thunderstorms. Navy Pier warps across thrashing, gray water in the building’s atrium.

“I think I came on a little strong before,” she says, from behind me, as she sits down. “Let me explain where I’m coming from.” She tells me about her depression in high school, how the only friends she made were the choral gays who’d sit next to her after their practices, smelling but not inhaling her cigarette smoke. “All of my friends have been gay,” she says. “People ask me what the most important part of my identity is, and it’s being an ally.” When I ask if she still talks to any of them, she changes the subject.

A few weeks later, with my soccer team at Sidetrack—the largest, most basic queer bar in Chicago – she is there, teetering on one heel, mascara, somehow, on her lip. “My boyfriend left me,” she grumbles, her mouth at the base of my neck, “I am only dating gay guys from now on.” I ask her where the friends she came with are, hoping that I won’t have to drop \$40 on a Lyft to pedal her back to South Loop during peak hours, and she says, “Look around.”

As my teammates and I help carry her into her ride home, she scratches at us. An acrylic nail breaks off of her and pins itself in my arm. She yanks it away, scrapes whichever piece of me has been dug out, holds it in a closed fist, flicks the nail onto the curb. As we close the door on her, she bats against it with her free hand, yelling, muffled, “Don’t leave me!” At work, the next Monday, she brings me a \$10 iTunes gift card as thanks, goes in for a hug, tells me I smell nice.

*The Perks of Being a Wall-Faggot (2004)*

I enter high school, understanding only the queer people I’ve seen on TV and in movies I’ve had to sneak out of my house to watch with cousins who have driver’s licenses and Tripp pants, who power down our cape’s single highway at three-digit speeds looking like *Final Fantasy* characters. These queer characters are clean-skinned, clear-eyed men who speak in encouraging, wispy voices. They never find love, but find a happiness in the performance of helping heterosexuals, diverting time and energy into them, teaching them how to dance or wear makeup or line a divan. In this service, they find something adjacent to love, which I, fourteen, interpret as the real thing.

The rule, then: I am only worthy of having a crush on another man if I can somehow serve them. I tutor extracurricularly, pay for lunches, defend teammates with unfortunately-timed shower erections with a knowledge of body that I do not have, but that is convincing enough. I fall for a boy and ask the girl whose name he keeps saying out for him. When they appear, a week later, deed done, hands across each other in class, it is the first time I understand that to fall on a sword for a straight person feels more like jumping into a pile of shattered glass. I love him, inexplicably, more, as he brags about how tight she felt. I tell myself that the trust he’s given me isn’t friendship but a stored-up kind of love. When they break up, the two of us sit in the sand of a sinking kettle pond, and I place a hand on his thigh that I will think about for years. I joke, when we are finished, that they didn’t talk about what we’d done in sex ed, and he says that if I ever tell anyone what happened, he’ll hit me until all of my teeth fall out. Even as a child, I am seen as a fragile object, beautiful until touched, broken, absorbed. We haven’t spoken since, but I find him online, years later, his arms around a wife and two sons.

There are many other crushes. I buy them art supplies, let them cheat off of me, distract teachers with elaborate questions and stories that match the topics they’d rather teach about. I take falls so often that one day, a vice principal sees me in his office and says, “Oh, fuck this.” I am told I have my whole life ahead of me, that my grades are perfect, that I need to stop defending people. So, then, I learn to mistake justice for love as well.

At the end of Senior Year, policemen and firefighters—plus the fake school cop who struts through school with an unbuckled belt and a taser—stage a car crash outside of school. It is an

assembly to prevent drunk driving. We know it is coming, but the reality they have dedicated to manufacturing—the Hollywood gore reconstructed by an art teacher with a background in stage makeup—is enough to break all of us. We see classmates, falsely-injured, birthed from impounded vehicles with the Jaws of Life. They are trained, supine, and taken away in an ambulance. A friend, another crush, turns to me when the emergency vehicles vacate, when the same vice principal gives a speech about how making the wrong choice, just one time, can lead to tragedy. He says, “Why didn’t you volunteer for that? That seemed like exactly your kind of thing.”

