



Invited Expert Commentary

Queer Depictions in American Cinema: Assumed Identities

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Abstract

Like most aspects of homosexuality, depictions of gay 'lifestyles' and identities were rare in any public forum in the United States, including cinema, prior to the Stonewall Uprising on June 28, 1969. The subject was treated in most social and academic circles as too vulgar for discussion, let alone depiction, and there was a genuine fear that the very discussion of homosexual behavior would encourage it among those who had never before considered it. In this environment, those who sensed in themselves an attraction to members of the same sex, or any other anomalous gender identity leanings, had only rumor and scandal to inform their sense of identity. For many queer individuals the derogatory descriptions and condemnation that such stories perpetrated resulted in them assuming negatives identities, often leading to self-hatred and sometimes-attempted suicide. This essay will look at the effect of emergent queer cinema and depictions of non-heterosexuals in mainstream cinema on the self-image and psychological well-being of those who identify as queer.

Keywords: Homosexuality, Queer, USA, American Cinema, Assumed Identities

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Prevailing Views on Queer Identities in America

There can be no doubt that a turning point in American attitudes toward homosexuality (and related gender identity issues) was reached when, as a U.S. presidential candidate in 1992, Bill Clinton voiced support for LGBT rights.^[1] A predictable, though often ignored,

result of the ensuing liberalization of American attitudes toward their queer compatriots has been the assimilation of the latter into mainstream culture. There is no better place to observe large-scale social change than in television and cinema, two realms where creative minds strive diligently to reflect back to us the lives we are living.

There is however, ongoing debate within the American queer community as to whether such assimilation is a positive^[2] or negative^[3] development for queer culture. For those individuals who do not knowingly have any queer friends or family, the media^[4] is often the only source of information on what it means to be queer. Cinema in particular can have a profound effect on society's shifting attitudes,^[5] for better or worse.

Cinema Before Stonewall

In the years prior to the Stonewall Uprising, a night upon which gay men-many in drag-resisted what had become habitual police harassment of patrons at a neighborhood pub in New York's Greenwich Village,^[6] queer individuals had rarely, if ever, seen people like themselves on television. Likewise, any depiction on the Silver Screen until that point, had been allusive at best, never spoken or named, and almost without exception negative.^[7] Gay men dominated these depictions, one assumes, perhaps because such were seen as more salacious and threatening to the almost exclusively male writers, directors, and producers of the day. Lesbians-or what heterosexual men thought of as lesbians-if they were shown at all, were often merely sex objects and fantasies of straight men. They were rarely seen as existing apart from the men who desired them, and the relationship was often inferred.^[8] The loneliness, desperation, and unlikability of such characters also informed the

identities of many real-life queer individuals.

Allusive Depictions

The years following World War II saw many films in which cross dressing men played drag for comedy. Cary Grant in 'I Was A Male War Bride' (1949),^[9] Tony Curtis and Jack Lemon in 'Some Like It Hot' (1959),^[10] and a slew of Jerry Lewis films from 1950-1956 are the most notable examples.^[11]

Non-Comedic Queer Characters.

Alfred Hitchcock, one of the most respected and prolific directors of his time, hinted at a gay male relationship^[12] in the psychological thriller 'Rope' (1948)^[13] is a dramatic imagining of the murder of a 14-year-old boy by real-life roommates Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb.^[14] While a homosexual relationship is never specified, the sub text is clearly there, the message overwhelmingly negative to those who found it: gay men are dangerous psychopaths preying on innocent boys.

This stereotype is teased out to its most gruesome conclusion in Suddenly, 'Last Summer' (1959),^[15] wherein Sebastian (portrayed by the bisexual-but-closeted Montgomery Clift)^[16] uses his beautiful cousin Catherine to lure young boys for sex during an island holiday. The plot centers on Catherine's recovery from the trauma she experiences after witnessing the boys mob, kill, and eat Sebastian. The unmistakable message: the homosexual got what he deserved.

