

QUEER IMAGES

A HISTORY OF GAY AND LESBIAN FILM IN AMERICA

HARRY M. BENSHOFF & SEAN GRIFFIN



Queer Images

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This book was first proposed to us as a volume that would update and theoretically complicate Vito Russo's *The Celluloid Closet*. It was to extend the scope of queer film inquiry into the twenty-first century, bring queer theory to bear on film history, include original scholarship, and yet also be accessible to students and interested lay readers. While that seemed then (and still does seem) a rather daunting task, we hope that we have produced a book that at least comes close to those goals—a book that will be useful to many different people interested in queer film studies. Helping us in this endeavor has been a series of editors at Rowman & Littlefield, including Leonard Leff,

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INTRODUCTION



What Is Queer Film History?



Hedwig (John Cameron Mitchell) and Yitzhak (Miriam Shor) form a very queer couple in *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2001). New Line / The Kobal Collection / Sophie Giraud

This book examines what American films, for the last one hundred years or so, have led us to believe about human sexuality. Its central focus is on the cinematic representation of homosexuality, but it also explores how other forms of sexuality have been represented and understood throughout the years, for as we shall argue, human sexuality is not a singular thing (heterosexuality), nor is it a choice between two singular things (either heterosexuality or homosexuality). Human sexuality is multiple, varying, and diverse, and in recent years the term *queer* has been brought into the academic lexicon to acknowledge and describe this multiplicity of sexualities—sexualities that encompass both straight and gay but also the vast gray areas between them as well as the sexualities that might lie beyond them. A queer film history then is an attempt to show how this range of human sexualities has been represented on American movie screens. Why is this important? Because the movies have taught us what it means to be heroic or villainous, masculine or feminine, heterosexual or homosexual. The movies, as one aspect of the vast popular-culture industry, influence how we think about ourselves and the world around us. As Ellis Hanson succinctly puts it in his introduction to *Out Takes: Essays on Queer Theory and Film*, “the study of film is especially important to questions of desire, identification, fantasy, representation, spectatorship, cultural appropriation, performativity, and mass consumption.”¹ In other words, films are cultural artifacts that are intricately connected to our understanding of (among other things) gender, sexuality, history, and identity.

In fact, it is within the sphere of popular culture that many people probably learn what they do know about sex and sexuality, because even in contemporary American culture there is still a great reticence to talk about it openly. While Madison Avenue advertising executives use sex to sell everything from tires to toenail clippers, and while many film and television shows trade on sexual titillation to sell tickets or increase viewership, there is still a taboo about talking about sex and sexuality in calm, rational terms—to try to understand it in all of its personal, social, political, and physical ramifications. America is, collectively, still a giggling adolescent when it comes to sex. In fact, conservative forces in our society regularly attempt to punish those who do dare to talk about it. When Joycelyn Elders—our nation’s first African American female surgeon general—suggested that we as a nation might want to have rational conversations with high school students about masturbation, she was promptly fired. In 2003, a conservative “think tank” actively lobbied the National Institute of Health to drop its funding for various researches on human sexuality.² The military’s “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy, designed to formalize the exact ways that gay and lesbian service

members can and should be discriminated against, might also be understood generally as our national motto about sexuality. Many high school health classes still do not discuss human sexuality, and when they do, many refuse to acknowledge its complexity and ignore important information about queer sexualities and birth control. “Abstinence only” sex education programs, increasingly instituted throughout the nation’s schools by conservative religious groups, teach young people to “just say no” to sex, without really teaching them what sex or sexuality is in the first place.

Partly, these silences, fears, and confusions about sexuality are the result of our nation’s Puritan heritage—many people still consider sex and sexuality to be taboo topics. Many people fear sex and sexuality, understanding it only within a religious framework that condemns it as sinful. This approach keeps many Americans ignorant of the basic terms and historical conditions of human sexuality. People still confuse sex with gender, gender with sexuality, and seem to have very little knowledge of nonstraight sexualities (except perhaps for the “fact” that “queer eyes” allegedly have better fashion sense than straight ones). Thus, before we begin to examine the various ways that sexuality has been represented on American movie screens, we need to be sure that we understand the basic terms and concepts used by contemporary scholars when discussing human sexuality.

Sexuality 101

Sexuality is broadly defined as “the quality or state of being sexual,” but in recent years it has come to mean one’s sexual orientation—to whom or what is one sexually attracted? Most commonly, this broad state of being sexual is limited in Western cultures to two choices: people are encouraged to self-identify as either straight (heterosexual) or gay (homosexual). By contemporary definitions, homosexual people are attracted to members of their own sex, while heterosexual people are attracted to members of the “opposite” sex. (The term *opposite sex* is itself problematic, creating a strict, essentialist binary between men and women when in fact many people are born intersexed or create identities for themselves that combine aspects of both male and female, masculinity and femininity.) The terms *homosexual* and *heterosexual* were first coined within the medical literature a little more than one hundred years ago, but they did not enter the public vocabulary until roughly the middle of the twentieth century. Until then, the public had other terms to describe various types of human sexuality. Throughout the first part of the twentieth century, the term *gay* was used to refer to any form of sexuality practiced outside wedlock. Thus, living “the gay life” did not necessarily

mean that one was homosexual but rather that one was sexually active outside of procreative monogamy. However, the meaning of *gay* has narrowed over the years, and by the rise of the homosexual civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s, *gay* became the label that many self-identified homosexual men chose to describe themselves. Similarly, many female homosexuals of the era began using the term *lesbian* to self-identify. *Gay* and *lesbian* were preferred by this new generation of open queers because the term *homosexual* had lingering negative connotations—suggestions of medical pathology and psychiatric abnormality.

Initially, both *heterosexuality* and *homosexuality* were coined by nineteenth-century sexologists to describe abnormal medical conditions, since the only “normal” or healthy sexuality was thought to be procreative genital intercourse between legally wed men and women.³ Some researchers used the term *heterosexuality* to name behaviors that we might today call *bisexual*. For others, heterosexuality was the disease of people being attracted to and having sex with members of the opposite sex without the benefit of clergy or state sanction, while homosexuality was the disease of people being attracted to and having sex with members of their own sex. The term *heterosexuality* lost its negative, pathological meaning far faster than did *homosexuality*. By the middle of the twentieth century, heterosexual sex outside of marriage had become a fairly “normal” practice, although it was still frowned upon by many moral leaders. Homosexuality, however, was understood by most professionals (and everyday people) to be a terrible medical condition, until 1974, when the American Psychiatric Association removed it from its official list of mental disorders.⁴ Today, neither heterosexuality nor homosexuality is considered a disease by the medical community, although one can still find instances of “homosexuality as sickness” rhetoric in many antigay platforms. Obviously, the meanings of the terms *heterosexuality*, *homosexuality*, *straight*, *gay*, and *lesbian* have shifted a great deal over the decades. Those changes are themselves a direct reflection of the idea that human sexuality is itself not a static thing but rather a fluid, ever-changing aspect of human life for which new words need to be coined on a regular basis.

The “invention” of the terms *heterosexual* and *homosexual* had further ramifications for our present-day understanding of sexuality. Those terms, for the first time, began to be used to label specific types of people and not just sexual behaviors. The continual use of the terms, as they evolved throughout the twentieth century, also implied a binary opposition between them, suggesting that a clear line could be drawn between people labeled *homosexual* and those labeled *heterosexual*. However, when one examines the reality of human sexuality, one finds a wide range of sexual behaviors that go far be-

yond this simple binary. Early sexologists such as Sigmund Freud and Sandor Ferenczi argued as much when they theorized sexuality as protean and fluid, and Dr. Alfred Kinsey's famous sex studies of the mid-twentieth century indicated that many (if not most) people engage in both homosexual and heterosexual acts and/or desires at some point in their lives.⁵ In fact, in an attempt to restructure the way we think about human sexuality, Kinsey proposed a six-point scale of human sexuality, with exclusive heterosexuality and exclusive homosexuality on either end of the continuum, and suggested that most human beings would fall somewhere in between. Today, the term *bisexual* is used (both in the medical literature and in everyday life) to describe someone who is attracted to both men and women. Yet it is a testament to the power of binary thinking that many people—both straight and gay—refuse to acknowledge the validity of bisexuality, insisting that such people must either be “really gay” or “really straight.” (The relative box-office failure of the biopic *Kinsey* [2004] may be partly due to its frank dramatization of such ideas; traditionally, sex only sells when it is heterosexual.)

If sexuality is indeed fluid—if most people have aspects of homosexual as well as heterosexual desire somewhere within them—it would explain some forms of what psychological researchers have named *homophobia*: the extreme fear and hatred of homosexuality. *Homophobia* is often used interchangeably with *heterosexism*, the more pervasive belief that heterosexuality is better than homosexuality. (As we shall see, most American culture, including its movies, has been and continues to be heterosexist to the extent that it rarely even acknowledges anything but heterosexuality.) Homophobia is a more extreme form of belief and behavior than is heterosexism, and clinical homophobia is often thought to be marked by an individual's conflict with his or her own desires. Either consciously or unconsciously, homophobic individuals compulsively denigrate homosexuals or homosexuality as a way of quelling anxiety about their own same-sex feelings. A behavioral study in 1995 presented scientific proof of this theory, concluding that homophobic individuals have higher levels of homosexual arousal than do their nonhomophobic counterparts.⁶ This theory is also born out in many cases of actual gay bashing and murder—it is often revealed that the perpetrators of such crimes have conflicted or repressed homosexual desires themselves. The murder at the end of *American Beauty* (1999) dramatized these ideas brilliantly: a retired military officer shoots a man who has awakened his homosexual desire, partly in order to maintain his “straight” identity but also to quell his own homosexual impulses.

As a way to acknowledge these complex issues of human sexuality, and to problematize the simple straight-gay binary, recent theorists and researchers

have begun to use *queer* as a collective term to describe the vast array of human sexualities that actually exist outside of monogamous heterosexual procreative intercourse. A quick peek at contemporary video pornography or Internet porn sites certainly reveals a world of human sexuality far beyond the simple hetero-homo binary. One such site breaks down human sexuality into the following categories: anal, bondage/ domination, sadomasochism, celebrity, one-on-one, threeways, group sex, exhibitionism, voyeurism, fetishism, first time, gay male, lesbian, bisexual, incest, interracial, wives, mature, mind control, nonconsent, nonhuman (aliens, ghosts, androids), animals, romance, toys, cross-dressers, transsexuals, and extreme. Clearly, human beings engage in sexual fantasies or sexual acts that the straight-gay binary cannot begin to encompass. For example, what label should we put on group sex? If the group comprises only one sex, then one might still describe this arrangement as homosexual. But what about a group-sex scene comprising men and women together? Are the participants still heterosexual, or are they now something else? An amusing scene occurs in *Auto Focus* (2002), a film about the life and death of 1960s television actor Bob Crane. Reviewing a videotape of a recent orgy in which he participated, Crane is shocked to discover his heterosexual buddy's hand on his butt. Does this make Crane gay? His buddy? What about the two women in the scene—should they now be considered lesbians? The term *heterosexual orgy* is something of an oxymoron, as it is part of the design of such an arrangement for sexual desire and pleasure to flow from person to person without regard to gender. Group sex is queer sex.

What about men who have sex with men but still label themselves *heterosexual*? This happens in racial and ethnic subcultures, prisons, frat houses, the military, and the porno industry where “heterosexual” actors are sometimes “gay for pay.” What about two young women who kiss on the dance floor to turn on their respective boyfriends? Men or boys who masturbate together? A woman who uses a strap-on dildo to penetrate her husband? All nonprocreative sexual acts, such as oral and anal sex, are queer sexual acts because they upset the idea that the only “normal” sex is procreative intercourse between husband and wife. Sadomasochistic sexualities, regardless of who enacts them, are also queer. Medical technologies such as cloning and artificial insemination can also be considered queer, since they confound or expand upon “normal” procreative sexuality. Similarly, fantastic sexualities, such as those of the vampire or the monstrous sexual creatures sometimes found in Japanese comics and animé, are also queer. Consider this more realistic situation: If a self-identified lesbian and a self-identified gay man come together and have procreative intercourse, is this an act of heterosexuality, homosexuality, or something else altogether?

The use of the term *queer* exposes the inadequacy of the straight-gay binary and the power hierarchies involved in it. For example, both heterosexual and homosexual couples can and do engage in anal sexualities; however, within heterosexist thinking, anal intercourse is often associated with gay men and branded disgusting, profane, or bestial. The fact that—in terms of sheer numbers—there are probably more heterosexuals than homosexuals practicing anal sex is hidden by the straight-gay binary, which tends to suggest an understanding of human sexuality strictly divided between “normal” heterosexuals and “deviant” homosexuals. Queer theory insists that there is a general overlap between all forms of human sexuality—and that all forms of sexuality are shaped by the words and images we use to describe them. Queer theory suggests that social discourses—such as those spoken by the legal, medical, and religious establishments—play a large role in shaping our understanding of sexuality. The law classifies sex as criminal or legal; medicine and psychiatry classify it as diseased or normal, while religion understands sex as either sinful or (much more rarely) holy. In order to truly understand sexuality, one must acknowledge how those frameworks have shaped its meanings throughout history. Different cultures, different eras, and different individuals all explain and experience human sexuality in different ways.

Matters of human sexuality get even more complicated when one considers issues of gender identity. Gender refers to the social roles that any given culture expects its men and women to follow. Gender identity thus refers to a person’s sense of his or her own masculinity or femininity (do you feel like a man or a woman?), whereas sexuality refers to sexual object choice (to whom or what do you find yourself attracted?). In Western cultures, ascribing to masculine gender often means exhibiting qualities of aggression, strength, stoicism, and leadership. Being feminine often means ascribing to “opposite” qualities—being passive, emotional, and dependent. The social meanings of heterosexuality (and homosexuality) are thus deeply imbricated with traditional notions of gender: it is supposedly “normal” for dominant men to seek out passive women as sexual partners. The media often reinforces these notions by routinely presenting images of passive women and dominant men. The reason is that the media (like most of Western culture) is currently and has been historically controlled by men, a state of social organization referred to as *patriarchy* (literally “rule by the father”). Under such a regime, men and masculinity are valued above women and femininity. Men and women who do not fit into traditional gender roles are often ridiculed or harassed with homophobic insults: effeminate men are called *fags*, and strong women are suspected of being lesbians, regardless of their actual sexual orientation. In this

way, the ideologies of heterosexism and homophobia work to enforce traditional gender roles, keeping women subservient and men empowered.

Various types of gender-bending should also be considered queer. For example, current medical literature lists a condition known as *gender identity dysphoria*, a label used to define a biological man who feels himself to be really a woman, or a biological woman who feels herself to be really a man. Historically, these individuals have been labeled *transsexuals*, although many today prefer the term *transgendered*. Like all human beings, transgendered people come in all shapes, sizes, and sexualities. Some choose to undergo sex reassignment surgery and/or hormone therapy in order to bring their physical bodies more in line with their mental ideas of themselves, while others do not. Some transgendered people prefer to live in a dual-gender zone, maintaining the sexual characteristics of both men and women. (On the Internet these individuals are sometimes crudely labeled “chicks with dicks” or “she-males.”)

Similarly, some human beings are born with the sexual characteristics of both sexes. These individuals used to be called *hermaphrodites* but are today referred to as *intersexed*. And then there are transvestites, or cross-dressers, people who like to wear the clothing of the “opposite” sex for any number of reasons. Studies suggest that transvestites tend to be heterosexual males, although there is often a cultural assumption that every man in a dress must be a homosexual. (Contemporary Western culture rarely assigns the *homosexual* label to women who wear pants, although it did in previous decades.) As the following chapters demonstrate, gay men have been regularly figured within cinema as being less than masculine, while lesbians have been portrayed as being less than feminine, despite the fact that in the “real world” gay men can be professional football players and lesbians can be supermodels.

For many Americans, gender identity and sexual orientation are themselves queerly blurred together. Some homosexual women do now and did historically dress like men in order to assert their lesbian sexuality. Likewise, some homosexual men do now and did historically develop effeminate or transvestite styles as a means of defining themselves as gay. However, probably the vast majority of twentieth-century homosexuals ascribed to the dominant culture’s notion of traditional gender, partly so they could pass as straight as and when needed. Furthermore, the complex sexualities of transgendered people underscore the inadequacy of the straight-gay binary. What do we call the sexuality of a biological male who feels like a woman and is attracted to women? Suppose we label him *heterosexual*, and he then undergoes a sex change. Is she now a lesbian? Other people undergo sex changes and in the process change their sexual object choices. In the example just given, the

new postoperative woman may now find herself attracted to men, therefore retaining a heterosexual orientation. The point of all this is that each individual's gender identity and sexuality are theoretically unique and oftentimes variable. This is what the use of the term *queer* tries to acknowledge, despite the best efforts of the patriarchal institutions under which we live to convince us otherwise. Most popular culture, including Hollywood movies, has contributed to simplistic understandings of gender and sexuality as either-or binary oppositions. However, queer theory allows us to dissect those images and begin to analyze them for the ways in which they maintain (or, more rarely, deconstruct) the various hierarchical meanings of gender and sexuality. In recent decades, queer theory has also been instrumental in helping filmmakers construct new images of sexuality on film.

What Is Queer Film?

There are at least five ways one could begin to answer the question “What is queer film?” Perhaps most obviously, a movie might be considered queer if it deals with characters that are queer. While more recent films occasionally feature queer characters in supporting or even leading roles, most movies made in America before the 1960s rarely acknowledged the existence of queer people—whether they be gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, or transgendered people. The Hollywood Production Code (a self-censorship mechanism that regulated the content of Hollywood films from 1934 to the mid-1960s) actively forbade the representation of what it called “sex perversion.” Any kind of queer “heterosexual” sex was also banned—the Production Code demanded that Hollywood films depict married, procreative heterosexuality as the only proper sexuality. However, as discussed more fully in ensuing chapters, classical Hollywood filmmakers sometimes found ways to suggest that certain characters might be queer. This type of characterization, sometimes called *connotative homosexuality*, implied that a character might be queer, through subtle mannerisms, costuming, or speech patterns. Usually, this meant making a male character overly effeminate or by representing a female character as masculine. These characters occasionally slipped by the Production Code censors, even as many in the audience (and behind the camera) understood such characters to be homosexual. Today, they might best be described as queer because of their implied homosexuality and deviance from traditional gender roles. But does the mere presence of a queer character make a film a queer film? Some films use a single stereotypically queer character as the butt of homophobic jokes, and most critics and filmgoers would probably not consider such a film to be a queer film. Perhaps a

queer film is one that both contains queer characters and engages with queer issues in some meaningful—as opposed to derogatory or exploitative—way.

Another way to define queer film could be via its authorship: films might be considered queer when they are written, directed, or produced by queer people or perhaps when they star lesbian, gay, or otherwise queer actors.⁷ The lesbian-feminist films of Barbara Hammer and the so-called New Queer Cinema of the 1990s are good examples of films produced by people who self-identify as lesbian, gay, and/or queer. Often, such films also feature lesbian, gay, and/or queer characters and actors—but what about films made during Hollywood’s classical period by homosexual directors such as James Whale, George Cukor, or Dorothy Arzner? Many of their films did not (because they could not) contain obvious homosexual characters or issues. To take a more contemporary example, should that recent Hollywood science fiction blockbuster—devoid of manifestly homosexual characters but produced by (and starring) homosexuals—be considered a queer film? In many cases queer filmmakers can and do inflect a queer sensibility into their work, even when obvious gay and lesbian characters and issues are not present. Thus, a supposedly “straight” film made by a queer filmmaker might be considered a queer film.

This suggests a third way of defining queer film, one that centers on issues of spectatorship. According to this model, a queer film is one that is viewed by lesbian, gay, or otherwise queer spectators. In other words, all films might be potentially queer if read from a queer viewing position—that is to say, one that challenges dominant assumptions about gender and sexuality. In many cases, lesbians, gay men, and other queers experience films differently than do straight viewers. Historically, an entire system of reading Hollywood films “against the grain,” known as *camp*, evolved within early-twentieth-century gay cultures, in effect queering manifestly straight films. In a more recent example, *Top Gun* (1986), a robust military action film with resolutely heterosexual characters, has become a queer cult film because of its incessant beefcake, suggestive word play, and intense homosocial bonding. (In the film *Sleep with Me* [1994], a character played by Quentin Tarantino explains in minute detail how and why *Top Gun* is really a story about a man’s struggle with his own homosexuality.) *Top Gun*—like another queer favorite *The Wizard of Oz* (1939)—might not be a queer film to most filmgoers, but according to this paradigm of spectatorship, it could be considered as such. As queer film theorist Clare Whatling has argued in regard to lesbian spectatorship, films are “lesbianised by the individual (or in some cases collective) viewer. The good thing about this is that, in practice, there are as many lesbian readings of films (and hence lesbian films) as there are lesbians in the audience.”⁸

Another way to conceptualize queer film is to think about the ways that various types of films or film genres might be considered queer. The horror film, for example, often depicts bizarre and monstrous sexualities that can be considered queer.⁹ Science fiction and fantasy genres also present new and varied types of identities and sexualities (and often in more neutral or positive terms than does the horror film). The Hollywood musical might also be considered a queer form. Although its stories are usually insistent upon their characters' heterosexuality, the musical (like the horror and science fiction film) creates a hyperreal world in which almost anything can happen.¹⁰ Animation (from traditional cel to today's computer generated) also lends itself to queer theorizing, blurring the real and unreal, figuring identity as fluid, and imagining fantastic spaces in which shape shifting and sex changing are as plausible as anything else.¹¹ Finally, if one assumes Hollywood filmmaking to be the dominant mode of American (heterosexist) filmmaking, then there is the sense that avant-garde, documentary, or other types of independent filmmaking might be thought of as queer. Such films often represent queer characters and issues more regularly than do Hollywood films, and their very structures and forms often allow for a critique of Hollywood narrative and its insistent focus on heterosexual romance.

Finally, it has also been suggested that the very act of experiencing films—the psychological processes of looking at and identifying with characters—might be thought of as queer.¹² In most Hollywood films, spectators are encouraged to identify with (and sometimes see through the eyes of) central characters. These central characters are traditionally white heterosexual men, but they can also be women, people of color, or even queers. This is one of the greatest powers (and pleasures) of narrative cinema—it allows its viewers to experience the world through other people's eyes. (This free play of identification is similar to that produced in cyberspace and is part of the appeal of computer games like *The Sims*, wherein individuals can play at being any gender, race, or sexuality that they choose.) Whatling again suggests that “as queer-identified cinema viewers we [do] not confine our desires to identity appropriate objects. Our desires rather [have] relatively free rein within the fantasy space of the cinema.”¹³ That said, this queer play of identification also may be one reason why overtly gay and lesbian characters do not appear very often in mainstream Hollywood films: many heterosexual viewers are still resistant to seeing through a queer character's worldview. In psychological terms, the act of identifying with a queer character may be threatening to someone's sense of his or her own gender or sexuality. Similarly, many men find it difficult to identify with female characters. Attending a “chick flick” or a queer film poses a potential threat to some men's sense

of masculinity: admitting an interest in such films poses a challenge to their presumed patriarchal authority.

All these ways of defining a queer film tend to overlap and blur together. Queer filmmakers can make films with or without queer content, within or without queer genres. Some of the most bizarrely queer horror films of the 1930s are today considered G-rated, and the most seemingly heterosexual of films can become a queer cult film. Self-identified heterosexuals can and do make queer films and are increasingly doing so as concepts of queer theory percolate through mainstream culture. For example, *The Birdcage* (1996) was written and directed by a heterosexual man and woman (Mike Nichols and Elaine May) and mostly starred heterosexual men (Robin Williams, Gene Hackman, and Hank Azaria). (Nathan Lane, the gay actor who portrays one of the leading men, was still in the closet professionally at the time of the film's release.) Nonetheless, most people would probably consider *The Birdcage* a queer film (or at least a gay film) because of its subject matter—drag queens and a gay male couple. Yet, while *The Birdcage* was popular with many audiences, others found it stereotypical, a trait some critics blamed on its lack of actual gay (or queer) authorship. Many queer spectators become wary (and probably rightly so) when heterosexual filmmakers attempt to depict queer lives and queer issues, precisely because—as this book repeatedly demonstrates—heterosexist filmmakers in Hollywood did such a poor job of it for almost one hundred years.

A Very Queer Film: *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2001)

Hedwig and the Angry Inch is a film that could be considered queer by all of the criteria just mentioned, despite the fact that none of the film's characters forthrightly claim a homosexual orientation. The film is a multiple generic hybrid—part musical; part concert film; part (fictionalized) biopic; and all satiric commentary on sex, drugs, rock and roll, global politics, creation myths, and the politics of personal identity. It centers on a glam/punk rocker, a beautiful creature of indeterminate gender, known as Hedwig, who attempts to reclaim his/her music and star status stolen by another, more successful (and more conventional) rock star. Through a series of musical numbers, the film explores how Hedwig had been born in East Berlin as a boy named Hansel and how he submitted to a sex-change operation in order to marry an American GI named Luther so that he could escape from behind the Iron Curtain. However, the sex-change operation “got botched,” and Hansel—now Hedwig—was left with a “Barbie Doll crotch,” the “angry

inch” of the film’s title. (Hedwig’s backup band is also known as the Angry Inch.) Once in America, Hedwig is dumped by Luther and befriends a teenaged boy named Tommy Speck, who, with Hedwig’s songs and guidance, becomes the famous rock star Tommy Gnosis. Tommy subsequently distances himself from Hedwig in order to maintain a less-queer star persona, and much of the film deals with Hedwig’s attempts to reconnect with Tommy—to regain what has been taken from him/her and thus become “whole” again.

Hedwig and the Angry Inch began its life in a series of drag-show appearances in New York City, where creator and star John Cameron Mitchell developed his ideas for the Hedwig character. Those appearances developed into an off-Broadway show with music and lyrics by Stephen Trask; the show became a critical hit and a cult phenomenon. The film version, also starring (and directed by) Mitchell, was produced by Christine Vachon’s Killer Films, a company known for producing many films of the 1990s independent queer film boom. Significantly expanding upon the stage show’s original conceit—Hedwig’s performing a concert in which she/he suffers an explosive emotional breakdown—the film incorporates narrative scenes along with music and songs and also features documentary footage, an animated sequence, and an audience sing-along (“Follow the bouncing wig!”). In so doing, the film both draws upon and subverts traditional concepts of Hollywood form and content, a stylistic trait common to much queer filmmaking in general.

Hedwig and the Angry Inch is grounded in one of queer theory’s central tenets: that identity—whether racial or sexual or any other—is not a static and essentialized thing but rather a fluid state constituted by a series of performances. The film itself is structured as a series of performances, and Hedwig’s dress and demeanor—not to mention his/her gender—are always in flux. The song “Wig in a Box” celebrates the transformative power of Hedwig’s wigs: he can be “Miss Midwest Midnight Checkout Queen,” “Miss Beehive 1963,” or “Miss Farrah Fawcett from TV.” (During the number, Hedwig’s trailer home transforms into a stage.) Hedwig’s identity blurs into that of her “Man Friday” Yitzhak and her protégé Tommy. Furthering this queer play with identity, the male character Yitzhak is played by the female actor Miriam Shor (in the stage show, Mitchell played both Hedwig and Tommy). At the end of the film, Hedwig relinquishes his/her wig to Yitzhak—a woman playing a man now playing a woman—and confronts Tommy in a sequence that can best be described as a musical apotheosis. Tommy acknowledges what he has taken from Hedwig, and Hedwig comes to realize that she/he is already whole, no longer needing to search for a missing half. The final image of the film shows a naked Hedwig—or is it Tommy? or Mitchell?—walking directly away from the camera into a new world of possibilities.

An alternate model of gendered and sexualized identities is dramatically illustrated in the song “The Origin of Love,” a mythic explanation of human sexuality based on ideas found in Plato’s *Symposium*. In the song, Hedwig describes how human beings were originally four-legged, four-armed, and two-headed creatures each composed of two men, or two women, or a man and a woman “glued up back to back.” As the story-song progresses, the gods grow angry at the composite humans and decide to punish them by splitting them in half, thus creating both homo- and heterosexual love as the “lonely two-legged creatures” try to reconnect themselves—if only for a short time—through the act of making love. The story-song is visualized in the film through a cartoon sequence in which men and women, gods and humans, and dinosaurs and lizards seamlessly morph into one another. In using animation to visualize this process, the film underscores the queer connections between the various labels and categories that we use to describe human identities. As Hedwig notes about such categories in another song, “There ain’t much of a difference between a bridge and a wall / Without me in the middle, babe, you would be nothing at all.”¹⁴

Funny and caustic, thoughtful and satirical, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* won many critical ovations and awards. Yet *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* received limited distribution in America, playing mostly at independent and art house theaters located in major urban areas. While the DVD release of the film has allowed it, like most overtly queer films, to be seen by people outside of selected cities, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* was marginalized because it was produced outside of Hollywood, the dominant American film industry. As the rest of this book amply demonstrates, Hollywood has usually been reticent to deal with queer content and queer styles. And at the start of the twenty-first century, it still remains grounded in heterocentrist discourses.

Queer Film History

A thorough history of how homosexuality was represented in Hollywood films (up until the mid-1980s) can be found in Vito Russo’s book *The Celluloid Closet*, first published in 1981 and revised in 1987.¹⁵ In over three hundred pages, Russo chronicles the images of homosexuality that Hollywood created and exhibited to America at large. In general, it is not a pretty picture: the Hollywood homosexual was usually a sissy stereotype, a tragic neurotic, or even a psychotic criminal. (In 1995, gay filmmakers Robert Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman compiled many of those images and, adding newly shot interview footage, turned *The Celluloid Closet* into a documentary film.) Yet, in all of its copious detail, the book never actually questions or investigates

definitions of sexuality or how cinema can convey these concepts to its audience. Unlike the social categories of race, age, gender, or disability, sexual orientation has few (if any) physical markers that the visual medium of film can exploit. Thus Hollywood filmmakers fell back on connotative means to suggest that a character was queer. As the next chapters explore in detail, these connotative means usually rely on stereotypes that invert traditional expectations about gender.

To a certain extent, all films use stereotypes. Unlike a novel, in which an author has hundreds of pages to create psychologically complex characters, most films have 90 to 120 minutes to tell a story in visual shorthand. There is a need for instant characterization, and stereotypes are frequently pressed into service. Film theorist Richard Dyer suggests that the purpose of stereotypes is to make something invisible visible. Thus stereotypes of homosexuals as effeminate men and mannish women afford heterosexuals the vision of what a homosexual is supposedly really like.¹⁶ If homosexuals were just like everyone else—not physically different—there would be less reason to single them out for special treatment or persecution. Indeed, in the 1950s, when it was suggested by sex researcher Alfred Kinsey that there were a great number of “normal looking” homosexuals in America, a crisis in categorization occurred. People grew paranoid and suspicious of one another because the prospect of lurking “invisible” queers was far more disturbing to the national psyche than was the occasional appearance of an effeminate man or a mannish woman. In this way, stereotypes work to invoke a consensus of opinion and make people think they “know” a group, when in fact what they know is only the stereotype. In actuality, most subcultural groups—especially queer ones—are highly diverse.

Cinematic stereotypes can be created in many subtle ways. Queerness can be hinted at in dialogue (as when a male character is described as liking flowers) or by delivery (uttering that description with a lisp, a smirk, or a flip of the wrist). Sometimes queer characters are given queer names. The name of comedian Ernie Kovac’s famous poet character, Percy Dovetonsils, announced his queerness to audiences even before he opened his mouth to lisp his verses. Similarly, a woman named George or Frank is likely to suggest queerness. Costume, makeup, and hair design can also suggest the queer, as when male characters wear frilly clothing, obvious makeup, or certain haircuts. Conversely, keeping with the gender-inversion trope, lesbians are usually pared down in costume, makeup, and hair design. In many films, they reject traditionally feminine fashion for a sparse, harsh look of plain gray dresses, sensible shoes, and short or pulled-back hair. Queers can also be signified with objective correlatives—props that seem to define something

about their sexuality—such as a woman with a softball bat or a man with a cane he seems to fondle too much. In tune with the reciprocal nature of film and the “real” world, some of these objective correlatives were (and still are) drawn from actual queer cultures—green carnations, red bow ties, and the color purple were all coded signs that actual queers used to identify one another in earlier eras. Even music can be used to suggest that a film character is not quite straight. In *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), funny, almost feminine-sounding music is heard in conjunction with the onscreen appearance of an effeminate fop.¹⁷ Similarly, in more recent decades linking male characters to the music of Cher or Madonna may suggest homosexuality, as would linking female characters to feminist folk singers or certain alternative rockers.

Stereotypical images, like all aspects of culture, change and evolve over the years. The effeminate pansy stereotype of the classical Hollywood era morphed into “the sad young man” of the 1950s.¹⁸ Queer women in classical Hollywood films often appeared as spinster aunts or prison matrons,¹⁹ but by the 1970s, they were often being represented as vampires, a trope that turned same-sex love and affection into something cruel and monstrous.²⁰ By the twenty-first century, a wide variety of openly queer people and queer “looks” has made it more difficult for the mass media to create new stereotypes, but traces of the old ones can still be discerned. For example, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* has been hailed as some sort of breakthrough in gay-straight relations, but if indeed it is, it has been accomplished by recirculating time-worn stereotypes about gay men as fashion designers, interior decorators, and hair dressers.

This book surveys over one hundred years of queer film in America. It examines queer characters, queer authors, queer audiences, and queer forms—in relation to one another and in relation to the social, cultural, and political history of homosexuality. It looks at Hollywood films, experimental films, exploitation/sexploitation films, cult films, documentaries, and some video and television movies, exploring the social and industrial conditions that allowed queer images to be created and circulated. This book is not meant to be *the* history of queer film in America but rather *a* history. It draws on and updates previous works of queer film history, but it also explores more recent films and more recent ways of thinking about older ones. It is grounded in the assumption that images matter, that they are always political. As Richard Dyer puts it, “how social groups are treated in cultural representation is part and parcel of how they are treated in life. . . . Poverty, harassment, self-hate and discrimination (in housing, jobs, educational opportunity and so on) are shored up and instituted by representation.”²¹ Throughout the twentieth century, queers have struggled to make themselves be seen and be heard,

both in real life and in popular media. The history of that struggle tells us where we have been, illuminates where we are now, and may suggest the future course of queer American cultures.

Notes

1. Ellis Hanson, *Out Takes: Essays on Queer Theory and Film* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999), 3.

2. "AIDS, Sex Research Questioned by NIH," *Dallas Morning News*, 28 October 2003, 6A.

3. For an overview of this history, see Jonathan Ned Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality* (New York: Dutton, 1995).

4. For an overview of these events, see John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988).

5. Alfred Kinsey et al., *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders, 1948); Alfred Kinsey et al., *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders, 1953).

6. Henry E. Adams, Lester W. Wright Jr., and Bethany A. Lohr, "Is Homophobia Associated with Homosexual Arousal?" *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 105, no. 3 (1996): 440–45.

7. For an overview of issues related to queer authorship, see Alexander Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 19–38. See also, Richard Dyer, "Believing in Fairies: The Author and the Homosexual," in *inside/out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1991), 185–201.

8. Clare Whatling, *Screen Dreams: Fantasising Lesbians in Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 5.

9. For an overview of how horror films might be considered queer, see Harry M. Benshoff, *Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuality and the Horror Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997).

10. For an overview of how musicals might be considered queer, see Brett Farmer, *Spectacular Passions: Cinema, Fantasy, Gay Male Spectatorship* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000).

11. For an overview of queerness and animation, see Sean Griffin, "Pronoun Trouble: The Queerness of Animation," in *Queer Cinema: The Film Reader*, ed. Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin (New York: Routledge, 2004), 105–18.

12. For an overview of these issues, see Caroline Evans and Lorraine Gamman, "The Gaze Revisited, or Reviewing Queer Viewing," in *A Queer Romance: Lesbians, Gay Men, and Popular Culture*, ed. Paul Burston and Colin Richardson (London: Routledge, 1995), 13–56.

13. Whatling, *Screen Dreams*, 2–3.

14. Lyrics by Stephen Trask.

15. Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1987 [1981]).

16. See Richard Dyer, *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representation*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2002 [1993]), esp. 6–18.

17. Richard Dyer's analysis of *The Maltese Falcon* in the film *The Celluloid Closet* (1995).

18. For more on this type, see Richard Dyer, "Coming Out as Going In: The Image of the Homosexual as Sad Young Man," in *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representation* (New York and London, Routledge, 1993), 73–92.

19. For more on these types, see Patricia White, *unInvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), esp. 136–93.

20. For an overview of lesbians in film and especially the figure of the lesbian vampire, see Andrea Weiss, *Vampires and Violets: Lesbians in Film* (New York: Penguin, 1992).

21. Dyer, *Matter of Images*, 1.

CHAPTER ONE



From Pansies to Predators: Queer Characters in Early American Cinema



Charles Laughton as Emperor Nero is served by his beefy slave boy in *The Sign of the Cross* (1932), a good example of how homosexuality could be implied rather than made explicit in pre-Code Hollywood cinema. Paramount / The Kobal Collection

Since the advent of the modern gay rights movement, historians have been researching queer images in popular culture. This is an almost-archeological process, since various forces over the years have tried to ignore, erase, or otherwise bury any and all evidence of queer lives. Furthermore, sexuality (of all kinds) was a taboo subject for roughly the first two-thirds of the twentieth century. Divorce was considered scandalous, and sexuality was definitely not a topic of “polite” conversation. Obscenity regulations and local laws forced Hollywood to veil references to any and all forms of sexuality. As such, queer images in early American film are especially hard to find, and often they look very different from those produced today because even the cultural meanings of basic terms such as *heterosexuality* and *homosexuality* were in flux.¹

Nonetheless, the implication of sexuality has always been a prime element of classical Hollywood filmmaking. Almost every Hollywood film contains at least one heterosexual romance, even if its overtly sexual aspects were kept relatively muted. Filmmakers developed subtle ways (and some not-so-subtle ways) to suggest offscreen heterosexual couplings. Shots of waves crashing on the beach, fireworks going off, or smoldering fireplaces soon came to signify what various censoring bodies decreed that Hollywood films could not explicitly show. (By 1959, such practices had become so commonplace that clever filmmakers could satirize them: Alfred Hitchcock’s *North by Northwest* ends with a shot of a train going into a tunnel, signifying the fact that his beleaguered hero and heroine were finally going to make love.) Images of gay and lesbian lovemaking—either manifest or metaphorical—were almost totally absent from classical Hollywood films. In most cases, even the mere existence of gay and lesbian characters had to be implied rather than made overt. Such processes of implication produced moments and characters in Hollywood films that are best described as queer rather than homosexual, gay, or lesbian. Certain stereotypes about gay men and lesbians—usually based upon gender and not sexuality per se—were pressed into service over and over again by Hollywood filmmakers. And, while those stereotypes had some connection to “real” life (as most stereotypes do), they also severely limited the range of representation of human sexuality and often worked to demonize queer sexualities.

Queer Images in Early Film

At the end of the nineteenth century, a number of people across the globe created the technology for motion pictures, and at the same time, the scientific community fashioned the concept of sexual identity. Yet, exactly who was considered “homosexual” when the word was first coined is not exactly

the same as it is today. Most of the period's authorities considered sexual identity to be strongly (if not completely) linked to gender identity, and thus it was theorized that homosexuals desired same-sex affection because they considered themselves (or desired to be) members of the opposite sex. In other words, homosexual men supposedly wanted to be women, and homosexual women wanted to be men. (Today we would describe such individuals as *transsexual* or *transgendered*—and not necessarily *homosexual*.) What marks this idea of the homosexual as invert as different from contemporary ideas about sexual identity is that, often, only people who deviated from their expected gender were identified and labeled *homosexuals*. Under this definition, any man who exhibited acceptable masculine behavior (including the “aggressive” insertive position in sexual acts) or any woman who exhibited typically feminine behavior (including the “passive” receptive position in sexual acts) was often still considered heterosexual—even if his or her partner was of the same sex. For example, the tradition of “Boston marriages” in the late 1800s allowed female couples to set up housekeeping and devote their lives to one another, as long as they remained appropriately feminine.²

Understanding how sexuality was regarded at the end of the nineteenth century is important when scanning early cinema, for a number of images that seem potentially homosexual to modern audiences may not have been read as such at the time. A good example is a short film experiment shot at the estate of Thomas Edison in the 1890s. Today, the film is commonly entitled *The Gay Brothers* (1895), but the film itself had no title card. In this short snippet (about a half-minute long), two men clasp each other and dance in circles. This cinematic record of same-sex physical intimacy is provocative, yet the image's intent is difficult to know for certain. While it is within the realm of possibility that these two fellows share a “special affection” for one another—or are enacting that type of affection—one can also view these two men as heterosexuals performing in such a way because there were no women available with whom to dance. Also, keeping in mind then-current conceptions of sexuality, the lack of effeminate behavior by either man (both wear shirts, pants, suspenders, and have short haircuts—neither swishes or flounces) would mitigate against viewers understanding these men to be homosexuals. They might be homosocial buddies—“just good friends.”

When viewing silent films, one can discover all sorts of same-sex physical intimacies that might today be read as homosexual. Women hug, kiss, and caress each other—and sometimes the men do too. Yet scenes that might surprise contemporary audiences, such as Buddy Rogers kissing Richard Arlen on the lips in *Wings* (1927) or John Gilbert warmly embracing Lars Hansen

in *Flesh and the Devil* (1927), seem not to have upset the critics or the moralists of their era. The lack of controversy probably lies in the fact that the male characters in these films were conventionally masculine: strong, active, aggressive, and, in these two films, officers in the military. Similarly, Clara Bow's character in *The Wild Party* (1929) may have raised eyebrows by her sexually free manner, but no one seems to have voiced outrage over her expressions of affection toward her college roommate. As long as one maintained one's proper gender role, same-sex affection was allowed and even celebrated. The lack of documentation makes it hard to know how queer spectators of the era reacted to such scenes. Certainly they may have understood them as celebrating homosocial bonds between heterosexual characters, although they may also have understood them as homosexual. At best, one might acknowledge that these moments are neither exclusively heterosexual nor homosexual—in other words, they are queer.

Other images from the silent era are equally hard to label as definitively straight or gay. For example, a large number of male comedians (including Fatty Arbuckle, Wallace Beery, and John Bunny) often donned female garb in their motion pictures. What makes the sexuality of these characters hard to define is that these actors were not playing men who dress up as women; rather, they were playing female characters. Such female impersonation had been a tradition in theater for centuries (including American minstrelsy and burlesque), but it was not automatically considered an indication of same-sex desire. More often it was used to reinforce traditional gender roles, drawing humor from the possibility of mistaking a man for a woman or by having men be unable to enact full femininity. However, some early film comedians (such as Stan Laurel and Charlie Chaplin) presented such convincing impersonations that their acts may have undermined the supposedly stable male-female gender binary. One can also find numerous examples in early cinema of women impersonating men, and there was even a small explosion of female cross-dressing films in the latter half of the 1910–1920 period, possibly in reaction to the growth of first-wave feminism.

Although they appear to focus primarily on gender, these cross-dressing comedies raise issues of sexual orientation by means of their narratives. For example, when a man in drag romances a woman or is chased lustfully by another man, the specter of same-sex desire is always raised, if only to be laughed away—a type of joke common to Shakespearean comedies as well as modern-day teen comedies. The farcical complications devised for the silent film *A Florida Enchantment* (1914) created so many opportunities for same-sex desire to express itself that the film is remarkably queer for its time.³ In it, Lillian Travers is given a box of magic seeds that change her sex when she

eats one. The film sends out different signals as to whether her body has changed or only her mind—Lillian as a man is played by the same actress (Edith Storey)—but one scene shows that she is growing facial hair. What is definite is that Lillian is suddenly drawn to wearing men’s clothes and is attracted to women. Others (including her African American maid and her male beau) also taste the seeds, resulting in similar gender transformation and comedic complications. The narrative tries to argue that the characters *have* switched sexes (whether bodily or mentally), thus suggesting that they are reacting “normally” to the fantastic situation—if Lillian is now a man (calling herself Lawrence), she would “naturally” start acting masculine and desiring women. Yet, a number of scenes show Lillian still in women’s garb acting butch and courting Bessie, who plainly returns the affection. The two women ballroom dance and even share a kiss good-bye before Lillian leaves to re-create herself as Lawrence. Similarly, Lillian’s former fiancé starts flirting with a man while still dressed as a man, creating consternation and outrage.

Variety’s review of *A Florida Enchantment* described Lillian as “mannish,” a word used by early sexologists to describe female inverts, and thus seems to indicate that at least some audiences of the era were viewing the film’s gender reversals as representations of homosexuality as it was then understood.⁴ Intriguingly, while the film plays with gender ambiguities, it nevertheless maintains strict racial lines—white characters are only attracted to white characters, and African American characters are only attracted to African American characters—revealing that in 1914 interracial heterosexuality was perhaps more of a taboo than was same-race homosexuality. However, the film’s play with the mutable performativity of gender and sexuality also implies that race itself is performative—especially since the African American characters are played by white actors in blackface. Furthermore, the stereotyped differences of black gender versus white gender that the film exhibits expose how variable the social construction of gender, sexuality, and race can be. Ultimately, the film ties itself into such knots that the only way to resolve the narrative (and still endorse the status quo) is to have Lillian wake up and realize that she has dreamt the whole thing.

The centrally queer characters of *A Florida Enchantment* were a unique example in early film, but “inverted” characters in smaller roles were not uncommon. Hinting at queer sexualities via gender inversion not only fit contemporary models of sexual desire but helped filmmakers shield themselves from litigation or government intervention (since a character’s queerness could be argued to be simply a matter of gender and not sexuality). The era’s moral reformers claimed that Hollywood films reveled in salacious content

and glorified licentiousness; they instituted state and local censorship boards that could reedit or completely ban a film when it came to their area. (Motion pictures were denied First Amendment rights by the Supreme Court in 1915, when it ruled that the movies were primarily a business and therefore open to state regulation.) Thus, explicit sexuality—be it homosexual or heterosexual—was rarely shown in Hollywood films, forcing filmmakers to rely on the connotative codes of gender to indicate sexual identity, a strategy that would carry itself through the next several decades of Hollywood history. Heroes and heroines would be defined chiefly by their adherence to traditional gender roles; their sexuality would be expressed through courtship, dancing, hugs, and tame kisses. Queer characters would be relegated to minor or bit parts and be defined chiefly through their gender inversion.

Films made outside Hollywood often had a more complex—and less stereotypical—take on human sexuality. For example, arguably the first film ever to feature homosexual love as its theme was the Swedish film *Vingarne* (*Wings*, 1916), directed by homosexual filmmaker Mauritz Stiller.⁵ Carl Theodor Dreyer's *Mikael* (1924), filmed in Germany a few years later, was drawn from the same source novel. Weimar Germany also produced the first film to make a plea for homosexual rights and freedoms: *Anders als die Anderen* (*Different from the Others*, 1919) was made in conjunction with early sexologist and gay rights pioneer Magnus Hirschfeld.⁶ A few years later G. W. Pabst's famous film *Pandora's Box* (1929) featured a lesbian subplot. Perhaps the most well-known German film of this era to deal with homosexuality was Leontine Sagan's *Maedchen in Uniform* (1931), a film about a schoolgirl's crush on her teacher.⁷ However, if and when these films played American theaters, they were often so badly censored or reedited that they lost most of their homosexual meaning.

The Pansy and the Mannish Woman

By the 1920s, a stereotypical image of male homosexuality was prevalent both in the cinema and in real life: the pansy. *Pansy* was a term used colloquially to describe a certain type of queer man—a flowery, fussy, effeminate soul given to limp wrists and mincing steps. As historian George Chauncey has shown, the pansy was a fairly visible citizen of New York City throughout the era.⁸ Show-business trade papers remarked upon a veritable “pansy craze,” as pansy performers sang and danced in nightclubs and vaudeville theaters. Much as white urbanites flocked uptown to Harlem to see African American performers, so too did they flock downtown to see famous female impersonators and other pansy entertainers. The craze also overtook Holly-

wood, where pansy figures proliferated in supporting roles and in simple incidental jokes. *Gold Diggers of 1935* (1935) specifically acknowledged the pansy craze in the lyrics to the song “Lullaby of Broadway,” referring to “the daffodils who entertain at Angelo’s and Maxie’s.”