*Mr. Faggot’s Opus (2012)*

I still consider my body in place of other bodies, envision my neck heroically punctured, blood trickling down my chest like a tournament bracket. There is still a small, exhilarating disruption whenever I see an opportunity to step in for a person that could later love – or at least be grateful for – me. When I begin to teach, just after college, this feeling swells. My chest feels like a bomb. There are so many people to help, to show that like other queer men, I can preempt the harm I assume they think I’ll do, that they may validate me through my service. Though I do not know it consciously, I see myself of representative of all queer people they’ll meet, feel like I must remain perfect, translucent. Soon, my students will all vote on whether I can marry, or donate blood, or work. I sign up to head four clubs. Students pool in my classroom during my lunch break, so I do not eat during the day, or go to the bathroom. I am 22. They make enormous strides in their Common Core standards, begin to thank me for telling them that I believe in them, say that they finally feel like they matter.

My supervisor in Teach For America films me, tells me I have done incredible work. I talk to him about how it is so difficult to make so many parental phone calls and grade two hundred and eighty papers. He says that it is difficult, but we are heroes, that we do this work because we are the people who truly do care, who can demonstrate love to kids scammed by a society that wants to show them only violence. I deliver him as much of a performance as I regularly give my students. I am fine.

I faint during lunch, and the kids playing *Super Smash Bros.* on my projector call the school nurse. I am sent home, told to spend money on a doctor. The health insurance plan for a first-year public school teacher in California without a master’s degree is jokingly called “The Coffin Plan.” It covers: funeral arrangements, a yearly checkup. An option for vision insurance occurs in Year 3. So—for others, I tell myself—I burn through my savings to pay for psychiatrists, medication.

My TFA supervisor says, “Let’s talk about some strategies to numb your feelings.” My psychiatrist says to take time off or I will die. It takes me weeks to make the decision.

When I tell my students I will leave them, I assure them that it will be brief, that they have already progressed—been healed—so much. I show them graphs. The school hires a temporary sub. On my last day for a while, my room is filled with children I have helped. It is the type of event a teacher dreams of—all of the students for which I have sanctified slices of my brain for thank me. They line up. One gives me a warm Snickers bar. I give them my classroom decorations, flags, and college posters. The three who are learning guitar bring their instruments, covered in bumper stickers, and the group sings. It feels coalescent, like the geometries of life I've given up for them are actually returned. I go home, cry, am in bed for two weeks. A year later, in my new role as a counselor, I will reference this moment, say it was a point I did not realize was my highest.

*The Shape of Faggots (2015)*

A volunteer coordinator for a queer center in Chicago tells me on a date about the time one of his employees said during a yoga class, “For this next hour, forget about the other people in your life—you deserve this time, you are the only thing that matters, so take this time for yourself,” and one of his students started crying, mid-downward dog, his snot leaking backwards up his forehead. “I think about that all the time,” he says, “about how life can be tough, but at least we’re never that empty—to think it’s so surprising to have value.” I take him home, hold him as I remember how inclined I had been to not make noise, to disrupt the individual rituals of the people around me, how much I wanted to wipe my face, how desperate I had been to hold my pose.

*Magical Faggot (2016-2017)*

The whole premise of being a magical faggot is that you continue to give away pieces of yourself, to volunteer for obligation so that another may be repaired. The humor is derived from what happens when you put two of them together, when they donate themselves to each other relentlessly. Think, “Gift of the Magi.” A twist. A great joke.

On date one, the narrator buys the object of his affection flowers. The two do not leave the house, deciding, instead, to fuck, to watch nature documentaries. They block each other’s eyes when one animal eats another, instinctively. Laugh track.

Date two, the object of his affection makes dinner, says he doesn’t eat unless he’s around people, how that was a rule his parents had, how sapped he feels in between their now-messy divorce. Plus, there is the housing crisis it is his job to address, the grant that will expire—and his job with it. His mediocre salary and the coding bootcamp that costs more than two months of it. The narrator lends him money, stays quiet when the object of affection falls asleep cooking

dinner, and the object of affection keeps saying, “I owe you,” “I owe you,” until it becomes a sort of catchphrase. It is almost like gratitude. It sustains the narrator.