Sympathetic Depictions

Sympathetic depictions of gay men prior to Stonewall were rare and, again, mostly allusive.^[17] The most notable film that avoids judgement of male-male love is 'Lawrence of Arabia' (1962).^[18] Lawrence, of course, is a classic: the dramatic re-enactment of T. E. Lawrence's involvement in the 1916 Arab Revolt on behalf of the British Crown. Co-written by Lawrence himself, the film avoids any explicit homosexual engagement (just as Lawrence himself denied any such activity in his own life), but the film makers didn't shy away from male-male intimacy and love between Lawrence and his beloved friend Sherif Ali. In fact, Director David Lean later said, "Throughout, Lawrence was very, if not entirely, homosexual. We thought we were being very daring at the time...."^[19]

Cinema After Stonewall

The news depictions that emerged from the Stonewall Inn of drag queens resisting uniformed police officers and subsequently being manhandled into waiting paddy wagons, electrified a largely closeted American gay population. For many in the audience, particularly teens and adolescents, it was the first acknowledgement that there were others like themselves in the world, actually gathering together in public places to socialize. It was also the first time anyone in America had seen queer-identified individuals fight back against an authority that demonized them.^[20] It gave LGBTQ Americans a new paradigm and led to the adoption of new proactive identities.

In 1970, just a year after Stonewall, *The Boys in the Band*^[21] became the first Hollywood film to address gay (men's) lives head on. It remains a watershed moment for the queer community.^{[22][23]} While it was, by today's standards, rife with stereotypes and bitchy, miserable gay characters, it opened the door to film makers who wished to depict non-heterosexual lives without sub text and inuendo. Queer people no longer had to be pathetic, villainous, or ridiculous; they could be seen as average, flawed individuals, like anyone else.

Unveiled But Unsympathetic

Capitalizing on the nascent 'gay liberation' movement that arose from Stonewall, film makers in the 1970s no longer felt the need to hide the queer identities of their characters. But homosexuality was still illegal in many states throughout the decade. As a result, film makers felt the need to tread carefully in their depictions of queer characters so as not to offend industry censors or, more importantly, the paying mainstream movie goer. While queer Americans were finally seeing themselves on the big screen, the characters they saw were often not fully realized and still not allowed happy endings.

Twisted and Tragic

Transgender visibility hit cinema in a big way in 1970 with the release of *The Christine Jorgensen Story*,^[24] a dramatized biography of a male-to-female woman, documenting the transition from her point of view. While the film was profoundly

educational and ground breaking in its honesty, producers felt it necessary to titillate mainstream audiences with tabloid-headline-emulating promotional art that screamed “Did the surgeon's knife make me a woman or a freak?”^[25]

Transgender issues were also played for comedy in 1971's *Myra Breckinridge*.^[26] One could argue that the saving grace of this film was that it was panned as “one of the worst films ever made”^[27] and, as such, didn't gain a wide audience.

‘*Cruising*’ (1980),^[28] starring Al Pacino, marked a low point in depictions of gay men, featuring a serial killer in the leather community. Gay men were again seen as victims, getting what they deserved at the hands of one of their own, simply for having the audacity to engage in sex.

I remember celebrating when, just two years later, ‘*Making Love*’^[29] became the first mainstream film to portray two men in love (rather than just lust or infatuation),^[30] and actually showed them in bed together. Scenes were post-coital, of course, as sex between men was still too much for straight audiences to contemplate. But even in this film, the focus was on the betrayed wife and the selfish behavior of her cheating husband.

By the end of the 80s, a queer identity was still not seen as mainstream or normal: LGBTQ people, according to Hollywood depictions, did not shop, do

laundry, raise kids, and work nine-to-five office jobs. Queers were still anomalies and outsiders.

Cinema Verité: HIV/AIDS

As tragic as it was, the HIV/AIDS pandemic was a watershed moment for queer cinema.^[31] It also marked a turning point, albeit a gradual one, in the depiction of gay men in mainstream cinema. Hollywood was still portraying gay men as victims, often pathetic, and where AIDS was concerned-implied that their suffering was a natural result of their own choices. The difference however, in films such as the made-for-TV *An Early Frost* (1985),^[32] was the empathy that depictions of bedridden, dying men elicited in straight audiences. Even if you believed that gay sex was sinful, it was hard not to shed a few tears as a sympathetic gay character slipped away. Straight people could relate to the loss, and the queer community began to feel their empathy.

Queer film makers seized upon the AIDS crisis to tell their side of the story, often with more nuance and honesty than was allowed in mainstream cinema. Just a year after *An Early Frost*, the queer-made *Parting Glances*^[33] painted a much more realistic picture of urban gay life, including a character with AIDS who faced his own death without the suburban-family love offered in *Frost*. It failed to gain much of a mainstream audience however.

Hollywood wasted no time in capitalizing on mainstream empathy-a

full decade into the AIDS pandemic -with the release of *Longtime Companion* (1989),^[34] a cinematic diary of the demise of a man with AIDS, from diagnosis to death. With numerous household names among the cast, it finally laid bare for queer and mainstream audiences alike, with unflinching honesty, the tragic nature of the disease.