As should be obvious, the pansy stereotype reinforced (and grew out of) notions of homosexuality as gender inversion. The many epithets that have evolved over the years for gay men—queen, sissy, Mary, Nancy, sister-boy, and so on—all speak to the effeminacy allegedly inherent in male homosexuality. Professions associated with women and femininity—such as fashion design, hairdressing, and flower arranging—also became stereotypically associated with gay men during these years. Linking a man to any of those professions, or to the colors lavender or pink, was as good as labeling him a homosexual. Straight-acting homosexual men (sometimes called *wolves* or *trade* within the era’s queer subcultures) were less noticed by mainstream society and thus rarely represented in film. The use of the pansy stereotype, however, is evident as early as the 1910–1920 period in comedies such as *Algie the Miner* (1912) and Charlie Chaplin’s *Behind the Screen* (1917). In the latter, another one of the era’s cross-dressing films, a man sees Chaplin kiss a woman who is dressed as a boy. The man then teases the two by sashaying up and down with his hands on his hips, eyes aflutter, indicating that he considers them to be pansies. Comic westerns such as *The Soilers* (1923) brought forth pansies to prance around more conventionally masculine cowboys. *Wanderer of the West* (1927) introduces a pansy shop clerk with the intertitle “One of Nature’s mistakes, in a land where men were men.” The implication is clear: homosexual men were not considered “real men.”

Cinematic pansies not only survived the transition to sound (roughly 1927–1929); they thrived. Part of their popularity may have been that pansies had unique vocal qualities (high-pitched or lisping voices) that the new talking films could exploit. Among the first pansies of the sound era is the costume designer in the Academy Award–winning film *The Broadway Melody* (1928), a nervous, fluttery man who complains about how the careless chorus girls are simply ruining his creations. Underscoring the designer’s effeminate hissy fit with another coded signifier of queerness, a bossy woman tells him that, had he designed the backstage area, the whole place would “have been done in lavender.” The success of *The Broadway Melody* sparked a cycle of backstage musicals, and many of them included a fey costume designer or set decorator. *Myrt and Marge* (1932), for example, follows in this tradition. An adaptation of a popular radio serial about two female friends in show business, the film also brought to the screen their costume-designer friend Clarence, who is accused in the film of trying on the chorus girls’ outfits. Yet,

pansies were not confined only to the theatrical world. In the prison film *Hell's Highway* (1930), the inmate cook on a chain gang is played as a pansy—with vague intimations that he has a relationship with the warden! Mostly, pansies were minor characters in the films in which they appeared, often used for one-time jokes. In *Palmy Days* (1931), an effeminate man orders a cake at a bakery and loudly announces that he wants a big pansy on top before he flounces out of the film. In *Call Her Savage* (1932), the main characters go to a Greenwich Village hotspot (a location itself suggestive of gay night life) and watch a pansy couple perform a quick routine before they too disappear from the film for good.

Critical reaction to the pansy stereotype over the years has been mixed. Some regard it as a negative image that insults and demeans gay men. Others point to the stereotype as important historical evidence that homosexuals did exist in Hollywood films, while others chastise pansy haters for thinking that effeminacy is necessarily insulting. Furthermore, while the pansy figure may differ from how people today view gay men, this image did correspond to how homosexuality was defined during that era—even by many homosexual men themselves. Yet, one must admit that the pansy was typically used in these films as a source of humor, relegated to the sidelines in throw-away moments or small supporting parts, simultaneously announcing both his presence and his inconsequentiality. His fleeting appearances also made it possible for some audience members to miss him altogether. While more urbane and sophisticated audiences knew what the pansy was meant to represent, there were probably large numbers of filmgoers who were oblivious to him. Since pansies tended to express more enthusiasm over a new silk kimono than another man, their actual homosexuality was still open to question. In the pansy stereotype, actual homosexuality was completely and overtly hinted at rather than made manifest, and thus he too might best be considered queer rather than specifically homosexual (or heterosexual).

The prevalence of a heavily implied and yet indeterminate homosexuality is perhaps more obvious when surveying the era's female counterpart to the pansy: the mannish woman. A number of women in 1920s Hollywood films were presented in tailored tweed suits (complete with pants rather than skirts), wearing men's hats and short slicked-back hair. At times, they were even shown smoking cigars. In films such as *My Lady of Whims* (1925), *The Clinging Vine* (1926), *The Crystal Cup* (1927), and *The Office Wife* (1930), such characters implied lesbianism as well as gender inversion. Still, these mannish women (like pansies) rarely enact any sign of same-sex desire, and some of them are romantically partnered with men by the end of their films. Consequently, these movies may have been not so much about lesbians per

se but about the “New Woman,” an image associated with the era’s feminist movement. As women gained the right to vote in 1920 and moved further into the public workforce, these films may have been expressing worries that all women (and not just lesbians) were on the verge of becoming like men. Yet, the mannish woman type could be found in the era’s real-life queer communities, and it perfectly describes the heroine of Radclyffe Hall’s groundbreaking lesbian novel *The Well of Loneliness*, first published in 1928.⁹ *The Well of Loneliness* became so well known as a marker of sexual deviancy that it too was used in the movies as code for queerness: *The Secret Witness* (1931) includes a joke about a woman who is reading the book.

Although they were mostly used as supporting characters, mannish women starred in a few Hollywood films of the era. Marlene Dietrich’s leading character in *Morocco* (1930) performs onstage in a man’s tuxedo, then flirts with and even kisses a female audience member. Yet, even here, it would be possible for audiences to read Dietrich’s character as another version of the newly independent heterosexual woman, since the rest of the film is devoted to her romance with Gary Cooper. Similarly, Greta Garbo’s title character in *Queen Christina* (1933) is shown preferring men’s garb and giving an affectionate kiss to another woman, but the script refashions the life of this historical lesbian into a tale of heterosexual romance. (If we further queer the text, we can read Christina as a cross-dressing heterosexual woman or as a female-to-male transgendered person.)

While *Morocco* and *Queen Christina* give quick glimpses of what might be understood as homosexual attraction (fleeting same-sex kisses between women), portions of Cecil B. DeMille’s historical costume epic *The Sign of the Cross* (1932) make homosexuality surprisingly overt. Charles Laughton’s Roman emperor Nero fits easily into the pansy stereotype, and the presence of his barely clad slave boy lounging beside his throne seems to indicate Nero’s homosexual taste. Also, Claudette Colbert as Empress Poppaea demands that one of her female friends disrobe and share her bath. Perhaps most memorably, in another scene a Christian virgin’s willpower is tested by another woman’s erotic dance. Performed to slow-throbbing music, the virgin stands immobile as the other woman rubs up and down her body, with a number of pelvic undulations thrown in for good measure. There was no hiding what this was all about, even though neither woman fits into the mannish-woman paradigm.

Why would a major studio such as Paramount release a film with such audacious sequences? Part of the answer is due to the Great Depression and Hollywood’s dwindling audience. In response, many filmmakers began using racier images, dialogue, and subject matter to entice audiences back to the



Greta Garbo in *Queen Christina* (1933) wears men's clothing and has intimate relations with both men and women. Is she meant to be heterosexual, homosexual, or transgendered? MGM / The Kobal Collection

movies. Along with films about underworld violence and prostitutes, pannies and their lesbian counterparts were called upon to titillate customers. *The Sign of the Cross*, like most of DeMille's biblical epics, also hid its exploitative sexuality behind a mask of Christian piety—such “evil” things had to be shown so that they could be condemned (or so the argument went). *Morocco*, *Queen Christina*, and *The Sign of the Cross* were all major box-office hits, and studios were poised to feature more and more representations of queer sexualities. In the musical *Wonder Bar* (1934), for example, a man interrupts a “heterosexual” couple on the dance floor, asks if he can cut in, and then dances off with the man. Female couples in various stages of intimacy are also seen in the background of various nightclub scenes in films such as *Grand Hotel* (1932), *Cavalcade* (1933), and *Going Hollywood* (1933). Importantly, such scenes no longer relied on gender inversion to hint at their characters' homosexuality; instead, they were beginning to show actual representations of same-sex desire and intimacy.

The Production Code and “Sex Perversion”

Various church groups decried films such as *The Sign of the Cross*—despite its pro-Christianity theme—not only for its implied homosexuality but also for its lurid violence (Amazon women beheading African pygmies) and its partial nudity (nearly naked women are tied to columns and preyed upon by gorillas and alligators). Religious and civic groups pointed out that *The Sign of the Cross* was not alone in its inclusion of “abnormal” sexual situations or characters. By 1933, the outrage had grown so intense that the Catholic Church created the Legion of Decency, a public crusade that set out to change Hollywood practices by lobbying the studios and boycotting theaters. Many other concerned citizens started demanding that the federal government step in to regulate and censor the Hollywood film industry. Fearing such intrusions into their business practices, the studios closed ranks and figured out a way to address the public outrage. A list of moral guidelines for films, called the Production Code, had been written in 1930, but when the Depression struck, the studios generally ignored the Code, using increased amounts of sex and violence to sell their product. Hollywood was capable of disregarding the Code because there was no strong method of enforcing it. However, in response to the censorship outcries of 1933, a strategy to enforce the Code was established: each studio would submit their scripts, wardrobe tests, publicity, and finished films to the Production Code Administration for approval. Only films that were judged to be within the new standards of decency were awarded the Code’s seal of approval. The Hollywood studios agreed that they would screen only Code-approved films in their first-run theaters, and thus the Code also served as a way for the studios to further their oligopolistic control of the industry (since other types of films were now officially unable to be screened in mainstream movie houses).¹⁰

The effect of the Hollywood Production Code on the content of Hollywood films was dramatic and rapid. Stories about loose women and sadistic gangsters were replaced by prestigious literary adaptations and vehicles for sweet-faced child stars such as Shirley Temple and Deanna Durbin. Suggestions of any kind of sexuality were muted. Films were especially forbidden from suggesting that unmarried people might engage in sex, and even heterosexual married couples had to be shown sleeping in separate beds. If a couple was reclining on a sofa or on a bed, at least one foot had to remain on the floor (with the supposed idea that only so much could be accomplished under this restriction!). The Production Code Administration (sometimes referred to as the Hays Office or the Breen Office, after Will Hays and Joseph Breen, who ran it) even began timing the length of kisses—and making sure

they were done with closed mouths. The Code also outlawed any reference to “miscegenation,” an outmoded term used to describe interracial relations, and stated that “sex perversion or any inference to it is strictly forbidden.” While the phrase “sex perversion” could be taken to mean a variety of things, the Production Code Administration’s use of the term in the ensuing years made it quite clear that what was being forbidden was homosexuality. (Most of the queer moments in *The Sign of the Cross* would be cut, for example, in its subsequent rereleases.)

The Production Code Administration demonstrated its power by making an example of producer Samuel Goldwyn’s attempt to film Lillian Hellman’s play *The Children’s Hour*.¹¹ The story deals with rumors of a lesbian relationship between two teachers at an all-girls school, and Code officials immediately warned Goldwyn that they would refuse to sanction a film version that contained the lesbian angle. Furthermore, Goldwyn was told that the play was so well known as a lesbian-themed property that he would not even be allowed to use the title.¹² The resulting film, called *These Three* (1936), changed the rumors of lesbianism into rumors about two women fighting over a man. (In an amusing anecdote reported by Vito Russo, Samuel Goldwyn had also shown interest in adapting *The Well of Loneliness*. When his subordinates informed the malapropism-prone mogul that the story was about a lesbian, he allegedly responded, “We’ll make her American!”)¹³

Some histories of the Production Code era claim that homosexuality was completely erased from American cinema for the next three decades. Certainly, the Breen Office officially attempted to scour “sex perversion” from American movie screens, asserting that even the mention of anything other than monogamous heterosexuality was dangerous. Yet, queer images did not completely disappear after 1934. Certain moments and characters and lines of dialogue seem to have slipped by the officials at the Production Code Administration. Often, because Code officials were lacking any understanding of the era’s queer subcultures, they missed more subtle instances. For example, while Code administrators were ever watchful to censor the word *pansy* from proposed film scripts, the newer use of the word *gay* seems to have slipped through on occasion. This may account for the celebrated moment in *Bringing Up Baby* (1938) when Cary Grant’s character is discovered wearing a frilly woman’s negligee and jumps into the air exclaiming that “I’ve just gone *gay* all of a sudden!”¹⁴ Historian George Chauncey has suggested that Grant’s next line, “I’m sitting in the middle of Forty-Second Street, waiting for a bus,” is a reference to a popular gay-male cruising spot.¹⁵ Similarly, a few years later, while the censors made certain that Peter Lorre’s vaguely homosexual portrayal of Joel Cairo in *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) never got too ex-

plicit, they seemed to miss the way he obsessively fondles his walking stick—even suggestively placing it to his lips in a gesture of symbolic fellatio.

While there are probably more overtly homosexual images in pre-Code Hollywood cinema (compared to those of the Code years), even they were almost always conveyed through implication rather than outright statement. That strategy was maintained throughout the Production Code era, with some modifications. For example, the pansy did not disappear after the Code was enforced; he merely became less obviously homosexual. Character actors such as Edward Everett Horton, Franklin Pangborn, and Grady Sutton spent their careers, both before and after the enforcement of the Code, playing slight variations of the pansy stereotype. One of the most common methods of “de-gaying” the pansy during this era was to establish that he was heterosexually married, thus providing a defense against any accusations of “sex perversion.” A different but common strategy was to paint the pansy as completely asexual: he might not be interested in the opposite sex, but he did not seem to be interested in any sex at all. David M. Lugowski, in his work on queer images of the 1930s, argues that most audiences of the era still understood these characters to be queer even after the imposition of the Production Code.¹⁶

The Fred Astaire–Ginger Rogers musical *Top Hat* (1935) is a good example of a film filled with Code-era pansies. In it, Edward Everett Horton plays the suggestively named Horace Hardwick with a constantly exasperated and nervous demeanor. Although the film establishes that Horace is married, he rarely spends time with his wife—and when in Venice, Horace takes a hotel suite with Jerry (Fred Astaire) rather than with his wife. In one sequence, Jerry walks in on Horace taking a bath and discovers him wearing a woman’s bathing cap to protect his hair. Horace is also strongly linked to his butler Bates, played by Eric Blore. Bates does not speak with a lisp but with an extreme fawning deference, and Horace and Bates often interact as if they were the married couple. In addition to Horton and Blore’s antics, Erik Rhodes appears as a prissy, egotistical Italian fashion designer named Beddini, who proclaims things like “I am no man! I am Beddini!” and “Never again will I allow women to wear my dresses!” Just as the film gives Horace a wife, Beddini is folded back into normative heterosexuality by proposing marriage to Ginger Rogers’s character. Although none of these men are referred to by terms such as *pansy* or *lavender* (words that the Production Code Administration would have been alert to and censored from the script), at one point Beddini apologizes to Horace by kissing him on both cheeks—to which Horace’s wife quips, “Go right ahead, boys, don’t mind me.”

Similar to the transformation of the homosexual pansy to asexual sissy, the sexualized mannish women of the pre-Code era were transformed into asexual tomboys or cold maiden aunts. Lesbian-film theorists Patricia White and Rhona Berenstein have argued that another method for hinting about lesbian desire in Code-era films was to keep the lesbian character offscreen altogether.¹⁷ In *Rebecca* (1940) and *The Uninvited* (1944), for example, queer women are dead by the time each film begins. As the other characters search for these women (or seek to understand their deaths), a sense of dark and taboo secrecy begins to assert itself, and audiences are left to guess exactly what that secret might be. Various moments in the films imply that the dead women were intimately involved with other women—but neither the films nor their characters explicitly define what those relations were. Letters and memos indicate that Production Code officials were aware that these relations could be read as lesbian and worked with filmmakers to keep them obscure enough to earn the Code’s seal of approval.¹⁸ *Rebecca* also has a more obvious onscreen queer—Rebecca’s housekeeper and personal maid Mrs. Danvers, played by Judith Anderson, in a long black skirt and a tightly pulled-back hair bun. In one sequence, Mrs. Danvers takes the new lady of the house through Rebecca’s meticulously preserved bedchamber. Almost as if hypnotized, Mrs. Danvers lovingly caresses Rebecca’s pillowcases, her combs, and even her sheer stockings and underwear, “made especially for her by the nuns in the convent of St. Clair.” Mrs. Danvers never specifically says that she was in love with her former companion, and the word *lesbian* itself is never spoken. But her obsessive, creepy devotion to Rebecca is made quite clear.

The 1940s: Buddies, Drags, and Villains

Coded references to queer sexualities in Hollywood films seemed to increase during the years of World War II, as homosocial groupings became more commonplace. As men joined or were drafted into the sex- and race-segregated armed forces, women increasingly banded together to do factory work on the home front. The war effort created an enormous amount of relocation for American citizens, and many lesbians and gay men who had been isolated in small communities were suddenly thrown into a new environment, where they met others like themselves. Some military and civilian leaders tacitly overlooked the existence of homosexuality in the ranks or in the workforce because (for a time) the need for able bodies outweighed the need to enforce traditional tenets of morality. In fact, men in the armed services were encouraged to foster strong emotional bonds with each other, with

the understanding that such attachments would make them better soldiers. The deep companionship of buddies was a common theme during World War II and inspired the hit tune “My Buddy,” a song whose lyrics express a deep love between men.¹⁹

Hollywood did its part to help win the war, and its films reflect the era’s shifting expectations about gender. Buddy films began to appear regularly, starring comedy duos such as Bob Hope and Bing Crosby or Bud Abbott and Lou Costello. As Steven Cohan has argued, the gender dynamics of these duos tended to construct the comedic couple along traditional male/female roles, allowing the male couple to be seen as almost husband and wife.²⁰ For example, in their famous *Road* movies, Bob Hope is often shown getting manicures and pedicures, sleeping with cold cream on his face, wearing a snood, and generally acting like a scared rabbit in need of protection. Bing Crosby comes off as the more masculine half of the duo: he always wins the girl (Dorothy Lamour) as a result of being more assertive and courageous. And while Bud Abbott tended to play the adult to Lou Costello’s overgrown baby, Costello would occasionally make use of effeminate routines to accentuate his comic lack of manliness.

Homosocial buddies also were commonplace in war films, as GIs in the trenches expressed their tender feelings for one another. The queerer possibilities of such buddy relationships were presented in the classic Warner Bros. film *Casablanca* (1943). In it, Rick (Humphrey Bogart) is explicitly portrayed as heterosexual, yet he has a strong (but never fully explained) bond with African American musician Sam (Dooley Wilson). Rick also develops a mutual grudging admiration for Lieutenant Louis Renault (Claude Rains) as the narrative progresses, until it seems as if the two men are almost flirting with each other. In trying to describe Rick, Renault fumbles for words until he admits, “If I were a woman . . . I should be in love with Rick.” For a film fondly remembered as one of Hollywood’s classic heterosexual romances, the story ends not with a male-female embrace but with Rick and Renault walking off into the fog together, with Rick intoning to Renault, “I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship.”

Hollywood also did its part in promoting the “Rosie the Riveter” image—that of a strong woman succeeding at conventionally masculine tasks. Although women were not allowed into combat during World War II, many films centered on nurses or members of the women’s auxiliaries. In films such as *Cry Havoc* (1943) and *So Proudly We Hail* (1943), strong female characters create and express intense emotional bonds with one another. Just as the male buddy comedies do not manifestly label their male characters as homosexual, these women’s films do not explicitly depict lesbian spaces. Yet, the

bonds between women are what all these films tend to emphasize. For example, while all of the women in *Tender Comrade* (1943) are linked romantically to men, most of the men are never actually seen onscreen. Instead, the film focuses on how the women create their own type of same-sex family.

Even more queer was a vogue for cross-dressing in wartime comedies and musicals. Paramount's musical revue *Star Spangled Rhythm* (1942) dusted off an old vaudeville routine called "If Men Played Cards like Women" and had Fred MacMurray, Franchot Tone, Ray Milland, and Lynne Overman act it out. The skit's humor is predicated upon the four he-men acting like stereotypical women—flighty and catty—but their characters can also be read as pansies, even down to the climactic joke where they all jump up on chairs and pull up their trouser legs upon seeing a mouse. It is probable that the wartime increase in cinematic gender bending was a reflection of the rise of female impersonation in military entertainments. GIs stationed overseas without movies or radio often created their own amateur theatricals, which often meant that men played women's roles. As Allan Berubé has documented in his book *Coming Out under Fire*, such diversions often gave gay enlisted men more license to flaunt their queerness.²¹ Drag performances became so commonplace that they were included in the all-military-cast Broadway charity revue *This Is the Army*, produced for the stage in 1942 and filmed in 1943. Mickey Rooney dressed like Carmen Miranda in *Babes on Broadway* (1942), and June Haver (dressed like a man) sings to a group of chorus boys in female drag in *Irish Eyes Are Smiling* (1944). Even Bugs Bunny, who rose to cartoon stardom during the war, regularly cross-dressed as part of his shtick.²² Almost without fail, the participants in these cinematic drag acts are obsessively heterosexualized in order to quell or contain the specter of homosexuality. For example, the GIs in *This Is the Army* are shown with girlfriends or wives before they become the "Ladies of the Chorus."

Nonetheless, the era's newfound awareness of homosexuality was also occasionally expressed in American movies. One scene in the musical *Up in Arms* (1944), for example, exploits the homosexual-or-homosocial question for an extended comedy routine. In the film, Danny Kaye and Dana Andrews play GI buddies in the typical manner—Andrews as the manly half, Kaye as a nelly hypochondriac—even as both are romantically linked to women. As the story progresses, their girlfriends become members of the Women's Army Corps, and the foursome meet on leave in San Francisco, wherein a crowded streetcar forces the boys to sit together on one seat with their backs to the two girls. The seating arrangement makes it look to the other passengers as if the two men are talking to each other, and the two women to themselves. Consequently, double takes abound as Andrews says, "You look great in a

uniform, but I always think of you with a blue ribbon in your hair.” Kaye says, “If I’d known you were going to enlist, I never would’ve sent you those silk stockings,” and one of the girls says, “I’m so glad you didn’t grow a moustache like you said you would.” The scene ends when Andrews says that he wishes he had flowers to give and a man hands him a corsage he had intended for his wife, saying “I’ll get her a derby hat instead!” As usual, the possibility of a homosexual relationship is raised, only to be disavowed through laughter.

Not all of the queers in early Hollywood films were frivolous and funny. Some were strange, sick, and potentially dangerous. A few war films seem to indicate that the Production Code Administration would allow intimations of “sex perversion” if they were used to characterize the enemy. For example, a Nazi spy in *Saboteur* (1942) is portrayed as effeminate—we are even told that as a child he had long hair like a girl—a device meant to show how “unmanly” and “perverted” the Germans were. Similarly, the chief Nazi agent in *The House on 92nd Street* (1945) is revealed to be a butch woman in male drag. Even the Italian import *Rome: Open City* (1945) featured a quasi-lesbian fascist pitted against stalwart men and traditionally feminine heroines. Villainous queers also appeared in the era’s thrillers and mysteries. One of the most prominent pansy character actors of the 1940s was Clifton Webb, whose leap to screen stardom came via his portrayal of Waldo Lydecker in *Laura* (1944). Instead of a flighty and amusing pansy, Waldo is a snide, cynical, and bitter man who turns out to be the villain of the piece, murdering one woman and attempting to kill another. Fey artistic men, hiding their perversions under a surfeit of culture, were also used as villains in gothic horror films. For example, Vincent Price played slightly effeminate men with dark psychosexual secrets in films such as *Dragonwyck* (1946) and *Shock* (1946), while Laird Cregar played overweight psychotic queers in films such as *I Wake Up Screaming* (1941), *The Lodger* (1944), and *Hangover Square* (1945). The ambiguous sexuality of the villain Ballin Mundson (George Macready) in *Gilda* (1946) also exemplifies this shift. Ballin marries Rita Hayworth’s title character but only after many vague insinuations about the status of his relationship with Glenn Ford’s Johnny, as well as a lot of manipulation of his phallic walking stick à la Joel Cairo in *The Maltese Falcon*. (In *The Celluloid Closet*, Vito Russo alleges that both Ford and Macready knew they were playing homosexual characters.)²³

Throughout the 1940s, Americans became a bit more worldly about many things, including sexuality. However, the Breen Office maintained its control over Hollywood film. Explicit references to “sex perversion” were not to be countenanced, and any filmic adaptations of plays or novels that had homosexual content were rewritten to eliminate the offending subject matter.

Thus, the film *The Lost Weekend* (1945) blamed its central character's alcoholism not on his repressed homosexuality (as the novel suggested) but rather on a severe case of writer's block. And while the novel *The Brick Foxhole* was about a GI brutally murdering a gay man in a homophobic rage, the film version, released as *Crossfire* (1947), was about a GI brutally murdering a Jewish man in an anti-Semitic rage. Biographies of gay men—such as *Night and Day* (1946) about songwriter Cole Porter or *Words and Music* (1948) about songwriter Lorenz Hart—also had to erase their protagonists' homosexuality. Connotative queerness, however, especially in relation to villainy, continued to thrive.

Richard Dyer has shown how frequently queer characters and situations appear in film noir, a type of late-1940s filmmaking that combined the hard-boiled detective story with postwar angst.²⁴ Everyone in these films seems to have psychosexual hang-ups, and the women in them—sometimes called *femmes fatales*—can usually be found plotting against men. Occasionally, such women were presented as especially ominous because of their lack of romantic interest in men. For example, in *Young Man with a Horn* (1950), the independent Amy North (Lauren Bacall) begins a relationship with another woman instead of being an obedient wife to her husband. The film uses Hollywood's usual connotative methods to suggest that Amy is queer (her costuming, set décor, etc.), and she is also given dialogue in which she says that she considers herself to be “sick.” That same year, the prison melodrama *Caged* (1950) presented lesbian desire as even more predatory and criminal.

Two villainous queer men are at the center of Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948). Although based on a play, reviewers quickly recognized that the film bore strong similarities to the Leopold and Loeb murder case of the 1920s.²⁵ In *Rope*, Brandon (John Dall) and Phillip (Farley Granger) are urban sophisticates who feel superior to the rest of (heterosexual) society. The film opens with them strangling another young man, and the murder is filmed almost like a secret sexual act, complete with Brandon and Phillip ecstatically describing the thrills they felt as the strangled boy's body went limp. Brandon and Phillip then place the body in a chest and proceed to host a dinner party, serving various foods from the top of the chest. In their minds, the murder and party are experiments to prove that they are smarter than everyone else and that therefore conventional morality does not apply to them.

Like all Hollywood films of the era, *Rope* had to pass inspection by the Production Code Administration, and thus Brandon's and Phillip's homosexuality is again suggested rather than made explicit. For example, although they live together in a one-bedroom apartment, there is a small mention in the script to Brandon's once having had a girlfriend. Just as with the era's buddy

films, Brandon and Phillip ape the dynamics of heterosexuality: Brandon is bossy and clearly the mastermind of the crime, while Phillip is passive and nervous. A later conversation makes a veiled reference to masturbation—another “sexual perversion” of the era—when Phillip is teased about wringing the necks of poultry (“choking chickens”). Ultimately, the film creates a strong link between queerness, criminality, and mental illness—a link that was increasingly being asserted during these years by many psychiatric professionals. Indeed, at the end of the film, Brandon and Phillip’s former professor (James Stewart) realizes what they have done and alerts the police but not before judging them to be “sick and twisted.”

Queer characters in postwar Hollywood films not only shifted from silly to villainous; they also increasingly moved away from the idea of homosexuality as gender inversion. While characters such as Brandon and Phillip were urbane and stuffy, they were not overly feminine in their appearance or mannerisms. Similarly, Amy North in *Young Man with a Horn* is never shown in a man’s tweed suit. She does smoke—but long filtered cigarettes rather than cigars. In other words, Amy seems relatively feminine in her appearance, just as Brandon and Phillip are relatively masculine. The appearance of traditionally gendered queer men and women suggests that social definitions of homosexuality were again changing. In fact, by the 1950s it was becoming increasingly difficult to tell the homosexuals from the heterosexuals, and that development would affect in its own way upon the cinematic representation of queers. But before turning to those issues, the next two chapters examine some of the queer people who worked in classical Hollywood, as well as some of the ways that queer spectators related to classical Hollywood’s heterosexist output.

Notes

1. Jonathan Ned Katz notes that homosexuality first appeared in Merriam-Webster’s *New International Dictionary* in 1909, defined as a “morbid sexual passion for one of the same sex.” Heterosexuality first appeared in the same dictionary in 1923, defined as a “morbid passion for one of the opposite sex.” Katz continues, “Only in 1934 does ‘heterosexuality’ first appear in Webster’s hefty *Second Edition Unabridged* defined in what is still the dominant modern mode. There, heterosexuality is finally a ‘manifestation of sexual passion for one of the opposite sex; normal sexuality.’” Jonathan Ned Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality* (New York: Penguin, Dutton, 1995), 92.

2. For more on “Boston marriages,” see Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Penguin, 1992).

3. R. Bruce Brasell, "A Seed for Change: The Engenderment of *A Florida Enchantment*," *Cinema Journal* 36, no. 4 (Summer 1997): 3–21. See also Siobhan B. Somerville, *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000), 39–76.

4. "A Florida Enchantment," *Variety*, 14 August 1914.

5. For a discussion of *Vingarne*, see Richard Dyer, *Now You See It: Studies on Lesbian and Gay Film*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2003 [1990]), 8–22.

6. Alex Doty discusses this film in conjunction with *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* in his book *Flaming Classics: Queering the Film Canon* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 23–26.

7. For more on these films, see Dyer, *Now You See It*, 23–62; and Alice A. Kuzniar, *The Queer German Cinema* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000), 21–56.

8. George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940* (New York: Basic, 1994), 301–29.

9. For an overview of the case and excerpts from the court documents, see Jonathan Ned Katz, *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the USA*, rev. ed. (New York: Meridian, 1992), 397–405.

10. For more on the Hollywood Production Code, see Leonard J. Leff and Jerold L. Simmons, *The Dame in the Kimono: Hollywood, Censorship, and the Production Code from the 1920s to the 1960s* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1990).

11. For a further queer analysis of *These Three*, see Patricia White, *unInvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 21–28.

12. Chon Noriega indicates that the Production Code Administration may have been correct—in that film reviewers inevitably mentioned the original play and its subject matter when reviewing the 1936 film—in "Something's Missing Here! Homosexuality and Film Reviews during the Production Code Era, 1934–1962," *Cinema Journal* 30, no. 1 (Fall 1990): 20–41.

13. Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1987 [1981]), 62.

14. Russo theorizes that this line made it past the censors because it was not in the official script; Cary Grant apparently ad-libbed the line during filming. Russo, *Celluloid Closet*, 47.

15. Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 18.

16. David M. Lugowski, "Queering the (New) Deal: Lesbian and Gay Representation and the Depression-Era Cultural Politics of Hollywood's Production Code," *Cinema Journal* 38, no. 2 (Winter 1999): 3–35.

17. White, "Female Spectator, Lesbian Specter," in *unInvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability*, 61–93; and Rhona J. Berenstein, "Adaptation, Censorship, and Audiences of Questionable Type: Lesbian Sightings in *Rebecca* (1940) and *The Uninvited* (1944)," *Cinema Journal* 37, no. 3 (Spring 1998): 16–37.

18. Berenstein covers the interactions between the Breen Office and the studios in detail.

19. Allan Berubé, *Coming Out under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War Two* (New York: Plume, 1991), provides an in-depth account of how the war affected lesbians and gay men. See also Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

20. Steven Cohan, "Queering the Deal: On the Road with Hope and Crosby," *Out Takes: Essays on Queer Theory and Film*, ed. Ellis Hanson (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999), 23–45.

21. Berubé, *Coming Out under Fire*, 67–97.

22. For more on Bugs Bunny's queerness, see Hank Sartin, "Bugs Bunny: Queer as a Three-Dollar Bill," *Windy City Times*, 24 June 1993, sec. 2, 79; Kevin S. Sandler, "Gendered Evasion: Bugs Bunny in Drag," in *Reading the Rabbit: Explorations in Warner Bros. Animation*, ed. Kevin Sandler (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 154–71; and Sean Griffin, "Pronoun Trouble: The Queerness of Animation," in *Queer Cinema: The Film Reader*, ed. Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin (New York: Routledge, 2004), 105–18.

23. Russo, *Celluloid Closet*, 78.

24. Richard Dyer, "Homosexuality and Film Noir," in *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representation*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2002 [1993]), 50–70; and Dyer, "Queer Noir," *The Culture of Queers* (London: Routledge, 2002), 90–113.

25. "Rope," *Variety*, 1 September 1948. A landmark essay in queer film theory specifically analyzes this film. See D. A. Miller, "Anal Rope," *inside/out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1991), 119–41.

CHAPTER TWO



Discreet Charms: Queer Filmmakers in Classical Hollywood



Dorothy Arzner was one of several queer directors during Hollywood's classical era. Although her films could not deal directly with lesbian desire, they often centered on strong emotional bonds between women. The Kobol Collection

As discussed in the last chapter, there were queer characters in American film almost from its very inception. Images of sexual or gender nonconformity in early cinema—while not often identified as outright homosexuality—did nonetheless indicate an awareness of queer lives and behaviors on the part of both filmmakers and audiences. However, those images were most often used to condemn or belittle queer nonconformists, and thus they helped to reinforce the dominant heterosexual paradigm in both film and American culture at large. Furthermore, cinematic images of queers often had only a tangential relationship to how actual queer people lived their lives. Because of legal sanctions and social attitudes, many (if not most) queer people of previous generations were isolated, hidden, and convinced of their own deviancy. Even the most openly queer individuals knew they had to lead careful, circumspect lives; if knowledge of one's sexuality became known to the wrong people, careers could be (and often were) destroyed. And while some communities and professions were more welcoming than others to queer people, prejudice, hatred, blackmail, and violence were constant threats to most queer lives.

This was true even in Hollywood, a place where many queers thought that they could live relatively open lives. Hollywood too had its own rules and regulations about sexuality, and tolerance for queers in the film industry waxed and waned in response to social and historical trends. As this chapter demonstrates, queer people working in Hollywood usually had to hide their sexuality. In some cases, they married people of the opposite sex and lived “heterosexual” lives. In other instances, queer people tried to live their lives more openly. Some even managed to bring queer touches to their film work, inflecting their films with sensibilities that occasionally managed to critique the dominant structures of heterosexist culture. Just as there have always been queer characters on American movie screens, so too have there always been queer filmmakers in Hollywood.

Queerness and the Arts

Western society has often considered the world of the performing arts to be a haven for homosexuals. Cultural historian Michael Bronski has referred to the theater as a “port of safety for homosexuals.”¹ As far back as Elizabethan times, before the term *homosexual* even existed, many people assumed that the theater was the domain of “a certain type of man.” Since women were not allowed on stage during this period, young men routinely donned wigs, makeup, and dresses in order to enact female roles. Many men employed offstage were concerned with costuming, set design, and decoration—professions that Western culture still deems feminine or feminizing. Consequently, it was as-

sumed by many that men in the theatrical professions were probably “fops” or “mollies” (to use the terms of the era). Such perceptions, while definitely stereotypical, were not entirely untrue—and the widespread nature of this assumption may have helped it to become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Queer men may have sought out careers in the theater specifically to find a more accepting circle of acquaintances, colleagues, and lovers.

Such attitudes about the theater sometimes carried over into the fledgling film industry. As it became a widespread business and an art form, many performers, writers, directors, and other professionals made their move from theater to film. A great number of them did not live conventionally straight lives. William J. Mann, who has written extensively on the lives of queer people in historic Hollywood, pointed out that one of the first major Hollywood stars, J. Walter Kerrigan, was gay by today’s understanding of the word. Kerrigan had begun his career on the legitimate stage, as had other queer artists of the era, including Edwin August, Eugene O’Brien, Marie Dressler, George James Hopkins, and Fred de Gresac.²

The advent of modernism in the arts also created a vibrant atmosphere in which queer individuals could sometimes feel freer to live and thrive. Modernism attempted to throw off traditional attitudes about both art and life—exploring new ways to paint, sculpt, compose, or write in order to create new ways to look at and think about the world. As such, many modernist artists lived unconventional lives that questioned the assumptions and values of the status quo. Artistic, bohemian communities coalesced in European and American cities, such as those found in Bloomsbury (London), the Left Bank (Paris), or Greenwich Village (New York City). These communities welcomed a variety of lifestyles and often championed women’s rights, free love, and a greater acceptance of queer sexualities. By the 1920s, many urban areas in the Western world could boast a large number of lesbian clubs and gay male meeting places. Berlin in particular gained a reputation for sexual experimentation in all its varied forms, and a proto-“gay rights” movement led by Magnus Hirschfeld even made tentative gains in Germany before it was quashed by the rise of Nazism.

In such neighborhoods, queer men and women often felt free to express themselves. Richard Dyer describes Mauritz Stiller, one of Sweden’s most critically acclaimed directors of the silent era, as “not only gay but a flamboyant man about town.”³ German director F. W. Murnau, who directed such classic films as *Nosferatu* (1922) and *The Last Laugh* (1925), was more discreet than Stiller but did not necessarily hide his homosexuality. Greta Garbo, who was discovered and nurtured by Stiller in Sweden, kept quiet about her private life but had a number of romantic relationships with

women.⁴ German screenwriter Christa Winsloe lived openly as a lesbian.⁵ German actress Marlene Dietrich was heterosexually married and a mother but had a number of affairs with both men and women over the course of her career.

The presence of queer people in the arts, and in cinema in particular, has often troubled homophobes, who from time to time accuse Hollywood of being run by a “gay Mafia,” an organized cabal of queers allegedly attempting to undermine the primacy of institutionalized heterosexuality. Such worries seem unfounded when examining the history of Hollywood. While many lesbian and gay people did work in front of and behind the cameras, the number of films that actually represent nonstraight sexualities in anything but a degrading comic or villainous light (especially during the classical era) are infinitesimal. Hollywood cinema has always emphasized the primacy of heterosexual attraction and courtship. Most of the lesbians, gay men, and other queer individuals working in Hollywood—from its earliest days to the present—are expected to write, direct, and act in stories that revolve around heterosexual romance. J. Walter Kerrigan, for example, may have been homosexual offscreen, but on screen he played nothing but heroic cowboys and romantic heterosexuals.

While various filmmakers in Europe considered cinema to be an art form, it is also important to recognize that, in the United States, cinema was primarily considered a business venture. American moviemaking has never been dominated by “long hair” aesthetes but rather by nine-to-five laborers who finish their work and then go home to their wives and children. Queer filmmakers in classical Hollywood—as in the rest of American society—had to interact daily with straight people. Those straight people could be accepting, homophobic, or even clueless. Thus while many queer people came to Hollywood to liberate themselves from old-fashioned attitudes about sexuality, such freedom was still limited.

Hollywood in the Jazz Age

One of the reasons why the founders of the Hollywood studios drifted out west in the first place was that they themselves were outlaws. They were escaping the lawyers (and the henchmen) of the Edison Trust that held the patents on motion picture technology. Since the trust was centered in the eastern states, moving west gave rebel filmmakers room to breathe. Southern California also had large amounts of cheap land and cheap labor; unions were strong on the East Coast but had not yet reached the West. This isolation, combined with the sudden extreme wealth that was bestowed on immigrant

and working-class film entrepreneurs, created in Hollywood an atmosphere of unbridled and immediate gratification. Stars and studio executives built lavish palaces, hosted magnificent parties, and generally lived a wild, carefree existence. Hollywood social life became notorious for its hedonistic use of alcohol and other drugs and gained a reputation for pre- and extramarital affairs, quickie divorces, sex parties, and even same-sex relations.

While gossip columns often portrayed Hollywood as a reckless place out of tune with the rest of America, in fact a large portion of the nation was overthrowing Victorian morality. References to the era as the Jazz Age or the Roaring Twenties suggest a general loosening of tradition and the pursuit of previously forbidden pleasures. Many women adopted the more sexually liberated pose of the flapper, and citizens across the nation widely flouted the prohibition against alcohol. Hollywood, however, became the focus of reformers who were aghast at this general shift in morality, and a number of film-industry scandals in the early 1920s further inflamed the moral crusaders. Comedian Fatty Arbuckle was accused of causing a young woman's death during a sex party. All-American star Wallace Reid died as he was trying to overcome his heroin addiction, and director William Desmond Taylor was murdered under mysterious circumstances.

The studio moguls knew they had to change Hollywood's image—away from that of a modern-day Sodom and Gomorrah and toward something more wholesome. In 1923, they hired former U.S. postmaster general Will Hays to be head of the newly formed Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America. Hays vowed to oversee and clean up motion pictures—and he demanded that “morals clauses” be put into studio contracts. These moves were largely public relations ploys, but at each studio, public relations departments became vital to the industry. It was their job to keep the more salacious activities of Hollywood filmmakers under wraps. This included keeping someone's same-sex relations from being exposed to the moviegoing public. For example, while studio publicists were unable to keep the press from covering the murder of director William Desmond Taylor, they did manage to quell reports referring to his bisexuality.⁶

Lesbians and gay men working in 1920s Hollywood, along with their heterosexual counterparts, thus learned the value of being discreet. Almost everyone in Hollywood knew that costume designers such as Travis Banton and Adrian or actors such as Ramon Novarro, William Haines, and Alla Nazimova were queer, but no one brought it up as a topic of general conversation. Stars especially knew they had to “keep up appearances” for the general public by going to premieres and publicity events with members of the opposite sex. Some stars were more prudent than others. Ramon Novarro, for example,

kept mainly to himself. Certain actresses, such as Janet Gaynor, had a conventionally feminine presence that precluded public suspicion. Others, though, pushed at what the limits would allow. William Haines, who was a top box-office draw, lived with his partner Jimmie Shields, and they were known by some wags as “the happiest married couple in Hollywood.”⁷ Actress Lilyan Tashman was also quite overt, renowned about town for her aggressive passes at other women. Often queers in Hollywood entered into marriages of convenience with other queers in order to appear “officially heterosexual.” For example, Lilyan Tashman married gay actor Edmund Lowe. And just as newspaper editorials began to suggest that Rudolph Valentino was “too pretty” to be anything but a “powder puff,” he married designer-choreographer Natacha Rambova, who was herself a longtime lover of silent screen star Alla Nazimova.

The history of the production of Nazimova’s *Salomé* (1922) provides a good example of how queer artists could or could not maneuver their way through the film industry at this time. Nazimova came to American cinema from the stage, a background that put her in touch with the bohemian lifestyle of the modernist-art enclaves of the early twentieth century. It was during those years that Nazimova had her first (known) lesbian affair with writer Mercedes de Acosta. By the time Nazimova came to Hollywood in 1916, she was one of the biggest stars in the world, even having had a theater named after her. Although supposedly married to a man named Charles Bryant, she also had many lesbian affairs.⁸ In Hollywood, Nazimova refashioned her home into a dazzling environment suitable for outrageous gatherings. Exotically christened “The Garden of Alla,” Nazimova hosted wild parties (many of them women only) that made the mansion legendary in Hollywood folklore.

In 1922, Nazimova decided to form her own production company in order to film *Salomé*, an adaptation of the infamous Oscar Wilde play that had been banned from the London stage. While none of the characters in *Salomé* are explicitly homosexual, and the storyline is expressly about heterosexual desire, the queer atmosphere of the project is extremely pronounced. For example, the film’s script is credited to one “Peter M. Winters,” but different sources consider this a pseudonym for either Nazimova or her lover Natacha Rambova.⁹ The film was designed in an art nouveau style reminiscent of the work of Aubrey Beardsley, whose drawings had accompanied the first edition of the Wilde play. Nazimova herself plays *Salomé* as both extremely feminine but also boyish, and both aspects of her character seem to exude sexual desire for John the Baptist. Some of the ladies of the court are played by female impersonators, and a subplot deals with the “deep friendship” a boy in black

tights has for a soldier costumed in gold lamé and painted nipples. And if this were not enough to infuse the picture with queerness, rumors at the time spread that the entire cast was either gay or lesbian. As *Variety* snidely describes the film, it is “higher art in all its form perversions.”¹⁰ In the wake of the various film scandals rocking the nation at the time, censors pounced on the film and practically vivisected it, and Nazimova’s film career began to wane.¹¹ *Salomé* had gone beyond what audiences and the industry deemed acceptable.

Queer Artists and the Production Code

As the 1930s began, there existed a vibrant network of lesbian social life in Hollywood informally referred to as “the sewing circle.”¹² Queer men in Hollywood also had their clubs, parties, and domestic lives. Following the example of William Haines and Jimmie Shields, up-and-coming stars Cary Grant and Randolph Scott bought a home together, as did Gary Cooper and Anderson Lawler.¹³ However, that sense of relative security would be severely curtailed only a few years later as Hollywood—in response to the same protests that led to the institution of the Production Code—attempted to purge queers from the industry. One studio executive stated in a memo, “I do not want any of them in Fox pictures,” a statement that seems to refer to both homosexual characters as well as performers.¹⁴ People were already assuming that many of the pansies and mannish women that appeared in the era’s films were being played by actual pansies and mannish women, forcing actors such as Edward Everett Horton and Franklin Pangborn to stress their own genuine masculinity in publicity interviews.¹⁵ Critics and protestors repeatedly decried the cinematic presence of male stars whom they deemed to be effeminate, and strong female stars were also suspect. Louis B. Mayer, the head of MGM, began asking directly if certain people under contract to the studio were lesbian or gay. When William Haines refused to give up his relationship with Jimmie Shields, his contract with MGM was terminated.¹⁶

In order to keep similar things from happening to them, many Hollywood queers quickly agreed to play by the new, stricter rules and went into the closet—not just in front of the press and public but in their day-to-day lives. Cary Grant soon married a woman, the first of many wives. (Grant remained “officially heterosexual” for the rest of his life and even sued comedian Chevy Chase in the 1970s for making a joke that implied he was gay.)¹⁷ Gary Cooper changed his public persona from sophisticated pretty boy to the rugged leather-faced cowboy. Star actresses also capitulated. Claudette Colbert, for example, may have had an affair with Marlene Dietrich in 1934, but



Hollywood star William Haines, seen here camping it up on the set of *Alias Jimmy Valentine* (1928), was forced out of the industry because he refused to stay in the closet. MGM / The Kobal Collection

in 1935 she married Dr. Joel Pressman. While the pressure to conform to compulsory heterosexuality was extremely high on actors and actresses (as it still is in the twenty-first century), artists behind the camera also felt the need to deflect intimations of homosexuality. Costume designer Adrian, for example, married actress Janet Gaynor in the early 1930s. Cedric Gibbons, the head of the entire MGM art direction department, married actress Dolores del Rio after knowing her for only a few weeks.¹⁸ Oscar-winning screenwriter Charles Brackett was so closeted (he married and had children) that many of his best friends never knew his secret.¹⁹

Closeted lives, while emotionally and mentally demanding, also construct sexual histories that do not easily correspond to simplistic labels such as *heterosexual* or *homosexual*. For example, referring to Brackett as simply *homosexual* denies his heterosexual behavior that allegedly produced his children. We can probably never know how these individuals might have defined their own sexuality; a gamut of queer options was possible. Some might have loathed their same-sex feelings and married in an attempt to cure themselves. Others

deliberately married partners as queer as themselves and then led separate but freewheeling queer lives under the cover of marriage (and who is to say what emotional ties these marriages of convenience may have forged). Clearly, Hollywood queers did not altogether disappear with the advent of the Production Code and the studio purges. Costume design and set decoration were still generally regarded as “gay fields” by most people in the industry. Informal circles of Hollywood queers still gathered regularly, albeit more discreetly.