This has a ripple effect through Boystown. The object of affection is not, they deem, the type of man to receive flowers. He has lived so many double lives, nonprofit by day and dancer by night. They call him The Demon Twink, warn the narrator that he’ll get his soul stolen. But the narrator, who has split himself between his students during the day and the object of his affection—now his boyfriend—by night, continues his gifts. Other men—exes, old flings—send the object of affection flowers, too, after he brags about receiving them, about how romantic the narrator is. The audience laughs at this—the narrator has not been established as a romantic character, outside of a two-year abuse that is neutered and summarized, as to not ruin the mood. The narrator learns to turn it into a single joke, impresses himself.

To save money, the two of them stick to watching movies at home, lights turned off, gas stove heating the place in winter. “I need to watch gay movies,” says the object of affection. And they rifle through all of the classics: *American Beauty* and *Mean Girls* and *Brokeback Mountain*. The narrator asks why the queer characters are always denied love, and the object of affection says, “I dunno—that’s just how life is.” One morning, they both cannot seem to wake up, keep hacking up empty air. “Uh oh,” says the object of affection, motioning loosely toward the stove, combusting into fog on the closed windows all night. The two of them cannot stop giggling. It feels, to the narrator, as though this is love, the pair of them constantly saving each other.

Months in, the object of affection’s kidneys fail temporarily. On the way back from the emergency room, when the narrator attempts to put his hands on his, the object of affection hits him in the arm, which quickly pools into bruising. “I didn’t say to touch me,” he says. “I’m so stressed. With you and the divorce and the job, and you’re not making it any better. The rest of this part is more slapstick, the object of affection clawing at the narrator’s biceps on the floor of their favorite bar, spitting, drunk, when the narrator has come to rescue him. He says, “I can’t believe you hate me like this, you hate faggots like this. Just let me have a good time.” When the narrator talks him into a walk home, the object of affection sighs like a kid, his breath bleeding into the air around them, his neck a smokestack, his body latent with energy. They arrive home, and each time the narrator tries to say something, the object of affection covers his mouth, says, “uhp,” in accruing forms, “uhp uhp uhp uhp uhp,” with the sort of threatening, Midwestern politeness that can get any audience giggling.

An internal monologue, the narrator’s eyes wet and wide and lost, a stare of enough yards that you could take a screenshot of him and turn it memetic, blow geometries across his face. “If I am perfect enough, I will be loved by someone perfect enough. If I can help someone through a rough time, if I can turn someone more perfect, more capable of love, then I, too, will be-

come more capable of love, more perfect.” An interruption: the object of affection throws a glass at the narrator’s head. In the cinematic remake, confetti bursts forth from it, like a piñata, but before this is a film, it bounces off of the couch, splits as it hits the ground, shattering like a broken body. The narrator, also, bounces, bolts so entirely he runs two miles in subzero weather before thinking about calling a ride. Another source of humor: everything is frozen, and the plows have not yet arrived. The snow falls menacing and soft. The narrator cannot, for the life of him, stay on his feet, skidding into the rigid constitutions of buildings, careening forward into poles. He bursts his lip, and his blood freezes over, dangling like a chandelier beneath his mouth. The Lyft driver he eventually calls says, “So who won? You or the other guy?” Roll snare.

Once the narrator breaks up with him, the object of affection reappears in clubs for a sequel once every few months, with new boyfriends, newer and higher-ranking on the service scale: nonprofit coordinators, doctors, psychiatrists. A nurse, friendly, tells the narrator a story about the object of affection: “Our first date goes well, we hook up and everything, we talk about how our parents hit us, and then, in the middle of sex, I’m inside of him, and he grabs my shoulders and says, ‘If you don’t bring me flowers the next time we do this, I’ll know this isn’t real.’ So I don’t know if he’s kidding or not, but I get him this bouquet at the hospital—they have really nice ones there, for all the people who die. And I hear that this is something he asks everyone he fucks. It’s been his thing forever, ever since an old hookup did this for him, this one time.” Then, noticing the object of affection waving him away, the nurse says, “By the way, who are you?”