Post-AIDS Cinema

Once AZT and other drug “cocktails” began to transform AIDS into a manageable disease rather than a death sentence,^[35] depictions of queer life in cinema began to change as well. The newly found voices of queer film makers that the AIDS pandemic brought to the fore during the 80s led to the depiction of other facets of queer life-predominantly that of gay men-during the early 90s. Many early queer stories were coming-of-age dramas about coming out. But the subject matter soon became much more diverse.

New Queer Cinema

As queer film makers broadened the scope of their stories and the quality of their film making entered the professional realm, the term *New Queer Cinema*^[36] was used to describe the phenomenon.

One of the first in this new category was Todd Haynes's *Poison* (1991),^[37] a sci-fi horror anthology loosely based on the novels of Jean Genet. Here, the stories departed from the heretofore chronicling of gay experiences, telling larger tales into which gay characters were seamlessly woven. It marked the “normalization” of the queer

individual as just another character in the story.

The Lost Language of Cranes (1991),^[38] a British family drama, is one of the only queer films-before or since-to deal with cross-generational queer identities in one household: a bisexual father and a gay son, both struggling with the challenges of their identities and their relationship to each other.

The documentary ‘*Paris is Burning*’ (1991)^[39] chronicled for the first time on film the “ball culture” of actual drag queens (as opposed to Hollywood caricatures) and, more importantly, revealed to both queer and straight audiences, the diversity of queer culture. The film featured numerous Black, Latino, and transgender individuals. In 2016, the film was selected for preservation in the United States National Film Registry by the Library of Congress as being “culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant.”^[40] Queer identities were here revealed in all their diversity.

Post-Pandemic Hollywood

Hollywood, always ready to capitalize on social trends, was quick to jump on the bandwagon with its own films about queer lives. Still cautious, aware of the sensibilities of straight audiences, film makers started offering gay characters and subplots that were no longer accusatory or incendiary. Queer observers were finally to see themselves in a broader range of more ordinary identities.

Modern Depictions

In the 25 years since New Queer Cinema broadened the range of queer characters depicted in American cinema, they have evolved from Hollywood's anomalous freaks and quirky sidekicks to fully realized individuals appearing in all facets of life. American cinema, whether mainstream, indie, or queer, now offers us a wide diversity of stories featuring queer protagonists and supporting roles.

Just two years ago, *Moonlight*,^[41] a coming of age story about a gay Black man, won the Oscar for Best Picture, as well as two others. This would have been unthinkable just 20 years earlier. Indeed, it was stunning even in 2017. A year later, *Call Me By Your Name*,^[42] a story about a gay adult-teen summer romance, won the Oscar for Best Adapted Screenplay. In previous decades such a story would have been called obscene and would never have made it into theaters, let alone receive Hollywood's highest honor.

Conclusion

In a 2016 essay,^[43] political scholar Catherine McClaren points out, "Stereotypical images have a particularly powerful effect on adolescents who seek representation of themselves in media and develop their own personalities based on the expectations they see on the screen."

As a queer youth in the 1960s, my perceptions—like those of many in my generation—of what it meant to

be gay were shaped not by experience (for we were too young to have much) but by what we saw on the Silver Screen. (Television censorship prevented that medium from contributing queer images for consideration). And what we saw was not positive. As Sky Gilbert, Professor of English and Theatre Studies at the University of Guelph, Ontario, tells us, "It is in media representations of gay men that... 'stealth homophobia' most clearly shows its face."^[44]

Yet, as stereotypes have given way to more diverse and more accurate portrayals of queer lives in American cinema, it has altered not only the attitudes of mainstream audiences, it has also changed the way we see ourselves in the queer community. As McClaren says, "film [has a] dual role as reflector and influencer of society."^[43]

Art imitates life, life imitates art. It's hard to tell in which direction this maxim is most evident. In the case of queer identities, both happen simultaneously. A film maker, queer or straight, depicts the queer experience onscreen. Thousands of LGBTQ individuals perceive this depiction as representative of themselves, internalizing either permissive or prohibitive mores, aligning their behaviors and identities with those depicted. With each succeeding generation, these depictions, and the mores they engender, become more diverse and inclusive. There is no longer a single queer identity in film and television. Of course, there never was in real

life. Moviegoers are finally able to see that.

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