With so many queers working in the classical Hollywood film industry, the question soon arises as to whether they were ever able to infuse some sort of “gay sensibility” into their work. Discussing the effects that queer filmmakers may have had on classical Hollywood films depends on concepts grouped together under the term *auteur theory*.²⁰ Auteur criticism searches for stylistic and thematic motifs across a director’s oeuvre and sometimes links these emphases to a director’s life history. For example, the emphasis on guilt and punishment in Alfred Hitchcock’s films might be in some way tied to his Catholic upbringing.²¹ Similarly, film historians in recent years have started to examine the work of queer Hollywood filmmakers and have argued that classical Hollywood queers were indeed able to make “queer films” (or at least films with queer moments) despite the constraints of the studio system and the Hollywood Production Code. Historians have also begun to investigate the queer traces that may have been left on film by other Hollywood craftworkers: producers, writers, designers, choreographers, and performers.

However, trying to establish what exactly constitutes a gay, lesbian, or queer sensibility in classical Hollywood filmmaking can prove to be quite difficult. Many artists now commonly considered homosexual may not have self-identified as such. Furthermore, a self-loathing, deeply closeted filmmaker is probably not going to exhibit the same kind of queer sensibility as would a filmmaker more at ease with his or her same-sex desire. Additionally, what looks forthrightly lesbian or gay to today’s audiences may not have been understood as such in previous eras. Again, queer theory allows us to deal with these historical vagaries, acknowledging that different queer directors may have held and expressed different queer sensibilities. What follows is an attempt to sketch out the queer traces and sensibilities that can be found in the work of three of Hollywood’s best-known queer directors: Dorothy Arzner, George Cukor, and James Whale.

Dorothy Arzner: A Woman in the Ranks

The case of Dorothy Arzner suggests some of the difficulties involved in labeling anyone’s sexual identity: Arzner never came out as a lesbian, and in

the 1970s she tried to argue against lesbian readings of her films.²² Yet she and choreographer Marion Morgan were life partners for over thirty years. Additionally, Arzner's public persona is hard *not* to understand as overtly lesbian: studio publicity shots repeatedly show her as the epitome of the 1930s mannish woman. In them, she sports dark, short slicked-back hair, wears little-to-no makeup, and is dressed in a coat and tie. In an interview about her film *Christopher Strong* (1933), Arzner said that she identified with Colin Clive's title role—a male character who is attracted to an aviatrix played by Katharine Hepburn.²³ Arzner also had a reputation for smoking cigars and talking tough, and her masculine demeanor extended beyond her outward appearance to include her behavior on the set. Some actresses thought that Arzner treated them like purely sexual objects, much as did Hollywood's straight male directors.

Studio publicity at the time attempted to explain away Arzner's lesbian connotations by claiming that Arzner presented a masculine image in order to compete in what was an almost exclusively male profession. While a number of women had been successful directors in the 1910–1925 period, men had almost completely taken over the profession by the 1930s. Arzner's butch personality supposedly convinced the rest of the crew that she was capable of working like “one of the boys.” However, Arzner's rise to the rank of director was due in part to successful women in the industry. Her first job was that of a script girl for Alla Nazimova, with whom she reportedly had a brief affair.²⁴ She then worked her way through the scenario department at the Famous Players/Lasky studio (soon renamed Paramount) at a time when women were writing approximately half the pictures made in Hollywood. Graduating to film editing, another department heavily populated with women, Arzner honed her skills as an editor while continuing to write scripts and doing some second-unit direction. Finally, in 1926, she convinced the studio to let her direct her first feature, *Fashions for Women* (1926). The film was a box-office success and earned Arzner a contract.

In the 1970s, Arzner's films were rediscovered by feminist film scholars, who analyzed them intensively, searching for any traces of a feminist sensibility. Arzner did direct women's films, and in many of them, female characters do chafe at the limitations placed upon them by male-dominated societies. Cynthia Darrington (Katharine Hepburn) in *Christopher Strong*, for example, has a successful career as an aviatrix when she takes a married man as her lover, an act that leads to tragedy. *First Comes Courage* (1943) also centers on a career woman, an undercover agent. *Dance, Girl, Dance* (1940) climaxes with dancer Judy (Maureen O'Hara) lashing out bitterly at her lascivious male audience. Working from a slightly different angle, *Craig's Wife*

(1936) is about a woman so obsessed with her role as a perfect homemaker that she inadvertently drives her husband away. (William Haines, now a decorator rather than an actor, designed the sets for this film.)

These and other feminist themes help to build a potential lesbian (or at least queer) reading of Arzner's work. For example, the valued sense of women's community in films such as *Dance, Girl, Dance* privilege female bonding over the typical Hollywood heterosexual courtship narrative. Hepburn's aviatrix in *Christopher Strong* is a very glamorous version of the era's mannish woman, and when she is out of her flight jacket (most infamously wearing a silver lamé butterfly costume), she looks almost ridiculous, a parody of femininity. Arzner also reworked the conventions of the traditionally masculine point-of-view shot.²⁵ She often gives women the power to look—sometimes at men but often at other women, as in *The Wild Party* (1929). This film also shows how Arzner occasionally challenged the tenets of Hollywood continuity editing. For example, one shot shows the headmistress of the girls college. The next shot shows what she sees: the provocative outfits that four of her students have chosen to wear to the costume ball. Yet the camera position of this second shot is not matched to the spatial positioning of the headmistress, giving audiences not her viewpoint (as would normally occur with traditional Hollywood editing) but rather one from an alternative—and potentially queer—perspective.²⁶

The Wild Party is one of Arzner's queerest films. In it, Clara Bow (famous for being the era's highly sexualized "It Girl") displays her flirtatious persona as college-girl Stella, but the film also emphasizes her strength and fortitude. She first comes onscreen lugging a steamer trunk and introduces herself as a "hard boiled maiden." She gets into physical scrapes with both women and men and at one point asks another woman to feel her flexed biceps. One of Stella's outfits in the film epitomizes her "butch flapper" style: she wears a short skirt and high heels, but her blouse is accessorized with a man's tie and suspenders. The official storyline of *The Wild Party* deals with Stella's tempestuous relationship with one of her male professors (Frederic March). Yet, running alongside that story is a tale of her "romantic friendship" with Helen (Shirley O'Hara). At the start of the film, Stella recounts a train trip where she and Helen shared a berth together, intimating that they spooned while sleeping. Throughout the film, physical displays of affection are common between the two: they hug and cradle each other and sit on each other's laps. Stella is also extremely protective of Helen and rushes off to save Helen's honor from a man's sexual advances: "You see, I love Helen too." At the climax of the film, when Helen may be thrown out of school, Stella takes the blame herself, asserting, "I have come to love and admire her more than any woman I've ever seen."

This is not to say that the film portrays female romantic friendship only in melodramatic terms. Stella, Helen, and the other college girls are also shown in intimate, happy settings, such as that of an all-girls costume ball where women (some in male costumes) dance with one another. (Arzner's partner, Marion Morgan, supervised the dancing in these scenes.) Thus, while Stella's courtship with her professor is presented as eternally combative, Stella's bond with Helen (and with the other college women) is shown to be warm, alive, and heartfelt. Arzner later denied that Stella and Helen were meant to be anything but good friends. Still, the film's celebration of female bonding stands in stark contrast to the warnings against women's romantic friendships that occur in the original novel, where an overtly lesbian character is used specifically to demonize such relationships. Arzner scholar Judith Mayne argues that the film's elimination of this character was designed to quell that demonization rather than to make lesbianism invisible.²⁷

As practically the only female director in classical Hollywood, Arzner had to battle sexism as well as heterosexism. In 1932, in the midst of the Great Depression, Paramount laid off many people, including Arzner. With moral-reform groups beginning to object to Hollywood's "sex perversion" both on- and offscreen, the studio may have thought it easier to fire Arzner than another, more conventional male director. Arzner kept making films for another ten years by doing freelance work at various other studios, but she retired from feature film directing in 1943. She then moved into making training films and directed for radio, theater, and television. In her later years, she was on the faculty of the University of Southern California's film school. She died in 1979, just as a generation of more openly queer filmmakers was beginning to arise.

George Cukor: The Better Part of Valor

While Arzner eventually left Hollywood in order to continue her career, George Cukor managed to thrive in the studio environment for his entire professional life, perhaps because he negotiated his queer sexuality in ways almost opposite to those of Arzner. While Arzner never admitted to being lesbian but seemed very overt in her day-to-day life, Cukor never denied being homosexual but lived a very discreet lifestyle. He was known in Hollywood for his all-male pool parties, but only a select few were invited, and they were expected to keep their mouths shut afterward. Cukor's respect for privacy even extended to heterosexual secrets: his close friends Katharine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy used his home as a safe haven for their affair. And while there are rumors that it was his homosexuality that caused him to be fired

from directing *Gone with the Wind* (1939), for the most part Cukor thrived in classical Hollywood's studio environment.²⁸ In a town where almost everyone had secrets, Cukor's tact and discretion made him well liked, and neither the industry press nor film historians had much to say about his homosexuality until after his death in 1983.

Cukor's early films, however, suggest that he was not as discreet at the beginning of his career as he would later become. Cukor started his career on Broadway and began directing films in the early 1930s at the height of the pansy craze. Many of his early films are strongly tinged with queer characters, subtexts, and contexts. For example, various actors from Hollywood's queer circle—including Lilyan Tashman, Jobyna Howland, Tallulah Bankhead, and Anderson Lawler—star in these films and help to give them a queer feel. In *Girls about Town* (1931), actress Kay Francis (who was probably at least bisexual) has intimate scenes with Jobyna Howland and Lilyan Tashman, causing one reviewer knowingly to insinuate that the picture was “very gay—very gay.”²⁹ The early Cukor musical *One Hour with You* (1932) also contains a classic queer moment. A character played by Charles Ruggles is dressing up as Romeo for what he thinks is going to be a costume ball. When he finds out too late that it is not a costume ball, he asks his butler why he did not inform him. The butler, with an arched eyebrow, replies, “Ah monsieur, I did so want to see you in tights.”

Cukor's notorious comedy *Our Betters* (1933) queerly tweaks the morality of the British upper class, particularly the competitiveness between two society women. Throughout the film, the characters anticipate the arrival of Mr. Ernest, a dance instructor who is adored as a paragon of culture and taste. Played by Tyrell Davis, Mr. Ernest finally appears in the film's last moments, and he is one of the most over-the-top pansies ever presented in a Hollywood film. Made up with eyeliner and lipstick, wearing a waistcoat and tails with a carnation, he flounces in with a limp wrist and his nose in the air, lisping the lines “You *must* excuse me for coming in my town clothes, but your chauffeur said there wasn't a *moment* to lose, so I came *just* as I am!” As the film ends, the two central women reach a tentative détente and kiss each other on the lips. Mr. Ernest, all atwitter, exclaims, “What an exquisite spectacle! Two ladies of title kissing one another!” While Mr. Ernest might be viewed as a negative stereotype by some, Cukor's involvement (as well as that of other queers, including writer Somerset Maugham) complicates that assessment. It is possible that Cukor and company pushed the stereotype too such an extreme in order to make fun not of gay men but of the stereotype itself. Whatever the possible intentions, *Our Betters* drove the era's moralists and censors wild, and studio heads at RKO were also displeased. They tried to modify Mr. Ernest, but Cukor insisted that the final scene stay as it was.³⁰

Perhaps it is not surprising that, in the wake of the reception of *Our Betters*, Cukor's next few films were mainly family fare. Adaptations of *Little Women* (1933) and *David Copperfield* (1935) were safe films for the queer director to make, and they were successful with both critics and audiences. Yet, Cukor had not totally given up on queer subject matter and managed to make *Sylvia Scarlett* (1935), surely one of "the queerest films ever made in Hollywood."³¹ In it, Katharine Hepburn plays a young woman named Sylvia masquerading as a man named Sylvester, with all the expected farcical twists and turns. In men's clothing and with her hair cut short, Hepburn is strikingly queer, potentially attractive to everyone: lesbians, gay men, and heterosexuals alike. The film even announces its celebration of *outré* lifestyles with a written prologue: "To the adventurer, to all who stray from the beaten track, life is an extravaganza in which laughter and luck and love come in odd ways, unexpectedly—but they are none the less sweet for that." The film's flouting of classical Hollywood narrative structure in favor of a picaresque plot makes it markedly different as well. Also, the film's emphasis on whimsy, such as when the characters randomly decide to become a traveling theatrical troupe called the Pink Pierrots, creates an *off-kilter joie de vivre*.

Although everyone in the film is allegedly heterosexual, Hepburn's disguise causes recurrent ambiguities of sexual desire. In particular, midway through the film is a sequence in which Sylvia (as Sylvester) is talking with her father's new girlfriend, Maudie. Plainly flirting with "Syl," Maudie reaches over and plants a big kiss on Sylvester's lips. (Is this a lesbian kiss or a heterosexual one?) Exasperated, Sylvester leaves Maudie, only to discover Monk (Cary Grant, whose presence adds yet another level of queerness to the proceedings) undressing for bed. He announces that because of the cold weather, he will be bunking with Sylvester who will "make a good hot water bottle." Later on, a bohemian artist named Michael (Brian Aherne) falls in love with Sylvester and confesses that "I know what it is that gives me a queer feeling when I look at you." During the final third of the film, Sylvia dons women's clothing and must be taught "how to be a woman" in order to win Michael's heart, allowing the film to satirize the obvious performativity at the heart of gender identity. Furthermore, as conventional patriarchal heterosexuality becomes more central to the proceedings, the film's tone shifts from comedic to tragic. Maudie runs away; Syl's father falls to his death off a cliff; and Michael's spurned lover tries to drown herself. However, the random queerness and joyfulness of the picaresque tale begins anew at the film's end, with Syl once again wearing men's clothing as she and Michael hit the road together.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Production Code Administration was very uneasy about the script for *Sylvia Scarlett*, but the general ineffability of the entire film made it hard to locate a specific complaint that could be used to prevent it from being made. As one letter from the Production Code Administration to RKO put it, “it is the general flavor [of the film] which is open to suggestion.”³² Originally the film was to start with Hepburn already in disguise, with no specific explanation of her gender-bending, but disastrous previews resulted in the addition of a small sequence wherein a long-haired Hepburn in a dress explained the need for the disguise (to get away from her father’s creditors).³³ Ultimately, *Sylvia Scarlett*’s emphasis on ambiguous gender identity and all sorts of queer sexual situations confused and angered both critics and audiences, and the film was a financial flop. Producer Pandro S. Berman swore never to work with either Hepburn or Cukor again, and Hepburn’s popularity slumped so badly that she was soon dubbed “box-office poison.” Although Cukor retained a special love for the film, never again did he attempt to make a film so forthrightly queer.

Instead, Cukor’s noted discretion in his personal life came to influence his directorial style. If and when queer characters appeared in his later films, as they did in *Adam’s Rib* (1949), they did so discreetly. Although early auteur critics were hard pressed to find an obvious stylistic signature consistent throughout Cukor’s oeuvre, his best films all show the presence of a discreet queer performativity. Arguably, Cukor’s double life in Hollywood attracted him to stories about performance, tales that hinged on conflicts between public personas and private selves, and many of his films deal with this topic through the prism of show business, such as *What Price Hollywood?* (1932), its musical remake *A Star Is Born* (1954), *A Double Life* (1947), and *Les Girls* (1957). The theme is also present in *Camille* (1936), *The Women* (1939), *Gaslight* (1944), *Adam’s Rib*, *Born Yesterday* (1950), *It Should Happen to You* (1954), and *Rich and Famous* (1981). Cukor won an Oscar for directing *My Fair Lady* (1964), yet another film about a double life, this time a street girl who is transformed into a “lady.” As this brief list of films attests, Cukor was one of the most well-known and successful directors of classical Hollywood cinema. Once he abandoned the more overt queerness of his early films, he became highly valued in the industry for his discreet queer sensibility that tweaked—but never directly challenged—the dominance of heterosexual relations.

James Whale: “A Very Queer Looking Old Gentleman”

While Cukor’s careful handling of his sexuality allowed him to work in Hollywood throughout his lifetime, James Whale’s refusal to be discreet may

have helped end his Hollywood career. At first, Whale was one of the most important directors working in Hollywood. Universal had brought him to America in 1930 after he had made a name for himself directing theater in London's West End. After directing *Journey's End* (1930), adapted from his stage success, Whale helmed the production of *Frankenstein* (1931), a film that would become an archetypal horror film. Universal kept him in the genre, and Whale directed other memorable horror films, such as *The Old Dark House* (1932), *The Invisible Man* (1933), and *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935). However, Whale was also adept in other genres, and he directed what many critics consider the best of the three film versions of the landmark musical *Show Boat* (1936). He also directed the first version of the classic woman's film *Waterloo Bridge* (1931) and a prototypical swashbuckler *The Man in the Iron Mask* (1939).

While Arzner never called herself a lesbian and Cukor learned to be discreet, Whale was unapologetically gay. He refused to follow studio protocol and brought male dates to public events. Recognition of Whale's sexuality was so widespread that he was eventually referred to as "the Queen of Hollywood" by industry wags.³⁴ Also, unlike those of Arzner and Cukor, Whale's films exhibit a very distinctive auteur style. Whale often employed chiaroscuro, or "Rembrandt," lighting, a technique that contrasts dark portions of the screen with intense pools of light. He would then accentuate those compositions with canted or tilted angles and/or grand camera movements, which greatly energized his shots. Whale's auteur signature also has a pronounced thematic component. Whether horror film, war film, woman's film, or musical, Whale's films emphasize the injustices caused by irrational prejudices. A misunderstood monster, a woman forced to prostitution, an African American wage slave, or a soldier fighting a war he does not understand: Whale's characters are brutally victimized by the everyday cruelty of dominant society. And while this theme may make Whale's films sound heavy-going, what one tends to notice most about Whale's auteur signature is its sly absurdist humor, threading its way through even the darkest subject matter.

The sense of a more flamboyant style in James Whale's films (more so than either Cukor's or Arzner's) might possibly be linked to his more open and overt queer sexual identity. He made it a habit to employ queer actors in his films, many of whom—including Charles Laughton, Colin Clive, and Ernest Thesiger—he had known through his stage work in London in the 1920s. Almost everyone who has studied Whale's work has found within it something that might be termed a "gay sensibility," a wry authorial stance that seems to comment upon heterosexual privilege.³⁵ Thus Whale's attraction to stories

about oppressed outsiders might be easily related to his own status as a homosexual in a heterosexual world. One might even argue that the prevalence of canted angles and other outlandish shots in Whale's films presents the viewer with a queer point of view, one that is off center from the usual way of seeing things. His repeated camera movements seem to indicate the necessity for seeing things from different, changing perspectives. Perhaps most important, Whale's love of black humor is directly tied to the traditions of gay male camp—a form of bitter wit common to the era's queer underground cultures. (Camp is discussed more fully in the next chapter.) Filled with witty jibes against Christian morality and heterocentrist pretension, Whale's films satirize "normality" and celebrate varied forms of social difference.

Bride of Frankenstein (1935), Whale's most highly regarded horror film, is probably also his most overtly queer film. Designed to be the first sequel to *Frankenstein*, Whale turned *Bride of Frankenstein* into a sort of horror parody, thus queering the very form of the horror film (much as he had done with *The Old Dark House*). The film begins with a historical framing story in which Mary Shelley (author of the novel *Frankenstein*) is coaxed by her lovers Lord Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley into continuing her tale. As is well known, this historical threesome had been thrown out of England for their unorthodox sexual exploits. In a bit of dialogue that was cut out of the film's final release print, Mary Shelley hints at their "open" relationship: "We are all three infidels, scoffers at all marriage ties, believing only in living fully and freely in whatever direction the heart dictates."³⁶ By foregrounding the queer context of the Frankenstein story, Whale hints at what is yet to come. *Bride of Frankenstein* climaxes with a monstrous parody of heterosexual courtship, as the monster (Boris Karloff) woos his freshly minted mate (Elsa Lanchester) by awkwardly sitting on a sofa and stroking her hand. She plainly cannot stand his attentions, and cataclysmic violence results.

Queerness also contextualizes the relationship between Dr. Henry Frankenstein (Colin Clive) and Dr. Pretorius (Ernest Thesiger), a rather fopish and effeminate mad scientist introduced in the film as "a very queer looking old gentleman." Quite pointedly, Dr. Pretorius interrupts Henry's wedding night and steals him away from his newlywed bride so that the two men may go off together to work on their own procreative act. Back in his lair, Pretorius displays his own experiments in the creation of life—miniature human organisms, including a king, a queen, and a bishop—all of whom provide Whale with more opportunities to satirize alleged "normality." Interestingly, as in the first film, the monster himself is a rather sympathetic character, a lost innocent whose violent acts are mostly due to misunderstanding or defensive anger. Midway through the film he shares a tender scene with a

blind hermit who offers him kind words, food, and drink. Whether one reads this scene as homosocial or homosexual, it is more heartfelt than any other scene in the film. Whale ends the scene as the hermit puts the monster to bed beneath a glowing crucifix, ironically suggesting that the link between the monster and the hermit is more holy than any other form of relationship depicted in the film. In fact, Whale compares the monster directly to Jesus Christ in two other scenes. As the townspeople hunt, stone, and imprison the monster, Whale uses crucifixion imagery to underline the abuse he endures at the hands of the bloodthirsty mob. (It has also been suggested that these scenes invoke a racial allegory, as the lynching of African Americans was still common in the 1930s.)³⁷

While *Bride of Frankenstein* was a critical and box-office success, it ended up being Whale's last horror film. He next directed *Show Boat*, but Universal took his next project, *The Road Back* (1937), out of his hands and then dropped his contract altogether. Partly this was due to a change in executive leadership at the studio, but many have suggested that it was Whale's homosexuality that largely led to his dismissal. George Cukor himself reportedly thought that Whale had asked for it (the ruination of his career) by flaunting his queer sexuality.³⁸ Whale attempted to freelance in Hollywood for the next few years, but after directing the provocatively titled war film *They Dare Not Love* (1941), he retired from the industry. In 1957, Whale was found dead at the bottom of his swimming pool, having left behind a suicide note. Even more so than that of Arzner or Cukor, Whale's work has continued to influence future generations of filmmakers. His horror films inspired *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975) and countless other queer-genre films. The Oscar-winning independent film *Gods and Monsters* (1998), about the connections between Whale's life and his art, serves as a fitting tribute to a pioneering queer filmmaker.

Conclusion: The Hollywood Closet

As the careers of Arzner, Cukor, and Whale exemplify, queer filmmakers dealt with the heterosexist demands of classical Hollywood in different ways and with different results. Arzner, Cukor, and Whale were only three of the many queers working in Hollywood throughout the 1930s and 1940s. Whale's longtime companion, producer David Lewis, kept his career going until the mid-1950s, just as the old studio system itself was coming to an end. Directors Arthur Lubin and Irving Rapper maintained healthy careers in part because, like Cukor, they kept their queer desires relatively under the radar. *Relatively* is a key word when describing the Hollywood closet during the Pro-

duction Code era. Generally, most people working in the industry knew or tended to suspect who was queer and who was not, but these things were seldom talked about directly. Lesbians, gay men, and other queer filmmakers throughout Hollywood history have tended to live their lives as “open secrets.”³⁹ A similar “there-but-not-there”-ness also describes the queerness inherent in their films, both during the classical era and even in contemporary Hollywood.

Notes

1. Michael Bronski, *Culture Clash: The Making of a Gay Sensibility* (Boston: South End Press, 1984), 110–11.

2. For more information on these individuals, see William J. Mann, *Behind the Screen: How Gays and Lesbians Shaped Hollywood, 1910–1969* (New York: Penguin, 2001).

3. Richard Dyer, *Now You See It: Studies on Lesbian and Gay Film*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2003), 11.

4. Axel Madsen, *The Sewing Circle: Hollywood’s Greatest Secret—Female Stars Who Loved Other Women* (New York: Birch Lane Press, 1995), covers the lesbian relationships of both Garbo and Dietrich (and others) in detail.

5. Dyer, *Now You See It*, 44–45.

6. Mann, *Behind the Screen*, 33–37, 85–86.

7. William J. Mann, *Wisecracker: The Life and Times of William Haines, Hollywood’s First Openly Gay Star* (New York: Viking, 1998), xv, attributes this quote to Haines’s close friend Joan Crawford.

8. The Internet Movie Database lists Charles Bryant as only having “lived with” Nazimova. Patricia White calls him suggestively “the man *known as* Nazimova’s husband” (emphasis provided). Patricia White, “Nazimova’s Veils: *Salomé* at the Intersection of Film Histories,” in *A Feminist Reader in Early Cinema*, ed. Jennifer M. Bean and Diane Negra (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002), 65.

9. The Internet Movie Database lists Winters as a pseudonym for Rambova, but White claims it is Nazimova’s writing alias (“Nazimova’s Veils,” 65). Such complications also apply to directing credit for the film: the director is listed as Nazimova’s “husband,” Charles Bryant. Yet, Bryant only directed three films in his career—all films produced by and starring Nazimova. White asserts that “he appears to have been director in name only.”

10. *Variety*, 5 January 1923.

11. Various truncated versions of the film seemed to be all that was left of the film for decades—some lasting barely over a half hour. The Internet Movie Database lists the film’s running time as thirty-five minutes; White refers to a print obtained by distributor Raymond Rohauer in the late 1960s that ran forty-five minutes (“Nazimova’s Veils,” 67–68); J. Hoberman, “Milk of Human Kindness,” *Village Voice*, 21 August

2001, reviewed a sixty-eight-minute partial restoration. In 2003, Image Entertainment released on DVD what may be the complete version, running 101 minutes.

12. Madsen, *The Sewing Circle*. Mann seems to dismiss Madsen's use of this term but does assert that lesbians (or experimenting women) "did seem to find each other" (*Behind the Screen*, 81; emphasis in the original).

13. For more on Grant and Scott's relationship, see Mann, *Wisecracker*, 231–35; on Cooper and Lawson's affair, see Mann, *Behind the Screen*, 104–10.

14. Mann, *Behind the Screen*, 127.

15. Mann, *Behind the Screen*, 160.

16. Mann, *Wisecracker*, 212–15.

17. Boze Hadleigh's interview with Cary Grant is included in *Hollywood Gays* (New York: Barricade Books, 1996), 237–82.

18. DeWitt Bodeen, *From Hollywood* (Cranbury, N.J.: A. S. Barnes, 1976), 285.

19. Mann, *Behind the Screen*, 204–6.

20. For one examination of auteur analysis in the context of lesbian and gay studies, see Richard Dyer, "Believing in Fairies: The Author and the Homosexual," in *inside/out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1991), 185–201.

21. Many critics have commented on the queerer aspects of Hitchcock's work. See Corey K. Creekmur and Alexander Doty, eds., "Dossier on Hitchcock," in *Out in Culture: Gay, Lesbian, and Queer Essays on Popular Culture* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995), 183–281; and Robert J. Corber, *In the Name of National Security: Hitchcock, Homophobia, and the Political Construction of Gender in Postwar America* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1993).

22. Many authors have grappled with this issue. See Judith Mayne, "Lesbian Looks: Dorothy Arzner and Female Authorship," in *How Do I Look? Queer Film and Video*, ed. Bad Object-Choices (Seattle, Wash.: Bay Press, 1991), 103–35; and Alexander Doty, "Whose Text Is It Anyway? Queer Cultures, Queer Auteurs, and Queer Authorship," in *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 19–38.

23. Gerald Peary and Karyn Kay, "Interview with Dorothy Arzner," in *The Work of Dorothy Arzner: Toward a Feminist Cinema*, ed. Claire Johnston (London: British Film Institute, 1975), 26.

24. Mann, *Behind the Screen*, 59.

25. The patriarchal bias of classical Hollywood style is famously theorized in Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Film Theory and Criticism: An Introduction*, 6th ed., ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 837–48.

26. Doty, "Whose Text Is It Anyway?" 32, makes the same observation using an example from *Dance, Girl, Dance*.

27. Judith Mayne, *Directed by Dorothy Arzner* (Bloomington; Indiana University Press, 1994).

28. The rumors center around Clark Gable's desire not to work with Cukor. The official explanation was that Gable felt that Cukor was spending more time with the female performers than with him. Others have suggested that Gable was uncomfortable with Cukor because the director knew of Gable's earlier career as a male hustler.

29. The un sourced review is quoted in Mann, *Behind the Screen*, 166.

30. Mann details the history of the production and reception of this film (*Behind the Screen*, 124–27).

31. Doty, "Whose Text Is It Anyway?" 35.

32. Memo from Joseph Breen (Production Code Administration) to B. B. Kahane (RKO), 5 August 1935, *Sylvia Scarlett* MPAA files, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Margaret Herrick Library, Beverly Hills, Calif.

33. Cukor recounts this anecdote in Boze Hadleigh, *Conversations with My Elders* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 164.

34. Gregory William Mank, *Hollywood Cauldron* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1994), 34.

35. For examples, see Monika Morgan, "Sexual Subversion: The Bride of Frankenstein," *Bright Lights* 11 (Fall 1993): 5–6; Rhona J. Berenstein, *Attack of the Leading Ladies: Gender, Sexuality, and Spectatorship in Classic Horror Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 134–47; and Harry M. Benshoff, *Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuality and the Horror Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 40–51.

36. William Hurlbut and John H. Balderston, *The Bride of Frankenstein*, ed. Philip J. Riley, Universal Filmstrips Series (Absecon, N.J.: MacImage Filmbooks, 1989), scenes A2–A6.

37. Elizabeth Young, "Here Comes the Bride: Wedding Gender and Race in *Bride of Frankenstein*," in *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 309–37.

38. Gavin Lambert (friend of George Cukor), quoted in David Ehrenstein, *Open Secret: Gay Hollywood, 1928–1998* (New York: William Morrow, 1998), 72.

39. The term is used by Ehrenstein, *Open Secret*.

CHAPTER THREE



“Those Wonderful People Out There in the Dark”: Queer Audiences and Classical Hollywood Cinema



Doris Day, seen here in butch garb for her role as *Calamity Jane* (1953), was one Hollywood star who had a large lesbian fan following. Warner Bros. / The Kobal Collection

The lives of queer people during the first half of the twentieth century were very different from what they are today. There were no gay or lesbian service organizations, and people who had intimate relations with those of the same sex rarely considered themselves part of a unified group or movement. Some effeminate queer men self-identified as “fairies,” while conventionally masculine men who had sex with other men often self-identified as “queers” (demonstrating that the meaning of “queer” has also changed over time). Then there was “trade,” a man who engaged in sex with other men (often for money) but who still considered himself to be heterosexual. Similarly, there were many different ways for women to have loving and sexual relationships with one another, although most of them would never have even heard the term *lesbian*, let alone identified as one. Further complicating this plethora of queer sexual identities was the fact that only larger urban areas tended to have organized homosexual subcultures, and those probably differed from city to city or even within cities, depending on factors such as race, ethnicity, and class. Queer people living in small towns or rural areas often experienced a tremendous sense of isolation, and they often had to negotiate their own idiosyncratic understanding of their sexual desires.

Such details must be taken into account when discussing queer film audiences from the last century. Since there were diverse conceptions of same-sex relations, and even the terms used to describe such relations were in various stages of coalescence and contestation, queer individuals probably appreciated cinema in a variety of diverse ways. Still, just as in later generations, the desire to see queer characters onscreen was an important one. Such images could let isolated queers know that other queers existed and how they possibly looked, acted, or lived their lives. Such images could validate a queer spectator’s very existence, even if the images were (as they usually were) stereotyped, derogatory, or even monstrous. Queer audiences thus learned how to read Hollywood films in unique ways—often by looking for possible queer characters and situations while ignoring the rest. As Henry Jenkins explains in his study of media fandom, specialized audience members (such as queers) learn how to “fragment texts and reassemble the broken shards according to their own blueprints, salvaging bits and pieces of the found material in making sense of their own social experience.”¹ That process formed the basis of queer reception practice for most of the twentieth century.

“Audiences of Questionable Type”

Despite their relative absence from American movie screens during the era of classical Hollywood cinema, many gay and lesbian people loved the

movies and attended regularly. Hollywood movies offer an often-beautiful fantasy to their spectators and a chance to avoid reality for at least a few hours. However, in certain places and for certain queers, going to the movies was not just an opportunity to escape from the heterosexual world but also a chance to enter into a queer social space. Historical research on the burgeoning gay male communities of New York City points out the centrality of moviegoing to queer men of the era.² Many used movie houses as cruising grounds—arenas in which to meet other men for sex, either in the main seating area, in the balconies, or in the cavernous bathrooms of large urban movie palaces. Such same-sex encounters were not that different from the way heterosexuals used the movies: straight couples also sexually interacted in the darkened semiprivate spaces of movie theaters. Partly for that reason, early movie theaters were often branded as dens of vice and amorality, and at one point the New York City police even closed down the city’s movie theaters in an attempt to regulate public morality.³

Another of the main reasons why early cinemas were so suspect was that they often catered to female customers. Social reformers feared that unescorted women in a movie house could be drugged, kidnapped, sexually assaulted, or turned toward prostitution.⁴ While actual proof of these fears was hard to come by, many believed the stories at the time, and theater owners were forced to react. Thus, a greater emphasis on supervising women at the cinema (ostensibly for their own safety) may have worked against queer women developing a clandestine social environment in theaters. That gender disparity lessened a bit during World War II, as women began to compose the majority of movie theater audiences. With so many women working odd factory shifts for the war effort, theaters began running late-night screenings of films aimed at those women.⁵ Lesbian communities grew rapidly during the war years, due partly to the interaction of women both in factories and in social spaces such as the movies. At least some people noticed this development, if disapprovingly. In 1944 the Catholic Legion of Decency wrote to the Breen Office that “large audiences of questionable type” were going to see certain films, often those with pronounced lesbian subtexts.⁶

Sophisticated audiences of all sexualities had learned that code words such as *pansy* or gender-bending costuming was meant to suggest a character’s homosexuality. This practice probably developed during the 1910–1930 period but became even more nuanced in the wake of the Hollywood Production Code. Knowing that they would not find any overt or denotative representation of lesbians or gay men, queer spectators grew adept in discerning connotative homosexuality, or what might be referred to as queer “subtexts.” An actor’s flip of the wrist, a woman’s broad shoulders and aggressive body

stance, or a lingering look between two members of the same sex: all might pass by straight or naïve audiences without a second thought, even as queer spectators zeroed in on such details.

Some instances of connotative homosexuality were purposely placed in films by Hollywood filmmakers, while others were not. Yet, as queer theorist D. A. Miller has pointed out, once a viewer starts playing “spot the queer,” the effects of connotation have the potential to expand well beyond directorial intent.⁷ Since connotative homosexuality is expressed through signs that are veiled or suggestive, there is no way to prove that they are absolutely meant to be homosexual or, conversely, that they are absolutely not meant to be homosexual. Suddenly everything becomes suspect, and an entire universe of cinematic queerness becomes possible. And the more the Production Code Administration tried to eliminate sexuality from Hollywood films by moving it offscreen or into connotative realms, the more audiences learned to infer what was going on behind closed doors. Censorship thus helped to create connotatively queer characters, spaces, and situations to which actual lesbian and gay audiences became attuned.

A good example of a historical queer response to a film from this era occurred with the exhibition of *The Uninvited* (1944). The film drew so many lesbians to it that several pundits actually commented upon it. Although the film had been passed by the Production Code Administration (as well as by other state and local censor boards), it quickly became obvious that queer viewers were flocking to it because they “had been previously informed of certain erotic and esoteric elements in this film.”⁸ While no character in this filmic ghost story is explicitly homosexual, its emphasis on female relationships lays a groundwork for a lesbian reading. Most pronouncedly, the character of Miss Holloway (Cornelia Otis Skinner) is a rather butch matron who rhapsodizes over the dead Mary Meredith, recalling her beauty and how “the two of us dreamed and planned our lives, what we would do together.” Even though Mary never appears in the film and is reported to have been married to a man before her untimely death, the evidence suggests that a sizable number of filmgoers were reading an implied lesbian relationship between Mary and Miss Holloway. The era’s film critics also picked up on the film’s lesbian subtext: “Cornelia Otis Skinner is quite chilly as a Mrs. Danvers by remote control,” wrote Bosley Crowther of the *New York Times*, comparing Miss Holloway to another of the era’s quasi-lesbian characters, Mrs. Danvers in *Rebecca* (1940).⁹

This strategy of selection and deletion formed the essence of queer film reception during these years. A scene, an image, or a sequence of a film that allowed for queer subtexting would be latched upon, while the rest of the film

could be forgotten. For example, gay male viewers focused on the scene in *Red River* (1948) that showed handsome cowboys played by Montgomery Clift and John Ireland lasciviously admiring each other's pistols, ignoring the rest of the western's aggressively heterosexual nature. The film version of *The Celluloid Closet* (1995) suggests that this practice was still common in the 1980s; many lesbians fixated on the sex scene between Catherine Deneuve and Susan Sarandon in *The Hunger* (1983), despite the fact that the scene was meant to be a horrible vampiric attack. As critic Alexander Doty describes his own spectatorial response to popular culture in his book *Making Things Perfectly Queer*, “I've got news for straight culture: your readings of texts are usually ‘alternative’ ones for me, and they often seem like desperate attempts to deny the queerness that is so clearly a part of mass culture.”¹⁰

Another way that lesbian or gay subcultures queered classical Hollywood film was by focusing on certain stars whose sexuality seemed somewhat ambiguous. Sexual attraction to glamorous Hollywood icons—a major component of cinematic pleasure for heterosexuals as well as homosexuals—was also a factor in queer spectatorship. For example, in 1927 the lesbian poet H. D. wrote, “Greta Garbo, as I first saw her, gave me a clue, a new angle, and a new sensation of elation.”¹¹ Contrary to studio efforts to assert their actors' heterosexuality, queers of the era frequently speculated about which of their favorite stars might in fact be lesbian or gay in real life. Rumors and gossip based on alleged real-life queer encounters with Hollywood stars furthered this process (another aspect of lesbian and gay spectatorship that has not changed much in eighty years). Queer viewers scoured films for some suggestion (a line reading, the movement of the face or body, the chemistry—or lack thereof—that the performer exhibited with other cast members) that might lend “proof” to such speculation. Such filmic evidence could also be supplemented by fan magazines and actor interviews. Photos of lesbian favorites Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich, and Katharine Hepburn in pants or in masculine activities furthered their queer cachet and increased their lesbian fan base.¹² Similarly, photographs of Cary Grant and Randolph Scott playing poolside or eating breakfast together in their Hollywood bungalow increased the likelihood that they “really were” gay.¹³

Certain other Hollywood films became important to queers not necessarily because they believed that someone in it was queer but because the film itself somehow spoke to the experience of being queer. *Camille* (1936), a film about exquisite yet forbidden and doomed love, was cherished by many lesbians and gay men, even though the love affair it depicted was heterosexual. Another type of film that seemed to resonate with queer viewers were those about social outsiders. Perhaps the best example of this type is *The Wizard of*

Oz (1939), a fantasy about a young girl who escapes a drab rural existence only to find a fascinating urban world in which anything is possible. The film also abounds with connotative homosexuality. The Cowardly Lion is a sissy who refers to himself (while stereotypically flipping his wrist) as a “dandy lion.” Alexander Doty has suggested an extended lesbian reading of the film surrounding its two “witches” (one butch, one femme) who fight over Dorothy.¹⁴ And while the film’s moral is clearly stated—“There’s no place like home”—almost every viewer (queer or not) probably enjoys the film not for its sepia-toned representation of banal “normality” but for its breathtaking creation of a Technicolor Oz, a land where difference and deviation from the norm *are* the norm.

As these few examples show, Hollywood movies were important to the era’s growing queer subcultures. Shared appreciation of certain films and stars was a way for queer communities to coalesce and feel a sense of connection. As one lesbian of the era put it, “I was just enthralled [by Marlene Dietrich]. She has a sustaining quality about her that I know has turned on thousands of women in this world.”¹⁵ Similarly, when critic Margie Adams was introduced to Greta Garbo’s films, she responded by saying, “[I] knew, right down to my molecular structure, that the shimmering beauty with such a jawline up there on the screen was a dyke, just like me.”¹⁶ Such cinematic tastes, icons, and reception practices were handed down from older to younger generations of queers, and acquiring them often served as part of one’s coming-out process. In this era, “coming out” did not refer to an individual’s announcing his or her sexuality to the straight world but was more like a debutante’s ball: one came out into a queer subculture. Coming out meant becoming adept at reading queer subtexts, being able to bend straight culture (in film as well as the rest of the material world) into something new, and learning the often clandestine and coded practices of the era’s queer subcultures. The sense of kinship created through such shared activity helped queer people begin to conceptualize themselves as both a community and a culture.

Going to Camp

Historical queer reception practice also involved the processes of camp—the playful reworking of straight cultural artifacts through a queer lens. Camp is currently a term that is thrown about casually when talking about all sorts of pop-culture artifacts, but in earlier decades it had a much more specific meaning. Camp, which emerged primarily out of urban gay male communities during the classical Hollywood era, was a highly idiosyncratic approach to appreciating not only films but also music, theater, art, architecture, fash-

ion, and (straight) culture in general. The term is believed to have evolved from the French term *se camper*, which means “to flaunt.” As such, camp is something that a spectator can do: a viewer can “camp up” a film, a room, or even a persona. Being or acting camp was a way of identifying oneself as a homosexual man, by drawing on the stereotypical traits of the pansy. For men of earlier decades, this often meant behaving in an effeminate manner, using feminine pronouns or names, or even wearing drag. (This aspect of camp seems to be waning over the years, as gay men continue to become more open about their sexuality.)

Camp is also “a way of looking at things . . . a quality discoverable in objects and the behavior of persons.”¹⁷ In this usage of the term, camp is a reception practice (although, as future chapters show, a growing awareness of it enabled filmmakers to start producing deliberately campy films). Like queer reading practices in general, camp created a subject position from which urban gay men could revise a text’s original meanings, and thus it strongly figured in the creation of a sense of shared community. Its nuanced complexity needed to be acquired and then taught to others. As at least one film historian has noted, “Two of camp’s most important channels of dissemination were movie houses and gay bars. While the former contributed images to be remade or recycled after camp affect, the latter provided a ground for the more or less unhampered display of such recyclings—whether in drag performance, in ‘verbal’ signs of gayness, or in the star photos that were, in pre-Stonewall days, a standard feature of bar décor.”¹⁸ Camp helped foster and define the emergence of one type of gay male sensibility.¹⁹

Camp is often associated with gay men’s idolization (and imitation) of classical Hollywood stars whose acting styles were rather melodramatic, such as Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich, Mae West, Bette Davis, Joan Crawford, Judy Garland, and Lana Turner (to name just a few). But camp aficionados also celebrated silent-film stars, because they too exuded a “bigger than life” quality that seemed to suggest the performative nature of gender. The need to overemphasize gesture in silent films made the seductive overtures of actresses such as Gloria Swanson seem ridiculously exaggerated and unnatural. (This is one reason that *Sunset Boulevard* [1950], starring Gloria Swanson as a retired silent-movie queen, became an instant camp classic.) Male stars such as Rudolph Valentino or Francis X. Bushman were also camp icons, their artificial performances revealing masculinity to be not much more than a series of dramatic poses. Even the very names of some early film stars—Rod LaRoque, Helen Twelvetrees, Theda Bara—underlined their artificiality and made them ripe for camp appreciation.²⁰ Similarly, many camp icons were “bad” actresses or minor stars such as Maria Montez, who appeared in low

budget exotica in the 1940s. Such stars were simultaneously adored and ridiculed precisely because of their limited acting abilities. Yet, camp is more complex than the queer adoration of movie stars. Camp contains a critical component, and it combines a genuine love and appreciation for its object with a wicked satiric bite. It is political in that it draws attention to issues of gender and sexuality by stressing their performative nature. Camp was (and still is) a tactic that can be used to deconstruct the heterosexual presumptions of dominant culture.

Like its attraction to bad acting, camp taste also gravitates toward any element of Hollywood cinema that is heavily stylized and artificial. Outlandish sets and costumes or wildly excessive story twists are all camp, precisely because one can simultaneously appreciate and mock them with delighted disbelief. On a basic level, the decision to focus on a film's costumes or sets also means refusing to give much importance to its inevitable heterosexual courtship. On another level, camp creates a viewpoint that treats everything as artificial, without depth or inner core, a queer trait that can be traced back to the works of Oscar Wilde (if not further). As Susan Sontag, an early theorist of camp explained, "Camp sees everything in quotation marks. . . . To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role."²¹ Similarly, Jack Babuscio asserted that "camp, by focusing on the outward appearances of roles, implies that roles, and in particular, sex roles, are superficial—a matter of style."²² And with the advent of queer theory in the 1990s, Moe Meyer defined camp simply as "queer parody."²³

All about Eve (1950) is a good example of a classical Hollywood film that queer movie lovers have cherished as camp for decades. Sam Staggs, in his book about the film, points out that *All about Eve* "has beguiled several generations of devotees, largely gay men, who have 'read' the film as though it beamed a limelight into the closet of their hearts."²⁴ In telling a story about the New York theater world, the film focuses on how people are constantly acting, whether they are onstage or not. Its characters are always ready to quote a quick epigram or make a bitchy riposte, a trait that seems to suggest they are masking their true, inner selves. Margo Channing, played by Bette Davis, most strongly displays this always-on-stage attitude. "With her flamboyant body language, jaded sense of humor, and relentless irony, Margo caricatures every female impersonator—or is Margo a drag queen's impersonation of Bette Davis?"²⁵ The title character, Eve (Anne Baxter), is possibly more subtle in her acting style, but the entire plot of the film revolves around her pretending to be sweet and self-effacing when she is actually using Margo to further her ambitions to become a star. And while the title *All about Eve*

refers directly to this one ruthless character, it also suggests that all women (as descendents of the biblical Eve) are performing their femininity, in ways both expected and devious.

All about Eve is also filled with characters who may be read as queer. Theater critic Addison de Witt (an Oscar-winning performance by George Sanders) is an oily snake-in-grass who seems to live on snide repartee. Margo's live-in companion Birdie (Thelma Ritter) is coded as a potential lesbian, as is Eve herself. A scene where Eve finishes a strategic phone call and knowingly throws her arm around a female companion seems to suggest that Eve might be lying about her sexuality, along with everything else. (A much later video about lesbians in film, *Dry Kisses Only* [1990], re-edits *All about Eve* in order to make this lesbian subtext explicit.)²⁶ Lastly, while the film seems to critique the bitchy rivalry between women and their lack of honesty, its fans clearly take pleasure in its caustic wit as well as its ultimate love and human respect for its characters. As the French film journal *Cahiers du Cinema* noted, the film “pretends to attack the theatre and its milieu, but it’s really a lovers’ quarrel.”²⁷ Particularly, Margo seems to act like a diva not because she is truly obnoxious but because she is afraid. Her cruelty is a defense against Eve but also against a world she fears may not have much more use for her. Performance and wit are her strategies for survival, just as they were for many queers of the era.

While often discussed in terms of certain stars and specific movies, camp taste is also drawn to specific types of films. Some genres are well suited for camp appreciation because of the various expectations built into them. For example, the melodrama often focuses on stories that emphasize the pressure to conform to social roles, including gender and sexuality. Other genres were popular with queer audiences precisely because of their elaborate, fantastic styles. Musicals, horror films, and cartoons all flaunt their lack of realism and their disdain for the “normal.” Similarly, the formulas and clichés of any genre, made apparent through repeated viewings and lack of production values, make B and exploitation films especially fertile ground for camp viewing. Indeed, the concept of camp today is often used to describe the pleasure one finds in watching cheesy old movies, a practice that does not necessarily imply a critically queer reading position. Still, camp is an important aspect of queer film history, having afforded its users a sort of proto-queer theory of cinematic reception. It is also an important aspect of various cinematic forms and genres that have in more recent years been theorized as queer in and of themselves. How and why queer audiences were (and are) drawn to some of them is explored in the following.

Queering the Hollywood Musical

Queers (and gay men in particular) have always felt strong ties to the musical genre both on stage and on film. As Al LaValley asserts, “At the heart of gaycult, the aesthetically stylized genre of the musical reigns supreme.”²⁸ At one point in history, saying that someone was “musical” was even a code word for “homosexual,” and the “show queen” remains a prevalent subtype of contemporary gay men. The genre is easy to read as queer since Western patriarchal cultures usually deem the music, dance, grace, beauty, and emotion at the core of the genre as “feminine” traits. Male stars who performed in Hollywood musicals were constantly suspected of being homosexual and took pains to assert their heterosexual masculinity.²⁹ As for male fans of the genre, they are still often assumed to be gay, regardless of their actual sexual orientation. Masculine culture dictates that “real men” like westerns and action films.

