

Changing Reels: Positive Gay/Lesbian Images in 1990s American Cinema

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Back in 1982, 20th Century Fox took a bold step where no major film studio had gone before by producing a movie entitled *Making Love*. Of course, films about lovemaking are old hat, but this one was unique in that the sex occurred between two attractive young men, Michael Ontkean and Harry Hamlin. The film was so bold in fact, that the producers prefaced it with an announcement literally pleading for tolerance from the audience. Despite the risk taken by the actors and the studio, the film was not a huge success and not even particularly interesting beyond the prurience factor. It gained attention solely because of the subject matter—a married doctor, Ontkean, married to Kate Jackson of *Charlie's Angels* no less, struggles against his hidden homosexuality and finally comes out, leaving Jackson for Hamlin.

Also in 1982, *Personal Best* appeared, about a young track star aiming for the Olympics and her love affair with her coach. This is also an old hat Hollywood idea—remember 1950's *Pat and Mike* featuring Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn as coach and athlete. Again, however, there was a bold twist—the track star was Mariel Hemingway, and her coach was Patrice Donnelly. Featuring a rather graphic and lovely nude scene between the two women, the film again made headlines. It also offered an insightful script about competition and training, and a strong argument for the then-burgeoning public acceptance of women's sports. But the big news was again the homosexual love scene, not the production itself.

These two landmark films seem utterly historical only eighteen years later, and demonstrate the remarkable progress attained by the Lesbian / Gay / Bisexual/ Transgender (LGBT) community in American films. Particularly in the 1990s, the path to understanding widened, at least in the cinema industry, in terms of acceptance, visibility, depiction and viability.

Certainly there is still profound homophobia in the United States. Some right wing Christian groups, one of which is known as the Center for Reclaiming America, are running advertisements offering Moonie-esque deprogramming for homosexuals. Other factions consider equal rights for homosexuals equivalent to special privileges. For example, in New Mexico, where I teach at Western New Mexico University, there is no hate crime law which targets particular kinds of attacks as particularly heinous in that they are motivated by racial, ethnic, religious or sexual preference prejudice. In the words of Republican governor Gary Johnson, "All crimes are hate crimes" (Hate Crimes Law 11). Considering the murder in

nearby Wyoming in October 1998 of gay 21-year-old college student Matthew Shepard, Johnson's comment isn't ingenuous or idealistic—it is unconscionable.

Yet tremendous strides were also made during the 1990s. Protease inhibiting drugs make living with AIDS a possibility. Domestic partnership laws exist in some states and within some companies, including Norwest Banks and the Disney Corporation. RuPaul stars in her own talk show on VHI. A feeble step in the right direction, tottering as though in five-inch disco heels, but a step nonetheless, was the military's "Don't ask, don't tell" policy. Ellen Degeneres came out on her sitcom on national television, and her mother's supportive memoir discussed her relationship with her lesbian daughter. Gay/Straight Alliance chapters are opening in high schools and universities, as are an increasing number of PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Gays and Lesbians) organizations in large and small cities. Numerous national and local LGBT publications, from *The Advocate* to GNETWORK (a small photocopied monthly newsletter in southwestern New Mexico), appear on neighborhood newsstands.

Even the "academy" of higher education has accepted Queer Studies as a legitimate academic arena. In fact, in its cover story of November 10, 1998 entitled "25 Coolest Straight People," *The Advocate* cited Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, a distinguished professor of English at CUNY, as a founder and "one of the main figures in Queer Theory, the academic field that examines literary texts for hidden gay themes and explores how those themes are played out in the culture" (57).

I can speak particularly to the miracle of the last three aspects. Living in the small town of Silver City, NM, population 12,000, I have seen GSA recognized on campus; a PFLAG chapter receive its charter; and the university's administration request a course addressing the LGBT community's concerns, which I taught in 1999. While a Fulbright Senior Lecturer in American literature at Hacettepe University for the 1999-2000 school year, I taught the same material in an alternative cultures and literatures course. And as one of my Turkish students commented, if such a course can be taught in a conservative country like Turkey, progress in America is undeniable.

Thus, there is positive proof that change in America toward gays and lesbians is occurring, and since cinema mirrors the movements of a culture, we can see this change in theatres, at video stores, and on television channels throughout the country. I would like to address in particular three trends which have both contributed to and been popularized by this shift in perspective—the acceptance of drag, the rise of the independent film industry, and the production of documentaries about LGBT concerns.