“I’m the guy who got the flowers,” the narrator says, and the nurse’s face blinks into disaster. *Buh-dum tss*. Slide whistle. Curtains. A great joke.

*All the President’s Faggots (2003-2016)*

Massachusetts, the state where I spend most of my childhood, is the first to legalize gay marriage. Though I am not yet out, it feels as though all of the teachers embracing, the neighbors slashing corks off of champagne bottles, affirm me. I want to write what I hear across my skin: Love is The Answer. My 76-year-old English teacher comes out to us the day afterward, tells us about the wife she has lived with for nearly 50 years, how if you love a person with enough volume, allow your love to expand, to cross boundaries, then you can accomplish anything. Weeks before I go to college, in 2008, California legalizes it as well, then scribbles across it with Proposition 8. I give myself to professors requesting long hours monitoring neon text in laboratories, find other men who seem in need of healing. It is overturned in 2010. I move to Chicago, to Boystown, and start programs for students that win awards. In 2015, when queer people are declared legal to marry by the Supreme Court, it all feels like it is working,

that the sacrifices I have made—for students, yes, but also for straight men looking for living, secret-keeping dildos, for straight women looking for safety, for other queer men who convince me that we are the two to heal each other. I continue to love so vividly and endlessly that I end up in the emergency room twice, an overdose, a workout so long that—coupled with a few, fun genetic complications—tears the fabric of my innards away from my bone. For the first time, I work a job where health insurance includes psychiatry, which I am reminded by another queer employee repeatedly, until I attend.

*Fag Swan (2020)*

I am afraid of writing this because it will mean that I do not contain the pulsating, upper-level capacity to heal that so many former teachers, so many queer elders, told me was, in my desires to do good and make change, inherent—that the currencies I have cultivated as a queer man, of openness and listening and an attempt to discover love that would have to be infinite enough to suddenly undo centuries of subjugation, hate crime, and genocide is limited, as much of a muscle as quadricep, a thing to be steadied and coordinated so that it goes undrained, doesn't snap back and recoil into an arrangement only a medical professional could repair. That there is a ceiling for worship of yourself through others, that an eternal selflessness results only in a removal, that there is only a certain number of times a body can be sacrificed before it is too cut-up and twisted to even look like one anymore. That there are thermodynamic laws about this that I learned in engineering school, that I should have known to begin with. If I were an infinite well, then some higher-ranking officials would have flashed their badges by now, attempted to drain me. Which is not to say that this has not been attempted. But even through all of the work that I have done to become magical—the rich, gay, arcane failures that have polished me into a faggot—I sometimes still forget to recycle some of it back into myself.

*2 Faggots 2 Furious (2017-)*

It is a right of passage, on my new soccer team, to be called a faggot. It is a title to be earned. Faggots are the ones who have stories, chains of long nights, mistakes. Who jump rope nude with a discarded chain in Jackhammer's hole, who lose a college v-card getting raved in the Progress bathroom, which leaks, and is owned by a racist man that will die a few nights afterward. On our first night out as a team, one of our defenders drops a bottle of poppers on the floor of a club, and it clears the whole place out like teargas. Another calls us to pick him up, and when we arrive, moving in a pack, our bodies in a mob to preserve our heat, we find him at the top of his stairs, pants down, an entire tray of chicken fingers sprawled down into his entry way, a small plastic canister of barbecue sauce in a pair of hundred-dollar shoes. Knowing them, existing near-exclusively around queer people, people who do not wish only to take,

is a removal of performance. We do spa days, learn to recover our sore bodies from dancing stupidly—I flail, apparently, like a shirtless Tina Belcher—after tournaments. I go with one teammate on a boat called *Holy Wood* into the middle of Lake Michigan, where its creepy driver tells everyone to get naked. We shrug and jump into the water. The water temperature feels barely in the single-digits. We shriek, cackle, fail to thermoregulate. I feel, for the first time, preserved. “Why in the world did we do this?” he asks. “You stupid faggot.”