Queer audiences seem drawn to the musical at least in part because of the genre’s fantastic utopian escapism.³⁰ Its signature trope—characters breaking into song and dance in the middle of real life—suggests that some people are able to transcend mundane reality. The major stars of the classical Hollywood musical exhibited such grace (Fred Astaire), energy (Gene Kelly), and intensity (Judy Garland) that they themselves seemed almost otherworldly. Queer devotees of camp also loved the musical’s highly stylized form, reveling in its spectacular musical numbers that seemed to rupture or resist heterosexual imperatives. For example, row after row of scantily clad chorus girls (or occasionally chorus boys) suggest orgiastic same-sex pleasures rather than traditional heterosexual romance. And although most musicals regularly enact boy-meets-girl narratives, their plots often revolve around mistaken identities, misunderstood conversations, and misplaced affections. Queer audiences could also rely on the musical to provide farcical destabilizations of gender and sexuality, whether via the presence of sissy sidekicks or in the genre’s persistent use of cross-dressing.

A musical number from *The Gang’s All Here* (1943) exemplifies these points. The infamous and outrageous “Lady in the Tutti-Frutti Hat” number has absolutely nothing to do with the story of the film—it is performed as part of a night-club act attended by some of the characters. But it does have everything to do with an excessive and anarchic sexuality. As Carmen Miranda sings about her sexual conquests, chorus girls wave giant strawberries and poke giant bananas between each others’ legs. Although the chorus girls are ostensibly on display for the sexualized pleasure of a heterosexual male viewer, the number can also be understood as depicting the sensual pleasures

of a tropical lesbian playground. Men are peripheral; they only provide the musical accompaniment to the all-girl ballet. (The number was choreographed by Busby Berkeley, a camp favorite hailed for his visual flair and female same-sex revelries.) The overt stylization of the “Lady in the Tutti-Frutti Hat” number also carries over into the nonmusical portions of the film, via vibrant Technicolor costumes and settings and heightened performance styles. Carmen Miranda’s excessive theatricality made her a camp icon during these years, and she was imitated by countless female impersonators in other movies, on stage, in amateur theatricals, and in urban gay bars.³¹

Gentlemen Prefer Blondes (1953) also provides a variety of queer pleasures. Jane Russell’s “Ain’t There Anyone Here for Love?” number, sung with a troupe of scantily clad muscle men, has been a perennial favorite among gay male viewers. Further underlining the number’s queer subtext, the muscle men are more interested in wrestling with one another than in dancing with Jane Russell. *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* also allows lesbians to find their own queer pleasures in the text, such as in the relationship between Dorothy (Jane Russell) and Lorelei (Marilyn Monroe). Despite their gold-digging for husbands, the two women seem more emotionally committed to each other than to the bland men they eventually find and marry. In fact, the concluding shot of film, showing their double wedding, is framed in such a way that it seems as if Jane and Marilyn are really marrying each other.³² Furthermore, neither of the men performs musically, so the women share the musical’s special generic bond themselves—singing and dancing together as a same-sex couple. Research and anecdotal evidence suggest that musical performers Eleanor Powell, Doris Day, and Julie Andrews all had (or still have) lesbian cult followings.³³ Although each actress inevitably ended her films in the arms of a man, many lesbians have repeatedly chosen instead to focus on certain queer aspects of their personas, such as Powell’s cross-dressing military tap dances, Day’s tomboyishness, or Andrews’s short haircut and spunky assertiveness.

Gay and lesbian audiences may have warmed to the musical in part because they were picking up on the queer traces left by the people who made them. Musical queers such as choreographer Jack Cole, songwriters Cole Porter and Lorenz Hart, and directors Charles Walters and Vincente Minnelli all brought their sensibilities to bear on the genre. The members of Arthur Freed’s MGM production unit—responsible for creating some of the most famous musicals ever made—were referred to by some studio wits as “Freed’s Fairies.”³⁴ Although most queer audiences had no direct knowledge of these artists’ sexual orientation, that did not stop them from delighting in the fantastic queer stylization of the Hollywood musical.

Cartoon Craziness

Just as many queer viewers were (and are) drawn to the joyous stylization of the musical, evidence suggests that animated cartoons were (and are) equally ripe for queer appreciation. In Weimar Berlin, “Mickey Mouse” was the name of a gay bar. “Mickey Mouse” was also a code phrase within some American queer circles of the era, and at least one lesbian soiree in Chicago in 1937 was dubbed by its attendees “Mickey Mouse’s party.”³⁵ Such use of a famous animated character suggests that some queers may have felt an affinity with the world of cartoons, a place where the suspension of natural laws was typical and even celebrated. Cartoons regularly visualize the impossible, particularly in regard to the body, such as when Felix the Cat detaches his tail to use as a baseball bat or when Wile E. Coyote is squashed like an accordion by a falling boulder.³⁶

As part of the topsy-turvy nature of cartoons during Hollywood’s classical era, overt references to queer sexual orientations were occasionally included. For example, in the Max Fleischer cartoon *Any Rags* (1932), a male customer buys a nude statue of a male discus thrower and then sashays off screen. In *Hair-Raising Hare* (1946), Bugs Bunny assumes the persona of a fey talkative manicurist as he (she?) files a hairy monster’s fingernails. In fact, Bugs Bunny cross-dressed so frequently in his films that entire articles have been written about his queer potential.³⁷ Yet, the queer appeal of cartoons extends beyond such manifest characterizations, for cartoons embody a sort of “polymorphous perversity”—the ability to transform being and desire in multiple and constantly shifting ways. As early as the 1930s, queer intellectuals such as British novelist E. M. Forster and Soviet film director Sergei Eisenstein were commenting upon such queer effects of the animated cartoon. Eisenstein, for example, was delighted in how animation created worlds in which “octopuses turn into elephants. A fish—into a donkey. A departure from one’s self from once and forever prescribed norms of nomenclature, form and behavior.”³⁸ (Japanese animé—free from the stigma of animation as “merely” a children’s format—exploits this aspect of the form most spectacularly, creating vast armies of queerly sexualized monsters and robots.)

Animated cartoons also seem to hint at the performative nature of gender, another aspect of their form that may have made them especially meaningful for queer viewers. For example, cartoon characters reveal their identity through the way they are drawn: through the rhythm of their walk or the way they manipulate their facial expressions. Since most cartoon characters cannot be drawn with actual sexual organs, animators rely on traits drawn from human culture to create the “illusion” of gender. If Bugs Bunny in drag is a

carefully rendered imitation of femininity, Bugs Bunny out of drag is a carefully rendered imitation of masculinity. Without any sexual organs to mark them as different, it only takes a polka-dot skirt, some pumps, and false eyelashes to turn Mickey Mouse into Minnie. The image of Bugs Bunny in drag raises another issue unique to animation: in or out of a dress, Bugs Bunny is always already in drag as a human being. Consequently, to see Bugs wearing lipstick and a wig is to see a drawing of a gender-neutral rabbit acting like a human male pretending to be a human female. The levels of impersonation reach the sublime, to the point where clear-cut borders become impossible to draw.

Even when animators have tried to create relatively realistic human characters (most particularly in Disney films), many queer audiences have tended to appreciate them primarily as camp because they are still so blatantly unnatural.³⁹ Camp is especially important to the queer fan followings that have developed around the villains featured in Disney films.⁴⁰ Many queers appreciate Disney’s evil queens and wicked stepmothers as if they were animated versions of male drag queens, which in a way, they are: they are bigger-than-life female characters created and “performed” by mostly male animators. Disney’s male villains (such as the fox-and-cat duo in *Pinocchio* [1940] or Captain Hook) are also imbued with camp appeal. Animated cartoons continue to entice queer audiences today via connotatively homosexual villains, such as Ursula (*The Little Mermaid* [1989]) and Scar (*The Lion King* [1994]), and a few denotatively homosexual characters, such as Mr. Smithers on television’s *The Simpsons* (1989–). But perhaps it is animation’s free-floating ability to transmogrify that makes it especially entertaining to many queer audiences.

Queer for Fear

For generations, queer audiences have also been fascinated with horror films. However, while the musical and the animated cartoon find joy and elation in the upheaval of social norms, the horror film purportedly figures such events as terrifying and evil. According to the horror film’s generic formula, “normality” (usually represented by a heterosexual couple or institution) finds itself threatened by a figure or force that wishes to disrupt “the natural order.” That figure or force often involves some sort of procreative or sexualized aspect, whether it be creating a race of zombies or infiltrating the world with alien DNA. From Dr. Frankenstein and his male assistants consistently attempting to create life without the unpleasantness of heterosexual intercourse, to cross-dressing Norman Bates attacking young women in the

shower, the horror film routinely figures queer characters and queer sexualities as nightmarish—if titillating—alternatives to mundane reality.⁴¹

While figured as monstrous, horror films were one of the few areas where queer audiences could vaguely recognize themselves during the Production Code era, when “sex perversion” was officially forbidden. Both critics and viewers of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1945) found “portions in the picture that could be interpreted as conveying implications of homosexuality.”⁴² Similarly, films such as *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1932, 1941) and *The Wolf Man* (1941) hinge upon average young men coming to terms with monstrous urges that force them to lead tragic double lives. *The Cat People* (1942), about a woman who will not make love to her husband because she fears she will turn into a panther, spoke to lesbian audiences of the era, as did haunted-house films such as *The Uninvited* and *The Haunting* (1961).⁴³ In fact, the lesbian/ghost trope was so pronounced that it found its way into lesbian pulp novels of the era. Books such as *Who Walk in Darkness*, *Women in the Shadows*, *The Shades of Evil*, *Twilight Girl*, and *The Ghosts* routinely figured lesbian desire as sinister and otherworldly but were nonetheless consumed voraciously by queer readers.

The vampire film has been especially meaningful to queer spectators, since the vampire’s queer sexuality is mostly manifest. Vampires do not always care to distinguish the gender of their victims but nonetheless embrace and seduce them with transformative kisses. As in many other horror films, the exchange of “bodily fluids” between vampires and their victims can easily be read as a metaphor for sexual intercourse. For decades, queer viewers (and some not so queer) have noted the pronounced lesbian subtexts of horror films that center on female vampires.⁴⁴ One of the first of these, *Dracula’s Daughter* (1936), had extreme difficulty with the Production Code Administration over its lesbian implications. By the 1970s, lesbian vampire movies became so prevalent that they began to constitute their own subgenre of the horror film.

Just as with the Hollywood musical, queer fans may have easily found homosexual traces in horror fictions because a great number of them were created by queer writers and directors. Gothic novelists Horace Walpole (*The Castle of Otranto* [1764]) and William Beckford (*Vathek* [1796]) were considered effeminate or were known to have had sexual relations with other men.⁴⁵ Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (the author of *Frankenstein* [1818]) were allegedly involved in a ménage à trois. Perhaps the best-known queer author of gothic literature is Oscar Wilde, whose book *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) contains a quintessential image of the monstrous queer: the sensitive young man whose terrible se-

cret must be locked away in a hidden closet. In film, queer German filmmaker F. W. Murnau directed the expressionist horror films *Der Januskopf* (1920) and *Nosferatu* (1922), while James Whale (discussed in the last chapter) helped to define the very look and feel of the classical Hollywood horror film.

While horror films supposedly uphold heterosexuality as normative, they also present the sexually Other as fascinating and thrilling. Most fans of the genre are drawn to it not because of its bland and boring heterosexual characters but rather because of its queerly monstrous characters and the thrills they provide.⁴⁶ Such attraction is only strengthened when certain films make their monsters sympathetic, as in James Whale’s *Frankenstein* films. Furthermore, queer horror fans often enjoy the genre as camp. Stars such as Lon Chaney, Bela Lugosi, and Boris Karloff are not adored for their “naturalistic” performances. Similarly, the films’ “normal” characters are often portrayed by lesser talents cast for their ability to scream in a lively, lurid manner (or to look sexy as their clothes are ripped off during monstrous attacks). Queer appreciation of horror has not abated over the decades. Currently, it is not unusual for gay bookstores to stock anthologies of gay and lesbian vampire stories, and openly gay author Clive Barker continues to write and direct best-selling horror fictions. Queer spectators continue to respond to the genre’s sexualized undercurrents, its campy thrills, and the “cinematic revenge” upon heterosexuality it often provides.

Camp, Subtext, and the Melodrama

Domestic melodramas, like the horror film, officially support the dominant heteronormative social system, but as many critics have noted, the genre is structured in such a way as to emphasize the defects that plague that system.⁴⁷ Stories of long-suffering romances, unstable marriages, and conflict within the family unit define the genre’s thematic interests. Like the musical, the melodrama is also associated with women and emotionality: terms such as “chick flick,” “the woman’s film,” “tearjerkers,” and “weepies” have been used over the years to describe (and denigrate) these domestic dramas. The melodrama’s over-the-top visual style and emphasis on wild mood swings—from ecstasy to tragedy and back again—also allow the genre to be appreciated as camp: gut-wrenching sobs and hysterical screams can provoke laughter as often as sorrow. (Most of the classical Hollywood stars who developed camp followings acted primarily in domestic melodramas.) Thus, melodramas are loved by some queer audiences because of their excessive performativity, the transparent role-playing that makes patriarchal heterosexuality

look forced and unnatural. But queer audiences also love melodramas more sincerely because they frequently dramatize issues—conformity to social and familial expectations, the vagaries of romance—that have special resonance for lesbians and gay men. As Patricia White puts it, “the women’s picture scenarios of secret suffering, anonymous desire, immediate recognition, forbidden physicality—of perversion and excess—have definite queer appeal.”⁴⁸

Domestic melodramas also frequently invoke queer subtexts because of their focus on independent women and female homosociality. In real life, actresses such as Bette Davis, Joan Crawford, Katharine Hepburn, and Barbara Stanwyck were as strong and independent as their era allowed. Their desire to define themselves by more than just their relationships to men helped each develop fan followings among all sorts of women, including lesbians. And even when their films centered on heterosexual romance, women were still the central characters, often relegating male love interests to supporting roles. Consequently, many Hollywood melodramas derive their energy from the chemistry between two female leads and not a male-female couple. For a lesbian viewer, the electric charge surging between Bette Davis and Mary Astor in *The Great Lie* seems much stronger than any erotic sizzle between either actress and George Brent.⁴⁹ Other excellent examples of strong female relationships in classical Hollywood melodramas include Claudette Colbert and Louise Beavers in *Imitation of Life* (1934), Katharine Hepburn and Ginger Rogers (and all their female housemates) in *Stage Door* (1937), and Joan Crawford and Eve Arden in *Mildred Pierce* (1945).

Mother love is another type of female bonding that melodramas repeatedly invoke. A great deal of the suffering in women’s films revolves around the sacrifices mothers make for their daughters. In *Stella Dallas* (1937), a woman gives up her child to be raised by another woman, creating a queer family with two mothers and a daughter. Furthermore, the heightened emotions of these maternal melodramas sometimes push familial affection to suggestive extremes. In *Stella Dallas*, for example, mother and daughter constantly kiss and caress, sit on each other’s lap, gaze dewy-eyed at one another, and swear devotion for life. The film has been called, simply, a “mother-daughter love story.”⁵⁰ While such readings may seem to twist the intended meaning of the films far out of context, the extreme nature of mother love in these films was noticed by the mainstream critics of their era. One review of *The Old Maid* (1939) compares the film’s mother love to that of the classic heterosexual romance *Wuthering Heights*: “Cathy’s repressed love for Heathcliff, Charlotte’s stifled yearning to manifest her love for her daughter—the two are much the same.”⁵¹ Patricia White suggests that the classical Hollywood melodrama was able to present these intense same-sex bonds because

they were regarded as homosocial and not homosexual by the average viewer. The “lesbian metaphor” allows for “the signification of a female desire . . . but at the same time it shelters lesbian sexual difference under a benign maternal umbrella.”⁵²

That said, *The Old Maid* can be easily read as a drama about a lesbian couple raising their daughter.⁵³ Charlotte (Bette Davis) and her cousin Delia (Miriam Hopkins) are at the center of the film’s drama as they fight over Charlotte’s illegitimate daughter, closely guarding the secret of her birth. Although a male romantic partner for whom both Charlotte and Delia have feelings is introduced (George Brent—again), he only appears briefly at the start of the film. Delia spurns him in favor of marrying a rich man, and he dies offscreen on the battlefields of the Civil War (after apparently having a brief encounter with Charlotte on the rebound, thus producing the illegitimate daughter). After Delia’s husband also dies, the two cousins move in together so that both can raise the child. *The Old Maid* also stresses the performative nature of gender, as Charlotte consciously molds herself into an “old maid” cliché (itself a common lesbian stereotype) in order to cover her “sin.” Delia, on the other hand, carefully fosters a hyperfeminine persona in her dress and public behavior. At the end of the film, the daughter marries and leaves the house, while Charlotte and Delia, butch and femme, entwine their arms and walk contentedly home together.

Conclusion

In multiple ways, queer movie audiences of the classical era refused to accept the fact that they were not supposed to exist. Lesbians and gay men may have had to live what were sometimes called “twilight lives,” but they never disappeared completely from real life or the cinema. When the Production Code mandated that films could not show “sex perversion,” queer reception practices found ways to make certain characters, films, stars, and even whole genres speak to and about them. Queer filmgoers used movies not only as an escape from the real world but also as the basis of a developing critique of dominant heterosexual culture. The practices of queer subtexting and camp appreciation were shared among the era’s lesbians and gay men and helped lay the groundwork for more modern queer sensibilities and communities to develop. And as lesbians and gay men began to find each other and develop their own visible subcultures, straight society found itself increasingly unable to ignore their existence. As America entered the postwar period, homosexuality became the forbidden topic that people began to talk about—sometimes openly and rationally but more often in highly emotional and discriminatory ways.

Notes

1. Henry Jenkins III, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 23. Theories of reception have been key to the rise of cultural studies as a discipline. In particular, the following chapter strongly borrows ideas and concepts from Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," *Culture, Media, Language*, ed. Stuart Hall et al. (London: Unwin Lyman, 1980), 128–38; and Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen, 1979). While all of these works assert the relative diversity of reading positions, none cover lesbian, gay, or queer subcultural readings in particular.

2. George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940* (New York: Basic 1994), 194–95.

3. Robert Sklar, "Oh! Althusser! Historiography and the Rise of Cinema Studies," *Radical History Review* 41 (Spring 1988): 10–35.

4. For more on women and early cinema, see Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1985); and Shelley Stamp, *Movie-Struck Girls: Women and Motion Picture Culture after the Nickelodeon* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000).

5. Thomas Schatz, *Boom and Bust: Hollywood in the 1940s* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1997), 151.

6. Letter from Brendan Larnen to Will Hays, 10 May 1944, *The Uninvited* MPA file, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Margaret Herrick Library, Beverly Hills, Calif.

7. D. A. Miller, "Anal Rope," in *inside/out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (London: Routledge, 1991), 119–41.

8. Larnen to Hays. The letter is analyzed in Rhona J. Berenstein, "Adaptation, Censorship, and Audiences of Questionable Type: Lesbian Sightings in *Rebecca* (1940) and *The Uninvited* (1944)," *Cinema Journal* 37, no. 3 (Spring 1998): 16–37. While the Production Code Administration responded to the letter with incredulity, Berenstein's research suggests that both Paramount and the administration recognized the possibility of a lesbian subtext in the narrative and negotiated an acceptable level of deniability in the final version to defend against any such charges. See also Patricia White, "Female Spectator, Lesbian Specter," in *unInvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 61–93.

9. Bosley Crowther, "Whoooooo!" *New York Times*, 21 February 1944. Another contemporary review describes Miss Holloway as "a new version of Mrs. Danvers." Otis L. Gurnsey Jr., "The Playbill: Ghosts Attend Miss Skinner's Film Debut," *New York Herald Tribune*, 23 January 1944.

10. Alexander Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), xii.

11. H. D. (Hilda Doolittle), “The Cinema and the Classics,” *Close-Up*, 1 July 1927.
12. Andrea Weiss devotes an entire chapter to lesbian appreciation of certain 1930s stars in *Vampires and Violets: Lesbians in Film* (New York: Penguin, 1992), 30–50.
13. For photographs of Grant and Scott in their bungalow, see Kenneth Anger, *Hollywood Babylon II* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1984), 155–58.
14. Alexander Doty, *Flaming Classics: Queering the Film Canon* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 49–78.
15. Quoted in Judy Whitaker, “Hollywood Transformed: Interviews with Lesbian Viewers,” *Jump Cut* 24/25 (March 1981): 35.
16. Margie Adams, “Greta Garbo’s ‘Mysterious’ Private Life,” *OUT/LOOK* 4 (Fall 1990): 25.
17. Susan Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp,’” *A Susan Sontag Reader* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983 [1964]), 105–20.
18. Juan A. Suarez, *Bike Boys, Drag Queens, and Superstars: Avant-Garde, Mass Culture, and Gay Identities in the 1960s Underground Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 133.
19. So fundamental are the two to each other that Jack Babuscio’s landmark article is titled “Camp and the Gay Sensibility,” in *Gays and Film*, ed. Richard Dyer (London: British Film Institute, 1977), 40–57.
20. Theda Bara is an anagram of Arab Death. The studios gave Theodosia Goodman that name when they fashioned her exotic vamp persona.
21. Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp,’” 280.
22. Babuscio, “Camp and the Gay Sensibility,” 44.
23. Moe Meyer, “Introduction,” in *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, ed. Moe Meyer (London: Routledge, 1994), 1.
24. Sam Staggs, *All about “All about Eve”* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), 241. See also, Paul Roen, *High Camp: A Gay Guide to Camp and Cult Films* (San Francisco: Leyland, 1994), 26.
25. Staggs, *All about “All about Eve,”* 241.
26. White also examines the lesbian undercurrents in the film (*unInvited*, 208–15).
27. Quoted in *American Film Directors: A Library of Criticism*, ed. Stanley Hochman (New York: Unger, 1974), 314.
28. Al LaValley, “The Great Escape,” *American Film* 10, no. 6 (1985): 31. Among other analyses of the connections between gay men and the musical are Brett Farmer, *Spectacular Passions: Cinema, Fantasy, Gay Male Spectatorships* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000), 68–109; D. A. Miller, *Place for Us: Essay on the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998); Phillip Brett, “Musicality, Essentialism, and the Closet,” *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology*, ed. Phillip Brett et al. (New York: Routledge, 1994); and Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer*, 10–14.
29. Steven Cohan, “‘Feminizing’ the Song-and-Dance Man: Fred Astaire and the Spectacle of Masculinity in the Hollywood Musical,” in *Hollywood Musicals: The Film Reader*, ed. Steven Cohan (New York: Routledge, 2002), 87–101.

30. Richard Dyer, "Entertainment and Utopia," *Only Entertainment* (London: Routledge, 1992), 17–34, is the key text on the genre's utopian traditions, although the article does not deal with queer appreciation of that utopian atmosphere.

31. For more on Carmen Miranda, see Shari Roberts, "'The Lady in the Tutti-Frutti Hat': Carmen Miranda, a Spectacle of Ethnicity," *Cinema Journal* 32, no. 3 (Spring 1993): 3–23.

32. Lucie Arbuthnot and Gail Seneca, "Pre-text and Text in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*," *Film Reader* 5 (1982): 20.

33. On Eleanor Powell, see Shari Roberts, "You Are My Lucky Star: Eleanor Powell's Brief Dance with Fame," in *Seeing Stars: Female WWII Hollywood Musical Stars* (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1993). On Doris Day, see Eric Savoy, "'That Ain't All She Ain't': Doris Day and Queer Performativity," in *Out Takes: Essays on Queer Theory and Film*, ed. Ellis Hanson (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999), 151–82. Chris Cuomo performs a lesbian reading of Julie Andrews's *Mary Poppins* (1964) in "Spinsters in Sensible Shoes: *Mary Poppins* and *Bedknobs and Broomsticks*," in *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture*, ed. Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas, and Laura Sells (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 212–23.

34. For an in-depth look at the queer artists in the Freed Unit (focusing specifically, but not exclusively, on director Vincente Minnelli), see Matthew Tinkcom, "Working Like a Homosexual: Vincente Minnelli in the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Freed Unit," *Working Like a Homosexual: Camp, Capital, Cinema* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002), 35–71.

35. Personal interview with Allan Berubé (Minneapolis, Minnesota, April 1994). See also "Box-Car Bertha," as told to Dr. Ben L. Reitman, *Sister of the Road: An Autobiography* (1937; repr., New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 65–67.

36. A tradition of animated films exploiting their formal abilities for metamorphosis and transmogrification can be traced back to the earliest cartoons, such as those by French animator Emile Cohl in 1903. See Donald Crafton, *Emile Cohl: Caricature and Film* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996).

37. Among those who have written on Bugs's queer identity are Hank Sartin, "Bugs Bunny: Queer as a Three-Dollar Bill," *Windy City Times*, 24 June 1993, sec. 2, 79; and Kevin S. Sandler, "Gendered Evasion: Bugs Bunny in Drag," *Reading the Rabbit: Explorations in Warner Bros. Animation*, ed. Kevin S. Sandler (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 154–71.

38. Sergei Eisenstein, *Eisenstein on Disney*, ed. Jay Leyda, trans. Alan Upchurch (London: Methuen, 1988), 10.

39. The Disney theme parks in the second half of the twentieth century make this even more apparent, as live performers are often hired to embody such implausible cartoon characters. Frank Browning, *The Culture of Desire: Paradox and Perversity in Gay Lives Today* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 72–73, describes a queer activist event at Disneyland, where the group Boys with Arms Akimbo interacted with some of the theme park's human versions of cartoon princesses.

40. The camp interest in Disney villains (as well as other connections between Disney and queer culture) is more fully analyzed in Sean Griffin, *Tinker Belles and Evil Queens: The Walt Disney Company from the Inside Out* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 72–77. Griffin’s book also displays a photo of a group of gay men in drag as various Disney villainesses.

41. For more on the queerness inherent in the genre, see Harry M. Benshoff, *Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuality and the Horror Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997); and Rhona Berenstein, *Attack of the Leading Ladies: Gender, Sexuality, and Spectatorship in Classic Horror Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996). In contrast to the horror film, the science-fiction and the fantasy genre (both in literature and in cinema) tend to create spaces for a more positive take on queer identities. See Eric Garber and Lyn Paleo, *Uranian Worlds: A Guide to Alternative Sexuality in Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1990).

42. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* MPAA files, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Margaret Herrick Library, Beverly Hills, Calif. See also Benshoff, *Monsters in the Closet*, 110–14.

43. Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), explores the lesbian subtext in gothic literature and classic ghost stories.

44. Weiss, *Vampires and Violets*, 84–108. During the late 1980s, Weiss also led symposia on lesbian vampire films at various lesbian and gay film festivals across the United States.

45. On Walpole, see E. F. Bleiler, “Horace Walpole and *The Castle of Otranto*,” in *Three Gothic Novels: “The Castle of Otranto,” “Vathek,” and “The Vampyre,”* ed. E. F. Bleiler (New York: Dover, 1966), vii, x; on Beckford, see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 91.

46. Doty points this out when he describes how horror films “actually encourage queer positioning as they exploit the spectacle of heterosexual romance, straight domesticity, and traditional gender roles gone awry” (*Making Things Perfectly Queer*, 15).

47. Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer*, 15.

48. White, *unInvited*, 110.

49. White analyzes this film’s subtext in more depth (*unInvited*, 129–31), and *Dry Kisses Only* (1989) opens with a reediting of the film to eliminate Brent entirely from the romantic equation. In Lawrence Quirk, *Fasten Your Seat Belts: The Passionate Life of Bette Davis* (New York: Morrow, 1990), 222, George Brent, who often played the male figure in Bette Davis movies, complained about his role in *The Great Lie* (1941), saying, “I’m used to playing second or third fiddle but this is too much!”

50. Linda Williams, “‘Something Else Besides a Mother’: *Stella Dallas* and the Maternal Melodrama,” *Cinema Journal* 24, no. 1 (1984): 2–27.

51. Frank Nugent, *New York Times*, 12 August 1939.

52. White, *unInvited*, 103.

53. Lesbian readings of *The Old Maid* may have been enhanced by those involved in making it. The film was based on a play by lesbian writer Zoe Akins and directed by queer filmmaker Edmund Goulding. Queer directors Dorothy Arzner, Mitchell Leisen, Irving Rapper, and George Cukor also worked consistently in the genre.

CHAPTER FOUR



Fear and Loathing in Postwar Hollywood



Audrey Hepburn and Shirley MacLaine starred in *The Children's Hour* (1961), one of the first Hollywood films to deal openly with homosexuality. Unfortunately, it all ends tragically. United Artists / The Kobal Collection

After World War II, American culture experienced a broad reactionary shift. Feelings of angst and anxiety permeated the postwar years, as war traumas lingered and new dangers came to light. The Korean War, the Cold War, the Red Scare, and the nuclear arms race all arose from and contributed to a general sense of xenophobia. Wisconsin senator Joseph McCarthy (among many others) fueled paranoia by asserting that large numbers of communist subversives had infiltrated the highest levels of government. Untold numbers of people were suspected, investigated, called before congressional hearing committees, forced to take loyalty oaths, fired, imprisoned, or even put to death. Conformity to a white, middle-class, heterosexual, jingoistic American norm became a national obsession, as well as a survival mechanism, especially for those deemed different in any way. Such an environment was increasingly hostile to queer people, and it impacted strongly on how queer people lived their lives and on how cinematic sexualities were represented on Hollywood movie screens from the late 1940s until the mid-1960s.

However, while many aspects of mainstream media were pretending that a peaceful and prosperous postwar consensus existed across the nation (or were scaring people into behaving as if there were one), simmering dissatisfactions could be discerned beneath the official façade. African Americans and other racial and ethnic minorities were growing increasingly vocal about their lack of civil rights. Women were increasingly frustrated by the limitations placed upon their lives. Beatnik poets, artists, and filmmakers abandoned cookie-cutter suburbs and took to the road in search of a more authentic America. Young people of all sorts began rebelling against familial and cultural pressures to conform, and by the 1960s they were loudly rejecting much of the nation's domestic and foreign policy. Queers, too, were part of all these various movements, and it was during the postwar years that an infant homosexual liberation movement was born. Queer bars and magazines struggled to survive, despite the hostile cultural climate. Lesbian and gay pulp novels proliferated; a few hit Broadway plays dealt with homosexuality in some fashion; and even Hollywood slowly began to acknowledge the topic of queer sexuality.¹

In many ways, the postwar era was a transition period. It was an era that tried to maintain attitudes from the first half of the twentieth century, even as new attitudes were beginning to assert themselves. It was also a transition period for Hollywood: The classical Hollywood studio system was failing. Stars and directors were becoming more independent of the old studio moguls. Producers had to deal with a dwindling and fragmenting audience, as women, people of color, and the younger generation became more and more vocal in their opposition to the status quo (and to films that endorsed

the status quo). Competition from foreign and independent films increased, and the rise of television cut into Hollywood's profits even more severely. Desperate to entice audiences, Hollywood turned to more titillating subject matter and new technologies (such as color, wide-screen formats, and even gadgets like 3-D and Smell-o-Vision). "Adult" subject matter found its way into more and more Hollywood films. Eventually, in the early 1960s, the Hollywood Production Code officially ended its thirty-year-old ban on homosexual content, allowing for more manifest—if still mostly derogatory—images of queer people and queer concerns.

McCarthy, Kinsey, and Shifting Models of Homosexuality

While the armed services had often overlooked lesbians and gay men in the ranks during the early years of World War II (when everyone was needed regardless of their sexuality), a veritable witch-hunt against homosexuals began once it became clear that the United States would be victorious.² In some cases, the mere suspicion of being lesbian or gay could get one dishonorably discharged from the military. In other cases, bizarre "medical" tests for repressed gag reflexes and "patulous rectums" were used to separate "true" homosexual men from "straight" men who just happened to have sex with another guy now and then.³ Queer men and women discharged from the armed services for homosexuality often received the infamous "Blue Discharge"—a document that clearly stated the reason for their dismissal. With such a military record, they could not get hired in most "reputable" places of employment, and many were forced to begin new lives away from former friends and families. The military witch-hunt against queers expanded after the war and seeped into other areas of national policy, blending with the era's baseline fear of difference.

Male homosexuality was especially egregious to a nation obsessed with its own masculinity (or potential lack thereof). According to psychiatric rubrics, homosexuality was considered a dangerous form of sexual psychopathology linked to all sorts of antisocial behaviors. Homosexuals were branded "sex murderers" in the press, a sort of human plague that was threatening to destroy the very foundations of society.⁴ Male homosexuality was increasingly associated with child molestation and seen as a possible cause or link to the rampant juvenile delinquency with which the era was also obsessed. In *Seduction of the Innocent*, psychiatrist Fredric Wertham argued that comic book superheroes such as Batman and Robin were secretly "role modeling" homosexuality to children.⁵ Boise, Idaho, became the focus of a national scandal in 1955 when local men were accused of molesting

teenage boys. Public service announcements and educational films such as *Boys Beware* (circa 1958) warned the nation about the predatory nature of male homosexuals.

Cold War rhetoric often linked homosexuality (either broadly or more subtly) to other forms of “un-American activity,” such as communism, unionization, and the civil rights movement. Anyone and everyone was potentially un-American in this paranoid atmosphere. One “wrong” opinion or misplaced association could make a person suspect, and an accusation was usually all that was needed to destroy a career. Alarmists argued that homosexuals were “security risks” not only because of their supposed mental disorder but also because they could be blackmailed by communists. As a result, thousands of people were purged from federal positions for suspected or actual homosexuality. Industries and academic institutions also investigated homosexuals in their ranks in order to dismiss them, and the U.S. Post Office felt within its rights to open the mail of suspected homosexuals in order to search for evidence.⁶ When Senator Joseph McCarthy accused the U.S. Army of harboring communists, the army responded by not-so-subtly intimating that McCarthy’s own aides were gay (as they were, the most famous being homosexual yet homophobic lawyer Roy Cohn). And while McCarthy himself was discredited shortly thereafter, the Red Scare he had helped to foment lingered well in the 1960s via blacklists and loyalty oaths.

Paranoia about homosexuality also arose with the publication of Dr. Alfred C. Kinsey’s national bestseller *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948). Based upon a survey of ten thousand men, Kinsey reported that 10 percent identified as primarily homosexual, that up to 37 percent had had a homosexual experience to orgasm, and that 50 percent had experienced erotic responses to their own sex.⁷ The book suggested that homosexuality was much more prevalent than anyone had imagined, and it queerly asserted that human sexuality was not an either-or proposition but rather needed to be understood as a continuum of fantasies, desires, and behaviors. Kinsey’s results indicated that men who engaged in homosexual sex did not always fit the pansy stereotype and helped cause a significant shift in the popular understanding of homosexuality—from a model based on gender-role deviance to one of object choice. That shift only increased public unease, however, since it implied that homosexuality could now be lurking anywhere, even in straight-acting friends and neighbors.

Living in such an environment was obviously very difficult for queer people. Laws were passed that made “gender-appropriate clothing” mandatory, and they were regularly used to harass butch lesbians and drag queens. Queers

were routinely rounded up and arrested at gay bars and beaches, and even private meeting spaces were not safe from prying eyes and gossiping neighbors. Faced with such oppression, many lesbians and gay men stayed in the closet, entering into heterosexual marriages and having children. Some did so out of sheer self-preservation, while others married in a sincere effort to become heterosexual, hoping that such actions would rid them of their same-sex desires. Many people—some voluntarily, some not—were subjected to various psychiatric treatments designed to “cure” homosexuality. These methods included psychoanalysis, electroshock therapy, hormone injections, and even lobotomies.

While the prevalence of hate and fear pushed many queer people further into the closet, it also inadvertently brought others together. For example, many dishonorably discharged servicemen and women did not return to their homes in rural America but stayed instead in the port cities where they had disembarked. As such, nascent queer communities in cities such as San Francisco, Los Angeles, Boston, and New York began to reach critical mass.⁸ The first postwar queer magazine in America, *Vice Versa*, was published privately by “Lisa Ben” in Los Angeles in 1947 and 1948. A few years later, America’s first homosexual liberation groups—known at the time as “homophile” organizations—were founded: the Mattachine Society was founded in 1951, and the Daughters of Bilitis was formed in 1955.⁹

While groundbreaking organizations, such as homophile groups felt the need to remain tentative. Members often went by aliases or by first names only, fearing that police would arrest them and ask them to identify others. Meetings were held behind closed doors and drawn curtains. The groups’ use of the term *homophile* rather than *homosexual* was strategic, shifting the emphasis from sex to love. In another attempt to protect themselves, the Mattachine Society defined itself as a group “interested in the problems of homosexuality” and not as a homosexual rights organization per se, which could be considered un-American in the 1950s.¹⁰ Most homophile groups also looked down on flamboyant or overtly queer behavior or dress, promoting an assimilationist platform that argued that gay men and lesbians were just like heterosexuals, except for what they did in the privacy of their own bedrooms. In fact, many members accepted the mainstream consensus that homosexuality was a medical condition and pled for tolerance by arguing that homosexuals should be helped to adjust to mainstream society.¹¹ In truth, the number of queer people who belonged to homophile groups in the 1950s was statistically minuscule. The toxic homophobia of the era was enough to keep most queers locked firmly into their closets.

The Weakening of the Production Code

In an environment so hostile and fearful of queer desires, postwar Hollywood continued to use connotative homosexuality to suggest villainy, especially in crime films. Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948) is discussed in chapter 1, and his *Strangers on a Train* (1951) features a similar queer murderer, this time a psychopathic mama's boy named Bruno. The gangster film *The Big Combo* (1953) implies that two hoodlums are a gay couple. Connotative lesbians appeared in a slew of women's prison pictures, including *Caged* (1950), *Girls in Prison* (1956), and *Reform School Girl* (1957); their images of older prisoners preying on younger inmates reflected the era's newfound understanding of queers as child molesters. Perhaps most infamously and forthrightly (given that it was made while the Production Code was still in force), *Suddenly, Last Summer* (1959) depicts a homosexual poet's pursuit of young men as vile and depraved, while several outright horror films exploited similar subtexts. In films such as *I Was a Teenage Werewolf* (1957), *I Was a Teenage Frankenstein* (1958), *Blood of Dracula* (1958), and *How to Make a Monster* (1959), queerly tinged adults lure teenagers into their unnatural practices.¹²

Teenagers and juvenile delinquency were themselves considered social problems during the 1950s, and Hollywood films began associating wayward youngsters with queerness in order to make them seem even more deviant. *Rebel without a Cause* (1955) is a good case in point. Plato (Sal Mineo) is a brooding, reclusive, and sensitive teen, and he has a pinup photograph of actor Alan Ladd in his locker.¹³ The longing looks he gives to his friend Jim (James Dean) seem to indicate a teenage crush; one religious journal of the era noted the film's "suggestion of a latent homosexuality among teen-age boys."¹⁴ In *The Strange One* (1957) a young cadet in military school (Ben Gazzara) takes brutal pleasure in mentally and physically assaulting his comrades; strange goings-on with broom handles, enema bags, and gag reflexes pepper a narrative that continually conflates homoerotic innuendo with sadistic violence.¹⁵ The leather-clad gang of male delinquents in *Touch of Evil* (1959) includes a butch female (Mercedes McCambridge) who lasciviously insists that she "wants to watch" as her male buddies sexually assault the film's heroine. Even the crimes of young queer murderers Leopold and Loeb were retold in *Compulsion* (1959), a mere eleven years after they were first allegorized in Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope*.

Partly, these slightly more overt queer characters were allowed to appear in Hollywood films because their existence was tempered with a "compensating moral value": the films punish their queer characters by killing them, often in quite brutal ways. The butch prison warden in *Caged* is brutally

stabbed to death with a fork. An entire carousel explodes in order to crush Bruno in *Strangers on a Train*. Plato in *Rebel without a Cause* is gunned down by cops. The queer male gangsters in *The Big Combo* are torn apart by a bomb. Both the adults and their young victims in the teenage monster movies suffer horrifying fates: explosions, fires, and electrocutions. Most spectacularly, in *Suddenly, Last Summer* the homosexual poet is torn apart and devoured by a mob of young men upon whom he has “preyed.” Still conceptualized by the Production Code Administration as “sex perversion,” cinematic intimations of queerness in 1950s films warranted severe retribution.

The homophobic environment of postwar America was not the only reason that Hollywood continued to depict (and then murder) queer characters. The need to keep audiences in theaters and away from other forms of entertainment (especially television) pushed American films toward more racy or adult subject matter. Also, in 1948 the Supreme Court ruled that the Hollywood studios were guilty of operating as an illegal trust. In compliance with the so-called Paramount Consent Decrees, the studios were forced to give up control of their theaters, and more and more foreign and independent films (which were generally more sexually frank than Hollywood films) got the chance to be screened. Then, in 1952, the Supreme Court ruled that the theater owner who booked the Italian film *The Miracle* (1948) was not guilty of sacrilege. This ruling reversed a 1915 Supreme Court decision and provided free speech protection to motion pictures. As such, independent American filmmakers and foreign film exhibitors began to push the envelope in terms of sexually explicit material. Hollywood filmmakers had to do likewise in order to compete for their share of the market.

Hollywood began tackling more adult material by adapting best-selling novels and Broadway plays with “mature subject matter.” This strategy allowed Hollywood to “sex it up” while claiming a literary or artistic alibi if and when needed. Emboldened by the Supreme Court’s extension of free speech protection and by the success of foreign and independent films, studio filmmakers began challenging the authority of the Production Code Administration. When the film version of the stage comedy *The Moon Is Blue* (1953) was denied a Production Code seal of approval (for its use of the term “virgin”), United Artists decided to release the film anyway, and it became a box-office hit. This event, according to most film historians, signaled a major power shift in Hollywood, and in 1954, the Production Code Administration relaxed its policies a bit. It would now allow some previously off-limits topics to be addressed (interracial romance, drug addiction, premarital sex), as long as they were depicted with restraint and taste.¹⁶ Restraint and taste most often meant that controversial issues could be raised as long as

characters were punished for them. For example, interracial romances of the era inevitably end in tragedy, and drug use and premarital sex are resolutely condemned.

The Production Code files of the 1950s reveal an ongoing battle between filmmakers and film censors over the topic of sexuality. For example, *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951) had to veil a number of sexualized story points stated more clearly in Tennessee Williams's hit play, such as the indication that Blanche DuBois had worked as a prostitute or that her brother-in-law Stanley rapes her at the end of the story. Intimations that Blanche's first husband killed himself because he was a homosexual were also largely stripped from the film version. Instead, the film indicates that her husband had a "delicate" nature, although his choice of death (a gun in his mouth) carries veiled nuances.¹⁷ The film version of Tennessee Williams's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1958) was also delicately rewritten in order to minimize the suggestion of homosexuality. In the film, Brick (Paul Newman) refuses to have sex with his wife Maggie (Elizabeth Taylor), but the reasons are left intentionally vague. It obviously has something to do with Brick's best friend Skipper committing suicide, but saying that Skipper was in love with Brick (which would connect the dots) was not allowed. Similarly, the script for *Suddenly, Last Summer* ties itself in knots trying to explain its dark secret: namely, that homosexual poet Sebastian Venable used his mother and then his cousin Cathy to attract young men, who he then paid for sex. Cathy, who has been reduced to a mental patient because of her experiences, climactically cries out that she "procured" for Sebastian—a statement that probably caused at least some members of the audience to run for a dictionary.

The cinematic adaptation of Robert Anderson's Broadway hit *Tea and Sympathy* (1956) encountered similar problems with the Production Code Administration. Both play and film focus on a boarding school student named Tom (John Kerr), who is being harassed by his classmates. The play did not mince words about the reason: Tom's classmates think he is queer. In approving the film version, however, the Production Code Administration demanded that the script eliminate any overt reference to suspected homosexuality. Instead, much like Hollywood used the pansy and mannish woman stereotypes in earlier years, the film of *Tea and Sympathy* uses deviance from traditional masculinity as a euphemism for Tom's potential homosexuality. At the end of the film, Tom is "cured" (from whatever it was he was suffering—effeminacy and/or homosexuality) when a housemaster's wife (Deborah Kerr) goes to bed with him to prove he is both masculine and heterosexual. Such adultery was itself a moral failing that the Production Code Administration was reluctant to allow, but it ultimately was deemed justifiable since it served

to cure a queer. Interestingly, while Tom is singled out because of his “feminine” traits, the gruff housemaster seems to be vaguely uncertain about his own sexual orientation. Conventionally masculine, as depicted in his scenes of boisterous roughhousing with his male charges, the housemaster has intimacy problems with his wife, and she wonders aloud why her husband is so overtly antagonistic to Tom. Thus, deeply buried within innuendo and connotation, *Tea and Sympathy* acknowledges a model of male homosexuality not tied to “gender deviance,” even suggesting the queer possibility of repressed homosexual feelings in an allegedly straight man.¹⁸

Bedroom farces and sex comedies of the late 1950s and early 1960s also began testing the limits of the Production Code, and they regularly included the suggestion of homosexuality as part of their sexual titillation. Perhaps most memorably, in *Pillow Talk* (1959), Doris Day’s character worries that Rock Hudson’s character may be “a mama’s boy.” A scene in which Hudson pretends to be fascinated with cooking and interior design plays directly into the old comedic pansy stereotype. In fact, many of these films have actual pansy figures in them: Day’s employer in *Pillow Talk* is a short, prissy man who runs a decorating business.¹⁹ Billy Wilder’s sex farce *Some Like It Hot* (1959) is a bit more sophisticated. Its famous men-in-drag plot is the starting point for social satire and not just a cheap joke. The film queerly points out the performative nature of all gender roles: Tony Curtis’s character impersonates both a woman and a man (a millionaire with a Cary Grant accent no less) with equal ease. Furthermore, while the film’s final joke plays off the purported absurdity of same-sex desire (Joe E. Brown replies “Nobody’s perfect!” when Jack Lemmon reveals himself to be a man), it leaves open the possibility that the two men may actually settle down together!

The 1961 Production Code Amendment

As the 1960s began, queerness in Hollywood films had become so completely obvious that Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960) actually names one possible queer identity before denying it. In discussing the monstrously queer figure of cross-dressing, knife-wielding, boy-next-door Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins), the police refer to him as a “transvestite” before a psychiatrist refutes the label. With Hollywood films increasingly mentioning the unmentionable, the Production Code Administration had to rethink its strategy, and in the fall of 1961, the Code was amended to allow for the “sensitive” representation of homosexuality, if treated with “care, discretion, and restraint.” Yet, as Vito Russo famously argued, “care, discretion, and restraint” actually meant to treat homosexuality “like a dirty secret.”²⁰ In other words,

the change in the Code did not overturn its basic emphasis on compensating moral values. In fact, Hollywood representations of queers throughout the 1960s would generally continue according to previously established stereotypes: homosexuality was silly and comedic, villainous and scary, or shameful and tragic. The only major difference was that now filmmakers could name the condition forthrightly instead of only hinting at it.

Films with small homosexual roles that presented queers in a negative light were far more likely to win the Code's seal of approval than were films that attempted to explore queer issues in sympathetic or even complex terms. A good case study examining exactly what the 1961 Production Code amendment actually meant can be found by examining two British films released in America in 1961. *A Taste of Honey*, approved by the Production Code Administration, features a sad, slightly pathetic male homosexual character in a supporting role. However, the film *Victim*, which explores the underworld of blackmailers preying upon closeted homosexuals—while implicitly arguing for the repeal of sodomy laws—was refused the Code's seal of approval. In 1961 the Production Code Administration also scuttled attempts to film *The Sergeant*, a film based on a novel about a repressed homosexual in the army, allegedly because it dealt too extensively with the topic of homosexuality. (The film was eventually made and released in 1968, a fact that indicates just how rapidly things were changing in both Hollywood and America during this era.)