Drag. For those who have never experienced it, I refer primarily to gay men dressing in women's clothing, makeup, jewelry, hairstyles, etc. I'm not referring to transvestite heterosexuals like British comedian Eddie Izzard or the late, great B-movie horror filmmaker Ed Wood. Instead I'm speaking of an aspect of homosexual culture which has finally become mainstream.

Drag has always been an aspect of American film comedy. The shock of the unexpected, the humor which comes from discordance, the culture's view of women or "feminine" behaviors, have led drag to be, as Douglas A. Mendini and Degen Pender note in a fun *Entertainment Weekly* article entitled "The Power of Heeling", "[D]rag may well be the oldest tradition in show business... Remember, there wouldn't have been a Juliet in Shakespeare's day without Avon calling" (22).

Think of *Charley's Aunt*, for example, the comedy hit of the London stage and Broadway, filmed with Jack Benny in 1941. Benny spends the majority of the film as Babbs, providing a chaperone to his college buddies who are trying to properly woo their girls. Or the classic 1959 Billy Wilder comedy *Some Like It Hot*, featuring Tony Curtis and Jack Lemmon as Josephine and Daphne, two musicians dressed as dames to avoid mobster George Raft. Or Dustin Hoffman as *Tootsie*, or Julie Andrews as *Victor/Victoria*, both released at the start of the AIDS epidemic in 1982.

Consider as well two of Robin Williams' biggest hits of the 1990s. In the 1993 feelgood family comedy, *Mrs. Doubtfire*, Williams dons drag for almost the entire film in order to play nanny to his children, right under ex-wife Sally Field's nose. Sure, he's a straight guy in drag, but at least it's for a noble cause. And since Hollywood loves noble dads who are slightly eccentric (think *Forrest Gump*), Williams was nominated for an Oscar. And in 1996's remake of the French farce *La Cage aux Folles*, *The Birdcage*, Williams plays it straight as a gay man whose son from his marriage is engaged to a conservative girl, and whose lover, Nathan Lane, dresses in drag to better impress the girl's parents. This was a high-powered production, directed by Mike Nichols and featuring Oscar winners Dianne Wiest and Gene Hackman, and it was also a mainstream hit. What is interesting in addition to the popularity of these films is the public's perception of these performers as heterosexuals, just giving the alternative preference a try. Hence these films were not threatening in their skittering around the edges of the "other" world.

Drag continued to be popular in the 1990s and increasingly acceptable. Perhaps it was due to the political correctness seizure which gripped the country, or greater activism in the LGBT community, or greater audience sophistication, or greater compassion for and understanding of AIDS victims, or the nostalgic 70s disco revival, or the popularity of the documentaries *Paris is Burning* (1990) and *Wigstock* (1995), or the twentieth anniversary of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. While some of the usual heterosexual ruses for the characters' wearing drag remain, a refreshing change is the occasional inclusion of a gay character in drag NOT pretending to be straight.

I've mentioned RuPaul, the 6'7" black drag queen who not only has a weekly talk show on VHI and a thriving recording career (remember "Supermodel of the World"?), but who also appears in films OUT of drag. Her positive self-image is made possible by the drag queen who opened the door for many gay actors and whose untimely death cut short a promising career—none other than the late great Divine. Her appearance as Ricki Lake's mother in John Waters' 1988 comedy *Hairspray* was played "straight" in that Divine, having made her name in Waters films like *Pink Flamingos*, *Female Trouble*, and *Polyester*, was portraying a character, and not merely herself, in a crossover film. *Hairspray* was an independent film that brought in enough money and good reviews to earn John Waters a big Hollywood budget - and Johnny Depp - for his next film, *Cry Baby* (1990). It also earned Divine a chance to appear regularly on *Married with Children*. Sadly, Divine died nine days after the film opened, but her performance as Edna Turnblad made 90s drag more acceptable.

Hollywood even remade the 1994 Australian hit, *Priscilla: Queen of the Desert*, an authentically sweet road film about three drag queens on their way to perform at a resort, as the less successful but moderately popular *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything, Julie*

Newmar in 1995. What is remarkable about this remake is the casting. Patrick Swayze as Vida, Wesley Snipes as Noxeema, and John Leguizamo as Chi Chi were able to take risks as actors which would have been unthinkable in the previous decade. Three butch boys playing three soft femmes truly represent progress.

And if Clint Eastwood can cast Black drag queen The Lady Chablis as herself in his 1997 adaptation of the John Berendt best seller, *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, then Queen Elizabeth can knight the openly gay queen Elton John.

