



WHITE KNIGHT

MILK

BY GUS VAN SANT

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IN MANY WAYS, IT SEEMS that the release of Gus Van Sant's biopic of the San Francisco activist Harvey Milk could not have been better timed. Its depiction of organizing against the 1978 Briggs Initiative, or Proposition 6—which would have banned gay teachers and their supporters from California public schools—cannot but resonate with the firestorm against 2008's antigay marriage Proposition 8 in the same state: The sense of urgency, the sign-carrying crowds, the language of equality.

The film also resonates with a political feeling of today. In light of Barack Obama's victory, we're at a moment in which activists, organizers, and writers are thinking again about the relationship between social movements and electoral politics, individual careers and population needs. Questions of vision and radicalism, as well as cooptation and centrism, are in the air.

If the emotional spark of the film feels especially sharp, so do its failures. The disappointments of *Milk* are the disappointments of politics today. The way the fires of desire and anger burn out, or are put out. How sexism and racism undermine true collective solidarity. How legal reform comes to absorb mass movements that once dreamt of something else, something more. As Armond White writes in his review, "focusing on Milk gives the movement a white idol," effectively erasing the work and lives of people of color. *Milk* joins the exclusive company of movies like *Boys Don't Cry* and *Brokeback Mountain*, part of a Hollywood mainstreaming of LGBT identity. Only white stories of pain and tragedy—and occasional triumph—make the cut, excising colored bodies from the cinematic frame.

This whitewashing of LGBT history gets a special insidious kick from the Proposition 8 moment. Within days of the film's release, in response to the ballot initiative's passage, the gay magazine *The Advocate* proclaimed on its cover "Gay Is the New Black." This statement encapsulates the structural racism behind the Proposition 8 moment—the erasure and marginalization of queers of color, the simplistic reduction of people's struggles to battles for formal legal equality, and

the glossing over of the differences between homophobia and racism, differences that allow for a gay rights agenda to be rooted in racism and white supremacy.

The biopic serves to canonize the individual, and consolidate a historical narrative. In this case, the danger is that a certain white gay male history will be enshrined as the story of LGBT liberation. In language that echoes Obama's, *Milk*'s hero asserts, "I am not a candidate. I am part of a movement. The movement is the candidate." The tensions of the film are about this—negotiating a system that atomizes individuals in terms of interest-groups, and often promotes individuals at the expense of collective needs and goals.

LATENT HOPE

Halfway through the film, Milk's nemesis, conservative Christian celebrity Anita Bryant, campaigns successfully for the repeal of an anti-discrimination ordinance in Wichita. When an outraged mass of people spontaneously take to the streets in San Francisco, Milk seemingly defers leadership to his young protégé, Cleve Jones. This is not an abdication of authority. Milk instructs Jones to lead the march toward City Hall, where he himself races on motorcycle. As the angry crowd arrives at the steps, Milk is able to emerge from within... to pacify the crowd. He is both their hero, demonstrating their collective progress—and the hero of City Hall, calming the masses before any damage is done. In this moment, despite itself, the film expresses a bit of cynicism. What does Milk gain from this moment? Also revealed is a latent hope, deferred. What might have happened had he not intervened?

This scene captures the painful limitations felt by queer and trans people today who watch as the professed victories of gay rights (hate-crimes, marriage, and anti-discrimination laws) deliver little to all but the assimilable few. This, in the midst of expanding wealth gaps, immigration enforcement, and incarceration. As legal recognition of gay people is extended simultaneously with the neoliberal nightmare, we become the liberal face of a United States that claims to be spreading liberty, equality, and democracy around the world... through massacre. The image we get of Milk as a clean-shaven container and substitute for mass queer rage foreshadows the current movement crisis. Today, somehow, the gay rights agenda has become aligned with the police (hate-crimes laws), conservative normativity (marriage), and militarism (armed-forces inclusion, as well as the sudden, questionably-timed interest in stopping Iran's alleged gay executions).

We have nostalgia for the queers of the 1960s and 1970s. We want to believe it was a time when sexual and gender outsiders aligned with other marginalized groups targeted by the cops, taking to the streets, engaging in solidarity, openly critiquing US militarism at home and abroad. The 2005 documentary *Screaming Queens*, about the 1966 battle of trans people against the police in San Francisco's Tenderloin, offers valuable evidence of this other narrative.

Milk largely depicts something else, something that looks more like gay rights politics today. Whether it's calling for

police to protect “us” by prosecuting our attackers; or for the election of business leaders who assert an alliance with other oppressed people—or not—depending on considerations of interest-group voting blocs.

Milk provides an opportunity to examine our hopes for a mass-based people-powered queer and trans liberation framework, a chance to challenge the elitism, legalism, and white supremacy that have dominated the gay rights paradigm for too long. Can we take stock of how these strategies have failed and divided us, and reinvent alternative, comprehensive approaches? Can we figure out how to use James Franco’s unbearably-hot mustache in anti-racist, anti-imperialist movement-building that ends coercive gender and sexual norms?

—*Dean Spade & Craig Willse*