Another example of the Production Code Administration's approach to homosexuality in films of the era can be found in the censorship decision made one year earlier in regard to *Spartacus* (1960). In it, a fairly explicit bathing scene was filmed between Crassus, a powerful Roman official (Laurence Olivier), and his "body slave" Antoninus (Tony Curtis). In the scene as it was approved by the Code, Crassus makes a homosexual advance on his slave that causes him to flee the household. However, in dialogue that the Code demanded be cut, Crassus frames his desire for Antoninus with a speech about the eating of oysters and snails, noting that preferring one over the other is not a question of morals but rather of taste. By implication, the dialogue implies a moral equivalency between heterosexuality and homosexuality—a sentiment that the Code would not allow to be expressed.

One of the first Hollywood films to deal with homosexuality and be approved under the 1961 Production Code amendment was *The Children's Hour* (1961). The film, based on Lillian Hellmann's play (which had been heterosexualized as the classical Hollywood movie *These Three* [1936]), is about two young women who together own and manage a private school for girls. Karen Wright (Audrey Hepburn) is quiet and fashionable and about to

be married to a local doctor played by James Garner. Martha Dobie (Shirley MacLaine) is loud and plain and meant to be understood as a repressed lesbian. When one of the students (who has already been characterized as a manipulative malcontent) spreads the rumor that the two women are lovers, parents arrive to remove their children, and Karen and Martha are forced to close their school. When Martha eventually reveals that “yes,” she feels “that way” about Karen, she also chastises herself as “wrong,” “guilty,” and “sick.” Karen attempts to comfort her friend, but rather than try to face life as a self-confessed lesbian, Martha hangs herself.

Today’s audiences might find *The Children’s Hour* somewhat melodramatic and out-of-date. Still, it does reveal a great deal about how homosexuality was understood in America at the beginning of the 1960s. Primarily, the women’s alleged lesbianism is represented as a distasteful medical and/or psychiatric condition of which polite people (and Hollywood films) were reticent to speak. When the students’ parents start arriving at the school to remove their children, no one will even admit to Karen and Martha why they are doing so. (When one parent finally does tell Karen the reason, director William Wyler replicates the mandatory cultural silence about homosexuality by filming the scene in a long shot, so that the audience cannot hear what is being said.) The film also dramatizes the violent effects of homophobia, most emphatically in Martha’s self-loathing suicide. Also, as the rumors about Martha and Karen spread, they become almost prisoners in their school, trapped there by a pickup truck full of threatening men who ominously stop in front of their home. Similarly, James Garner’s character is fired from his job at the local hospital simply because he knows the women socially.²¹

As has been pointed out by many critics, *The Children’s Hour* is primarily about the evil effects of rumors—in this case the suggested possibility of homosexuality—rather than homosexuality per se. As one more recent analysis puts it, the “film’s greatest critical potential then comes not from the inclusion and introduction of a lesbian character, but from its consideration of the effects of social categorizations of sexual behavior and identity, and the inevitable social exclusions that result from such categorizations.”²² Significantly, the film does point out that there is such a thing as an openly gay life—Karen tells Martha that “other people haven’t been destroyed by it”—but Martha cannot imagine being one of those people. And although Martha commits suicide, Karen’s fate is left ambiguous. Somewhat remarkably for a Hollywood narrative, Karen is not reunited with the doctor for a requisite happy ending. Instead, the film concludes on an enigmatic close-up of her face. Has she realized something about herself? Will she go on to be openly

lesbian? Or is she a heterosexual who has learned a valuable lesson about social prejudice? This ending, highly reminiscent of the close-up of Greta Garbo at the end of *Queen Christina* (1933), creates a truly queer potential for her character. Karen may or may not be homosexual, heterosexual, or bisexual—and in refusing to answer that enigma, the film suggests that it hardly matters. What does matter is that Karen is shown to be a self-possessed and self-empowered woman, someone who is able (as Martha was not) to rise above the bigotry of her era.

Advise and Consent (1962), a drama about politics in Washington, D.C., contains another self-loathing homosexual who commits a gruesome suicide. It also contains a scene set in a gay bar that the Production Code Administration was especially concerned about: Code executive Geoffrey M. Shurlock did not want the filmmakers to show any “swish” characters and demanded that “none of the men would be painted as described, or portrayed in any unduly shocking manner.”²³ Thus, the scene is focused not on the men in the club but on Senator Brig Anderson (Don Murray), who is plainly sickened to be there. The senator (from Utah!) is being blackmailed by a former lover with whom he had an affair while in the armed services. Frightened and repulsed by the environs of the gay bar, Brig runs out quickly, followed by his ex-lover. In his panic, Brig pushes his former lover into a rain-slicked gutter and jumps into a taxi. A few scenes later, we discover that Brig has gone back to his office and slit his throat.

In much the same manner, Hallie Gerard (Capucine) in *Walk on the Wild Side* (1962) desperately tries to hide her past from the new love in her life: not only was she a prostitute, but she also had an affair with her madam (Barbara Stanwyck). In the end, the horrible secret is revealed, and Hallie is shot and killed during the ensuing altercation. Homosexual secrets from the past also doom a presidential hopeful in *The Best Man* (1964).

While many of these films touch upon a potential critique of heterosexism—and even more specifically how social and cultural taboos against homosexuality can be internalized by queers with devastating, even suicidal effects—homophobia was a concept not yet articulated in any systematic way within the popular sphere. As such, the violence and hatred depicted in these films was understood by most reviewers to be the result of homosexuality itself and not the result of prejudice and discrimination against homosexuality. As such, whatever mild critique of prejudice some of these films might offer was more often overshadowed by lurid imagery (thundering music, tilted camera angles) that figured homosexuality as scary, sad, lonely, tragic, and destructive. Indeed, that was the message that the Production Code Administration wanted to emphasize: according to internal memos, the administra-

tion was upset that *Advise and Consent* was too sympathetic to its suicidal queer character—that the film only provided a “semi-condemnation of homosexuality.”²⁴ Reviewing the finished film, however, newspaper columnist George E. Sokolsky thought that the Code had done its work in shaping the correct message about homosexuality. He wrote that the film proved in no uncertain terms why “all such persons should be fired from all Government agencies, particularly the State Department where they are always subject to blackmail.”²⁵

Thus, despite the new freedom to represent queer characters in Hollywood in more open ways, not too much changed in the early 1960s. Gay jokes and comedic pansies still abounded in films such as *Lover Come Back* (1961) and *That Touch of Mink* (1962). Queer villains populated thrillers such as *From Russia with Love* (1963) and *Goldfinger* (1964). William Castle’s *Homicidal* (1961)—a blatant rip-off of *Psycho*—revealed its psychotic murderer to be a transsexual,²⁶ and a vague lesbian presence is part of the unnatural disease found in the ghost story *The Haunting* (1963). In *Lilith* (1964), the title character is crazy because she is queer, and queer because she is crazy. Psychiatry still officially insisted that homosexuals were mentally ill, and in Hollywood films they were just as likely to kill themselves as they were to murder someone else.

Queers in Hollywood; Queers in the Audience

While the reigning paranoia about homosexuality’s alleged ties to communism, pederasty, and mental illness profoundly affected the onscreen representation of queerness, it also had enormous effect on queer artists working in the industry. At the start of the Cold War, the Hollywood studios had been targeted by red-baiting politicians who accused them of employing communist sympathizers who were using films to spread anti-American propaganda. In response, the studios blacklisted anyone even vaguely suspected of being a communist. And, since queers and communists were often linked in the public gestalt, and homosexuals were being ousted from their federal jobs in Washington, D.C., many queers in Hollywood got understandably nervous. Harry Hay, the founder of the Mattachine Society, told historian William J. Mann that he “knew gays in the motion picture industry who thought they’d be next.”²⁷ Certainly, some Hollywood queers were blacklisted, including actor Will Geer and screenwriter Arthur Laurents (although it is hard to know how much their blacklisting was due to their leftist sympathies versus their homosexuality). However, in such a climate of fear, queer life in Hollywood grew even more precarious and circumspect.

The era's closet mentality was also a response to, and a reflection of, a sort of "queer witch-hunt" waged by the newly minted gossip magazines. As Hollywood's power waned throughout the 1950s, so did the power of studio publicists, and many queer stars found themselves no longer protected by studio-concocted cover stories. Scandal sheets began to be published and found vast readerships by writing salacious exposés about the private lives of Hollywood celebrities and other well-known figures. Rather than uphold the official studio versions of stars' lives, pulpy magazines such as *Top Secret*, *Confidential*, and *Hush-Hush* titillated customers with stories about the stars' adulterous love affairs, drug use, drunken sprees, violent outbursts, communist ties, and even queer behavior. For example, an article in *Confidential* in 1955 promised to tell "The Untold Story of Marlene Dietrich," the fact that the actress had a thing "going for dolls."²⁸ Later that same year, *Confidential* announced a "Disorderly Conduct Charge against Tab Hunter." In 1950, before Hunter was a promising new star, he "landed in jail, along with some 26 other good-looking young men, after the cops broke up a pajama party they staged—strictly for the boys."²⁹ Stories about actor Dan Dailey's cross-dressing, singer Johnnie Ray's arrest for homosexual solicitation, and Tallulah Bankhead's affairs with women all made the tabloids.³⁰ When hard facts (photos, arrest records) could not be obtained, these magazines were content to insinuate queer rumors about stars such as James Dean, Montgomery Clift, and Lizabeth Scott.

The studios did maintain some leverage in this new environment. When they wished to help a star, they could sometimes manage to quell a potential scandal. Thus, having invested a great deal in the rise of Tab Hunter as a studio star, Warner Bros. ignored *Confidential's* story about him and mounted its own publicity push, and the fan magazines became awash with photographs of Hunter escorting beautiful young women around town. When *Confidential* planned to run a story exposing Rock Hudson's homosexuality, Universal (Hudson's studio) reportedly bargained with the magazine and gave them instead information about lesser contract star Rory Calhoun's jail record for robbery.³¹ Not long afterward, Hudson married his secretary, Phyllis Gates, in order to protect his "heterosexual" image. Actress Lizabeth Scott, who often refused to go along with the desires of studio publicists, was less lucky. When she filed suit against *Confidential* without industry support, she lost the lawsuit, and it practically finished her career.³² Thus, bankable queer actors who played the Hollywood publicity game (Rock Hudson, Tab Hunter, Anthony Perkins, Raymond Burr) remained popular and protected. Others (Sal Mineo, George Nader) preferred to be honest, even if that meant—as it surely did—that they were sacrificing greater stardom.

Rumors of homosexuality could be especially devastating for younger actors just starting out in the industry. Disney fired former *Mickey Mouse Club* star Tommy Kirk when he was discovered to be sexually involved with another young man. Basically blacklisted by the major studios, he was forced into smaller and smaller B films, such as *Mars Needs Women* (1968) and *Blood of Ghastly Horror* (1972). After a bout of severe depression and drug use, Kirk abandoned his Hollywood career.³³ Similarly, character actress Sheila Kuehl was also forced to leave the industry when it was discovered that she was a lesbian. Kuehl was a popular actress on the hit television show *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis* (1959–1963), and there was even talk of spinning her character Zelda off into her own series, before rumors of lesbianism killed her career. Kuehl became an attorney specializing in feminist causes and was elected to the California state senate in 2000.

For other queers in Hollywood, gay life continued to be discreet, existing mostly via private parties and exclusive clubs. The Los Angeles Police Department maintained extreme vigilance in raiding and closing any new gay bars, but other queer gathering places in neighboring towns such as Santa Monica, Malibu, and Palm Springs went relatively unmolested. George Cukor continued to host his all-male pool parties, and he continued to find success directing high-profile Hollywood films, as did Charles Walters and Vincente Minnelli. Playwright, novelist, essayist, and screenwriter Gore Vidal arrived in Hollywood in the 1950s and even inserted a subtle gay subtext into *Ben Hur* (1959) while working on that film.³⁴ Other queer writers, including Tennessee Williams, William Inge, and Truman Capote, came to Hollywood to oversee or collaborate on films adapted from their plays and novels, but as discussed, their input was still hampered by the Production Code and Hollywood's formulaic heterocentrism.

In fact, queer writers sometimes worked on the most homophobic films. For example, *Suddenly, Last Summer* was written by Gore Vidal and based on a play by Tennessee Williams. How and why did queers become central to such a project? Did they do it out of internalized homophobia, some sense of their own queerness as a sickness? One may never know for sure, although various biographers have noted that Tennessee Williams did have a somewhat conflicted "southern gothic" relation to his sexuality (as did William Inge and Truman Capote). That said, it might be argued that *Suddenly, Last Summer* is more about the straight world's gruesome annihilation of a queer artist than it is about a monstrous homosexual. Still, all queer people of the era, artists or not, internalized to some degree the negative social attitudes and homophobic ideologies that surrounded them, including those of the

Production Code. And while images such as those in *Suddenly*, *Last Summer* may today seem far less than optimal, they were nonetheless images that at least spoke of the existence of queer desires.

Producer Ross Hunter was another major player in queer Hollywood of the 1950s and 1960s. The string of domestic melodramas that he made with director Douglas Sirk (which often starred Rock Hudson) have become important texts in (queer) film history. For example, *All That Heaven Allows* (1955) was remade by queer German filmmaker R. W. Fassbinder as *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* (1974) and has also served as the touchstone for the more recent queer melodramas *When Night Is Falling* (1995) and *Far from Heaven* (2002).³⁵ As is true of the overall genre, Hunter's melodramas often emphasize the social pressures that are placed on individuals to uphold propriety and dignity. They have a glossy plastic sheen in their visual design that increases their sense of artificiality and performativity, even as their storylines expose the secret desires and frustrations that lay beneath those gleaming surfaces. Ross Hunter films such as *Imitation of Life* (1959), *Portrait in Black* (1960), and *Madame X* (1966)—all with the sublime acting talents of Lana Turner—readily became camp classics among the era's gay men.

Lesbians and gay men in the audience continued to love the queer appeal of Hollywood musicals, melodramas, horror films, and exotic adventure stories. While they too mostly navigated life from inside their closets, queer reception strategies continued to be practiced. In many ways, queer readings were even easier to perform in the postwar years, as queer content was slowly becoming less subtextual and more forthright. Scandal sheets such as *Confidential* were confirming queers' suspicions about certain stars. And despite the Production Code Administration's repeated attempts to censor queerness from films such as *Tea and Sympathy* or *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, mainstream newspaper and magazine reviews regularly brought the missing homosexual elements to their readers' attention.³⁶ As such, everyone in America, straight and gay, was learning how to read Hollywood films queerly.

Lesbian subcultures of the era responded in their own unique ways to Hollywood cinema. Some working-class lesbians expressed their sexual identity by adopting either butch or femme personas, rigid roles that in some way parodied the very structure of heterosexuality. They often latched on to films and figures that spoke to those constructs. For example, Julie Harris's tomboy in *The Member of the Wedding* (1952) and Joan Crawford's butch gunslinger in *Johnny Guitar* (1954) became important lesbian icons. The love/hate relationship between Crawford and Mercedes McCambridge in

Johnny Guitar, a rare female western, also fueled lesbian fandoms, as did James Dean. Apparently Dean's rumored bisexuality and his combination of both "tough" and "soft" masculine characteristics made him a role model for "baby butch" lesbians.³⁷ Another key butch image of the 1950s was Doris Day as the title character in *Calamity Jane* (1953). Jane wears buckskin breeches, talks in a low raspy drawl, and repeatedly challenges any man to try to outdo her. The film plays with all sorts of gender turmoil: Wild Bill Hickok gets dressed up as a squaw at one point, and a male character named Francis is assumed to be a female named Frances. Perhaps most memorably, the butch Jane and the femme Katie become roommates and move in together. Their duet about interior decorating, "A Woman's Touch," certainly had extra meaning for lesbian audiences of the era. Jane's anthem "Secret Love" also became a huge hit in lesbian and gay bars because of its obvious ties to life in the closet.³⁸

Gay-male camp appreciation of over-the-top Hollywood films and stars also continued unabated. One of the most significant stars idolized by the era's gay men was Judy Garland, an idolization that continues among many gay men today. Garland was such an icon among gay men that her *Wizard of Oz* character even became a code word within the era's queer subcultures: one could ascertain whether another man was homosexual by euphemistically asking "Are you a friend of Dorothy's?" Garland's gay male fans identified with her ability to keep smiling publicly while suffering off-camera.³⁹ Her refusal to surrender also seemed to give encouragement to queers of the era, as did her explosive talent. When Garland performed live, gay men were prominent in the audience, so much so that articles about her concerts often made (snide) comments about them. Still, those concerts—like her films—provided space for gay men to meet and feel less isolated. As one gay fan recalled, Garland's concerts afforded "an exuberance, a liveliness, a community of feeling which was quite new to me and probably quite rare anyway then. It was as if the fact that we had gathered to see Garland gave us permission to be gay in public for once."⁴⁰

Gay men of the era also flocked to sword-and-sandal epics because of their visual beefcake. Many gay men remember *The Ten Commandments* (1956), *Ben Hur*, and *Spartacus* not for their edifying biblical platitudes about social (in)justice but because of the ways they put their hunky actors on bare-chested display. Foreign knockoffs such as *Hercules* (1958) and *Goliath and the Dragon* (1960) dispensed with the messages altogether and concentrated on putting bodybuilders such as Steve Reeves into short-waisted togas or furry briefs. Sword-and-sandal films were also high camp. Their wild exoticism and elaborate production values recalled those of the silent

era or the Technicolor adventure films of Maria Montez. Their historical or biblical settings also called for spectacularly mannered dialogue and acting. Often such “bad” acting was due to the fact that producers cast actors who looked better than they emoted, and the less-than-natural acting of Charlton Heston or Steve Reeves helped create their camp appeal (as well as undermine their alleged “natural” masculinity). *The Ten Commandments* is a veritable treasure trove of camp moments, such as when Nefretiri (Anne Baxter) lustfully declaims to a mud-caked Charlton Heston, “Oh Moses, Moses, you stubborn, splendid, adorable fool!” A bit later Vincent Price as Baka, “The Master-BUILDER,” prissily whips a chained but scantily clad hunk (John Derek): “You’ve seen me drive my chariot—I can flick a fly from my horse’s ear without breaking the rhythm of his stride.” In this way, even the most pious and traditional of Hollywood films were queered by the era’s homosexual spectators.



Foreign-made “sword and sandal” epics, such as *Goliath and the Barbarians* (1959) starring Steve Reeves, were perennial favorites among gay male filmgoers of the postwar era. Standard Prods / The Kobal Collection

Conclusion

In 1961, just as the Hollywood Production Code was amended to allow homosexuality to be treated openly on screen, Illinois became the first state to decriminalize homosexuality between consenting adults. And although the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis continued to meet somewhat furtively and fearfully, they also began to organize public demonstrations, marching in major urban areas with signs demanding civil rights for homosexuals. Following the example of the African American civil rights movement, these first protests were well behaved and nonconfrontational; picketers were careful to dress in acceptable, gender-appropriate clothing. At the same time, patrons and owners of gay bars in cities such as San Francisco and New York City began protesting against incessant police raids and the monetary kickbacks they had to pay in order to stay open at all. Queer culture and queer activism were slowly becoming more consolidated and defined. Part of this community building was due to the fact that homosexuality was becoming a topic that could be discussed. Although most mainstream discussion of homosexuality was derogatory or condemning, it may have helped some queer individuals give name to their desires or led them in search of other queers. It also led other queers to pick up movie cameras and begin to make alternative images, the first American films made by and for queer audiences.

Notes

1. For more on the history of pulp fiction and queer sexualities, see Susan Styker, *Queer Pulp: Perverted Passions from the Golden Age of the Paperback* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2001); and Michael Bronksi, ed., *Pulp Friction: Uncovering the Golden Age of Gay Male Pulps* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2003).

2. For a history of queers and World War II, see Allan Bérubé, *Coming Out under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War II* (New York: Plume, 1991). The book was turned into a documentary film of the same name by Arthur Dong in 1994. See also Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Penguin Books, 1992).

3. For an account of such medicalized "tests" for homosexuality, see Nicolai Gioscia, "The Gag Reflex and Fellatio," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 107 (May 1950): 380.

4. Barry D. Adam, *The Rise of a Gay and Lesbian Movement* (Boston: Twayne, 1987), 58.

5. Fredric Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent* (New York: Rinehart, 1953), 188–93.

6. John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940–1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 41–47.

7. Alfred C. Kinsey, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders, 1948). In his 1953 book on women's sexual behavior, Kinsey reported that 13 percent had experienced homosexual sex to orgasm and that 28 percent of women surveyed reported an erotic response to their own sex. Alfred C. Kinsey, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders, 1953).

8. Adam, *Gay and Lesbian Movement*, 62.

9. Adam, *Gay and Lesbian Movement*, 63.

10. Adam, *Gay and Lesbian Movement*, 64.

11. Donald Webster Cory, *The Homosexual in America: A Subjective Approach* (New York: Castle Books, 1951), is a seminal postwar attempt to describe queer life by a self-identified homosexual who ascribes to the concept of homosexuality as a medical condition.

12. For an overview of this trend, see Harry M. Benshoff, *Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuality and the Horror Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 137–57.

13. The Production Code Administration warned Warner Bros. after reviewing the initial script for the film that “it is of course vital that there be no inference of a questionable or homosexual relationship between Jim and Plato,” indicating its awareness of the homosexual implications, even though it eventually awarded the film a seal of approval. Memo from Geoffrey Shurlock, Production Code Administration, to Jack L. Warner, 22 March 1955, *Rebel without a Cause* production files, Warner Bros. Archives, University of Southern California Cinema-Television Library, Los Angeles.

14. J. C. Wynn, review of *Rebel without a Cause*, *Presbyterian Life*, 26 November 1955, 42. This review is quoted by Michael DeAngelis, *Gay Fandom and Crossover Stardom: James Dean, Mel Gibson, and Keanu Reeves* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2001), 102.

15. For more on this film, see Harry M. Benshoff, “Representing (Repressed) Homosexuality in the Pre-stonewall Homo-military Film” in *Sleaze Merchants*, ed. Jeff Sconce (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005).

16. For more on this moment in the Production Code Administration's history, see Leonard J. Leff and Jerold L. Simmons, *The Dame in the Kimono: Hollywood, Censorship and the Production Code from the 1920s to the 1960s* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1990), specifically 185–216.

17. See Leff and Jerrold, *Dame in the Kimono*, 172–84, for a fuller history of the Production Code Administration's dealings with the production of this film.

18. A letter from playwright Robert Anderson to film director Vincente Minnelli (7 March 1956) discusses the husband's “latent homosexual” nature. *Tea and Sympathy* File, Vincente Minnelli Collection, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Margaret Herrick Library, Beverly Hills, Calif.

19. "The film follows the current trend in romantic comedies of being as broad as the traffic allows, and the traffic allows considerably broader these days than it used to." *Variety*, 11 August 1959.

20. Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1987 [1981]), 132.

21. Proto-queer in its attack on sexual and social categorization, the play fits neatly into writer Lillian Hellman's overall oeuvre. She contributed to movies such as *Dead End* (1937), *The Little Foxes* (1941), and *Julia* (1977), films that reveal her to have been something of a crusader for social justice and human rights. Perhaps unsurprisingly, during the Red Scare, Hellman was called before the House Un-American Activities Committee as a suspected communist.

22. Jennifer A. Rich, "'(W)right in the Faultlines': The Problematic of Identity in William Wyler's *The Children's Hour*," in *The Queer Sixties*, ed. Patricia Juliana Smith (New York: Routledge, 1999), 190.

23. "Manuel, in Scene 114, will be a sort of beatnick [sic] character. There will be no suggestion of the 'swish' in his case, or in any of the characters in the café, in Scene 117." Letter from Geoffrey M. Shurlock (G. M. S.) to Otto Preminger, 28 July 1961, *Advise and Consent* MPAA files, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Margaret Herrick Library, Beverly Hills, Calif.

24. Letter from Geoffrey M. Shurlock (G. M. S.) to Otto Preminger, 28 July 1961, *Advise and Consent* MPAA files, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Margaret Herrick Library, Beverly Hills, Calif.

25. George E. Sokolsky, "Movie: *Advise and Consent*," *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, 12 June 1962, *Advise and Consent* MPAA files, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Margaret Herrick Library, Beverly Hills, Calif.

26. For a brief, critical discussion of the film in relation to heterosexual performance, see Wheeler Winston Dixon, *Straight: Constructions of Heterosexuality in the Cinema* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 18–23.

27. William J. Mann, *Behind the Screen: How Gays and Lesbians Shaped Hollywood, 1910–1969* (New York: Penguin, 1991), 296.

28. Kenneth G. McLain, "The Untold Story of Marlene Dietrich," *Confidential* (July 1955): 22.

29. Quoted by David Ehrenstein, *Open Secret: Gay Hollywood, 1928–1998* (New York: William Morrow, 1998), 90.

30. Mann, *Behind the Screen*, 309.

31. Ezra Goodman, *The Fifty-Year Decline and Fall of Hollywood* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1961), 52. Goodman does not name Hudson outright as the protected Universal star, but this anecdote has been in the gossip mills of Hollywood for decades.

32. Mann, *Behind the Screen*, 311–12.

33. Sean Griffin, *Tinker Belles and Evil Queens: The Walt Disney Company from the Inside Out* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 99–101.

34. Vidal makes this assertion in Russo, *Celluloid Closet*, 76–77, and also in the film *The Celluloid Closet* (1995).

35. *Far from Heaven* is discussed in chapter 12. *When Night Is Falling* has received an excellent queer exegesis by Julia Mendenhall, "Juggling Genres in a 'Sirkus of Sorts': Patricia Rozema's *When Night Is Falling* (1995) and the Queering of Douglas Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows* (1955)" (paper presented at the 2004 Society for Cinema and Media Studies conference, Atlanta, Ga.).

36. Chon Noriega, "Something's Missing Here! Homosexuality and Film Reviews during the Production Code Era, 1934–1962," *Cinema Journal* 30, no. 1 (Fall 1990): 20–41.

37. For more on the development of these rumors about Dean in the mainstream and the gay press from the 1950s to the present, see DeAngelis, *Gay Fandom and Crossover Stardom*, 100–117.

38. For an excellent (if esoteric) queer analysis of this film, see Eric Savoy, "That Ain't All She Ain't: Doris Day and Queer Performativity," in *Out Takes: Essays on Queer Theory and Film*, ed. Ellis Hanson (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999), 151–82.

39. Richard Dyer, "Judy Garland and Gay Men," in *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 141–94.

40. Quoted in Dyer, "Judy Garland and Gay Men," 145.

CHAPTER FIVE



Exploitation or Art? Queer Films beyond Hollywood



Kenneth Anger's experimental film *Fireworks* (1947) explores the borders between male homosexual desire and violent homosocial masculinity. Fantoma Films / The Kobal Collection

As the previous chapter explores, the postwar years were a period of transition for American cinema. As the studios sold off controlling interests in film exhibition, American movie theaters gained greater ability to show films made outside the Hollywood mainstream. Many of these films tackled material considered either taboo in Hollywood (due to the Production Code) or noncommercial, and as the 1950s became the 1960s, more and more people began seeking out these alternative cinemas, including gay and lesbian viewers who hoped to see images that countered Hollywood's stereotypes. Many of these films were controversial, and prints of some of them were seized by the police, even though the Supreme Court had declared in 1952 that films were deserving of First Amendment protection. Attempts to suppress these films resulted in protests by their potential audiences, in effect bringing them together as a group demanding their rights. In this way, some of these queer alternative films helped politicize the homosexual community, and a full-fledged queer civil rights movement would in fact arrive by the end of the 1960s. Also, in challenging censorship statutes and obscenity laws, these films helped change the cultural understanding of sexuality in general, contributing in direct ways to the so-called sexual revolution of the 1960s, when for a brief period sexuality was celebrated as a revolutionary force.

Although alternative cinemas gained a great deal of attention during the 1960s, they had been around for decades, even though Hollywood's control of the industry had worked to keep them marginalized. These various alternative cinemas included foreign films of all sorts, black-cast "race movies," Yiddish-language films, avant-garde or experimental films, physique films, and exploitation/sexploitation films. Unable to get regular theater bookings, most of these films were screened in specialized urban theaters, in film clubs, or in "road show" formats in which they could be moved from community to community for special midnight screenings in tents or other rented exhibition halls. Stag reels—films that showed actual sexual intercourse—were technically illegal and could only be screened in private places, such as brothels or men's clubs. And while stag reels usually emphasized patriarchal heterosexual relations, evidence suggests that they could also be queer. In *Cast Ashore* (aka *The Exclusive Sailor*, 1924), for example, two men and a woman engage in various sexual acts, proving that decades before the sexual revolution, queer sex was part of the sexual landscape.¹ Similarly, a surviving segment of a pornographic cartoon known as *Eveready Harton* (circa 1925) shows a man sexually penetrating women, men, and even a donkey.²

Each of these fringe cinemas—from the pornographic to the self-consciously artistic—was in some way a queer alternative to Hollywood: the films were produced and exhibited outside the usual Hollywood channels,

and as this chapter shows, their form and content also queered one's usual moviegoing expectations. Queer artists turned to these alternative cinemas in order to make the types of films they wanted to make, rather than try to obey the dictates of the classical Hollywood studio system. As such, queer filmmakers working in alternative cinemas challenged established ideas of sexuality as well as the established rules of film style.

Classical-Era Exploitation Films (1930s–1950s)

The term *exploitation film* is a broad one, but for the purposes of what follows, it is defined historically as a type of film made outside (or on the edge) of Hollywood that promised to show spectators something that Hollywood films could not (because of the Production Code). The word *promised* is an important one, for classical exploitation films still had to operate within the bounds of obscenity laws and could not represent hardcore sexuality as could stag films. At most, the typical exploitation film of the 1930s and 1940s might feature a few glimpses of a woman's bare breast or bottom, and thus they frequently disappointed spectators who had come to see something stronger. Classical exploitation films took as their subject matter topics that the Production Code had expressly forbidden: venereal disease, drug use, vice, out-of-wedlock pregnancy, and criminal atrocity.³ As such, exploitation films inevitably veered into queer territory. In covering forbidden aspects of sexuality, such as nonprocreative heterosexual desire outside marriage, exploitation films underline the fact that many forms of heterosexuality were themselves unsanctioned and queer throughout the first half of the twentieth century.

Although they were made outside the Hollywood industry, exploitation films still often worked within the "compensating moral values" paradigm. Thus, the illicit thrills they presented were framed within the narrative context of the social-problem film, offering their viewers "moral lessons" about the "dangers" of out-of-wedlock sex, drug use, or whatever. Just as in Hollywood movies, exploitation film characters who committed those "sins" were usually punished by the end of their films via death, misery, or jail time. Exploitation filmmakers framed their stories in this way to protect themselves from prosecution by local and state censorship boards: they were only presenting "cautionary tales," or so the argument went, and not pandering to the sex and drugs trade.⁴ And while it is hard to say how audiences of the era reacted to these films, by the early 1970s some of them had become campy midnight movies. Countercultural audiences smoked marijuana and laughed at the excesses of films such as *Reefer Madness* (1936), a drama that suggests

that marijuana use will make people murderous and insane. This brief historical anecdote is a good example of the way audiences can take movies made for one purpose and turn them toward another.

Classical exploitation films may be considered queer in the ways they distort and generally sexualize Hollywood narrative formulas, but their reception was also queer. First, there was an overlap between these films' existence on the edges of polite legal society and the marginalized gay subcultures of the era; exploitation audiences undoubtedly contained many queer men. Second, as the changing reception of *Reefer Madness* shows, these films were often decoded in multiple and sometimes unsanctioned ways. Their use of cheap sets, bad acting, and poor lighting (not to mention their histrionic narratives) allows for a campy deconstructive response, affording spectators a critical stance toward not just the exploitation film in question but toward Hollywood films in general. The existence of exploitation films thus contributed to the rise in camp reception practices, styles, and aesthetics.

At least one classical-era exploitation film dealt directly with homosexuality, and because of that, it constantly faced convoluted censorship battles.⁵ *Children of Loneliness* (circa 1935) could be "legally" screened only after the Supreme Court extended freedom-of-speech rights to cinema in the early 1950s and then only with extensive editing. An exploitative docudrama, *Children of Loneliness* tells two stories. In the first, butch-dyke Bobby fails to win the girl of her dreams; instead, she gets acid thrown in her face and is run over by a truck. In the second story, in accordance with the era's gender-inversion model of homosexuality, a doctor tells effeminate artist Paul that he will "never love as a husband because mentally he's a woman." Faced with that "truth," Paul commits suicide. Queer viewers of the era apparently did seek out *Children of Loneliness*, but it is hard to gauge how they might have reacted to it.⁶ Surely, some of them would have found the film quite campy. Others may have internalized its official psychiatric take on homosexuality, especially since many screenings of the film were accompanied by a filmed prologue and epilogue in which a medical "expert" lectured on "perversion."⁷

A few other exploitation films of the era dealt with homosexuality more or less forthrightly. However, in accordance with 1950s psychiatric discourse, homosexuality was portrayed as a tragic medical condition. The French film *Olivia* (1951) was released on the exploitation circuit as *Pit of Loneliness*, a title that implies shame and sterility; at the end of the film, its lesbian characters renounce their desires. One (most probably heterosexual) film critic of the era remarked that the film had "an air of pathos and emotional tragedy—the only real outcome of such an unhappy and unnatural relationship."⁸ Similarly, the German import *The Third Sex* (1958) invokes the era's common

image of older queers luring young people astray. In it, a young man falls under the sway of older homosexuals who enjoy modernist art and Greco-Roman wrestling. As in the Hollywood film *Tea and Sympathy* (1955), our young protagonist is saved from homosexuality via an act of curative heterosexual sex. As exploitation film scholar Eric Schaefer notes, the young man's heterosexual initiation

and his mother's "procurement" of the girl for him, both of which would have been condemned in earlier exploitation films, were presented as defensible in the late 1950s. By rejecting an unproductive form of desire (homosexuality) and embracing desire that will maintain the consumer-based economic and social order, what would have once been presented as a sin has become a therapeutic means of preserving the new status quo.⁹

In other words, while heterosexuality outside of marriage was becoming an increasingly accepted part of male-female relations, same-sex couplings were still to be avoided at all costs.

One of the most important exploitation films of the era, from a queer point of view, was Edward D. Wood Jr.'s *Glen or Glenda* (1953). By most accounts, Ed Wood was a heterosexual transvestite who wrote and directed some of the most memorable "bad movies" of the 1950s. His *Plan 9 from Outer Space* (1959), an extremely low-budget science-fiction horror film, has often been hailed as the worst film of all time. While Wood's films have in recent years gained a cult following because of their hilarious ineptitude, they are also interesting because of their queer autobiographical elements. *Glen or Glenda*, which Wood directed for producer George Weiss, is a fascinating peek into how queer sexualities were understood during the McCarthy era. True to exploitation form, the film makes use of pseudoscientific narrators (including Bela Lugosi as a scientist-cum-God figure), various dramatic vignettes, and lots of stock footage. Its central plot sympathetically focuses on Glen/Glenda (played by Ed Wood himself), a heterosexual cross-dresser about to be married to "Barbara, a lovely, intelligent girl" (played by Wood's girlfriend, Dolores Fuller). Much is made of the fact that Glen and Barbara are just "two perfectly normal people about to be married and lead a normal life together."

While *Glen or Glenda* might have been a very early vehicle for the idea of "queer" as it was developed some thirty years later, it frequently draws harsh distinctions between the types of queers it asks its viewers to accept as "normal." While arguing that transvestitism and transsexualism are as American as apple pie, the film repeatedly condemns male homosexuality. As the narrator forbodes, "Glen is *not* a homosexual. Glen is a transvestite, but he is *not*

a homosexual. *Transvestitism* is the term given by medical science to those persons who desperately wish to wear the clothing of the opposite sex, yet whose sex life in *all* circumstances remains *quite normal*.” A bit later, the film actually depicts two male homosexuals cruising under a street lamp while the narrator points out (in typical Wood-en dialogue) that

Glen and Glenda, like all the other Glens and Glendas, have an even bigger problem. The homosexual, it is true, at times does adopt the clothing or the makeup of a woman to lure members of his own sex. But this is not so for the transvestite. The transvestite is not interested in those of their own sex. The clothing is not worn to attract the attention of their own sex but to eliminate themselves from being a member of that sect.

While these “educational” points are offered on the soundtrack, Glenda is shown rebuffing the advances of a homosexual man who later appears in his/her nightmare.¹⁰ Finally, an exchange between the psychiatrist and the police inspector raises the point a final time:

INSPECTOR: Did this Glen have any homosexual tendencies?

DOCTOR: Absolutely not. It's very seldom that a true transvestite does.

Glen or Glenda may be the first American film to portray transvestites and transsexuals as sympathetic human beings, but it did so by distancing itself from homosexuality.

During the 1950s, actual nudity became increasingly central to exploitation films. With First Amendment protection, exploitation films moved from “sex hygiene” social-problem narratives to (almost) plotless nudist-camp exposés and filmed recordings of burlesque acts. Surprisingly, some of these burlesque films feature queer content: female impersonation and jokes about male homosexuality.¹¹ For example, in *Varietease* (1954) and *Teaserama* (1955), a male performer billed as Vicki Lynn strips out of female clothing, revealing his “true” sex at the end of his act, in the process suggesting that even a man can be a sexy woman. Comedy routines in burlesque films such as *Hollywood Revels* (1954) and *Kiss Me Baby* (1957) acknowledge and make sport of gay men in the military. Film historian Eric Schaefer argues that it is wrong to dismiss these films as nothing but the heterosexist objectification of women (or queers) for a straight man's pleasure: “Rather than showing gender as coherent and unified and desire as a fixed product of it, these routines present desire as polymorphous and subject to rapid change.”¹² Thus, even in one of the most supposedly heterosexist of cultural institutions—the strip show—queer elements were historically apparent.

Physique Films: The First Gay Male Erotic Cinema

Burlesque and nudist-camp movies traded almost exclusively on the implied or actual nudity of female models. In contrast, there also arose in the postwar years a practice whose *raison d'être* was the sexual objectification of male bodies. Physique photography and films date back at least to the nineteenth century—some of the earliest Thomas Edison kinetoscopes feature the famous strongman Sandow flexing his muscles—but it was in the immediate postwar period that pictorial muscle magazines and films began to be produced in mass quantities.¹³ These images queered gender and sexuality in multiple ways. The muscular men in physique photos allowed themselves to be put on visual display, a conventionally feminine position. The sense that they were overly concerned with their physical appearance also linked them to feminine preoccupations of fashion and beauty. Indeed, even as weightlifting was becoming a popular postwar activity, it carried a faint aura of homosexuality about it, especially since Kinsey had just shown that homosexuals need not be pansies.

Magazines devoted to “physical culture” proliferated during the postwar period. While some publications worked desperately and repeatedly to dissociate themselves from bodybuilding’s homosexual aura, other journals specifically aimed themselves at gay male readers. One of the pioneering queer physique photographers was Bob Mizer, who in 1945 founded AMG (Athletic Model Guild) studios. Mizer’s idea was to circulate in pamphlet form photos of muscular young men to artists who might consider employing them as models. For his efforts, Mizer was convicted on obscenity charges in 1947 and sentenced to six months on a prison farm.¹⁴ Mizer served his sentence but refused to capitulate and went on to publish the pocket-sized photomagazine *Physique Pictorial* for over four decades. Its readers were clearly not artists seeking to hire models but rather gay men hungry for erotic imagery. Bodybuilding thus served as an alibi for photographing and looking at nearly nude men. The alibi of “physical fitness” or “healthy sport” could be invoked by publishers (and later filmmakers) if and when they were brought into court on obscenity charges.

Physique Pictorial was so popular that similar publications (such as *Tomorrow’s Man* and *Vim*) flooded the marketplace throughout the 1950s. In terms of sheer numbers, physique magazines far outnumbered the relatively sparse circulation of early homophile publications, such as *The Mattachine Review* or *One*. Evidence suggests, though, that Mizer recognized that *Physique Pictorial* and the homophile journals held common aims. By the mid-1950s, Mizer was using magazine space to express political opinions. Editorials on censorship

dominated, but columns on the death penalty, police harassment, and homosexuality were also recurrent topics, and Mizer included information on how to contact the Mattachine Society and the ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union) on numerous occasions.¹⁵ *Physique Pictorial* also printed letters from readers, providing a space for queer men of the era to engage in dialogue about issues important to them.¹⁶

It was not long before physique photographers became physique filmmakers, and the magazines started to advertise the availability of short 8 MM and 16 MM films for mail-order purchase. They were produced not just by Bob Mizer but by countless other firms, such as Apollo, Zenith, and Kris in cities across North America and Europe. Thomas Waugh, in his book *Hard to Imagine: Gay Male Eroticism in Photography and Film from Their Beginnings to Stonewall*, suggests that physique films can be categorized into one of three main genres: posing, wrestling, and lastly a more elaborate type of narrative film.¹⁷ The first to appear was the posing genre, as filmmakers simply shot their former subjects in the way they always had: models in posing straps flexed their muscles for the length of an entire reel (about seven or eight minutes). However, this formula quickly grew stale, and the wrestling genre was born. In combining homosocial violence and homosexual desire, the wrestling films were responding to the possibilities of censorship. As another historian of physique films once put it, “Wrestling, wrestling, wrestling! Dressed, undressed, or halfway in between—why were they always wrestling? . . . because [if the models] had been embracing instead of wrestling, everyone involved would have been arrested for pornography and perversion, but since they were trying to kill one another, it was okay.”¹⁸ Wrestling films represent male homosexual desire in displaced, frequently sadomasochistic ways: a caress becomes a slap, an embrace a tackle, and a kiss a spit in the face. They are also frequently choreographed as sexual acts, as the models approach one another, playfully grasp and wrestle, increasingly pant and heave, and end in postclinch exhaustion with the two models physically spent.¹⁹

Eventually physique filmmakers began adding small narratives in order to justify or motivate the wrestling scenes, and they often drew their stories from homosocial rituals and spaces. Physique films were made about police arrests (*Cop and the Drunks*, *Cop and the Truants*), barracks roughhousing (*Military Initiation*, *Strip Poker*), and prison harassment (*Cellmates*, *Boys in Prison*). Hollywood films were also a major source of inspiration. Bob Mizer in particular was quite fond of filming eight-minute sword-and-sandal epics, each with a title like *Aztec Sacrifice*, *Pharoah's New Slave*, *Gift for Demetrius*, or the wittily named *Ben Hurry*. Other Hollywood genres with queer followings were also reworked as physique films. AMG's *How to Make an Athlete*

and *Mad Scientist* recall the era's teenage monster movies, especially *How to Make a Monster* (1958). *Space Mutiny* and *Muscles from Outer Space* queer the science fiction genre, while *Cowboys and Indians* queers the western. Mizer also produced a film entitled *Advice without Consent*, its title campily misquoting Hollywood's tragic queer melodrama *Advise and Consent* (1962).²⁰ Actually, the links between Hollywood culture and the physique industry were apparent from its inception. The second issue of *Physique Pictorial* included a drawing inspired by Cecil B. DeMille's *Samson and Delilah* (1949),²¹ and the magazine regularly included beefcake photos of Hollywood stars such as Marlon Brando, Tony Curtis, and Robert Wagner, often obtained from studio publicists. Other young men modeled for Mizer in the hopes of launching film careers, and bodybuilders Ed Fury and Steve Reeves did later become stars in international sword-and-sandal films.

Hollywood-inspired physique films are excellent examples of how historical queers campily rewrote Hollywood cinema for their own goals. In some of them, the sense of the filmic spectator becoming the filmic producer is further suggested through the narrative device of dreaming: the sword-and-sandal or cowboy story turns out to be the fantasy of a young gay man who has fallen asleep while reading a physique magazine. At times the films could also express a growing sense of political awareness. Waugh points out that one common storyline of the narrative physique film would have had real-life resonance for many of the era's gay men: the cop harassing a young man for no particular reason. Films such as *Cop and the Delinquent* not only sound the idea of police abuse but also provide a sense of wish fulfillment, as when the harassed young man overcomes the cop and successfully pins him to the ground. Also, while the AMG films in particular emphasized wrestling and physical violence as a substitute for actual homosexual relations, films from other physique studios often showed greater amounts of tenderness and intimacy between men, suggesting that two men might even be able to *love* one another.

By the mid-1960s, physique films were being booked into urban theaters in predominantly gay neighborhoods. Sometimes they played before or after campy Hollywood features from earlier decades. Physique films could still be purchased for home viewing, but they were also becoming a public forum at which gay men could meet, socialize, and exchange information. Also by the mid-1960s, obscenity laws had been loosened enough to allow nudity both in print and on film. The posing strap once considered necessary to the legality of the physique industry soon disappeared, and "danglies"—so-named for the flaccid penis they dared to show—were born. A few years later, explicitly hardcore heterosexual and homosexual shorts and features started to be produced, and the physique film became obsolete.²²

The Rise of Queer Experimental Film

Experimental or avant-garde films of the postwar era also featured queer content on a regular basis. As a film practice, experimental filmmaking is especially open to the representation of polymorphous desires because of its open-ended, fluid, and often symbolic form.²³ Experimental filmmakers (then and now) are interested in exploring the range of possibilities of the cinematic medium. Instead of making movies that tell stories, experimental filmmakers often try to make films that evoke ideas, feelings, or moods. Also, while Hollywood films work to answer every question and wrap up all loose ends by the time they end, avant-garde films often prefer not to provide definitive answers and concrete meanings. They are designed to be open to multiple interpretations, to challenge traditional ideas and opinions, and to initiate new ways of looking at things—including (but not limited to) gender and sexuality. In this way, experimental filmmaking runs counter to the Hollywood tendency to uphold the patriarchal and heteronormative status quo. Also, experimental films rarely play in conventional cinemas; instead, they are usually screened for specialized film societies located mainly in urban areas throughout the United States and Europe. Historically, such film clubs provided a safe cover for queers to meet and socialize during the first half of the twentieth century. By the 1960s, such underground screenings had become important places for queers to meet.²⁴ In all these ways (form, content, and reception), the avant-garde film encouraged queer border-crossing.

Avant-garde cinema developed in response to the dominance of fictional narrative filmmaking epitomized by the output of the Hollywood studios. The initial phases of avant-garde filmmaking occurred mostly in Europe in the 1920s and 1930s, where films were made in conjunction with modernist art movements such as Expressionism, Impressionism, or Surrealism. As discussed in chapter 2, modernist artistic communities often espoused philosophies of love and sex that diverged from the establishment and often championed women's rights, free love, and queer sexualities. At least two classic examples of European avant-garde filmmaking are specifically tied to queer desire. French poet and playwright Jean Cocteau's *Le Sang d'un Poete* (1930) is an abstract meditation on artistic creation that includes a number of homoerotic metaphors. In the film, an artist is shown consistently looking back at his creation—which is himself (in other words, two men looking at each other)—and, in the film's most famous image, he becomes so obsessed with this mirror image that he falls into the mirror and enters a realm where a variety of queer vignettes (somasochistic, lesbian, androgynous) are witnessed. Cocteau also helped further the career of French writer Jean Genet,

who made *Un Chant d'Amour* in the late 1940s. Genet also used artistic metaphors to suggest homosexual desire—either refined (flower garlands) or lurid (a man blowing smoke through a straw into a hole in a wall). Like much of Genet's work, the film is centered on the queer world of criminals and prisoners, where violence is yet another aspect of desire between men.²⁵

Arguably, the first American avant-garde film to deal with homosexual themes was *Lot in Sodom* (1933), made by James Watson and Melville Webber. Gay critic Parker Tyler described the film as “obeying the Biblical account concerning Lot and his family and the function of the two angels who investigate Sodom at the Lord's behest, [but using] all of its creative accents to depict the sensual responses of the male homosexuals of Sodom to the physical beauty of the foremost angel.”²⁶ Like many of the era's exploitation films (as well as Hollywood spectacles made by men such as Cecil B. DeMille), *Lot in Sodom* “gets away with” depicting queerness by officially offering a moral lesson about its sinfulness. The highly conflicted nature of queer desire within a heterosexist society—wherein one desires something that must be officially renounced, deemed perverse, or kept hidden—was especially pronounced in lesbian and gay culture before the civil rights movement of the 1970s. Some of the early avant-garde films made by homosexual filmmakers, despite their frankness in tackling queer subject matter at all, still seem enmeshed in such paradoxical attitudes.