Drag was not the only major influence upon shifting perspectives in American films concerning the depiction of gays and lesbians. The rise of independent filmmakers, whose small budgets and artistic control dominated the 90s film industry, changed Hollywood forever. Just a few of the innovations include the creation of a number of cable/satellite channels (Sundance Channel and Independent Film Channel are two major examples), the instituting of the Independent Spirit Awards and a host of new film festivals, and the domination by independent artists of the Academy Awards over the last few years (*Shakespeare in Love*, *Gods and Monsters*, *Shine* to mention a few films). If *The Blair Witch Project*, made for approximately \$400,000, can become a nationwide and now worldwide hit, grossing by summer's end \$130 million, there must be room for all kinds of alternative filmmakers, i.e., gays and lesbians.

Alexander Doty notes in his essay "Queer Theory" that in actuality, "'New Queer Cinema' is most (or only) possible within non-mainstream production...that is within avant-garde, documentary, and other independently produced alternative-to-traditional narrative forms"(149).

Beginning with 1990's timely and powerful *Longtime Companion*, the independent film scene has been the most honest venue for the LGBT community. Granted, studio-made *Philadelphia* (1993) won a lot of Oscars for a lot of people and made AIDS more understandable to the mainstream audience, but it also fails to show a kiss between lovers Tom Hanks and Antonio Banderas. Adaptations of popular Broadway shows, including *Jeffrey* (1995) and *Love! Valour! Compassion!* (1997) utilized Hollywood names and money but didn't receive the kind of publicity campaigns the studios reserve for mainstream entertainment. It is to the non-studio productions where one could look to see authentic visions of gay/lesbian life made by people, straight and gay, who were and are a part of that community.

Consider for example *It's My Party* (1996), starring Eric Roberts as a man dying of AIDS who throws a farewell party for himself and his loved ones, at the end of which he commits suicide, a decision viewed in the film as legitimate and humane. This independent film was important enough to attract a variety of interesting cast members, including the straight Roberts and Michael Ontkean, as well as Lee Grant and Olivia Newton-John.

A number of gay-themed films appeared in the independent camp, including *My Own Private Idaho* (1991) with Keanu Reeves and the late River Phoenix, *Swoon* (a 1992 retelling of the Leopold and Loeb murders), and *Billy's Hollywood Screen Kiss* (a 1998 comedy about a young gay actor trying to make it in more ways than one. Billy Bob Thornton's 1997 Oscar winner *Sling Blade* was particularly important, according to Alan Frutkin and Anne Stockwell in *The Advocate*, in that it offered John Ritter as a "small-town gay everyman whose

unconditional love extends to the woman he never bedded and the son he never fathered” (37).

Lesbian film also caught fire during the 90’s, however. There had been occasional forays into lesbiania, such as John Sayles’ groundbreaking 1983 *Lianna* and the popular 1985 film *Desert Hearts*. But lesbian voices hadn’t been heard as loudly as those of gay men. Perhaps the explanation offered by Margaret Reynolds for silent *literary* lesbian voices, in her introduction to *The Penguin Book of Lesbian Short Stories*, works for silent lesbian *film* voices as well: “Lesbian history and gay history are not parallel...The practice of homosexuality between men was considered dangerous and disruptive...But lesbianism is about women, and all ideas to do with women include an ideology of difference which is generally an ideology of presumed inferiority” (xiv).

This changed in the 1990s in American film, albeit not in the same numbers as men. After all, boys still run things in the US. However, the 1997 romantic tragicomedy, *Chasing Amy*, addressed the problems Ben Affleck encounters when he falls in love with Joey Lauren Adams, who happens to be a lesbian. 1994’s *Go Fish*, directed by out lesbian Rose Troche and cowritten by Troche and out lesbian Guinevere Turner offers a humorous look at a group of women trying with varying success to date with other women. It’s a romantic comedy, and the women’s sexual preference is incidental. 1994 also produced *Bar Girls*, another comedy about a group of pals who hang out at the same bar and who happen to be lesbians. *The Incredibly True Adventures of Two Girls in Love* (1995) addressed the problems two teenage girls encounter when they discover they are falling for one another AND happen to be checkerboard chicks—black and white. *Boys on the Side* (1995), while a Hollywood studio film, featured Whoopi Goldberg as a lesbian traveling with two gal pals, one of whom has AIDS, in a subversion of the male *On the Road* and gay/AIDS genre. The thriller *Bound* (1996) featured Jennifer Tilly and Gina Gershon as partners in crime—and as lovers. *Set It Off* (1996 also) offers up African-American rap diva Queen Latifah as a *very* butch dyke bank robber. Ally Sheedy won the best actress award at Cannes for her portrayal of a troubled lesbian artist in *High Art* (1998).