After some sporadic attempts at avant-garde filmmaking in the 1920s and 1930s, an entire movement of avant-garde filmmaking arose in 1940s America. This movement, sometimes referred to as Poetic Cinema, produced short movies that were also called “trance films” or “psychodramas” because they explore in dreamlike ways the inner, psychological life of a single protagonist as he or she wanders across what might be best described as a psychic landscape. The best-known example of Poetic Cinema is Maya Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943), a film that symbolically explores the mental state of a woman who may or may not be trapped in an unhappy relationship with a man. Other films of the movement were made by gay men and explored queer themes, including Kenneth Anger's *Fireworks* (1947), Gregory Markopoulos's *Psyche* (1947), *Lysis* (1948), and *Charmides* (1947–1948), Willard Maas's *Images in the Snow* (1948), Curtis Harrington's *Fragment of Seeking* (1946–1947), and John Sitz's *The Voices* (1953).²⁷

Probably the best known of these films is Kenneth Anger's *Fireworks*. In it, a young man (played by Anger himself) wakes with an erection and drifts through a series of homoerotic dreamscapes involving several different sailors. Cruising for gay sex and actual homosexual acts are displaced onto outlandish visual metaphors, such as a Roman candle held at crotch level, a

blazing faggot of sticks, and a milk-bath orgasm. Humorous and erotic, the film figures queer desires as highly conflicted and violent. The sailors desired by the protagonist are valued precisely because of their brutish masculinity. They beat the young man in what appears to be a sort of gay bashing—or is it meant to symbolize an all-male orgy? Eventually, the young man seems to find some personal satisfaction with a particular sailor, who returns to his bed.²⁸

According to one biography, Kenneth Anger, like many homosexual men of his generation, was attracted to sailors and “trade,” straight or straight-acting men who would have sex with gay men for money. These macho men, the types also celebrated in the era’s physique films and magazines, were desired as “real men”—that is to say, not homosexuals—but approaching them for sex sometimes ended in violence or even arrest. (As a teenager, Anger himself had been arrested while trying to pick up another man in a California park.) Films such as *Fireworks* convey the everyday violence, shame, fury, and guilt of postwar queer life in powerful ways. Bitter about the hypocrisies of American homophobia and violent masculinity (although drawn to it), Kenneth Anglemyer changed his name to Kenneth Anger when he was twenty years old. In later years, he claimed that *Fireworks* was “all [he had] to say about being seventeen, the United States Navy, American Christmas, and the Fourth of July.”²⁹

Kenneth Anger embodied many traits that later theorists would call *queer*. His identity was constantly shifting and performative—he constantly embellished his life story with fictional vignettes. Even his films were reworked and reedited over the years so that they remained textually unstable. He was defiant and unapologetic about his sexuality and became a sexual outlaw by idolizing the life and philosophies of Aleister Crowley, an early twentieth-century occultist variously labeled as a paganist or a Satanist. Crowley’s “magick”—especially as Anger adapted it—was a ritualistic practice of drugs, sex, and the invocation of mystical godlike figures drawn from global religions and sects.³⁰ According to Richard Dyer, who has examined Anger’s work in relation to these beliefs, “magick rituals invoke vital forces . . . of chaos and disruption, joyously celebrated but also in the course of the ritual mastered or used by the ritualist.”³¹ As such, *Fireworks* might be understood as Anger’s ritualistic initiation into the sadomasochistic world of male bonding and male sexuality.

Anger’s work also consistently engaged in a queer reworking of Hollywood iconography. Anger had grown up in and around Hollywood and played the changeling child in the Warner Bros. film *A Midsummer’s Night Dream* (1935); he is also the author of *Hollywood Babylon* and *Hollywood Babylon II*,

gossipy picture books that revel in Hollywood scandal.³² His film *Puce Moment* (1949) shows a young woman elaborately reenacting the “glamour” of 1920s Hollywood, complete with sequined gowns, gaudy jewelry, and Russian wolfhounds. Anger’s most famous film, *Scorpio Rising* (1963), is about (among other things) the social construction of the male homosexual subject from popular culture icons, including Hollywood stars James Dean and Marlon Brando. It explores the intersections between popular culture, masculinity, male homosociality, and gay desire. Structured around a series of early 1960s pop songs, the film uses dialectical montage to compare homoerotic motorcyclists to (among others) Adolf Hitler and Jesus Christ, linking the bikers’ violent macho posing to both fascism and divinity. While the film might be dismissed as a masturbatory fantasy about gay Nazi bikers, it seems more radically to suggest the existence of a slippery link between male homosocial bonding and male homosexual desire and that the latter is perhaps what fuels the former.

American avant-garde filmmaking expanded throughout the postwar era. Film festivals and museums began to show more experimental films, and distribution companies and film journals specifically devoted to the topic were founded. Many avant-garde artists chafed at the postwar era’s expectations about social conformity, and they used their art to rebel against it. The Beat movement rejected white-bread suburbia in favor of bohemia, and Beats expressed their philosophy in literature, music, and film. Many were also homosexual or otherwise queer, and those sensibilities were apparent within their art, whether it was Allen Ginsberg’s epic poem *Howl* (1956) or Ron Rice’s film *The Flower Thief* (1960). Many of the Beat poets and filmmakers would have strong ties to the more overtly queer underground cinema of the 1960s: Gregory Corso, Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and Peter Orlovsky are all featured in Andy Warhol’s film about polymorphous desire, *Couch* (1964), partly as a homage to the earlier Beat film *Pull My Daisy* (1959).³³

Underground Cinema

Underground cinema is an umbrella term used to describe a movement of experimental filmmaking that grew more and more popular during the 1960s. It includes later Beat films, as well as the work of filmmakers such as Kenneth Anger, Jack Smith, Andy Warhol, and the Kuchar brothers.³⁴ The few female filmmakers in the underground scene included Carolee Schneemann (*Fuses*, 1964–1967) and Barbara Rubin (*Christmas on Earth*, 1963). Underground cinema was often distributed by the Film-Maker’s Cooperative and championed by Jonas Mekas in the pages of *Film Culture*, one of the new

journals devoted to experimental cinema. Many of the most famous underground films are campy explorations of queer subcultures or queer pastiches of Hollywood form and content that foreground the performativity of gender and sexuality.³⁵ The term *underground cinema* also refers to the way these films were exhibited, often in late-night shows at out-of-the-way venues, making attendance itself seem somewhat illicit. Such exhibition practices were often in reaction to attempts to close down theaters and arrest the participants. A theater owner in Los Angeles, for example, was arrested and successfully prosecuted on charges of obscenity for showing *Scorpio Rising*. Screenings of Jack Smith's underground film *Flaming Creatures* (1963) were repeatedly raided by the police, and theater owners and projectionists were dragged off to jail. Denied a showing at a film festival in New York, one zealous supporter barricaded himself into the projection booth and began running the film until the police cut off the electricity to the theater.³⁶ Such strong-arm tactics only helped publicize the underground cinema as hip and happening.

By most accounts (including Smith's own) *Flaming Creatures* was meant to be a comedy—a sort of parody of the orgiastic bacchanalias one could find in biblical and Orientalist Hollywood adventure films (not to mention physique films). The film appears to be a mostly improvised “Scheherazade party” in which Smith and his friends dress up in exotic costumes and enact various queer vignettes.³⁷ According to one recent critic, “Smith embraced (cinematic) artifice as a necessary precondition for the acting out of fantasies. He realized that only through artifice—and self-consciously trashy artifice at that—could the reality of his [queer] creatures be expressed on film.”³⁸ In *Flaming Creatures*, a parody of a lipstick commercial is followed by a Roman orgy and what appears to be a scene about a vampire. Bombastic Hollywood-style music is heard over the images, but unlike similar big-budget Hollywood sequences that would try to titillate audiences yet actually show very little, Smith shows explicit nude close-ups—but of flaccid penises and sagging breasts wiggled at the camera in banal and listless ways. Amid all the men and women in drag costume and makeup, and overly exaggerated performances, it becomes impossible to tell who is truly male and who is truly female, let alone who might be straight and who might be gay. And that is precisely the point: the film is a queer hodgepodge of polymorphous genders and sexualities, made some thirty years before the advent of queer theory.

Flaming Creatures, like much underground film, embodies the deliberate queer camp of the era's urban homosexual populations. Jack Smith was one of the first people to publish an essay on the topic: his 1962 *Film Culture* essay “The Perfect Filmic Appositeness of Maria Montez” is a high-camp love

letter to the splendid tackiness of B-movie star Maria Montez.³⁹ Smith further honed his camp sensibility into something he called a “moldy aesthetic.” In the same way that camp unearths and revalues older artifacts that have been forgotten by mainstream culture, Smith’s art celebrated junk, rubble, trash, the jaded, the dated, and the forgotten. His legendary performance pieces, which went on for hours in some cases, featured him onstage in exotic robes and bangles, surrounded by mounds and mounds of discarded objects. (Jil Godmilow’s *Roy Cohn/Jack Smith* [1994] attempts to recreate the Jack Smith experience.) Like Kenneth Anger, Smith also frequently recut his films, treating them as little more than found objects themselves. In altering the order of sequences, the background music, or even the title, Smith conceived of his films as unstable texts with blurred boundaries.⁴⁰

Probably the most well-known figure associated with underground cinema was pop artist Andy Warhol. Warhol had already made a name for himself as a graphic artist when, between 1963 and 1968, he shot hundreds of hours of 16 MM film—some of which was screened on the underground circuit and eventually crossed over into more mainstream distribution. Many of his least commercial films—the so-called Screen Tests—were cinematic portraits: Warhol would turn his camera on a subject and let it run uninterrupted for the length of the reel. That minimalist aesthetic can also be seen in films such as *Sleep* (1963, five and a half hours of a nude man sleeping), *Eat* (1964, in which a man nibbles on a mushroom for forty minutes), and *Empire* (1964, eight hours of static footage of the Empire State building as night falls). Warhol’s long-take aesthetic challenged the assumptions of Hollywood storytelling and continuity editing (and also recalls the naïve portraiture of the first “posing strap” physique films). Like most underground cinema, Warhol’s films challenged multiple cinematic conventions. For example, Warhol’s “actors” were frequently the junkies, transvestites, and male hustlers who hung around his studio, known as the Factory. In a parody of the Hollywood star system, they proclaimed themselves Superstars and went about New York City aping the glamour and exclusivity associated with Hollywood celebrities.

Warhol’s films consciously revel in a queer camp aesthetic, a fact exemplified by the forthrightly named *Camp* (1965). That piece works as a sort of queer variety show and begins with an older man in Roman soldier garb miming a gladiator death scene à la Francis X. Bushman in *Ben-Hur* (1925). Underground transvestite star Mario Montez strikes poses and dances exotically, and Jack Smith appears to ask repeatedly, “Should I open the closet?” Many of Warhol’s films gleefully deflate the tropes of mainstream media and parody generic conventions. *Batman Dracula* (1964), again with Jack Smith,

queers the Hollywood vampire movie. *Soap Opera* (1964), also known as *The Lester Persky Story*, shows various Factory personalities waffling their way through melodramatic scenes, intercut with actual television commercials made by producer Persky. *Harlot* (1965) was Warhol's response to two Hollywood biographies of 1930s star Jean Harlow released in 1965. It consists mostly of Mario Montez in Jean Harlow drag, decadently lounging on a sofa with his/her entourage, peeling and eating a series of bananas in highly suggestive ways. *Horse* (1965), a camp western set inside the Factory, presents an actual horse surrounded by young men in western gear posing and dully intoning clichéd dialogue, such as "There's gold in them thar hills" and "Yup."

Warhol's films regularly contained forthright depictions of queer people and queer behaviors. *Haircut* (1963) is a homoerotic film that shows several seminude men giving, getting, and watching a haircut. *Kiss* (1963) contains a dozen long-take close-ups of various couples kissing, including an interracial heterosexual couple and two male couples. Similarly, *Couch* (1964) is a series of explicit sex scenes set on the titular piece of furniture; the scenes grow increasingly queer as men and women occupy the couch in various combinations. *Blow Job* (1964) is a forty-minute close-up of a man's face as he receives oral sex from an offscreen participant.⁴¹ *My Hustler* (1965) features static long takes of Paul America as he lies on the beach and then later showers and primps.⁴² *Bike Boy* (1967) also features a long, languorous shower enjoyed by the titular character, as well as a shopping trip to a gay male boutique.

Yet, despite the queer content of underground cinema, there was little-to-no mention of it in the gay and lesbian press of the era.⁴³ It is probable that underground cinema was too graphic and too controversial for the more staid, assimilationist homophile groups who published those journals. And there was very little in most underground cinema to interest lesbians: films such as *Scorpio Rising*, *My Hustler*, and *Bike Boy* share obvious similarities with the era's physique films in that they are all about the pleasures of men looking at other men in sexualized ways. Even polymorphously queer films such as *Kiss* or *Couch* overlook the possibility of lesbian desire, a fact that might best be explained by the era's base-level sexism. In fact, feminist author (and occasional Factory actress) Valerie Solanas shot and wounded Andy Warhol in 1968 because she felt his work was demeaning and sexist. (As discussed in chapter 7, a substantial lesbian avant-garde film practice would not develop until the early 1970s.) Yet, even as they only initially spoke to a small number of urban queers, underground films soon became so notorious that they started to get more mainstream bookings. For example, Warhol's *The Chelsea Girls* (1966) was theatrically released, and it became an

art house hit. The film consists of two roughly three-hour films that are projected side by side; its subjects are the Factory Superstars and various denizens of the Chelsea Hotel.

The Chelsea Girls brought Warhol's style to a wider audience, and his last few films enjoyed more widespread distribution. One of these, the camp western *Lonesome Cowboys* (1968), was shot on an actual standing movie set that had been used in countless Hollywood westerns. The film features Factory regulars Viva, Tom Hompertz, Joe Dallesandro, Eric Emerson, and Taylor Mead. The plot—roughly based on *Romeo and Juliet*—follows Viva and her nurse (Taylor Mead) as they variously interact with a group of sexy cowboys and a cross-dressing sheriff. The film opens with a seven-minute, long-take simulated-sex scene between Viva and one of the cowboys. On one level, the scene is obviously heterosexual—it shows a nude man and woman grappling on the ground—but the actors perform in such a weary, offhanded manner that it becomes almost a parody of heterosexual sex. Furthermore, while the couple is “copulating” on the image track, a faux western-sounding ballad is heard on the soundtrack and seems to suggest other socio-sexual meanings related to the cowboy movie:

At the old Rialto theater,
In the market part of town,
The West that lives on the screen
Brightens up the mezzanine,
'N' there I sit, stretching wide,
Just like *Lonesome Cowboys* ride.
At Rialto intermissions—
When those dudes all slip around—
I let my mind turn away and dream again about the day
I'll be *Lonesome Cowboys*-bound.⁴⁴

Halfhearted heterosexuality is performed onscreen, while the soundtrack playfully puns on being “cowboy-bound,” acknowledging the cruising for sex that took place in the balconies of the era's urban movie houses.

Like many underground films, *Lonesome Cowboys* explores and exploits homosocial-homosexual boundaries. The gang of cowboys are allegedly rough-and-tough heterosexual he-men, but they practice ballet moves on the hitching post and discuss “Eastern perms” for their hair. Scenes of seminude horseplay such as bathing, urinating, and wrestling provide both homosocial bonding rituals for the characters as well as eroticized viewing pleasure for the audience, a dynamic that the film suggests is also part of the classical western's appeal. (Responding to the nude-male imagery, the brand-new gay

magazine *The Advocate* gave the film a rave review, calling it the “mind blower of the year.”⁴⁵ When two cowboys ride off into the sunset together—on their way to a better life as surfers in California—the line between homosexuality and homosociality is left blurred. Richard Schickel, writing in *Life* magazine, seemed to get the point and noted that “if you want to get still more serious about all this you could say Warhol has made a cartoon version of Leslie Feidler’s famous theorizing about the homosexual components in our basic, sustaining, masculine mythology.”⁴⁶ More recently, *Lonesome Cowboys* has been described as a “film that encouraged the western to speak its unconscious.”⁴⁷ It was certainly one of the first films to acknowledge the probability of homosexual cowboys in the Old West, a fact that most Hollywood westerns could never admit.⁴⁸

As with much of Warhol’s work, *Lonesome Cowboys* created considerable controversy. Even while it was being shot, local townspeople were wary of the sophisticated and queer New Yorkers. And although the *Hollywood Reporter* gave the finished film a favorable review,⁴⁹ other critics spewed invective: “Warhol’s best movie to date, which is like saying a three-year-old has graduated from smearing mud on a wall to occasional use of finger paints. . . . *Cowboys* is simply an unedited but in focus home movie for homosexuals and a drag in every sense of the word.”⁵⁰ A theater owner in Atlanta, Georgia, was arrested for showing it,⁵¹ and an entire audience in London was arrested for watching it.⁵² Rather remarkably, the shooting of the film and its San Francisco premiere had been monitored by the FBI, whose agents considered *Lonesome Cowboys* (and its makers) national security risks.⁵³

As the production and reception of *Lonesome Cowboys* demonstrates, forthrightly queer underground films were gaining more widespread notoriety, especially among younger, hipper members of the 1960s counterculture. As the next chapter explores, moviegoing in America was undergoing a tremendous upheaval. Audiences were rejecting Hollywood fare in favor of all sorts of foreign, underground, and sexploitation cinemas. These types of films could sometimes be found playing alongside each other in urban theaters, and their content and styles continued to blur into one another. Is *Lonesome Cowboys*, for example, an art film that comments upon a Hollywood genre, or is it a feature-length physique film with high-art pretensions? Its failure to be adequately categorized is part of the point. Regardless of the label one applies to it, it exemplifies a moment in film history when queer filmmakers and queer audiences were becoming less content to hide in their closets. The underground film scene may have been scorned by both mainstream critics and the homophile movement, but it helped create a space for queer desire to be spoken cinematically, laying the groundwork for future queer film and video work.

Notes

1. A preserved copy of *Cast Ashore* is archived at the George Eastman House in Rochester, New York. It was directed in France by Bernard Natan, where it was known as *La Maitresse de Capitaine de Meydeux*.

2. For more on the history of this cartoon, see Karl F. Cohen, *Forbidden Animation: Censored Cartoons and Blacklisted Animators in America* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1997), 12–13.

3. The history of exploitation films is summarized in Eric Schaefer, *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True! A History of Exploitation Films, 1919–1959* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999).

4. Some filmmakers and distributors actually believed in the moral lessons the films were purportedly teaching, especially about the dangers of marijuana. In the documentary film *Sex and Buttered Popcorn* (1991), exploitation pioneers relate that they thought *Reefer Madness* (1936) made valid and serious points—that smoking marijuana would really turn people into licentious or violent maniacs.

5. Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1987 [1981]), 104–6.

6. Schaefer, *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!* 211.

7. Schaefer, *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!* 211.

8. Nadine Edwards of the *Hollywood Citizen-News*, quoted in Russo, *Celluloid Closet*, 102.

9. Schaefer, *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!* 214.

10. Oddly, this scene is missing from one recent DVD release of the film.

11. Schaefer, *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!* 317–22.

12. Schaefer, *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!* 321.

13. For an overview, see F. Valentine Hooven III, *Beefcake: The Muscle Magazines of America, 1950–1970* (Cologne, Germany: Benedikt Taschen, 1995).

14. Wayne E. Stanley, “Introduction,” in *The Complete Reprint of Physique Pictorial* (New York: Taschen, 1997), 13.

15. The first major instance of an editorial stance in *Physique Pictorial* would be “Crucifixion of the Arts,” 5, no. 2 (Summer 1955): 2. Later, in the same issue (20), is printed the first editorial against capital punishment. Three prominent articles on homosexuality are “Homosexuality and Bodybuilding,” *Physique Pictorial* 6, no. 3 (Fall 1956): 17, which includes addresses to contact *One* and *Mattachine Review*; “Men’s ‘Teaser’ Magazine Declares Many Muscle Men Are Homosexual,” *Physique Pictorial* 9, no. 9 (Spring 1959): 18; and “Muscle-He-Men vs. Sissies—Is One More ‘Normal’ Than the Other?” *Physique Pictorial* 10, no. 1 (June 1960): 13, which also includes addresses to contact *One* and *Mattachine Review*. Mizer also wrote a surprising satire on homophobia but switched things around and asserted that “Heterosexuality Can Be Cured!” in *Physique Pictorial* 14, no. 4 (June 1965): 22, which he posited as an excerpt from an article in *Time* magazine from the year 2065.

16. The first “Letters to the Editor” section appeared in *Physique Pictorial* 5, no. 4 (Winter 1955): 2. Letters on an editorial about homosexuality were printed in *Physique Pictorial* 7, no. 1 (Spring 1957): 4.

17. Thomas Waugh, *Hard to Imagine: Gay Male Eroticism in Photography and Film from Their Beginnings to Stonewall* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 254–69.

18. Hooven, *Beefcake*, 129–30.

19. These films (and others like them) suggest interesting connections between homosocial male violence, homosexual male desire, and censorship. Then as now, Western patriarchal culture celebrates male violence as an acceptable part of culture (condoned in warfare, sport, and most mainstream media), while the idea of two men showing affection for one another is still an unacceptable image to many. Perhaps Western patriarchal cultures repress and oppress male homosexual desire in order to create (and then profit from) violent and competitive male homosociality?

20. Description and photos of this film found in *Physique Pictorial* 12, no. 2 (November 1962): 10.

21. The picture can be found in *Physique Pictorial* 2, no. 1 (February 1952): back cover. The drawing was obviously so popular that it was reprinted in *Physique Pictorial*, special review issue (October 1953): back cover.

22. Examples of physique films are now available for purchase through specialized video distributors, such as Something Weird Video. The video series *Gay Erotica from the Past* also packages physique films, and the documentary compilations *Days of Greek Gods* (1988) and *AMG: The Dream Factory* (1990) provide good introductions to the topic.

23. An excellent introduction to American avant-garde filmmaking—including many of the figures, films, and movements discussed here—can be found in *Experimental Cinema: The Film Reader*, ed. Wheeler Winston Dixon and Audrey Foster (New York: Routledge, 2002).

24. Janet Staiger, “Finding Community in the 1960s: Underground Cinema and Sexual Politics,” in *Swinging Single: Representing Sexuality in the 1960s*, ed. Hilary Radner and Moya Luckett (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 39–74.

25. Richard Dyer, *Now You See It: Studies on Lesbian and Gay Film* (London: Routledge, 1990), 63–108, does a thorough analysis of *Un Chant d'Amour*, including some discussion on Cocteau’s influence on Genet.

26. Parker Tyler, *Screening the Sexes: Homosexuality in the Movies* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1993 [1972]), 128.

27. Juan A. Suarez, *Bike Boys, Drag Queens, and Superstars: Avant-Garde, Mass Culture, and Gay Identities in the 1960s Underground Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 128.

28. For a much more detailed exegesis, see Dyer, *Now You See It*, 120–25.

29. Quoted in Bill Landis, *Anger: The Unauthorized Biography of Kenneth Anger* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 44.

30. Landis, *Anger*, 26.

31. Dyer, *Now You See It*, 117–18.
32. Kenneth Anger, *Hollywood Babylon* (New York: Dell, 1975); Anger, *Hollywood Babylon II* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1984).
33. For more on the connections between Beat and Underground film, see Reva Wolf, “*The Flower Thief*: The ‘Film Poem,’ Warhol’s Early Films, and the Beat Writers,” in Dixon and Foster, *Experimental Cinema*, 189–211.
34. For more on the Kuchar brothers, see George Kuchar and Mike Kuchar, *Reflections from a Cinematic Cesspool* (Berkeley, Calif.: Zanja Press, 1997); Jack Stevenson, *Desperate Visions: Camp America* (San Francisco: Creation Books, 1996); Mark Finch, “George Kuchar: Half the Story,” in *Queer Looks: Perspectives on Lesbian and Gay Film and Video*, ed. Martha Gever, John Greyson, and Pratibha Parmar (London: Routledge, 1993), 76–85.
35. Suarez, *Bike Boys, Drag Queens*, 135.
36. The history of *Scorpio Rising*’s and *Flaming Creatures*’s exhibition difficulties is recounted in Suarez, *Bike Boys, Drag Queens*, 181–87.
37. For more on the intersection of race, nation, and sexuality in Jack Smith’s work, see Michael Moon, “Flaming Closets,” in *Out in Culture: Gay, Lesbian, and Queer Essays on Popular Culture*, ed. Corey K. Creekmur and Alexander Doty (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995), 282–306.
38. Marc Siegel, “Documentary That Dare/Not Speak Its Name: Jack Smith’s *Flaming Creatures*,” in *Between the Sheets, in the Streets: Queer, Lesbian, Gay Documentary*, ed. Chris Holmlund and Cynthia Fuchs (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 97.
39. Jack Smith, “The Perfect Filmic Appositeness of Maria Montez,” *Film Culture* 27 (Winter 1962–63): 28–32.
40. Saurez, *Bike Boys, Drag Queens*, 197.
41. For a discussion of *Blow Job*, see Douglas Crimp, “Face Value,” *About Face: Andy Warhol Portraits* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press), 110–25.
42. For more on *My Hustler*, see Michael Moon, “Outlaw Sex and the ‘Search for America’: Representing Male Prostitution and Perverse Desire in Sixties Film (*My Hustler* and *Midnight Cowboy*),” in *A Small Boy and Others: Imitation and Initiation in American Culture from Henry James to Andy Warhol* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1998), 117–32.
43. Saurez, *Bike Boys, Drag Queens*, 126–27.
44. Lyrics by Bobb Goldstein.
45. J. R., “Warhol Rides Again with Cowboys,” *The Advocate*, January 1969, 10.
46. Richard Schickel, “The Yawnsome Task of Waiting for Warhol,” *Life*, 13 June 69.
47. Simon Watney, “Queer Andy,” in *Pop Out: Queer Warhol*, ed. Jennifer Doyle, Jonathan Flatley, and José Esteban Muñoz (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1996), 21.
48. Although it sometimes came close to hinting at that fact, as in the infamous “shoot-off” between Montgomery Clift and John Ireland in Howard Hawks’s *Red River* (1948).

49. John Mahoney, "Andy Warhol's Latest Pic, 'Lonesome Cowboys,' Erotic," *The Hollywood Reporter*, 19 November 1968.

50. Rick, "Review of *Lonesome Cowboys*," *Variety*, 7 November 1968.

51. "Homosexual Film Did Have Girl," *Hollywood Citizen-News*, 7 August 1969.

52. Recounted in Watney, "Queer Andy," 21.

53. The FBI agents also penned a (rather accurate) review of the finished project for the agency's files: "All of the males in the cast displayed homosexual tendencies and conducted themselves toward one another in an effeminate manner. . . . There was no plot to the film and no development of character throughout. It was rather a remotely-connected series of scenes which depicted situations of sexual relationships of homosexual and heterosexual nature." Recounted in Margia Kramer, "The Warhol File," *Village Voice*, 17 May 1988.

CHAPTER SIX



Hollywood and the Sexual Revolution



In *The Killing of Sister George* (1968), Beryl Reid and Susannah York play lesbian lovers; in this scene, shot on location at a lesbian nightclub, they attend a costume ball dressed as Laurel and Hardy. Palomar / The Kobal Collection

The “birth” of the modern gay and lesbian rights movement is often said to have occurred in June 1969, when a business-as-usual police raid on a Greenwich Village gay bar turned into a full-scale riot. The Stonewall Inn was a bar frequented by queers of all types: white gay men and lesbians, people of color, cross-dressers, drag queens, and butch bull dykes. On Friday night and Saturday morning, June 27–28, 1969, several policemen arrived at the bar and began to arrest its customers, but what was different this night was that the customers were tired, angry, fed up with harassment, and willing to fight back. Gay icon Judy Garland had died earlier in the week, and some historians have drawn a link between many queers’ sorrow over that loss and their frustration and fury in fighting back against the cops that night at the Stonewall Inn. The bar’s patrons resisted arrest, trapped the cops in the building, trashed police cars, and set fire to the building itself. The melee led to three more days of protest and disobedience—some of it civil and some of it not—throughout Greenwich Village and lower Manhattan. (Twenty-five years later, the film *Stonewall* [1995] would capture many of the issues, sentiments, and events leading up to those fateful nights.) Most historians agree that the Stonewall Riots sparked new attitudes toward queer self-acceptance and the struggle for equality.¹

Importantly, the Stonewall Riots received a great deal of mainstream publicity, which spread the idea of queer resistance and defiance across the nation and around the globe. Local newspapers such as the *Village Voice* started up a dialogue on gay rights issues, and even glossy mainstream magazines such as *Time*, *Life*, and *Newsweek* reported on the event in the following months.² Suddenly, a new civil rights struggle—often compared in the press to those being fought by people of color and women—burst into national view. New gay and lesbian advocacy groups (including various Gay Liberation Fronts, the Gay Activists Alliance, and the National Gay Task Force) were formed in the United States, Canada, Australia, and across Western Europe. And, with gay liberation newspapers founded in Los Angeles (*Advocate*), New York (*Come Out!*), San Francisco (*Gay Sunshine*), Boston (*Fag Rag*), Detroit (*Gay Liberator*), Toronto (*Body Politic*), and London (*Come Together*), diverse queer constituencies suddenly became aware of one another’s issues and struggles.³ Suddenly there was a large, visible, and often unruly network of queer activists that literally supplanted the postwar generation’s cautious homophile movement.

The Stonewall Riots were just one part of the so-called sexual revolution that occurred (roughly) throughout the 1960s.⁴ American mores about gender and sex were dramatically changing, becoming more permissive throughout the postwar era. *Playboy* magazine had premiered in 1953, and all sorts of

sexually oriented materials (including physique magazines and underground films) became more available as court after court struck down obscenity laws. Sex outside of marriage was becoming less taboo, especially with the availability of new birth-control measures, including “the pill.” Divorce rates were on the rise, and many people in the younger generation rejected marriage in favor of simply living together. The sexual revolution was deeply connected to all aspects of the counterculture. Sexual autonomy was important to second-wave feminist groups, the antiwar movement suggested that the country needed to “make love not war,” and the civil rights struggle fought social taboos against interracial dating and marriage. The Stonewall Riots brought queer sexualities into the mix in a forthright way, announcing to the nation that homosexuality was now itself a civil rights issue and not a medical one.

Meanwhile in Hollywood, studio revenues were dwindling as countercultural audiences—who generally preferred foreign, independent, and avant-garde films—continued to grow. Many studios were on the verge of bankruptcy, and several allowed themselves to be bought out by larger, corporate entities.⁵ New studio leaderships adopted an almost “try anything” approach to winning back their audiences. The Production Code was scrapped and replaced by a ratings system, and Hollywood films began to include content and style common to European art cinemas, American avant-garde film, and even exploitation and adult films. As such, the boundaries between these types of filmmaking became increasingly blurred. Younger, foreign, and countercultural filmmakers were hired in an attempt to reach younger, foreign, and countercultural audiences. New concepts about homosexuality and other queer identities (not to mention gender and race) came into play, and in searching for its missing audience, Hollywood of the late 1960s and early 1970s became very eclectic, producing work that was arguably more radical and experimental than it had ever produced before. However, by the mid-1970s, more traditional concepts of Hollywood filmmaking were beginning to reestablish themselves. This short period in Hollywood filmmaking had the potential to explore new, complex understandings of sexuality, but that potential was not to be reached.

“Sexploitation” Cinema

By the 1960s, exploitation films had become so overtly sexualized that many people referred to them as “sexploitation” films. The moralistic drug-scare or birth-of-a-baby films from earlier eras had been replaced with nudist camp and burlesque films in the 1950s. By the 1960s the exploitation film had developed into a variety of narrative softcore subgenres, including the “nudie

cutie” (a playful romp with naked women), the “roughie” (films that often substituted violence for sexuality), and the “white coater” (pseudodocumentaries that served up sexual titillation under the guise of education). As one part of the overall sexual revolution, sexploitation cinema was a booming, integrated industry. Glossy magazines that showcased scenes from them—such as *Art Film Review*, *Blazing Films*, *Raw Flix*, and *Adam Film Quarterly*—could be purchased in adult bookstores and newsstands, many of which were located next to other types of adult businesses.

Unlike the short 8 MM or 16 MM physique films that were aimed at gay men, most sexploitation films were fairly professional-looking 35 MM feature films. They were mostly made by heterosexual men and aimed at heterosexual male spectators. Nonetheless, they frequently featured a variety of sexualities that can be considered queer. Because 1960s sexploitation films were still forbidden from actually showing heterosexual intercourse, they are instead filled with all sorts of other nonprocreative sexualities: voyeurism and exhibitionism, sadomasochism, (simulated) group sex, “girl-on-girl” scenes, and even implied bestiality as nearly nude women perform kinky routines with snakes and fish and men in gorilla suits. By the late 1960s, as obscenity statutes continued to be struck down, sexploitation features evolved into short 16 MM “beaver loops”—films similar to “danglies” that simply showed vaginas in somewhat clinical terms. After that, it was a short step to the production of hardcore pornographic adult films and the creation of the contemporary adult film and video industries.⁶ (Interestingly, many sexploitation filmmakers and distributors decried the advent of hardcore films, preferring instead the softcore tease of sexploitation cinema.)

By today’s standards, most 1960s sexploitation films seem as naïve and campy as classical-era exploitation films such as *Reefer Madness* (1936). They are also loaded with sexist violence that reflects their era’s baseline assumptions about male dominance. For example, in *One Million AC/DC* (1969), written by Ed Wood under the pseudonym “Akdon Telmig,” a woman being repeatedly raped by a horny gorilla is meant to be a humorous motif. To some extent, campy sexploitation films such as *One Million AC/DC* reveal the violent (hetero)sexism inherent in the Hollywood formulas on which many of them were based. Genre formulas such as the cave-man movie, the erotic thriller, and the horror film routinely figure men as brutal beasts and women as helpless victims. That said, there are also plenty of sexploitation films in which the male figures are helpless dweebs and nerds, seemingly paralyzed by the overwhelming power of female sexuality. How actual audiences reacted to these films probably varied a great deal; clearly however, they were popular.

Group sex and “girl-on-girl” scenes can be found in just about every sub-genre of sexploitation filmmaking. Girl-on-girl scenes are so named to differentiate them from actual lesbian scenes, because they generally reflect a straight man’s fantasies of submissive heterosexual women more than they do actual lesbian sexuality. Both group sex and girl-on-girl scenes are quite clearly queer, yet when they occur within narratives aimed at heterosexual men, their queerness becomes somewhat muted, constructed within an overarching male heterosexual desire that tends to disavow their homosexual components. For example, orgies in these films are usually carefully staged so that men do not interact with other men, and the girl-on-girl scenes allow straight men to fantasize about having sex with two women (or perhaps even *to be* a woman making love to a woman). These practices have not changed that much over the ensuing decades—“heterosexual” pornography still frequently includes sex scenes between two women in order to titillate its mostly male audience. Girl-on-girl and group sex scenes within “heterosexual” pornography represent another instance of how homosexuality blurs into aspects of heterosexuality. In this case, queer sexualities are commodified and incorporated into heterosexuality for fun and profit, as long as they are kept under careful control of the straight-male producers and consumers. A heterosexual man who privately enjoys girl-on-girl photo spreads in *Penthouse* magazine may still be homophobic in his public life.

One sexploitation film from the 1960s that purportedly centered on actual lesbians was *Chained Girls* (1965). A pseudodocumentary produced by George Weiss of *Glen or Glenda* fame, the film is a black-and-white exposé of the “twilight world” of urban lesbians. As with most films of this subgenre, the audience learns some interesting “facts” but has to separate them from the exploitative straight-male perspective in which they are enveloped. One of the most interesting aspects of *Chained Girls* is its ethnographic quality. The film comments upon culturally and historically specific topics, such as butch-femme subcultures and the era’s coming-out process. Scenes shot inside and outside actual queer bars and nightclubs provide and preserve something of a historical record of the era’s lesbian nightlife. And, as the film ends, a butch lesbian transforms herself back into a femme for her day job, literally dramatizing the performative nature of gender and sexuality. A few years later, *Daughters of Lesbos* (1968) mined similar territories. While both of these films are clearly produced by and aimed at men in the audience, they may have given some pleasure to lesbians of the era.

Male homosexuality in 1960s sexploitation filmmaking—when depicted at all—was not all that different from male homosexuality in Hollywood film: it tended to be either frightening (queer male psychos) or humorous

(fag jokes or men in drag). Low-budget knockoffs of *Psycho*, for example, allowed for both. The exploitation film *Day of the Nightmare* (1965) was advertised with the tagline “The Horror of Half Man, Half Woman, ALL KILLER!”⁷ In it, an artist with a multiple-personality disorder (incorrectly referred to as *schizophrenia* in most of these films) uses a bullwhip on his nude female models when he is a man, and when he is a woman, he tries to knife his wife to death. *Day of the Nightmare* also comes complete with allegedly “normal” sexual hijinx, including a highly contrived (and irrelevant to the story) orgy scene between three men and three women. In the similar *Scream of the Butterfly* (1965), a bisexual male gigolo runs over a woman with a car after she questions his manhood (that is to say, his heterosexuality). Much of the story centers on policemen, lawyers, and psychiatrists discussing whether the gigolo should be sent to prison or to a psychiatric hospital, reflecting the era’s cultural debate over whether homosexuality should be considered a mental disorder or “merely” a criminal act. (One should remember that during these years there was still a large overlap in the general meaning of terms such as *psychopath*, *sex criminal*, *pervert*, and *homosexual*.)⁸

A slightly more credible exploitation film centering on male queers was *The Queen* (1967). This documentary film eschews the official condemnatory voice-over narration found in most similar films and instead uses a straightforward cinema-verité style. As such, it perhaps should not even be considered a sexploitation film, although it played on the sexploitation circuit. *The Queen* follows the varied multicultural contestants in a New York City drag pageant as they arrive, primp, prepare, and compete for the grand prize. Most of the participants consider themselves gay men and not—as *Glen or Glenda* had asserted—transsexuals or straight male transvestites. They men chat about their “husbands,” gays in the military, and their feelings toward women. The film presents drag as a performative, artistic act of creative hard work and not a psychiatric compulsion or necessary side effect of homosexuality. Perhaps surprisingly, *The Queen* garnered many positive reviews, even in the mainstream press. Judith Crist, in *New York Magazine*, called it a “beautiful film; its sensational and shocking subject matter is treated with such sensibility, taste, and compassion that what might have been a grind-house movie emerges as an impressive human document and a finely made film as well.”⁹

By the end of the 1960s, exploitation, sexploitation, hardcore pornography, foreign-film styles, and experimental-film practice were increasingly blurring into one another. Was *The Queen* a serious documentary or a sexploitation film? This queer crisis in categorization became so pronounced that during these years the term *art house cinema* became a well-known eu-

phemism for a theater that showed sexploitation movies. Art porno films (often made in Europe), such as Radley Metzger's *Therese and Isabelle* (1968), *The Lickerish Quartet* (1970), and *Score* (1972), continued to showcase queer sexualities and suggest the inherent bisexuality of a new generation. For example, *Score* (which was released in both hardcore and softcore versions) centers on two "heterosexual" couples who meet and pair up for sex in every possible homo- and heterosexual combination. Similarly, *The Meatrack* (1969) is a fascinating hybrid of art, sex, narrative, and documentary filmmaking. It follows a young male hustler through his various engagements and uses overexposed flashbacks to suggest the psychological traumas that led him to such a life. Its steamy close-ups of the nude hustler's body point both backward to physique films and the films of Andy Warhol and forward to the gay adult film industry.

Hollywood Homosexuals

Somewhat remarkably, in 1969 Hollywood released its own film about a male hustler. However, whereas *The Meatrack* was aimed at queer sexploitation audiences, *Midnight Cowboy* (1969) was a major Hollywood release and even won Oscars for Best Picture, Best Director, and Best Screenplay. *Midnight Cowboy* centers on the relationship between hustler Joe Buck (Jon Voight) and his grungy roommate Ratso Rizzo (Dustin Hoffman). The bond that develops between Joe and Ratso is kept strictly platonic, but it is the only genuine expression of love in the entire film. In defense of their homosociality, Joe and Ratso loudly proclaim their heterosexual prowess and desire, and when Ratso puts down Joe's cowboy hustler getup as "strictly faggot stuff," Joe becomes infuriated. Joe also services mostly women in the film, and sex between men is presented in sick and pitiful terms. In one scene Joe gets a blow job in a dingy movie theater. In another, an older man filled with self-loathing goads Joe into bashing him as punishment for his sins.

Yet, amid all the self-denial and protestations of heterosexuality, the film is constantly signaling the queer dynamics at work in the construction of male identity and male relationships. For example, flashbacks suggest that Joe was gang-raped as a teenager by a group of men just as he was about to have sex with a young woman. This traumatic event seems to have helped shape Joe (via overcompensation) into his hypermasculine cowboy-hustler persona. As Robert Lang explains in his perceptive analysis of the film, it is "only when Joe stops conceiving of manliness as a performance (involving a costume, and some strain) does he find his true masculinity, which can admit to loving another man, and may even be homosexual."¹⁰ *Midnight Cowboy* is

a remarkable film in many ways and exemplifies how quickly things had changed in both Hollywood and the country at large from the start of the decade.

Throughout the postwar era, Hollywood filmmakers had pushed at the boundaries of what the Production Code would allow. In response to the sexual revolution and the success of foreign, sexploitation, and underground films, Hollywood filmmakers began to include more profanity, nudity, and sexuality into their films, forcing the Production Code to demand that some of them be advertised as “suggested for mature audiences.” Finally, the Production Code was scrapped altogether, and a ratings system was introduced in 1968. Under this plan, Hollywood films could supposedly say or show anything that they wanted—but audience attendance was now limited via age-appropriate ratings: G, M, R, and X (M was soon redesignated GP and then PG.)¹¹ Freed from the Production Code’s restrictions, Hollywood films in the late 1960s often seemed to revel in their newfound freedoms. Pictures such as *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), *The Graduate* (1967), *The Wild Bunch* (1969), and *Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice* (1969) depicted more sex and violence than had ever been shown before in mainstream American cinema.

The new ratings system also resulted in another spate of Hollywood films tackling the topic of homosexuality, and many of them exploited Hollywood’s usual stereotypes about queer people. Indeed, as *Time* magazine noted in 1968, “most of the homosexuals shown so far are sadists, psychopaths or buffoons.”¹² Like *The Children’s Hour* (1961) or *Advise and Consent* (1962), many late-1960s queer Hollywood films seem to suggest that homosexual desire leads to tragedy or violence. However, a few of them (such as *Midnight Cowboy*) do attempt to be more complex meditations on the borders between homosociality and homosexuality. For example, *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (1967) and *The Sergeant* (1968), both adapted from novels, focus on repressed homosexuality in military men. Although both films end with mayhem and death, they suggest that psychic and physical violence results from the repression of homosexual desire and not homosexuality itself. Perhaps even more clearly, the crime film *The Detective* (1968) dramatizes how a man can become so disturbed by his own homosexual desires that he seeks out and then attacks more openly gay men as a means of denouncing or purging his own homosexual feelings.

Other films of the era also examined the dynamics of the queer closet. *Rachel, Rachel* (1968), through the supporting character of Calla Mackie (Estelle Parsons), suggests that repressed lesbian desire might fuel religious fervor, a theme also present in *The Night of the Iguana* (1964) and *Seven Women* (1966). *The Music Lovers* (1970), a flamboyant historical biopic directed by

Ken Russell, dramatizes that nightmare that arose when the homosexual composer Tchaikovsky (played by then-closeted gay actor Richard Chamberlain) married a woman. Conversely, the exploitation comedy *The Gay Deceivers* (1969) centers on two swinging straight bachelors who pose as gay in order to avoid the draft. While the film milks much humor out of swishy gay stereotypes, the actual gay men encountered by the straight protagonists are comfortable in their skins and proud to be who they are. The film also makes some political points about antigay prejudice: when the boys' ruse proves to be too effective, they begin to lose their families and their jobs. The film's final joke is that the military is itself secretly full of gay men, and thus the boys' newly confessed heterosexuality *still* disqualifies them from serving their country. (A decade later Milos Forman's film of the Broadway musical *Hair* [1978] would mine similar territory as African American army induction officers sing about the alluring charms of "White Boys.")

Unfortunately, because of the public's general ignorance about matters of human sexuality, many of these films created confusion about their intended messages; many of them are easy to read as yet a new variation on the old stereotype of crazy killer queer. Reviews of them in the popular press usually failed to make distinctions between homosexuality and repressed homosexuality. For example, *Time's* review of *The Sergeant*, linking itself to the medical discourses of previous decades, simply labeled the repressed sergeant as a "psychotic homosexual."¹³ *Newsweek's* review was a bit more sympathetic if equally confusing. It chastised the film as "a relentlessly melodramatic and mean foray into male homosexuality . . . [treating] sexual inversion with the same horrified ignorance that the ancient world applied to leprosy and the Victorians to syphilis."¹⁴ However, the *Newsweek* review of *The Music Lovers* did seem to get the film's point, namely, that "Tchaikovsky's attempt to conceal his homosexuality in a marriage that ends in disaster warns of peril to those who violate their true selves."¹⁵ Writing in *The Advocate* about the same film, gay-rights pioneer Tom Kepner noted, "There will be a few homosexuals who will think that the treatment of homosexuality is somehow bad. I think it is one of the few great films touching on the subject."¹⁶ As a sympathetic portrait of the deleterious effects of the closet on an individual psyche, *The Music Lovers* was way ahead of its time.

Arguably, the two most important Hollywood films of the era to deal with homosexuality were *The Killing of Sister George* (1968) and *Boys in the Band* (1970). Both films were multicharacter comedy-dramas adapted from the stage, and both films explore issues of same-sex romance, the closet, the possibility of blackmail and job loss, internalized homophobia, and the burgeoning (but still mostly underground) gay and lesbian culture of many cities.

While these films may seem overly melodramatic or stereotypical by today's standards, they did capture a certain slice of life for many urban homosexuals of their era. And, although both films were directed by self-identified heterosexual men, they do seem to capture some degree of subcultural verisimilitude. *Sister George* features scenes shot in an actual lesbian nightclub, while *Boys in the Band* was written by a gay man (Mart Crowley) who later admitted that he based his play on his own experiences of being gay in the 1960s. Many of the play's original cast members (who also starred in the film) were also gay.

Yet, both films have been excoriated over the years for containing "negative images" of homosexuals: in the weeks and months after Stonewall, *Boys in the Band* was picketed by gay activists. Both films contain self-loathing characters, and the films might be understood by some spectators as cautionary morality tales about the empty, sick lives of queers. However, once one moves beyond the positive-or-negative image debate, one can see how both films illuminate the struggle for modern, out-of-the-closet gay or lesbian sensibilities.¹⁷ In other words, both *Boys in the Band* and *The Killing of Sister George* are important cultural artifacts that shed light on the social construction of gay and lesbian identities in England and North America in the late 1960s. The films dramatize how homosexual identity was then beginning to emerge from within psychological models of disease and disorder and celebrate itself as a valid social identity deserving of equal rights.

The Killing of Sister George is based on a British stage play by Frank Marcus. It centers on a sadomasochistic lesbian relationship between June Buckridge (Beryl Reid) and her much younger lover Alice (Susannah York). June is an actress on a successful British television soap opera named *Applehurst*. The character she plays, a beloved nun named Sister George, is being written off the show because June's real-life lesbianism is becoming too scandalous for the network to condone. Alice, whom June calls "Childie," is a naïve femme given to wearing sheer nightgowns and playing with her doll collection. In one moment that clearly defines their relationship, June forces Childie to eat the butt of her cigar. Their relationship is broken apart by television executive Mercy Croft (Coral Browne), who not only fires June but also steals Alice. At the end of the film, June/George, isolated and desolate, contemplates her future career as a talking cow in a children's television show, the consolation role the network has offered her.

While this brief synopsis makes the film sound fairly stereotypical (a butch and femme couple are split apart by a predatory dyke), the film's multiple takes on performance and identity make it especially interesting from a queer perspective. As cultural theorist Judith Halberstam describes it, the film's

power “lies in the way it insists on the absolute confusion between theater and life. Sister George is both an acting role and a real role, just as George’s butch persona is both a role and an identity. In the course of the film, George accosts a clutch of nuns in a taxicab, visits a prostitute, and goes to a dyke bar costume party with her lover as Laurel and Hardy: everything and nothing is an act.”¹⁸ Similarly, film theorist Patricia White also finds the Laurel and Hardy impersonation to be a moment of queer appropriation, making “reference to a practice of comic typing that conceals homoerotic logic within a wildly popular and presentable mass cultural form,” the comedic buddy duo.¹⁹

That said, *Sister George* was written and directed by (straight) men and can also be seen as a fairly voyeuristic exploitation of lesbian culture, desire, and space.²⁰ Director Robert Aldrich, perhaps best known for his earlier horror-melodramas about monstrous women (*Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* [1962], *Hush . . . Hush, Sweet Charlotte* [1964]), approached the film’s central relationships in similarly gothic terms. The scene in which Mercy Croft seduces Alice is shot like a vampiric attack, complete with chiaroscuro lighting, thunder, and lightning. Supposedly, both actresses had major reservations about even filming the scene. That sex scene, along with the film’s lesbian subject matter, earned the film an X rating—one of the first assigned to a Hollywood film under the newly designed ratings system. The sex scene was also edited out of the film when it was shown in Connecticut and Massachusetts.²¹

The Killing of Sister George still confounds many historical researchers and contemporary spectators; people seem to have widely divergent reactions to it. For example, in her introduction to the book *The Queer Sixties*, Patricia Juliana Smith notes a

conversation with a lesbian activist, now middle-aged, whom I had assumed to be a paragon of “political correctness.” I was therefore rather amazed to hear her recall—with great fondness—her experience, while still a “baby dyke,” of seeing the 1968 film, *The Killing of Sister George*, in a theater somewhere in the American Midwest, in spite of what many would now consider its outrageously grotesque and unflattering representations of lesbian characters. The over-the-top characterizations did not matter; what did matter, she told me, was her realization that other women shared the desires she felt, that she was neither unique nor alone in this world.²²

Stereotypical or not, films such as *The Killing of Sister George* provided isolated queers of the 1960s with the much-needed evidence that people like them did exist and that there was possibly hope for a better tomorrow.

Similarly, *Boys in the Band* has been chastised for its negative stereotypes as well as hailed as a gay classic. The film takes place mostly in a self-contained apartment set where Michael (a rather fussy and bitchy Catholic gay man) is throwing a birthday party for his close friend Harold. Other guests include Donald (Michael's current boyfriend), Larry (a photographer who enjoys casual sex), Hank (Larry's uptight domestic partner), Bernard (an African American who works in a bookstore), Emory (a flamboyantly effeminate queen), and a "midnight cowboy" hustler (a birthday gift for Harold from Emory). The group trades bitchy quips for most of the first act, but the gaiety is compromised by the unexpected arrival of Michael's old college chum Alan, who may or may not be a repressed homosexual. Alan is visibly disturbed by Emory's flamboyance, and a brief scuffle ensues. Things turn serious—and maudlin—as the evening progresses and the alcohol flows. Michael insists that his guests play the "telephone game." Everyone has to call someone they have "really and truly loved" and admit it over the phone, thus outing themselves in a very personal way. Alan calls his wife and reaffirms his heterosexuality, despite Michael's assertions to the contrary. Emory and Bernard call people from their past who barely remember them, and Larry and Hank win the game by calling one another. Everyone leaves the party but Donald and Michael, and Michael suffers a nervous breakdown, sobbing, "If only we could just not hate ourselves so much." After pulling himself together, he heads out to a midnight mass.

Despite that rather grim plot outline, *Boys in the Band*—especially in its first half—is a very funny film filled with great one-liners and knowing camp humor. It even features a successful and relatively happy homosexual couple (Hank and Larry), though a scene of them atop a bed together was cut from the film before its release. Although the film's use of gay stereotypes may be seen as negative (the *Catholic Film Newsletter* somewhat predictably said that the characters confirmed "the desolation and waste which chill this way of life"),²³ there is at least a range of stereotypes, and the characters express concerns common to many queer men of the era. Like several of the other films discussed, *Boys in the Band* raises issues of internalized homophobia, sexual repression, and life in the closet, chiefly through the character of Michael's college friend Alan (whose sexuality author Mart Crowley allows to remain indeterminate). Michael's nastiness also is shown to be the product of his own shame and guilt over being gay, a dynamic that still resonates with some modern-day viewers of the film. Despite thirty years of gay liberation, many queer individuals still grow up steeped in shame and internalized homophobia, especially those queers raised within overtly homophobic families, fundamentalist churches, religious schools, and small-minded townships.

Backlash: The “Loathsome Film”

There were a few other Hollywood films from the era that were definitely queer in not just content but also in style, undermining the centrality of heterosexuality in favor of a more diverse queer perspective. Using deliberate camp, self-conscious nostalgia, generic hybridization, and other assorted experimental techniques, these films flaunted their disregard for “positive images” and happy Hollywood endings. They shocked, confused, and ultimately angered many mainstream viewers. Critic John Simon labeled them “Loathsome Films.”²⁴ Most of them—including *Boom!* (1968), *Secret Ceremony* (1968), *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* (1970), *Myra Breckinridge* (1970), *Something for Everyone* (1970), and *Performance* (1970)—were meant to be dark comedic allegories about American social mores and sexual hypocrisy. Their activist stance and stylistic hybridity look ahead to the films of New Queer Cinema, and most of them are in some way about the performative roles—racialized, sexualized, classed—that each of us has been conditioned to play. Their storylines explicitly examine the nature of identity, or they employ campy posturing that ruptures and questions Hollywood form. While many of them were lost to obscurity for many years (becoming cult films in the process), they remain among the most obviously queer films ever to come out of Hollywood.

Beyond the Valley of the Dolls, *Myra Breckinridge*, and *Performance* are probably the most remembered and notorious of the Loathsome Films. *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* was directed by sexploitation filmmaker Russ Meyer. It was supposed to be a sequel to *Valley of the Dolls* (1967), but with the aid of a script written by film critic Roger Ebert, Meyer turned the film into a deliberately campy satire of the Hollywood melodrama. In it, a three-girl band and their manager travel to Hollywood, where they encounter the “oft-times nightmarish world” of the entertainment industry, including a predatory lesbian fashion designer and a psychotic transsexual record producer. *Myra Breckinridge*, directed by Michael Sarne, was based on Gore Vidal’s controversial novel about a transsexual dynamo who travels to Hollywood to tear down American gender roles. Postoperative Myra is played by Raquel Welch; preoperative Myron is played by film critic Rex Reed; and John Huston and Mae West appear as characters representative of classical Hollywood filmmaking. In the film’s most notorious scene, Myra uses a strap-on dildo to sodomize a cowboy actor. *Performance* was a collaboration between cinematographer Nicholas Roeg and portrait artist Donald Cammell. It was shot in England in 1968 and (reluctantly) released by Warner Bros. two years later. In it, James Fox plays a sadistic gangster on the run who hides out in



Playing the titular postoperative transsexual in *Myra Breckinridge* (1970), Raquel Welch prepares to deflower her not-so-willing student, a scene that caused many critics to label the film as “loathsome.”
20th Century Fox / The Kobal Collection

the decaying London mansion of a retired rock star played by Mick Jagger. Queer sex, drugs, and rock and roll ensue, and personalities begin to melt and merge. At the end of the film, it is unclear who is left for dead and who survives.

These and other Loathsome Films were denounced by mainstream film critics with an unprecedented fervor. Especially egregious to most were *Myra Breckinridge* and *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls*, two X-rated films released by 20th Century Fox. *Time* magazine said that *Myra Breckinridge* was “contemptible,” “grotesque in the extreme,” “about as funny as a child molester,” and “so tasteless that it represents some sort of nadir in American cinema.”²⁵ Charles Champlin of the *Los Angeles Times* declared that 20th Century Fox had “fouled its own nest” by releasing the films. He further suggested that studio moguls Darryl and Richard Zanuck, “man and boy, ought to have their studio washed out with soap.”²⁶ *Life* magazine’s critic declared that *Performance* was “the most disgusting, the most completely worthless film I have

seen since I began reviewing.”²⁷ *Newsweek* placed it “among the ugliest, most contrived, and most self-indulgent films of the year,”²⁸ while the *Saturday Review* said it was “perversion exploited for its own sake . . . the nadir of tastelessness.”²⁹

Clearly, these films touched a raw nerve. Why were they so hated? Part of the answer lies in the queerly hybrid form these films took. Many of them contain stylistic elements drawn from foreign, avant-garde, and exploitation/sexploitation cinemas, even though they were released by major Hollywood studios and featured major Hollywood stars. Almost all are unstable generically, and many of their critics expressed confusion as to what type of film they were supposed to be reviewing. *Performance*, for example, combines elements of the gangster film, the musical, the LSD film, and the European art film. *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* is a musical horror sex comedy. Not being able to identify precisely a film’s generic status—and thus know how to review it—many critics misunderstood what these films were doing. For example, although a few reviewers did decode *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* as it was intended—as a satire of Hollywood’s melodramatic clichés—even the reviewer for *The Advocate* had trouble knowing if the film was meant to be a “put-on” or not: “For the first 90 minutes it is unclear whether you are watching a bad movie or if it is intentionally bad.”³⁰

In fact, most of the Loathsome Films might best be described as examples of deliberate queer camp: they use deconstructive styles that deliberately critique gender and sexuality.³¹ Thus it might be argued that *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls*’s psychotic transsexual murderer is not queerphobic, because it is meant to be a parody of that very stereotype. *Myra Breckinridge* is punctuated with clips from classical Hollywood films, setting up a dialectical confrontation between Hollywood as it imagined itself in its heyday and an antithetical critical position embodied by Myra herself. This device explodes the fantasy world that traditional Hollywood narrative creates for viewers, by forcing old movie clips to comment ironically upon the action. For example, in the film’s infamous dildo rape scene, traditional Hollywood genres (including the horror film, musical, and western) are quoted in order to suggest how they might be rewritten or reunderstood in light of Myra’s sexual terrorism and her oft-stated goal: “the destruction of the American male in all its particulars.” As the sequence plays out, classical Hollywood icons are reimagined in new contexts, and the coded sexual euphemisms of classical style (the knight’s lance, the battering ram, the dam bursting) are all made explicit through the cross cutting. *Time* magazine was especially horrified that “in the context of Myra, Laurel and Hardy are made to look like fags.”³² Indeed, the juxtaposition of Laurel and Hardy clips within the uber-queer space of the dildo

rape scene allows the spectator to recognize the latent homosexual core of the famous comedic buddies, in effect “outing” decades of closeted Hollywood queerness.

Although they did not have the vocabulary to name it as such, the subversive charge of deliberate queer camp was commented upon by many of the Loathsome Film’s critics who decried the “homosexualization” of Hollywood. For example, in an op-ed piece he wrote for the *Los Angeles Times Sunday Calendar*, Charles Champlin stated that *Myra Breckinridge* and *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* “make a major studio . . . and by extension the industry as a whole—look as corrupted and venal as the filmmakers and exhibitors who cater to the sad, select clientele for stag and gay films.”³³ Similarly, in a press release denouncing Jack Valenti and the new ratings system, former Fox executive Paul Monash lambasted the X rating, which he felt was “a total disservice to the entire film industry. Hollywood used to cater to the tastes of the country: now it is pandering to the sick fantasies of the perverted.”³⁴ These comments reflect the era’s resurgent fears about a “pink mafia,” the paranoid belief that queers in the entertainment industry were attempting to destroy American morals by promoting pro-homosexual themes. John Simon weighed in on that theme in his review of *Something for Everyone*, seeing it as “a prime example of disguised homosexuality at its distorting worst.” He continued,

What is objectionable is the covert slanting of the film toward making heterosexual relations unappetizing, and toward turning moral values upside down. . . . I submit that the entire film exemplifies a kind of vengeance on the heterosexual world. . . . Anything that the so-called normal world considers healthy and decent—and some if it, so help us, is healthy and decent—is systematically trodden underheel.³⁵

Mainstream critics could tolerate Hollywood films about tragic homosexuals, comedic pansies, and lesbian vampires; what they could not tolerate were films such as these, which presented outrageous queer inversions of both traditional (hetero)sexual mores and Hollywood form itself.

“Taste classifies the classifier,” social theorist Pierre Bourdieu has argued, and thus when John Simon wrote that “you do not have to be a drug addict, pederast, sado-masochist or nitwit to enjoy *Performance*, but being one or more of those things would help,” he was indirectly telling his readers that he was none of those things.³⁶ More directly, he was also implying that if one actually liked the film, the chances were that one *was* a hippie, a homosexual, a pervert, a criminal, or just a plain old idiot. Under the guise of film crit-

icism, John Simon and “cultural hygienists” like him were policing the line not only of permissible film practice but also permissible social existence.³⁷ The labeling of these films as Loathsome blurred into the process of labeling their creators and supporters as being themselves Loathsome—or at least un-American—and thus less worthy than their establishment counterparts. As part of the larger mainstream backlash to countercultural ideals, the campaign to smear Loathsome Films was mostly a successful one. Stylistic experimentation and queer content would ebb from Hollywood filmmaking throughout the 1970s and 1980s. And is it nostalgic or appalling to know that following protests by Christian activists, a screening of *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* was canceled by the AMC Theatre chain as recently as 1997?³⁸

Into the 1970s and Back to the Closet

The critical backlash against Loathsome Films did arguably contribute to Hollywood’s avoidance of complex queer characters and styles throughout the 1970s. Simplistic queer stereotypes, however, continued to thrive. Swishy gay men were the source of humor in films such as *Staircase* (1969), *Dirty Harry* (1971), *Blacula* (1971), and *Theatre of Blood* (1973). Even more prevalent was the return of the vicious queer, such as the evil convict who rapes a young man in prison in *Fortune and Men’s Eyes* (1971) or the murderous transvestite in *Freebie and the Bean* (1974). In the James Bond thriller *Diamonds Are Forever* (1971), two hired assassins are shown to be lovers: they walk into the sunset hand-in-hand after committing a particularly heinous deed. The lesbian vampire also made a triumphant return to the screen during these years, especially in a series of British and European imports, including *The Vampire Lovers* (1970), *Lust for a Vampire* (1971), *Daughters of Darkness* (1971), and *Vampyros Lesbos* (1971).³⁹ The era also produced a more overtly homosexual version of *Dorian Gray* (1970), as well as the transsexual thriller *Dr. Jekyll and Sister Hyde* (1971). Even *The Christine Jorgensen Story* (1970), a rather old-fashioned melodrama about the famous transsexual, could not escape the horror film’s generic coding: it was advertised with the exploitative tag line “Did the surgeon’s knife make me a woman or a freak?” Perhaps these aggressive and frightening images expressed the straight culture’s fears about newly activist queers marching in the streets; the films’ narratives would have soothed those anxieties by showing the destruction of queer monsters at the hands of traditionally heterosexual heroes.

Only a very few mainstream films of the early 1970s attempted to address queer desire in any kind of nonjudgmental or nonexploitative way. The British import *Sunday, Bloody Sunday* (1971) centers on a love triangle

between a married man, his wife, and his male lover. The film was director John Schlesinger's next project after *Midnight Cowboy* and was one of the first mainstream films to feature a romantic male-male kiss. The scene repeatedly drew revolted gasps from audiences, and many theaters refused to book the film at all.⁴⁰ Talky and introspective, the film failed at the U.S. box office, but it did get several major Oscar nominations. More successful was the musical *Cabaret* (1972), perhaps because even though its queer love triangle is central to the film, the same-sex characters never kiss and are never shown in bed together. It is also possible to read the film's central three-way affair as part of the "decadence" of Weimar Germany, thus linking queer sexuality to the rise of Nazism. Like the biblical epics produced under the mandates of the Hollywood Production Code, queer sexualities in *Cabaret* are presented as an aspect of a historically distant—and damned—culture, not as an aspect of contemporary Western life.

Hollywood's financial crisis began to wane when it stumbled on to the blaxploitation formula. Blaxploitation films were cheaply made genre films such as *Shaft* (1971) and *Superfly* (1972). While they focused on the trials and frustrations facing contemporary African Americans (but with plenty of sex, violence, and uncomplicated plots), blaxploitation films also contained occasional queer supporting characters. Often queerness functioned in opposition to the black hero or antihero, and some of the films equate homosexuality with a corrupt white culture (as did some of the era's Black Nationalist discourse). Priest, the main character in *Super Fly* (1972), for example, demeans the power of his white male antagonist by calling him a "faggot." This motif also carried into blaxploitation films centered on women: white lesbian supercriminals are featured battling African American heroines in *Cleopatra Jones* (1973) and *Cleopatra Jones and the Casino of Gold* (1975). Despite such queer villainy, other critics have argued that homosexual characters in blaxploitation films are "less marginalized and oftentimes less demonized than most queer characters in American cinema" of the era.⁴¹ Films such as *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971) and *Shaft* make a point to link queer minorities with racial minorities (as did some Black Panther rhetoric). *Norman, Is That You?* (1976) is a comedy about an interracial gay couple dealing with homophobic parents. Much of the humor comes from the father (Redd Foxx) making homophobic jokes, but the story ends with the parents coming to terms with their son's life. And at least one blaxploitation film, *Car Wash* (1976), features an out-and-proud black gay militant (Antonio Fargas), a proto-snap queen who gets many of the film's best lines (written by queer screenwriter Joel Schumacher before he became a director).

By the mid-1970s, Hollywood was beginning to retrench, abandoning the radical stylization and subject matter with which it had briefly experimented. Yet, the spirit of underground cinema and the Loathsome Film had one last gasp of life: the 20th Century Fox release *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975). Based upon a successful British stage play, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* is a deliberately campy satire of both the musical and the horror genre and features Tim Curry as a bisexual-transvestite mad scientist named Dr. Frank N. Furter. In the course of the film, he creates for his own sexual amusement a blond muscleman named Rocky and seduces both Brad and Janet (Barry Bostwick and Susan Sarandon), a “perfectly normal” heterosexual couple who accidentally stumble into Frank’s castle laboratory. By the end of the film, everyone is wearing corsets and fishnet stockings and performing in a musical floor show and aquacade while singing “Don’t Dream It—Be It.” It all ends badly, however, when Frank N. Furter’s much-abused servant Riff Raff (Richard O’Brien—who also wrote the play, music, and lyrics) seizes control; kills the mad scientist and his creation; and, with his sister/lover, blasts the castle back into outer space.

Mainstream audiences stayed away from *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* in droves. But then something queer happened, and *Rocky Horror* became the best-known midnight cult movie of all time, as fans who “got” the film returned again and again to savor its unholy hodgepodge of bizarre characters, genre parody, and queer sexualities.⁴² While the film’s unstable tone of address has allowed it to be interpreted in many different ways (some see it as homophobic because Frank N. Furter and Rocky are ultimately killed by Riff Raff), it can perhaps best be understood as a deconstructive genre hybrid—that is, a film that uses the icons and conventions of two different genres in order to contrast and critique the social and cultural meanings found in them. *Rocky Horror* does this by combining the horror film and the musical and by demonstrating that although they are both queer in many ways, they are ultimately incompatible. In its opening scenes with Brad and Janet, *Rocky Horror* self-consciously acknowledges how the classical Hollywood musical celebrates heterosexual romance and white patriarchal “normality.” The film then brings forward the queerness inherent in the horror film via Frank N. Furter and his assorted queer accomplices, figuring Frank’s queerness as the force opposing the musical’s celebration of heterosexual courtship.

However, the tragedy of *Rocky Horror*—if it is indeed a tragedy—is that Dr. Frank N. Furter, the “Sweet Transvestite from Transsexual Transylvania,” wants to be a musical star, but there is no place for him within the Hollywood musical format. Although Frank attempts to create his own musical extravaganza and become part of the musical’s more subtle queer space, he



The Rocky Horror Picture Show (1975) was one of the last Hollywood films of the 1970s to feature overtly queer content; in this scene, Dr. Frank N. Furter (Tim Curry) inspects his creation (Peter Hinwood).
20th Century Fox / The Kobal Collection

is defeated when his own genre's narrative conventions take over and he (along with his dream of being a musical star) is destroyed. The hybrid world of the film literally explodes, leaving everyone—including Brad and Janet—confused and forever transformed. Through such dialectical hybridization, *Rocky Horror* exposes the thematic myths of both the musical and the horror film, subverting the status quo of dominant ideology and the generic structures that so often serve to bolster it. Like the *Loathsome Film* of 1970, it is best appreciated by audiences who share its queer anti-Hollywood sensibility.

While *Rocky Horror* was dying a quick death at the box office, Hollywood was discovering that films that exploited more straightforward nostalgia—devoid of queer camp—were making money. Big-budgeted reworkings of old Hollywood genre films became landmark successes and helped to solve Hollywood's financial woes. *The Godfather* (1972), an epic gangster film, became the biggest moneymaker in Hollywood history to that time. *The Exorcist* (1973) used state-of-the-art special effects (as well as state-of-the-art profan-

ity) to update the old-dark-house monster movie, while *Jaws* (1975) did the same for *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954). The success of *Rocky* (1976), *Star Wars* (1977), and *Grease* (1978) further proved that remaking or refashioning old Hollywood-style films could produce spectacular returns, and the nostalgic Hollywood blockbuster has fueled the industry ever since. Such films often take place in earlier eras or invoke earlier forms of moviemaking and thus rarely concern themselves with contemporary notions of race, gender, or sexuality. Such films relegate homosexuals back to the realm of connotation, and queer audiences went back to wondering whether or not fussy *Star Wars* robot C-3PO might be gay. (Modeled as he was on the rather effeminate Tin Man from *The Wizard of Oz* [1939], C-3PO does seem be a mechanical version of the pansy stereotype.) Queers may have been marching and dancing in the streets by the mid-1970s, but very little in Hollywood films would have given that impression. And so, following in the traditions of independent cinema, queer filmmakers began to document their own lives.

Notes

1. For an in-depth look at the history and meaning of the Stonewall Riots, see Martin Duberman, *Stonewall* (New York: Dutton, 1993).

2. See “Policing the Third Sex,” *Newsweek*, 27 October 1969, 76, 81; “Homosexuality: Coming to Terms,” *Time*, 24 October 1969, 82; “The Homosexual: Newly Visible, Newly Understood,” *Time*, 31 October 1969, 56, 61–62, 64–67.

3. Barry D. Adam, *The Rise of a Gay and Lesbian Movement* (Boston: Twayne, 1987), 82.

4. For a concise overview of the era’s sexual politics, see John D’Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 301–43.

5. For an overview of these issues, see Jon Lewis, *Hollywood v. Hard Core: How the Struggle over Censorship Saved the Motion Picture Film Industry* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 135–229.

6. For a history of this evolution, see Eric Schaefer, “Gauging a Revolution: 16 mm Film and the Rise of the Pornographic Feature,” *Cinema Journal* 41, no. 3 (Spring 2002): 3–26.

7. Press materials reproduced on the film’s DVD release by Something Weird Video.

8. See Allan Berubé, *Coming Out under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War II* (New York: Plume, 1991), 258–59, for a description of the development of the concept of homosexual psychopathology.

9. Quote excerpted on *The Queen’s* trailer.

10. Robert Lang, *Masculine Interests: Homoerotics in Hollywood Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 149. For more on the film, see Michael Moon, "Outlaw Sex and the 'Search for America': Representing Male Prostitution and Perverse Desire in Sixties Film (My Hustler and Midnight Cowboy)," in *A Small Boy and Others: Imitation and Initiation in American Culture from Henry James to Andy Warhol* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1998), 117–32.

11. For more on the transition from the Production Code to the Ratings System, see Leonard J. Leff and Jerold L. Simmons, *The Dame in the Kimono: Hollywood, Censorship, and the Production Code from the 1920s to the 1960s* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1990), 268–77.

12. "Trends: Where the Boys Are," *Time*, 28 June 1968, 81.

13. "New Movies: Fascination with the Deviate," *Time*, 10 January 1969.

14. Raymond A. Sokolov, "Man to Man," *Newsweek*, 13 January 1969.

15. "Tonight We Love," *Newsweek*, 8 February 1971.

16. Tom Kepner, "Tchaikovsky, the Pathetic Gay: Powerful Film Delves into life of Famed Composer," *The Advocate* 53 (February 17–March 2, 1971): 18.

17. William Scroggie, "Producing Identity: From *Boys in the Band* to Gay Liberation," in *The Queer Sixties*, ed. Patricia Juliana Smith (New York: Routledge, 1999), 238.

18. Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1998), 197.

19. Patricia White, *unInvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 137.

20. For an overview of the film's production history, as well as a consideration of heterosexual male voyeurism in relation to cinematic "realism," see Kelly Hankin, "Lesbian Locations: The Production of Lesbian Bar Space in *The Killing of Sister George*," *Cinema Journal* 41, no. 1 (Fall 2001): 3–27.

21. Reported in Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1987 [1981]), 173.

22. Patricia Juliana Smith, "Icons and Iconoclasts," in *The Queer Sixties*, ed. Patricia Juliana Smith (New York: Routledge, 1999), xx.

23. Quoted in Russo, *Celluloid Closet*, 177.

24. John Simon, "The Most Loathsome Film of All!" *New York Times*, 23 August 1970, sec. 2, 1D, 5D. Reprinted in John Simon, *Movies into Film* (New York: Dial Press, 1971), 363–67.

25. Unsigned review, "Some Sort of Nadir," *Time*, 6 July 1970.

26. Charles Champlin, "Exploiteer Hitchhikes on Dolls' Title," *Los Angeles Times*, 18 June 1970.

27. Richard Schickel, "Life Movie Review: A Completely Worthless Film," *Life*, 2 October 1970.

28. Paul D. Zimmerman, "Under the Rock," *Newsweek*, 17 August 1970.

29. Arthur Knight, "SR Goes to the Movies," *Saturday Review*, 22 August 1970.

30. Harold Fairbanks, "Beyond Dolls—How to Make Worse out of Bad," *Los Angeles Advocate*, 8–21 July 1970, 13, 15.
31. Different types of camp (and their political ramifications) are explored by Moe Meyer in "Introduction: Reclaiming the Discourse of Camp," in *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, ed. Moe Meyer (London: Routledge, 1994), 1–22.
32. "Some Sort of Nadir."
33. Champlin, "Sexploiteer Hitchhikes."
34. Mary Murphy, "Valenti Blasted for Condoning MYRA," *Los Angeles Times*, 26 June 1970.
35. John Simon, review of *Something for Everyone*, reprinted in Simon, *Movies into Film*, 160–62.
36. Simon, *Movies into Film*, 363.
37. For a discussion of the politics of film taste, see Jeff Sconce, "'Trashing' the Academy: Taste, Excess, and an Emerging Politics of Cinematic Style," *Screen* 36, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 371–93.
38. "Roger Ebert Flick Gets Thumbs Down," *Press-Telegram*, 19 August 1997, A2.
39. Bonnie Zimmerman, "Daughters of Darkness: The Lesbian Vampire on Film," in *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 379–87.
40. Russo, *Celluloid Closet*, 211.
41. Joe Wlodarz, "Beyond the Black Macho: Queer Blaxploitation," *The Velvet Light Trap* 53 (Spring 2004): 10–25.
42. For an introduction to the *Rocky Horror* fan phenomenon, see Robert E. Wood, "Don't Dream It: Performance and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*," in *The Cult Film Experience: Beyond All Reason*, ed. J. P. Telotte (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991), 156–66.

CHAPTER SEVEN



Producing Pride: Queers Make Movies



Heroin junkie Joe Dallesandro (left) works as a male prostitute in Paul Morrissey's *Flesh* (1968), a film that carried underground film traditions into art house theaters. Warhol / The Kobal Collection

In the wake of the Stonewall Riots, openly gay and lesbian political groups utilized grassroots activism and publicity-gaining civil disobedience (or “zaps”) in the fight for “gay liberation”—“a distinctive moment and analysis of lesbian and gay oppression that blended New Left politics with the attempt to build a gay counterculture.”¹ *Gay* came to replace the more clinical term *homosexual*, and a new concept of coming out—to families, friends, and coworkers—became the key strategy to sexual liberation and pride in oneself. As part of this movement, in 1973 the Gay Activist Alliance, along with the National Gay Task Force, lobbied the entertainment industry for better images, releasing a set of educational guidelines that they hoped would improve the onscreen representation of queer people.² However, as the last chapter demonstrates, Hollywood in 1973 was actually withdrawing from the topic. Despite some fleeting attempts to address queer lives and queer issues, Hollywood film mostly ignored the burgeoning gay rights movement altogether. Speaking of the era, film historian Thomas Waugh recalls “how desperate it felt in those days before there were queer film and video festivals in every city and twenty-year-old queers with video cameras at every gathering. *Famine, drought, silence, and invisibility* were indeed the words that self-styled cine-pinko-fags like me used to describe the audiovisual environment in the first decade after Stonewall.”³

The felt need for media representation of queer lives was acute, and rather than wait for Hollywood to mend its ways, queer people began to produce their own films in unprecedented numbers. Of course, people had been making queer underground films for several decades, and some would continue in that tradition. However, there was also a new desire to produce films that would document the emerging queer communities of the 1970s and to reclaim the gay and lesbian past. The aim of these films was multiple. They were meant to unearth historic queer communities that had been formerly overlooked and through that process help define and solidify the struggles of contemporary queers. These documentaries also demonstrated that gay and lesbian people were indeed everywhere, in every walk of life. As such, they were cinematic extensions of the coming-out strategy. Still other queer filmmakers combined both documentary and experimental impulses in order to question the very nature of cinematic representation. Meanwhile, a very few others, following Hollywood’s example, began to make more conventional narrative films about gay male lives.

The Gay Liberation Movement

As historian Eric Marcus has noted about the effects of gay liberation, by “the early to mid-1970s, the world was a dramatically different place from what it

had been in 1968.”⁴ The rallying cry “Out of the closets—and into the streets!” was heard with increasing frequency. By coming out, queers of this generation hoped to dispel negative stereotypes, show the straight world that they existed in great numbers, and develop a sense of pride in themselves. Groups of lesbian and gay lawyers, doctors, students, teachers, and others began to coalesce, and parades, pride marches, and festivals began to be held each summer in major American cities to commemorate the anniversary of the Stonewall Riots. Such events were sometimes reluctantly covered by the mainstream press, and more and more gay and lesbian community newspapers debuted and bookshops opened.⁵ Jim Foster of SIR (the San Francisco–based Society for Individual Rights) gave a nationally televised address to the Democratic National Convention in 1972 and spoke on behalf of a gay rights plank.⁶ Elaine Noble became the first open lesbian to be elected to the Massachusetts state legislature, and Minnesota state senator Allan Spear came out shortly thereafter.⁷ After generations of hiding in the closet, lesbian and gay people were becoming visible in the public sphere.

In many ways, gay liberation was a grassroots phenomenon. Much like earlier homophile groups such as the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis, 1970s gay-liberation groups rarely agreed on methods or goals. The Gay Liberation Front was charged with a radical Marxism and set about championing gay rights within a larger project of social revolution. Other groups, such as the Gay Activists Alliance, focused on more narrowly defined legislative goals, such as the repeal of sodomy statutes and the passage of equal opportunity laws.⁸ Neither group lasted for very long, but openly gay individuals from every walk of life continued to organize on more ad hoc bases to fight for local issues. The “strategy was to open an aggressive educational attack on more fronts than the early activists had thought possible, laboring to institute a discreet gay presence in America’s libraries and classrooms, law offices and television studios, stores and theaters, churches and corridors of power, both civilian and military.”⁹

One of the most important gay liberation victories occurred in 1973, when the Board of Trustees of the American Psychiatric Association voted to remove *homosexuality* from its official list of mental disorders.¹⁰ As Judd Marmor, one of the psychiatrists who helped usher in this momentous policy reform, later stated, “We didn’t merely remove homosexuals from the category of illness, we stated that there was no reason why, a priori, a gay man or woman could not be just as healthy, just as effective, just as law abiding, and just as capable of functioning as any heterosexual. Furthermore, we asserted that laws that discriminated against them in housing or in employment were unjustified.”¹¹ With the medical “reason” for discrimination struck down,

other professional organizations—legal, pedagogical, corporate—began to issue similar doctrines of inclusion and acceptance.

Another important aspect of gay liberation was the solidification of gay male and lesbian identities and communities in most large western cities. By 1977, over two hundred thousand people were marching in San Francisco's annual gay pride parade.¹² Queers had an impact on the commercial sector of most large cities: gay bars, bathhouses, nightclubs, discos, coffee shops, bookstores, movie theaters, music festivals, and gift shops began to appear in neighborhoods where queer people congregated. Queer travel guides were published, and queer travel destinations—including Cherry Grove, Fire Island, Provincetown, West Hollywood, Palm Springs, and Key West—became even hotter vacation spots. In many ways it was a decade of unprecedented openness for American queers, after decades of living in secrecy. It was a commercialized celebration (as more radical lesbian and gay activists pointed out) but an era of newfound freedom nonetheless.

Gay liberation, like women's liberation, directly fought for personal sexual freedom—the right to one's own body and desires and to live life on one's own terms. Many gay liberation manifestos view gender as a societal strait-jacket; critique the limitations of heterosexual institutions such as marriage; and see the need to restructure the erotic, romantic, and sexual lives of everyone, not just gay men and lesbians.¹³ As such, they often seem distinctly *queer* (as that term would come to be used in the 1990s) rather than *gay* or *lesbian* per se. Some gay liberation manifestos address age-of-consent laws, racism, environmentalism, and the alleged heterosexism inherent in gay and lesbian role-playing (such as lesbian butch/femme styles or gay men doing drag). Still others champion queer androgyny and bisexuality as ways of dismantling the oppressive binaries of heterosexuality. French theorists Guy Hocquenghem and Monique Wittig explored the psychoanalytic dimensions of capitalism, patriarchy, and heterosexism and found them to be dependent on the oppression of women and femininity.¹⁴ Radical lesbians called for an end to all forms of patriarchal dominance and suggested that all women could be (and should be!) lesbians, the so-called woman-identified woman, a sort of political lesbianism closely aligned with feminist goals.¹⁵ Radical feminist Robin Morgan proclaimed herself a lesbian, despite the fact that she lived with a man and had a child: "I identify as a Lesbian because I love the People of Women and certain individual women with my life's blood."¹⁶

However, while such sentiments reflect later queer theorizing about the fluidity and social construction of sexual identity, the gay liberation movement was becoming increasingly balkanized. White gay men, who had the money to support the increasing commercialization of homosexual culture,

took prominence in the movement. Feeling increasingly slighted, queers of color began to form their own political and social groups, often creating their own smaller ghettos within or alongside the larger (white) gay ghetto. Lesbians of the era often felt doubly estranged. The mainstream women's movement (as represented by groups like NOW, the National Organization for Women) was hostile to lesbians, and many gay men were equally hostile to women, whether straight or gay. As such, a movement of lesbian-feminist separatism arose, and queer women withdrew to their own circles of bookshops, music festivals, concerts, and clubs. As Robin Morgan noted, there were even "sub-sub-sub-divisions" of queer female identity, and they did not always get along with one another either. There were

gay women, Lesbians, Lesbian-Feminists, dykes, dyke-feminists, dyke-separatists, Old Dykes, butch dykes, bar dykes, and killer dykes. In New York, there were divisions between Political Lesbians and Real Lesbians and Nouveau Lesbians. Help a woman who is unaware of these fine political distinctions and who wanders into a meeting for the first time, thinking she maybe has a right to be there because she likes women.¹⁷

Coalitions of gay men similarly fractured. Some declared themselves "faggot-effeminists," purging themselves of masculinist behaviors. Others embraced the masculinity so long thought to be alien to them, creating a hypermasculine gay style that became known as the clone look. Clones wore Levis and work boots, flannel shirts, and thick mustaches—symbols that reasserted or reclaimed traditional masculinity. (The costumes of the disco act Village People—policeman, construction worker, cowboy, soldier, and so on—are good examples of the clone look taken to its extreme.) Many clones turned their backs on effeminate gay men and drag queens, associating such gender-bending with the pre-Stonewall era, self-pity, and self-loathing. Most clones also championed recreational sex, drugs, and rock and roll—and the more, the better. Some queer women also thought that nonmonogamous relations were the path to sexual freedom, while other queer women critiqued such a lifestyle's "emphasis on genital sexuality, objectification, promiscuity, non-emotional involvement, and tough invulnerability" as nothing but the same old patriarchal attitudes that had been oppressing people for generations.¹⁸

As the dream of a utopian queer community was splintering into various smaller queer communities, a growing backlash against any and all forms of queerness was taking place. The gay liberation movement was a thorn in the sides of some people, and moralists began to invoke the Bible (as well as discredited medical "experts") as a means to justify their prejudice. Faded pop

singer Anita Bryant launched a successful campaign to repeal gay rights protections in Florida, and the Briggs Initiative in California—which would have outlawed gay and lesbian teachers—was fiercely debated before it was narrowly defeated. Scapegoating queers as symbols of moral decline and national turpitude, the so-called religious right (led by televangelists such as Jerry Falwell) became a formidable force within mainstream American politics, especially after Ronald Reagan was elected president of the nation in 1980.

Although by that time the collective euphoria of the gay liberation movement had dwindled considerably, the era's queerly made films helped to define and illuminate the decade. They were often amusing, often confrontational, and sometimes educational—but they were always a reflection of queers' newfound social, political, and artistic freedoms. Some of them were straightforward documentaries, while others were more stylistically experimental. Many of them recall underground films and presage the advent of New Queer Cinema in the 1990s. They represented queer communities and queer issues when the mainstream media still refused to do so.

Continuing the Underground Film Tradition

By the 1970s, underground cinema, physique films, and sexploitation pictures were all evolving into other modes. As obscenity laws were repealed, physique films and sexploitation films were superseded by gay-male hardcore pornography. Among the first gay-porn features distributed were *Song of the Loon* (1970) and *Boys in the Sand* (1971). *Song of the Loon*, based on a popular gay pulp novel, was a queer reworking of the western genre. *Boys in the Sand*'s campy title pun also links it to pre-Stonewall queer appropriation, a practice that continues today with many adult film titles. A sexually explicit cinema for queer women was much slower to evolve and has never reached the same degree of commercial success.

Underground cinema also morphed into new—and more sexually explicit—forms. Although by 1970 many of the key underground filmmakers (including Andy Warhol and Jack Smith) were no longer directing films, others carried on the tradition. For example, Jim Bidgood's *Pink Narcissus* (released in 1971, after seven years in various stages of production) encapsulates many of the underground's motifs and stylistic devices. Like the work of Jack Smith, *Pink Narcissus* draws upon the artifice of Hollywood kitsch, including Roman slave movies, Arabian nights bacchanalia, and Mexican bullfights. Like the work of Kenneth Anger, the film also revels in the seamier aspects of gay male culture, with scenes shot in dingy public restrooms or on

gay hustlers' street corners. Reaching even further back into the traditions of gay experimental film, *Pink Narcissus* counterbalances such lurid scenes with sublime moments set in a highly artificial outdoor setting that recalls Jean Genet's *Un Chant d'Amour* (circa 1950). Richard Dyer also points out that "the use of 8 MM blown up to 35 MM gives the film both the iridescent color of Anger and Markopoulos and the graininess of Warhol."¹⁹ What the film does manage to add to these influences is a far greater amount of full-frontal tumescent nudity, as its main figure, Bobby Kendall, traverses these fantasy spaces in various stages of arousal.

Avant-garde films by queer artists such as Tom Chomont and Curt McDowell also attempted to carry on the traditions of the underground cinema.²⁰ Curt McDowell's *Thundercrack!* (1975), for example, is a campy "old dark house" thriller with explicit queer sexuality. However, such films were growing longer and more narrative, evolving into feature-length midnight cult movies, a move that allowed them to be distributed and exhibited in more traditional, profitable ways.²¹ The midnight screening time still suggested something forbidden and underground, and the films usually delivered, whether they were bizarre foreign head films such as *El Topo* (1970), resurrected exploitation films such as *Reefer Madness* (1936), or the latest art-porno hybrid such as *Thundercrack!* And while *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975) would eventually become the most well-known midnight movie, the early films of Paul Morrissey and John Waters predate it by several years.

Paul Morrissey worked with Andy Warhol throughout the late 1960s, and there is some disagreement among film scholars over which of Warhol's later films were actually directed by Warhol and which were directed by Morrissey. Some sources contend that Morrissey directed *Lonesome Cowboys* (1968), while others suggest it was the last Warhol film actually directed by Warhol himself.²² By the early 1970s, however, it is generally acknowledged that Morrissey was directing the films that were being released under Andy Warhol's name, as in *Andy Warhol's Frankenstein* (1973) and *Andy Warhol's Dracula* (1974). According to many historians of the scene, Paul Morrissey was an oddly conservative type to be associating with the Warhol gang. He apparently loathed many of Warhol's "Superstars"—the transvestites, hustlers, and drug addicts who starred in many of the films.

Paul Morrissey is best known for directing Warhol's so-called *Flesh* trilogy—*Flesh* (1968), *Trash* (1970), and *Heat* (1972)—as well as the two horror films just mentioned. The *Flesh* trilogy starred assorted Factory Superstars and gave prime screen time to beefy hunk Joe Dallesandro, who is frontally naked throughout much of them. As such, they were hybrid films that drew upon the physique film "danglie," the art film, and sexploitation

cinema. As Joan Hawkins has noted, the Warhol-Morrissey films were “crossover” films. They played in commercial art houses and in mainstream commercial theaters, but like many earlier underground films or Hollywood’s Loathsome Films, they contained subversive and explicit subject matter.²³ In *Flesh*, Joe Dallesandro plays a street hustler who services both men and women to make money for his bisexual girlfriend. *Trash* is about an impotent heroin addict (Dallesandro again) and his drag queen girlfriend. *Heat* is a riff on the Hollywood classic *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), with Dallesandro as a former child star seduced by an older woman, played by Sylvia Miles. In his essay on the *Flesh* trilogy, Stephen Tropiano notes that even though Joe is the protagonist of each story, he “is a passive figure—the object of the other characters’ desires, both male and female. They look at him, talk about his body, offer to pay for him, providing Joe with ample opportunity to undress for the camera, whether it be for money, drugs, or employment.”²⁴ As such, the *Flesh* trilogy inverts the usual form of Hollywood filmmaking—in which women are figured as the sexualized objects of the camera’s gaze—producing instead a male homosexual effect for all spectators in the audience.

Andy Warhol’s Frankenstein and *Andy Warhol’s Dracula* are also known as *Flesh for Frankenstein* and *Blood for Dracula*. *Frankenstein* was released in 3-D, and both films were rated X. They played more widely than did the *Flesh* trilogy, and they are also less obviously homosexual. Their queer horror dynamics, on the other hand, are exploited to the maximum. Dr. Frankenstein (Udo Kier), obsessed with his plans for nonsexual procreation, ignores his wife (Monique Van Vooren), who trysts with a lusty stable hand (Joe Dallesandro). The baron wants Joe’s head for his male “zombie” creation but instead cuts off the head of Joe’s rather queer, asexual friend, thus dooming the doctor’s plan to breed his male and female zombies. In one of the film’s more infamous scenes, Dr. Frankenstein opens the stitches on his female zombie’s abdomen and, as he has sex with her, puts his hand into the gaping wound to fondle her internal organs. He tells his assistant, “To know death, Otto, you have to fuck life in the gallbladder,” a line that was consciously meant to be a parody of the pretentious dialogue in Bernardo Bertolucci’s then-popular art-sex film *Last Tango in Paris* (1972).²⁵ Ultimately, the doctor and his zombies die in an orgy of blood and body parts (many of which are hurled at the camera in order to exploit the 3-D effects), and at the end of the film the baron’s silent ominous children prepare to vivisect the stable boy. Morrissey’s version of *Dracula* is not quite as kinky, although it too ends in an over-the-top display of violence, as Joe Dallesandro’s Mario hacks Udo Kier’s *Dracula* to pieces, limb by limb.

After leaving the Warhol circle, Morrissey continued to make films sporadically. *Forty Deuce* (1982), *Beethoven's Nephew* (1985), and *Spike of Bensonhurst* (1988) all explore homosocial and homoerotic desires between men, but the films were not widely seen, and none of them have gained much of a cult reputation or queer following. This may be partly due to Morrissey's own self-identification as a "reactionary conservative," a political position that kept him separate from much of the 1960s counterculture as well as later generations of queer filmmakers and audiences.²⁶ Independent of the independents, and highly critical of the liberal and radical values from which gay liberation emerged, Morrissey's bleak filmic satires illuminated queer cultures in a harsh and critical light. They may have featured beefcake, drag queens, and campy excess, but the sensibility behind those images was always that of a conservative Catholic filmmaker.

Perhaps the most important queer filmmaker to emerge in the 1970s was John Waters, whose early films, including *Pink Flamingos* (1972) and *Female Trouble* (1974), might best be thought of as full-length underground films. Like many underground films, they queerly hybridize exploitation/sexploitation films, art films, and Hollywood melodramas. Similar to Hollywood's Loathsome Films, Waters's movies are outlandishly camp epics designed to shock middle-class sensibilities. Most of them star Harris Glenn Milstead, an actor who rocketed to cult stardom in these films as "Divine," a three-hundred-pound "woman" who has been described as "the Godzilla of Drag Queens."²⁷ Through black comedy, outrageous characterizations, and extreme narrative situations, the films expose and satirize the shallowness of the American Dream. Waters has said that he wanted his films to explore the "hate generation" rather than the clichéd "love generation" of the 1960s. Yet despite such an assertion, his films (especially as they became more mainstream in the 1980s) often exude a true love and affection for the social misfits and queer oddballs they depict.²⁸

John Waters was born and raised in Baltimore, a city that has served as the setting (and inspiration) for most of his films. Rebellious against his upper-middle-class Roman Catholic suburban childhood, Waters took drugs; made friends with other angry, countercultural kids; and escaped via frequent hitchhiking trips to New York City, where he saw all sorts of films, from Forty-second Street schlock and sexploitation fare to the contemporary foreign art cinema. He was especially drawn to the work of the underground filmmakers, a fact that can be attested to by examining his work. Like Kenneth Anger, Waters makes highly ironic use of popular music. And like Andy Warhol, Waters drew upon a regular coterie of bizarre actors and actresses, the stars of his "Dreamland Studios" (which was really his parents' house and yard).

Waters's first feature, *Mondo Trasho* (1969), was a black-and-white, non-synch sound 16 MM opus that he shot for two thousand dollars. His next, *Multiple Maniacs* (1970), cost five thousand dollars and was shot with synch sound; both films starred Divine. *Multiple Maniacs* centers on a traveling freak show called the Cavalcade of Perversion ("See two actual queers kissing!"). In the film, Divine commits mass murder and is raped by a giant lobster, a deliberately cheesy special effect designed by Waters's friend Vince Peranio. In a blasphemous swipe against his Catholic upbringing, the film features the story of Jesus Christ crosscut with a "rosary job" in a church pew. As Jesus feeds the masses fish and bread (cans of tuna and hot dog buns) and is whipped on his way to the cross, Mink Stole as a religious pervert anally penetrates Divine with a set of rosary beads. But as shocking as that scene might have been for some, nothing could top Waters's next film, the infamous *Pink Flamingos*.

With a comparatively huge budget of twelve thousand dollars, *Pink Flamingos* was shot on 16 MM color stock and blown up to 35 MM for its highly successful run of midnight shows. *Pink Flamingos* centers on Divine and her family, who are engaged in a deadly struggle with Raymond and Connie Marble (David Lochary and Mink Stole) to be named "The Filthiest People Alive." The Marbles sell heroin to school kids, kidnap young women in order to impregnate them with their servant's semen, and sell the resultant babies to lesbian couples. Divine throws a party at her trashy trailer home where she receives a pig snout as a gift, and one of her guests demonstrates his "singing asshole." The Marbles send her human excrement through the mail and burn down her trailer, but in the end Divine executes them in front of tabloid reporters in order to claim her rightful title. In the film's final sequence, Divine eats dog shit, a scene that was *not* faked. Mainstream critics were appalled, but countercultural audiences found it hysterically funny and turned it into a cult-film hit. It was eventually screened at the Cannes Film Festival, and the Museum of Modern Art included it in its Bicentennial Salute to American Humor.²⁹ *Pink Flamingos* cemented John Waters's reputation as one of the era's most important independent filmmakers.