However, 1999’s fictional version of Brandon Teena’s life (the young woman who passed as a man and was murdered when discovered), *Boys Don’t Cry*, was the real breakthrough film for the lesbian community. The film earned acclaim from mainstream and LGBT critics, and Hilary Swank as Brandon Teena/Teena Brandon won both the Golden Globe and the Academy Award for best actress.

And lest we forget, Ellen DeGeneres’ lover Anne Heche appeared after coming out in 1998’s *Six Days, Seven Nights* with Harrison Ford and in the *Psycho* remake as a hetero female.

While television doesn’t strictly count as independent film, John Hill notes in his essay “Film and Television,” “[A]n alliance between film and television has provided... the [form] most likely to offer a culturally distinctive alternative to Hollywood norms, by drawing on television’s public-service traditions and speaking to their own cultures in ways that Hollywood films, aimed at a global market, cannot” (609-10).

Two major films to come from the wee box were very important in terms of lesbian visibility and viability. Glenn Close and Judy Davis co-starred in 1995’s *Serving in Silence*,

the biography of Army officer Marguerite Cammermeyer who was forced to leave the military when she revealed she was lesbian. Anjelica Houston's directing debut, *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1996), based on Dorothy Allison's autobiographical novel, was too daring for the original producer, HBO, and was finally shown on Showtime.

Finally, in addition to the acceptance of drag and the rise of independent film as a venue for gay/lesbian films and filmmakers, the growth of interest in documentaries led to a plethora of valuable and fascinating examinations of LGBT culture in America. Perhaps the interest comes from our increased fascination with celebrities, or from the obvious fact that truth really IS stranger than fiction. Perhaps it is because the present youth generation is looking back nostalgically at the disco era of the 1970s and investigating those years. Programs like A&E Biography and Unsolved Mysteries, daytime talk shows from Jerry Springer to Oprah Winfrey, televised and sensational trials like those of OJ Simpson and Bill Clinton, and pseudo-journalistic endeavors like *Hard Copy* and Geraldo Rivera all contribute to our hunger for self-examination. One of the benefits was the wider venue for homosexual-themed documentaries.

Three films dealing with the inception of the gay liberation movement arrived--*Before Stonewall* (1984) and *After Stonewall* (1999). Stonewall refers to the gay bar in NYC which had been raided repeatedly by police until, in June 1969, three days of rioting ensued after a raid and the contemporary gay civil rights effort began in full force. *Coming Out Under Fire* (1994) relates movingly the stories of men and women serving in silence in the military during WWII.

Three films addressing the issues of homosexuality as perceived by children and experienced by adolescents also appeared. *It's Elementary* (1996) examines ways that homosexual culture can be introduced in k-8th grade classrooms. *Out of the Past* (1998) discusses the efforts of Kelli Petersen, a Utah Mormon, to introduce a gay/straight alliance group at her high school in Salt Lake City. *The Brandon Teena Story* (1998) tells the tragedy of this aforementioned young woman's murder in documentary format.

A very important film which surveyed the history of gays and lesbians in film was 1995's *The Celluloid Closet*, based on the late Vito Russo's film history of the depiction of the community in Hollywood and narrated by Lily Tomlin. It's both an inspiring and frustrating look at the stereotypes embraced by filmmakers and the slow but steady breaking of censorship "taboos." Featuring both gay and straight actors, writers, directors and producers, *TCC* demonstrates very clearly the power that cinema has in defining ourselves and the world around us.

Are images of the LGBT community more fairly represented in American cinema as we enter the twenty first century? Absolutely. But we must be aware that strides made in the 90s can be easily reversed; the feminist movement certainly learned about that backlash potential the hard way. Filmgoers must remain conscious and stay on the alert. As Susan Sarandon notes in *TCC*, "Movies are important; and they're dangerous because we're the keepers of the dreams. You go into a little dark room and become incredibly vulnerable. On the one hand, all your perspectives can be challenged. You can feel something you couldn't feel normally. [They] can encourage you to be the protagonist in your own life. On the other hand, [they] can

completely misshape you.” And, she might have added, movies can enlighten or misshape an entire culture.

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