Films such as *Pink Flamingos* obviously complicate the "positive image" approach to queer visibility. Many queers were as outraged by *Pink Flamingos* as were the film's right-wing censors, because it depicted a host of bizarre sexual practices framed within the context of filth, shit, and degradation.³⁰ While these images were meant to be humorous à la Jack Smith's campy *Flaming Creatures*, some audience members could not get past the shock value. Camp and drag styles themselves were anathema to some sectors of the gay liberation movement. "Faggot-effeminists" lamented the "anti-woman

mimicry and self-mockery known as camp which, with its trivializing effect, would deny us any chance of waking to our own suffering.”³¹ Lesbian separatists also decried the “obscenity of male transvestitism” and called for an end to “men who deliberately *re-emphasize* gender roles, and who parody female oppression and suffering as ‘camp.’”³² Such critics were not amused by Divine’s antics or the films that featured Warhol’s “Superstar” transvestites. Indeed, Paul Morrissey’s *Women in Revolt* (1971)—a film allegedly about women’s liberation, starring Factory drag queens Candy Darling, Jackie Curtis, and Holly Woodlawn—seems to have been made as a deliberate affront to lesbian separatists. If the casting of drag queens as feminists was not controversial enough, Morrissey underlined his satiric attack by making the name of their feminist coalition the Politically Involved Girls, or PIGs.

The notoriety of *Pink Flamingos* helped John Waters make films on increasingly larger budgets. *Female Trouble* (1974), *Desperate Living* (1977), and *Polyester* (1981) all satirize Hollywood melodramas, middle-class sensibilities, and politically correct self-righteousness. Divine, who starred in most of these films, became a well-known cult celebrity, although he died just after the mainstream success of *Hairspray* (1988), Waters’s first PG-rated film. (In 2002, *Hairspray* became even more mainstream when it was transformed into an award-winning Broadway musical written by real-life queer couple Marc Shaiman and Scott Wittman.) John Waters’s more recent films include *Cry Baby* (1990), *Serial Mom* (1994), *Pecker* (1998), *Cecil B. Demented* (2000), and *A Dirty Shame* (2004), but it was his films of the 1970s that broke new ground. They generated controversy and announced to the world a unique filmmaking aesthetic: one that was militantly camp, activist, scatological, and unapologetically queer.

Barbara Hammer and the Rise of Lesbian-Feminist Filmmaking

Although queer men had made experimental films in America as early as the 1930s, a movement of experimental films by, about, and for queer women did not emerge until the gay liberation era. Many of these films documented lesbian-feminist communities of the decade, and their engagement with avant-garde stylistics also dovetailed with then-current feminist thinking on the male biases of traditional film form. It was thought by many feminist scholars and filmmakers of the 1970s that traditional (Hollywood) film form contained a masculinist bias, that it could not adequately represent women’s concerns or images. Hollywood films—and even some foreign art or experimental films—were said to inscribe a “male gaze” at women’s bodies. In other

words, it was argued that the very style of Hollywood filmmaking automatically objectified and eroticized women's images as spectacles for the viewing pleasure of a presumed (heterosexual) male spectator.³³ Thus, much feminist film practice of the era was concerned with articulating a new cinematic language, one that was different from that of Hollywood.

Some European feminists made feature films that did precisely that. Belgian filmmaker Chantal Akerman's films, including *Je Tu Il Elle* (1974) and *Les Rendez-Vous D'Anna* (1979), are decidedly anti-Hollywood in form and content and "bring in a feminist concern with positioning women's experiences at the center of the narrative and with attempting to articulate lesbian desire."³⁴ German filmmaker Ulrike Ottinger's films, including *Madame X: An Absolute Ruler* (1977) and *Johanna D'Arc of Mongolia* (1989), use hybridization and camp in order to explore new forms of cinematic spectacle and spectatorship. Even when the work of European feminist filmmakers was not overtly queer, it was more open to queer concerns than was Hollywood. In the era's European art films, "lesbianism is not an individual psychological problem but is positioned within a female continuum which privileges relationships between women over those with men."³⁵ As such, much of this work drew on the feminist theorization of political lesbianism and the celebration of "women-identified women."

Many lesbian filmmakers of the era shared these concerns and deliberately worked outside traditional cinematic conventions and modes of production. As a result, many lesbian-feminist filmmakers chose to queer documentary form with experimental techniques. As Kate Haug explains about these films, "the objectivity associated with documentary practice is transformed and complicated by a more subjective mode of filmmaking. While these films point to the desire to 'document' women's experience, they thwart the traditional patriarchal affiliations often associated with ethnographic and documentary films."³⁶ Thus, lesbian-feminist experimental film was not only concerned with documenting women's issues; it was also concerned with finding new ways to represent the very image of women, especially women's sexuality. The films sought to exclude the male gaze by creating a "women only" cinematic space. Sometimes they would also be screened for women-only audiences.

One of the first lesbian-feminist films made in America was Jan Oxenberg's *Home Movie* (1972). In it, the filmmaker "juxtaposes, and in the course of the short film replaces, images of patriarchal order with images of lesbian pleasure."³⁷ For example, home movies of Oxenberg as a little girl playing with dolls (or as a high school cheerleader) are matched to voice-over narration that undercuts the "normality" of such images. Oxenberg points out

how the presumed meaning of the surface image did not match her inner feelings of difference: she desired other cheerleaders and not football heroes. Another formal experiment by Jan Oxenberg, *Comedy in Six Unnatural Acts* (1975), is a scripted and performed document of “lesbians’ subcultural myths, fantasies, and appropriations of mainstream cultural baggage (from child molester stereotypes to romance).”³⁸

By far the most prolific lesbian filmmaker of this or any other era is Barbara Hammer: since the late 1960s, she has made over eighty films and videos. Hammer’s films—even her earliest—are excellent examples of queer cinema. They cross borders (between documentary, fiction, and experimental filmmaking) and focus on the complexities of human sexuality—especially the ways in which those sexualities have been socially constructed across time and place. Hammer’s films explore love, sex, identity, humor, community, relationships, nature, and spirituality. Almost all are deeply personal, drawing on autobiographical elements and centering on the filmmaker as well as her friends and lovers. The films try to express lesbian-feminist desire and passion without falling into traditional patterns of objectification. As Hammer herself describes them, “All of my early work was made out of that appreciation of the body that came to me through loving another woman.”³⁹

Hammer’s earliest films, set in and around San Francisco, reflect the mythic femininity that many lesbian feminists of the 1970s were trying to reclaim. For example, *Menses* (1974) makes use of bold symbolism (blood, eggs), superimpositions, and sound loops in order to exalt menstruation. *Superdyke* (1975), in which a group of self-identified “Amazon” women joyously overrun San Francisco, is even more playful in tone and form. Time-lapse photography is used as the women burst into a department store to purchase vibrators, and the ritualistic use of bones and dust becomes a signifier of eternal, spiritual, and natural Womanhood. In the 1980s, Hammer’s work began to use feminist film theory to engage with more complex questions related to cinematic representation. Formally, she began experimenting with digital video and the optical printer, media technologies that allowed her to mechanically alter images of “reality,” providing a critique of documentary objectivity while exploring new ways of seeing.⁴⁰ For example, in *No No Nooky TV* (1987), she pixilated images of women’s bodies and obscured them altogether by writing sexually explicit language over them. As Hammer herself explains her cinematic aesthetic, “the lesbian body is holes and gaps and innuendoes and fringes and areas that are not defined. To me, we can’t be defined or won’t be defined—as much as we try. Or once we get a definition, the lesbian will move on to redefine herself.”⁴¹

Perhaps as a result of experimenting with technology and its impact on representation, Hammer's later films move beyond solely lesbian-feminist concerns to a wider range of issues related to sexuality, identity, and artistic creation. Hammer tackled the AIDS crisis, for example, directly in the video *Snow Job: The Media Hysteria of AIDS* (1986) and more indirectly in *Endangered* (1988), an abstract aural and visual collage that makes a connection between endangered species (including *Homo sapiens*) and the precarious nature of her own experimental film work. In both films, abstract forms and sounds generated via media technology threaten to eradicate their living subjects altogether. In the 1990s, Hammer made a series of longer films. The first of these, *Nitrate Kisses* (1992), begins with a consideration of how the American novelist Willa Cather's sexuality has been erased from history. The film explores queer sexualities hitherto hidden, including lesbian relationships during the Holocaust and gay male iconography of the 1930s. Hammer counters those historical musings with contemporary footage of sexualities still considered to be taboo (even by many queers). Thus, two older women make love for the camera, as does a sadomasochistic duo. As an interracial male couple have sex, Hammer overlays the written text of the Hollywood Production Code, in effect forcing that document to confront what it had censored for so long. Similarly, *History Lessons* (2001) uses found footage appropriated from old newsreels, stag films, pulp magazines, and educational films to explore the interstitial spaces in which lesbians have hidden from mainstream culture's view throughout most of the twentieth century.

Barbara Hammer and Jan Oxenberg were part of a growing contingent of 1970s lesbian-feminist filmmakers who sought to challenge cinematic conventions in order to imagine new ways of representing women's bodies and concerns. Another such filmmaker, Anne Severson, in her film *Near the Big Chakra* (1973), clinically documented the "vaginas of thirty-seven women of all ages, allowing the biological reality of women's anatomy, the diversity of its forms, to desensationalize it and retrieve it from the sanitized cosmetics of the [mainstream] media."⁴² In *Gently down the Stream* (1981), filmmaker Su Friedrich scratched words onto the film's emulsion, obscuring and commenting upon its photographic images. Friedrich's film *Damned If You Don't* (1987) deals directly with the pleasures of voyeurism. In it, a woman alternates between watching *Black Narcissus* (1946, a British film with connotative lesbianism between nuns) on television and watching an actual nun in her neighborhood. The film repeatedly disrupts the power of the gaze: the woman gets distracted from watching the film; the audience's view of the television image is often blurred; a scene of the woman chasing the nun is shot with a jerky handheld camera; and the film ends before the viewer can wit-

ness the culmination of the encounter between the woman and the nun. The films of Su Friedrich, Jan Oxenberg, and Barbara Hammer—along with those of other lesbian-feminist filmmakers of the era, including Lizzie Borden, Sheila McLaughlin, and Sadie Benning—experiment with the possibilities of film form in order to represent lesbian-feminist concerns, often while simultaneously questioning the very nature of representation itself.⁴³

Gay Liberation Documentary Comes Out

The lesbian-feminist experimental films of the 1970s paralleled another development in lesbian and gay filmmaking: documentary films about the gay liberation movement and its history. Speaking of the first generation of these films, Thomas Waugh notes that many of them “seemed intuitively to prefer artificial and hyperbolic ‘performance’ discourses that pushed through and beyond realist codes . . . hence the tutti-frutti compendium of performance styles that characterizes so many” of them.⁴⁴ Here Waugh is referencing not just the works of Barbara Hammer and Jan Oxenberg but also those of German filmmaker Rosa von Praunheim, whose two experimental “documentaries” of the era generated a great deal of controversy (as did much of his later work). *It Is Not the Homosexual Who Is Perverse but the Situation in Which He Lives* (1971) was a didactically Marxist attack that “infuriated most American gays with its highly dogmatic, almost dictatorial litany of accusations lodged against bourgeois homosexuals and their self-destructive lifestyle.”⁴⁵ In the early years of gay liberation, such a harsh critique of the movement was not welcomed by many. Von Praunheim’s later film *Army of Lovers, Revolt of the Perverts* (1978) was an even more queer hybrid of documentary and fictional footage, and it too infuriated middle-class sensibilities with its call for radical militancy. (Von Praunheim’s work has rarely been widely distributed in the United States; instead, it has been screened mostly within occasional gay and lesbian film festivals.) Tom Joslin’s *Blackstar: Autobiography of a Close Friend* (1977) also invoked performance styles, not only to explore aspects of sexual identity, but also to question the dominant modes of cinematic realism. Similarly, Jack Hazan’s *A Bigger Splash* (1975), a film about gay painter David Hockney, veers between fact and fiction, never claiming to be presenting objective “truth.”⁴⁶

However, the era’s actual lesbian and gay audiences tended to prefer films that were more traditional in style, more anchored in the prescribed realist discourses of documentary filmmaking. As Tom Waugh puts it, “most of the prophetic ‘performance’ films that stand up well in this retroactive view—autobiographical, experimental, and erotic—had uneven relationships with

the lesbian and gay masses who allegedly preferred positive images and realist conventions.”⁴⁷ Thus, while many gay liberation theorists and filmmakers advocated more challenging hybrid film styles that sought to question issues of cinematic realism and the nature of “objective” representation, audiences often preferred uncomplicated “talking head” documentaries and cinémarité type chronicles. The straightforward lesbian-feminist documentary *In the Best Interests of the Children* (1977), for example, dealt with child-custody issues for lesbian mothers, and it was arguably the most popular lesbian documentary of the period.⁴⁸ Queer audiences’ dislike of formal experimentation surprised artists such as Barbara Hammer: “Finding that the lesbian audience was just as conservative as a heterosexual one was a big blow to me, because I just thought that all lesbians were going to be curious, breaking rules, breaking norms, out on the fringe. I thought that’s what a lesbian was.”⁴⁹

Probably the most significant 1970s queer documentary made in conventional style is *Word Is Out* (1977), a film featuring interviews with some twenty-plus queers from diverse walks of life. *Word Is Out* (which is subtitled *Stories of Some of Our Lives*) was a groundbreaking work for its era. For the first time, an American film allowed a broad cross section of actual gay and lesbian Americans the chance to speak for themselves. There is no “objective counterpoint” from homophobic psychiatrists, religious leaders, or legal experts. In fact, the film makes it all too clear that medicine and psychiatry—allegedly helping professions—have brutalized queers with supposed cures that historically included castration, shock treatment, and the dubious prescription of “two green salads per day.” One participant notes that she had been incarcerated in a state mental hospital for four years, placed there as a teenager by her misguided parents. The film also demonstrates how the era’s queers were made to feel ashamed of themselves by allegedly loving Christian communities and how police forces—instead of protecting the queer minority—were often the first ones to beat, taunt, harass, bribe, and blackmail gay men and lesbians.

Word Is Out is divided into three main segments: “The Early Years,” “Growing Up,” and “From Now On.” In the first, the film gives its subjects the chance to relate their own histories. Memories include how lesbians were witch-hunted out of the military during and after World War II; how gay men found solidarity at gay bars in the early 1960s; and how, as a fifteen-year-old boy, one interviewee sought out sex with older men—directly challenging assumptions about older gay men preying upon teenagers and boys. In “Growing Up,” the film’s speakers begin to develop a queer critique of gender. Butch women and effeminate men discuss defying traditional gender roles in order to express themselves. Donning opposite-sex drag was often the only

way one could express one's queerness, like the butch women of the Women's Army Corps who adopted masculine garb as a way of rejecting traditionally passive femininity. Still, learning to perform "proper" gender was tantamount for most of these people, since every aspect of their lives (from high school social events to business trips to church functions) was predicated upon the illusion of compulsory heterosexuality. Several recount marrying opposite-sex partners and how those marriages were often able to function on the surface of things—even producing children—but that they were nevertheless painful shams.

The third section of the film speculates on the future of the gay liberation movement and helps link the film's historic concerns to contemporary ones. While parts of the film seem quite dated (such as the music, hairstyles, and language), this section makes one realize that many of the same battles are still being fought in our supposedly much more liberated era. The military still maintains discriminatory practices against queers. Two lesbian mothers talk about their children but also the harassment their kids face in school and the ease with which one homophobic husband (with the aid of the courts) could and did reclaim "his" children from an "unhealthy" environment. One man decries the assimilationist trend of queer men reembracing masculine styles and attitudes, mourning the truly queer potential of the early 1970s. Another participant presciently fears a potential backlash—that the many gains queers were making in the 1970s might be reversed in future years.

Those gains were also the subject of Arthur Bressan's *Gay USA* (1978), another of the era's more traditionally constructed documentaries. The film consists mostly of recorded conversations and events at gay pride parades and festivals in New York City, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Chicago, and San Diego. Like *Word Is Out*, *Gay USA* was meant as an act of cinematic coming out, documenting a new generation of queers unafraid to talk about their current and past experiences. For example, the film documents the growing rift between gay male and lesbian communities over the politics of drag. Anita Bryant and her crusade to repeal gay rights ordinances are referenced throughout the film, and the historical persecution of homosexuals is recalled via displays of the pink triangle, the symbol homosexual men were forced to wear in Nazi Germany's concentration camps. Historical gay life in America is also discussed. Police brutality and thirty-day jail sentences are recalled, and one older commentator notes (in relation to the out-and-proud crowd), "Thank God they're out—they won't need shrinks." Despite such historical transformations, the film still warns that there is more work to be done: it is dedicated to Robert Hillsborough, a man murdered by gay bashers on June 22, 1977.

As the 1970s became the 1980s, queer history would continue to be unearthed by documentary filmmakers. With *Pink Triangles* (1982), the Nazi persecution of homosexuals was revealed to many people—even some historians—for the very first time. *Before Stonewall* (1984) explores the history of queers before gay liberation, insisting that gay and lesbian people have always been a part of Western culture. *Silent Pioneers* (1985) centers on older gay and lesbian people and reviews the historic changes that occurred within their lives. *The Times of Harvey Milk* (1984) chronicles gay culture in San Francisco, the election of Harvey Milk as the city's first openly gay city supervisor, and his eventual assassination at the hands of an unhinged right-wing politician. When the film won an Oscar in 1985 for Best Documentary Film, it signaled new respect for queer-themed work. Queer documentaries, whether conventional or hybrid in form, continue to be made in ever-greater numbers. They continue to illuminate aspects of queer lives that the mainstream media still refuses to acknowledge.

The First Gay Fictional Features

Just as many lesbians and gay men preferred straightforward documentaries to more experimental ones, so too did they prefer traditional Hollywood-style films to underground or midnight cult films.⁵⁰ Thus, starting in the 1970s, there were several attempts to produce independent—but still conventional—films about contemporary gay lives. By their very nature, these films cost much more to make than experimental shorts, but a few gay male filmmakers found enough capital to get their films made. Still, many of them suffer from low production values, bad acting, and disorganized storylines. They also had a hard time recouping their costs, since they were poorly distributed. Most legitimate distributors and exhibitors refused to handle them, and many newspapers refused to advertise them. As such, these first gay-narrative films have been largely forgotten, not only to American film history, but also to gay culture.

These first gay feature films explore a variety of issues related to gay liberation, such as coming out, gender norms, heterosexism, and monogamy versus sexual freedom. Most of them seem to have been inspired by *Boys in the Band*, as they all focus on a diverse (albeit mostly middle class and white) group of contemporary gay men living in and around New York City. *Sticks and Stones* (1970), for example, centers on a troubled gay male relationship but also presents a larger, communal context for its central characters, as friends gather for a party at a Fire Island time-share. By turns campy, outrageous, and maudlin, much of *Sticks and Stones* was apparently improvised.

More scripted (and more widely distributed) was *Some of My Best Friends Are . . .* (1971), a film that follows a large cast of characters as they interact on Christmas Eve at a gay bar called the Blue Jay.

Christopher Larkin's *A Very Natural Thing* (1974) explores the impact of gay liberation on traditional romantic ideals. The film is a realist drama punctuated by "talking head" interviews shot at gay pride festivals and thus partakes of a hybrid form. In it, gay ex-monk David (Robert Joel) desires a traditional "marriage," while his lover Mark (Curt Jareth) wants a more sexually open relationship. Their initial romance is represented via Hollywood clichés—sharing the Sunday *New York Times*, romping through a spectacular Central Park in the fall—and the film makes this explicit by having its characters repeatedly refer to *Love Story* (1970). The couple eventually break up because Mark will not remain faithful to David. *A Very Natural Thing* was "dismissed as a trivial soap opera by the establishment press and generally savaged by gay liberationists for its romantic illusions and lack of a radical conviction."⁵¹ Stylistic choices made in the film (lighting, focus, music) do seem to encourage the spectator to regard sexual experimentation as threatening rather than liberatory. However, David's desire for traditional monogamy is also made to seem rather whiny and controlling. Furthermore, by the end of the film, David himself has shied away from total commitment. Finding another beau, *he* is the one who tries to keep from making a permanent declaration. The film's final slow-motion images show David and his new boyfriend romping on the beach, enjoying what they have at the moment, leaving the exact nature of gay relationships open for discussion.

Mainstream reviews of these films indicate that many people assumed that an independent gay film must be a pornographic one. The *Boxoffice* review of *Sticks and Stones*, for example, points out with surprise that "the story is played seriously and is thus far better than a typical flesh film."⁵² New Line Cinema went out of its way to distribute *A Very Natural Thing* (often to gay community groups rather than to commercial theaters) as "the first accurate, non-pornographic presentation of contemporary American urban gay life."⁵³ Like many earlier films made by and for queers, these first gay-male features today have an ethnographic quality, as they document the era's gay beaches, nightclubs, bars, and baths located in and around New York City. One review of *Sticks and Stones* even praised it for its alleged "cinema-verité quality,"⁵⁴ while another said it was "in every respect an authentic presentation of the ups and downs of a homosexual love affair."⁵⁵ While one may doubt the actual authenticity of these films—beyond the locations they used—they nonetheless provide compelling representations of gay men of the liberation

era. (Conventional narrative features made by and about American lesbians seem to have been nonexistent at this time.)

At the same time that gay independent filmmakers in America were struggling to produce their work, a number of foreign films made by queer artists were being distributed in the United States. The films of Rainer Werner Fassbinder, a leading figure of New German Cinema, were especially significant.⁵⁶ Many of them, including *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* (1972), *Fox and His Friends* (1975), *In a Year of Thirteen Moons* (1978), and *Querelle* (1982), deal with lesbian, gay, and transsexual issues from austere and uncompromising perspectives. Even when they do not contain explicitly queer characters, Fassbinder's films use camp aesthetics to rework the conventions of the Hollywood melodrama (especially those films directed by Douglas Sirk and produced by Ross Hunter). *The Marriage of Maria Braun* (1978), *Lola* (1979), and *Veronika Voss* (1981) use the genre's mannered style to radically distance the audience from their characters and actions and make even traditional heterosexuality seem queer. Furthermore, Fassbinder's films continually draw links between sexuality, gender, race, class, and nationality, dramatizing how all are queerly interconnected in complex ways.

Fassbinder was not the only queer foreign director getting noticed in America. Also from Germany came the aforementioned Ulrike Ottinger and Rosa von Praunheim, as well as Frank Ripplloh, whose *Taxi Zum Klo* (1980) was embraced by many gay liberationists.⁵⁷ Homosexual Italian auteurs Pier Paolo Pasolini and Luchino Visconti also directed notoriously queer films distributed in American art houses, including Pasolini's *Teorema* (1968), *The Decameron* (1971), and *Salo* (1976); and Visconti's *The Damned* (1969), *Death in Venice* (1971), and *Ludwig* (1972). British queer director Derek Jarman received international notice for his homoerotic film *Sebastiane* (1976). Art house audiences also had a chance to see Richard Benner's *Outrageous!* (1977), a Canadian comedy about a gay female impersonator.

Many of these films (and countless others not lucky enough to earn distribution deals) were first screened in America at newly formed lesbian and gay film festivals. In 1977, a group of filmmakers in the San Francisco Bay Area organized a collective that they called Persistence of Vision and held the nation's first gay film festival. The group's goal was "to provide a forum for our art and at the same time provide a pool of talent, energy, and equipment to help each other."⁵⁸ Rechristened Frameline in 1979, this group moved from organizing the annual festival to becoming a lesbian/gay independent film distribution network.⁵⁹ Other lesbian and gay film festivals were formed in major cities across the nation. The growth of the festivals allowed people in urban areas to see internationally produced queer films, as well as

documentaries and experimental films made by domestic queers. For queer audiences who had access to films such as *Pink Narcissus*, *Superdyke*, *Word Is Out*, *A Very Natural Thing*, or *Taxi Zum Klo*, the images they provided were like a breath of fresh air. They seemed real—or at least more real than the stereotyped queers offered up in Hollywood movies. Gay Liberation films made by and for queer people helped to define and solidify queer communities. They laid the groundwork for increased criticism of Hollywood's representation of homosexuality, as well as the explosion of work that would be produced by queers in the ensuing decades.

Notes

1. Mark Blasius and Shane Phelan, eds., *We Are Everywhere: A Historical Sourcebook of Gay and Lesbian Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 377. For more on this moment, see John Loughery, *The Other Side of Silence: Men's Lives and Gay Identities: A Twentieth Century History* (New York: Henry Holt, 1998), 321–38.

2. The guidelines addressed the role of stereotyping and the use of derogatory terms in reference to gay and lesbian people, as well as the need for straight media professionals to avail themselves of actual queer input when making media that dealt with queer issues. The guidelines are reprinted in Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987 [1981]), 220–21.

3. Thomas Waugh, “Walking on Tippy Toes: Lesbian and Gay Liberation Documentary of the Post-Stonewall Period, 1969–84,” in *Between the Sheets, in the Streets: Queer, Lesbian, Gay Documentary*, ed. Chris Holmlund and Cynthia Fuchs (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 107–8.

4. Eric Marcus, *Making History: The Struggle for Gay and Lesbian Equal Rights (1945–1990): An Oral History* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 258.

5. See “Homosexuals in Revolt,” *Life* 71 (31 December 1971): 62–72; and “The Militant Homosexual,” *Newsweek*, 23 August 1971, 45–48.

6. Loughery, *Other Side of Silence*, 345.

7. Loughery, *Other Side of Silence*, 345.

8. Loughery, *Other Side of Silence*, 330.

9. Loughery, *Other Side of Silence*, 340.

10. For more on this struggle, see Ronald Bayer, *Homosexuality and American Psychiatry: The Politics of Diagnosis* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987).

11. Judd Marmor, quoted in Marcus, 254.

12. Marcus, *Making History*, 259.

13. Many of these have been collected and reprinted in Blasius and Phelan, *We Are Everywhere*, 380–437.

14. Guy Hocquenghem, *Homosexual Desire*, trans. Daniella Dangoor (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1993 [1978]); Monique Wittig, *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992).

15. See especially the manifesto by Radicalesbians, "The Woman-Identified Woman," in Blasius and Phelan, *We Are Everywhere*, 396–99.

16. Robin Morgan, "Lesbian and Feminism: Synonyms or Contradictions?" in Blasius and Phelan, *We Are Everywhere*, 425.

17. Morgan, "Lesbian and Feminism," 426–27.

18. Morgan, "Lesbian and Feminism," 430.

19. Richard Dyer, *Now You See It: Studies on Lesbian and Gay Film*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2002 [1993]), 161.

20. For more on these filmmakers, see Dyer, *Now You See It*, 162–63.

21. For an overview of the midnight-movie phenomenon, see J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Midnight Movies* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983).

22. Maurice Yacowar writes that Morrissey did direct *Lonesome Cowboys*; but Yacowar himself does not discuss the film in any depth as part of Morrissey's overall body of work. It is perhaps best to consider *Lonesome Cowboys* as a collaborative effort between Warhol and Morrissey, whereas the films discussed here in the body of this text (and Yacowar's) are more regularly credited solely to Paul Morrissey. Yacowar, *The Films of Paul Morrissey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 21.

23. Joan Hawkins, "Monsters in the Art World: Andy Warhol and Paul Morrissey," *Cutting Edge: Art-Horror and the Horrific Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 169–203.

24. Stephen Tropiano, "Joe Dallesandro—a 'Him' to the Gaze: *Flesh*, *Heat*, and *Trash*," *Spectator* 10, no. 1 (Fall 1989): 51.

25. Discussed in Hawkins, "Monsters in the Art World," 194.

26. Yacowar, *Films of Paul Morrissey*, 1.

27. Quoted in the documentary film *Divine Trash* (1998).

28. One of the first and best books about John Waters was written by Waters himself: *Shock Value* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1995 [1981]). See also Jack Stevenson, *Desperate Visions: Camp America* (London: Creation Books, 1996); and J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Midnight Movies* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), 136–73. Waters has also published screenplays and essays: *Trash Trio: Three Screenplays* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988) and *Crackpot: The Obsessions of John Waters* (New York: Vintage Books, 1986 [1983]).

29. Waters, *Shock Value*, 22.

30. For a similar critique from within film studies per se, see Gaylyn Studlar, "Midnight S/Excess: Cult Configurations of 'Femininity' and the Perverse," in *The Cult Film Experience: Beyond All Reason*, ed. J. P. Telotte (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991), 138–55.

31. Blasius and Phelan, *We Are Everywhere*, 436.

32. Morgan, "Lesbian and Feminism," 428.

33. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Film Theory and Criticism: An Introduction*, 6th ed., ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 837–48.

34. Andrea Weiss, *Vampires and Violets: Lesbians in Film* (New York: Penguin, 1992), 112.
35. Weiss, *Vampires and Violets*, 119.
36. Kate Haug, "Femme Experimentale Interviews with Carolee Schneemann, Barbara Hammer, and Chick Strand," *Wide Angle* 20, no. 1 (1998): 4.
37. Weiss, *Vampires and Violets*, 140
38. Waugh, "Walking on Tippy Toes," 116.
39. Barbara Hammer, quoted in Kate Haug, "An Interview with Barbara Hammer," *Wide Angle* 20, no. 1 (1998): 67.
40. Dina Ciraulo, "Artistic Presence," *Wide Angle* 20, no. 1 (1988): 97.
41. Barbara Hammer, quoted in Kate Haug, "An Interview with Barbara Hammer," *Wide Angle* 20, no. 1 (1998):67.
42. David James, *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989), 317.
43. See Chris Holmlund, "When Autobiography Meets Ethnography and Girl Meets Girl: The 'Dyke Docs' of Sadie Benning and Su Friedrich," in Holmlund and Fuchs, *Between the Sheets*, 127–43.
44. Waugh, "Walking on Tippy Toes," 112–13.
45. Russo, *Celluloid Closet*, 204.
46. For a more thorough analysis, see Scott Bagley, "A Painter's Discourse: David Hockney and the Image-Repertoire," *Spectator* 13, no. 2 (Spring 1993): 18.
47. Waugh, "Walking on Tippy Toes," 122.
48. Waugh, "Walking on Tippy Toes," 116.
49. Hammer, 77.
50. "Mainstream films were indeed far more popular than experimental films among gay audiences." Juan A. Suarez, *Bike Boys, Drag Queens, and Superstars: Avant-Garde, Mass Culture, and Gay Identities in the 1960s Underground Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 130.
51. Russo, *Celluloid Closet*, 207.
52. "Experimental Feature: *Sticks and Stones*," *Boxoffice BookinGuide*, 4 May 1970. The review also notes that the film "goes much further than *The Boys in the Band*, as it shows men in bed together and there is some frontal nudity of both sexes. . . . Best playing dates will be found in art houses, particularly in hippie sections which attract many people to their shops and restaurants."
53. Advertising copy (on file at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences).
54. Kevin Thomas, "Movie Review: *Sticks, Stones*' Tragicomedy," *Los Angeles Times*, 21 February 1970.
55. Edgar D. Jones, "Film Review: *Sticks and Stones*," *Los Angeles Free Press*, 20 March 1970, 38.
56. There are many resources available on Fassbinder. For an explicitly queer take on his work, see Alice A. Kuzniar, *The Queer German Cinema* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000), 57–87.

57. Again, see Kuzniar for more on these filmmakers.

58. San Francisco Lesbian and Gay Film Festival announcement (1977), reproduced in Twenty-Fifth Annual San Francisco Lesbian and Gay Film Festival program (2001), 3.

59. Susan Stryker, "Festival—25 Years," Twenty-Fifth Annual San Francisco Lesbian and Gay Film Festival program, 19.

CHAPTER EIGHT



Out of the Closet and into the Art House



Though written and directed by a heterosexual man, *Personal Best* (1982) drew many lesbians to the theater because it depicted a relationship between Chris (Mariel Hemingway) and Tory (Patrice Donnelly). Warner Bros. / The Kobal Collection

A decade of gay liberation created new shifts in Americans' understanding of sexuality. Although homophobia, secrecy, and the closet were still fairly pervasive phenomena, more and more queer people were finding ways to come out and live openly. Yet, there was also a growing resistance to the advances made by the gay liberation movement. A revival of Christian fundamentalism in the United States helped fuel a backlash to feminism and gay liberation. The shift to the political right and the rise of the "Moral Majority" led to the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980; his administration and supporters tried to roll back much of what had been accomplished by women and queers (among others) during the previous decades.¹ The Equal Rights Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was defeated in 1982. And, as the 1980s progressed, the New Right would use the growing AIDS crisis (discussed more fully in the next chapter) to argue that homosexuality was unhealthy as well as immoral and to once again figure queers as social pariahs.

American motion pictures during this period reflected both the progress that had been made by gay liberation and the backlash against it. Some films tried to show greater awareness and acceptance of sexual diversity, while others expressed fear and hatred. One of the first and most notorious of these new queer films was *Can't Stop the Music* (1980), a disco musical starring Steve Guttenberg, Olympic athlete Bruce Jenner, Valerie Perrine, and the queer disco group Village People. Directed by character actress Nancy Walker and written and produced by gay music mogul Allan Carr, the film features over-the-top acting, unbelievable dialogue, and outrageously homoerotic dance numbers staged in the tradition of classical Hollywood choreographer Busby Berkeley. In the "YMCA" number, for example, the cast sings and dances in a gym full of hot young men in skimpy shorts, and everyone soaps themselves up for a frothy, naked group-shower scene. Yet despite the beefcake and wall-to-wall camp, Valerie Perrine and Bruce Jenner are always front and center as the film's heterosexual love interests. Like the song "YMCA" itself—a winking hymn to the casual sex that gay men could expect to find there—the film is steeped in a queer sensibility while also maintaining "plausible deniability." Producer Allan Carr allegedly demanded retractions when industry publications called the film "gay themed," and during "preproduction, filming, and postproduction, individual Village People had to agree not to be gay."² All of this was moot however, since the film bombed on its initial theatrical release. By 1980, mainstream audiences were beginning to realize that disco music had emerged from the gay and black club scenes of the 1970s. In response, "disco sucks" became a common catchphrase used to disdain the music and its fans. Although *Can't Stop the Music's* outlandishly queer sensibility alienated

many moviegoers in 1980, the film has since then become a cult item among aficionados of cinematic camp.³

Portrayals of queer figures in mainstream media of the 1980s were a constant source of contention. Members of the New Right organized to voice their objections to any images deemed to be promoting “the gay agenda,” and they worked to pass strict rules against obscenity and to limit government funding of “controversial” art. Lesbian and gay consumers also reacted against what they felt to be negative depictions of queers in the mass media and took grassroots action to protest. Yet, there was rarely a consensus over what constituted a positive representation, even among queers themselves. The balkanization of various queer communities that had begun in the 1970s continued apace as the 1980s began. Lesbians and queers of color were often denied access to the worlds of white gay men. Transgendered or effeminate gay men continued to clash with clones, who favored overt expressions of masculinity. Some lesbians still took offense to male cross-dressing, while others critiqued the butch/femme traditions of their own communities. Lesbians who championed radical sexual practices, including sadomasochism or a performative butch/femme aesthetic (including self-identified “lipstick lesbians”), clashed with feminist antiporn crusaders, whose belief in the harmful nature of explicit sexual representation created a strange alliance between them and the religious right.⁴ In such a climate of contestation, most queer films of this period (whether made in Hollywood or by the growing number of independent producers) had a hard time pleasing diverse audiences.

The Return of the Killer Queer

As part of the growing right-wing backlash toward lesbians and gay men, the 1980s opened with a volley of Hollywood movies that reinvented the decades-old stereotype of the killer queer. One of the first of these films was Brian De Palma’s glossy thriller *Dressed to Kill* (1980). In it, Michael Caine plays Dr. Elliott, a crazy cross-dressing psychiatrist who slashes Kate Miller (Angie Dickinson) to death in an elevator with a straight razor. *Dressed to Kill* obviously “quotes” Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960), a film that might be thought of as the progenitor of the slasher film, a subgenre of the horror film that would become one of the most profitable film formulas of the 1980s. In slasher films, sexually active teenagers and women get murdered in brutal phallic ways, often by a psychokiller of more or less queer origin. In some films, the homosexuality of the psychokiller is relatively overt, as in *Windows* (1980) or *The Fan* (1981). Other slasher films, such as *Prom Night* (1980), *Deadly Blessing* (1981), *Sleepaway Camp* (1983), and *Heart of Midnight*

(1988), copy the *Psycho* formula and reveal their killers to be transsexuals. Even when not overtly homosexual or transgendered, the killer is still usually queer, often a man in some sort of gender distress. He is an updating of the psychopathic sex pervert so beloved of 1950s psychiatrists. Carol Clover, in her groundbreaking work on the subgenre, also notes that the “Final Girl” hero of these films is relatively masculinized, thus representing another queer wrinkle in the formula.⁵

It has often been suggested that slasher films are best understood as part of a reactionary backlash to the 1960s counterculture. Sexuality, drugs, queers, and independent women are all “punished” or made horrifying in these films, as phallic chainsaws and butcher knives penetrate bodies in deadly ways. Furthering their antisex agenda, the Final Girl hero of these films generally survives precisely because she is a virgin. Critics have also understood these films as cultural responses to the AIDS crisis, since the generic imperative of the slasher film seems to be “those who have sex will die horribly.” Although slasher films predate the public’s awareness of AIDS, they became cultural staples during the first years of the crisis. Other types of homophobic horror films also underwent a renaissance in the 1980s. The lesbian vampire staged a comeback in *The Hunger* (1983), and monstrous quasi-lesbian attacks on women by women occur in both *Prince of Darkness* (1987) and *The Kiss* (1988). The killer-queer motif was prevalent in even larger, more sophisticated films of the era. For example, *Deathtrap* (1982), based upon Ira Levin’s successful stage thriller, stars Michael Caine and Christopher Reeve as murderous gay playwrights who kiss before they kill.

Intriguingly, one of the era’s slasher films was written by noted lesbian novelist Rita Mae Brown. On the surface of things, *The Slumber Party Massacre* (1982) does not look that different from any other slasher film. But on closer inspection, the film seems to suggest that violence against women is endemic to patriarchal heterosexuality itself. The film creates a continuum between “normal” young men (who think it is fun to terrorize women) and its psychotic killer (whose favorite weapon is an electric drill). In case anyone missed the point, the drill is pointedly framed between the killer’s legs in many shots (and in the film’s advertising campaign), literally refiguring the penis as a deadly weapon. The film’s sequel, *Slumber Party Massacre II* (1987, written and directed by Deborah Brock), takes this idea even further, turning its driller-killer into a “cock-rocker” whose phallic guitar now sports the deadly drill. His attacks are directly conflated with sexual intercourse, and he even sings and dances in an aggressive masculine fashion as he hunts down his victims. By breaking out of the horror genre with music and comedy, the film allows the spectator the chance to relate to the premise in a more ironic,

critical way. However, it is equally possible that viewers can respond to the picture as just another slasher film in which sexually active teens get butchered in gruesome ways.

The rise of the slasher film did not go unchallenged. Many women's groups decried them, and lesbian and gay activists were also motivated to protest. Perhaps the most famous of these protests involved *Cruising* (1980), a murky thriller set in the world of New York City's gay S&M subculture. In it, a "straight" cop (Al Pacino) searches for a serial killer of gay men by going undercover as a gay leatherman, a process that makes him question his own sexuality. *Cruising* is based on a novel by Gerald Walker, and plans to film it had begun in the early 1970s with Paul Morrissey slated to direct and Jack Doroshov (who had worked on *The Queen* [1968]) named as consultant.⁶ Talks stalled, however, and the project would not be revived until early 1979, when William Friedkin (*Boys in the Band* [1970], *The French Connection* [1971], *The Exorcist* [1973]) decided to direct the film. Extensive shooting in New York City was planned for the summer of 1979, and a number of leather bars and their patrons were hired to provide verisimilitude. Then, someone in the production team (presumably gay) leaked a copy of the script to the gay press, and word soon spread about the story's dark, violent, and potentially homophobic tone. All but one of the gay bars hired for the picture withdrew, as did a number of extras.⁷ The Gay Activist Alliance protested through formal channels and petitioned Mayor Ed Koch to revoke the production's location permits, a request that was denied.⁸ The National Gay Task Force, on the other hand, organized street protests and civil disobedience in an attempt to disrupt the filming. *Village Voice* columnist Michael Bell informed his readers when and where filmmakers were going to be shooting and encouraged them "to give Friedkin and his production crew a terrible time."⁹ People who lived near the film's location sets blasted their stereos or squatted on stairways in order to sabotage filmmaking. Others lined "police barriers, blew whistles, sounded smoke alarms, banged pots, [and] played castanets."¹⁰ There were even reports of bomb threats. (The thought-to-be-more-gay-friendly-film *Can't Stop the Music* was also shooting on location throughout New York City that summer, but protesters took care not to interfere with that production, even warning it when *Cruising* protests were going to occur.)¹¹

The rage against *Cruising* continued even after location shooting wrapped, as gay groups held press conferences and prepared to picket theaters. Then, a month before *Cruising*'s premiere, United Artists (the studio responsible for making and distributing it) released *Windows*, a slasher film about a psychotic lesbian stalking a straight woman. Already primed, protestors sprung

into action: the National Gay Task Force, the National Association of Lesbian and Gay Filmmakers, Women against Violence against Women, and Women against Pornography vigorously lambasted the film.¹² When spokespeople for the film defended themselves by claiming that the picture was not indicating that all lesbians were psychotic, protesters sent out a press statement arguing that “it would be cynical to argue that this film . . . portrays only one sick individual and not all lesbians. . . . The fact remains that other contrasting images of lesbians do not exist in Hollywood films.”¹³ *Windows* had been shot partly on location in New York City, as had *Cruising*, but it did not encounter any organized attempts to disrupt filming, because, unlike *Cruising*, *Windows* and its subject matter were not known by the lesbian and gay community.¹⁴ As a press release for the film acknowledged, “because of the highly unusual nature of the storyline, *Windows* was filmed on closed sets, and the cast and production crew were pledged to secrecy when it came to discussing the movie.”¹⁵ During production, the film was known as *Corky*, and it was described in trade journals as a romantic thriller.

Demonstrations against *Windows* and *Cruising* were initially thought to be great publicity, especially by *Cruising*'s producer Jerry Weintraub.¹⁶ However, the ferocity and duration of the protests ended up working against both films. *Windows* bombed at the box office. When *Cruising* finally did premiere, it was rated X, limiting its potential advertising and exhibition venues. Even after it was recut to an R, some theater chains worried about the film's bad press and tried to break their contracts to exhibit it.¹⁷ Ultimately, the film did nowhere near the business that Friedkin and United Artists had hoped. It became known to many (and still is known) as a notoriously homophobic Hollywood film. Its leather clubs are made lurid and threatening, and part of the point seems to be that Pacino's cop “catches” violent homosexuality just from associating with such people. The film also seems to equate homosexual sex with bloody murder on several occasions: during one sex scene gone awry, a knife literally replaces the penis and stabs a man in the back (as per the usual slasher-film formula). In *The Celluloid Closet*, Vito Russo wrote that “the audience is left with the message that homosexuality is not only contagious but inescapably brutal”;¹⁸ and, as feared, the film did incite some viewers to homophobic violence. In *The Celluloid Closet* film (1995), gay screenwriter Ron Nyswaner recounts how he and his lover were almost gay bashed by thugs who yelled at them, “If you saw the movie *Cruising*, you know what you deserve.”

However, even during the initial controversy over *Cruising*, there was not a consensus of opinion about the actual meaning(s) of the film, either among

straight critics or queer filmgoers, partly because the film's rather incoherent narrative leaves various plot points unexplained. Even the actual identity of the killer is not made explicit.¹⁹ Other aspects of the film also caused confusion—for example, *Time* described “Precinct Night” at one of the leather clubs as a party for gay men who liked to dress up as cops, while the *New Yorker* saw it as a party for actual cops who were gay.²⁰ Furthermore, not all gay men considered *Cruising* to be a “bad” film. According to John Devere, the editor in chief of the gay skin magazines *Mandate* and *Honcho*, “more than 1600 gay men participated in the filming of *Cruising*.”²¹ Most of the gay extras who worked on the film in spite of the protests were themselves part of the leather subculture and were eager to represent what they felt was a marginalized group within the gay community. They wanted to counter “established straight stereotypes of gays . . . with unexpected images . . . of gay men as super-macho men certainly capable of taking care of themselves, not limp-wristed Franklin Pangborns.”²² While many viewers of the film see its club scenes as scary and ominous, those scenes are also filled with gay men reveling in their sexuality (as well as the fact that a camera is interested in capturing it). According to Devere, many of the gay men who protested against *Cruising* were middle-class “vanilla” homosexuals who found the entire leather S&M scene itself to be a negative image.

Similarly, writing in *The Advocate* in 1995, columnist Donna Minkowitz recalled, “Many of us saw Friedkin’s film as an indictment of the ’70s gay male sex scene, but it could just as easily be viewed as a celebration of it.”²³ Although many gay film critics lambasted the film upon its initial release, some have also come to its defense over the years. Gay film scholar Robin Wood argues that *Cruising* is actually about the violence that results from the repression of sexuality,²⁴ a project that links it to films such as *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (1967) and *American Beauty* (1999). Gerald Walker, the author of the novel on which *Cruising* was based, explained as much while defending the project in a 1979 letter to the *Village Voice*: “The two violent characters in the book—the killer and the decoy cop—are depicted as latent homosexuals who, for their own reasons, cannot admit their gay tendencies. As a result, the energy emerges not as ‘forbidden’ homosexuality, but as murderous violence directed at homosexuals in the vain attempt to exorcise what they see as internal demons.”²⁵ Despite the era’s facile debates over whether or not *Cruising* was a positive or negative development in the representation of gay men, it has proved to be an enduring queer film that explores the borders (however murkily or irresponsibly) between male homosexual desire, “straight” homosocial bonding, and violence.

“Gay Positive” Hollywood?

The large outcry over killer-queer films such as *Windows* and *Cruising* seemed to register with studio executives—at least in the short term. Suddenly, producers were lining up a slate of ostensibly positive queer films to go before the cameras, prompting David Denby to write in *New York* magazine, “As all the world knows, 1982 is the year of the Great Hollywood Gay-Movie Caper.”²⁶ Indeed, in that one year Hollywood released *Partners*, *Victor/Victoria*, *Tootsie*, *Personal Best*, *Making Love*, and *The World According to Garp*, films that attempted to represent lesbians, gay men, and even transgendered characters in more realistic, sensitive ways. Another probable reason for the “kinder and gentler” approach was the phenomenal popularity of *La Cage aux Folles* (1978), a French film farce about an aging gay couple that became the most successful foreign film release in American history (to that point in time).²⁷ *La Cage aux Folles* deals openly with gay themes and gay characters, and most audiences were delighted by its light, comedic tone, although some queers were offended by its use of stereotypes. The film does invite straight audiences to laugh at the swishy antics of effeminate gay men and drag queens, and both central gay roles are played by heterosexual actors. Still, the film represents a gay male relationship as loving and enduring, and no one gets murdered. *La Cage aux Folles* was so successful that it led to two film sequels (1980, 1985), a Hollywood remake (*The Birdcage* [1996]), and a long-running Broadway musical. (The musical property was so hot in the 1980s that Frank Sinatra was in talks to star in a movie version opposite either Jack Lemmon or Dudley Moore.)

Hollywood’s desire to copy the success of *La Cage aux Folles* led Paramount executives to hire its screenwriter, Francis Veber, to write *Partners*. A comedy about a straight cop and a gay cop who must come to terms with one another in order to solve a case, the film is filled with unfunny stereotypes. Few people laughed and few went to see it. The old-fashioned sex farces *Victor/Victoria* and *Tootsie* were much more successful with mainstream audiences, perhaps because they keep the heterosexuality of their cross-dressing protagonists front and center.²⁸ Julie Andrews’s *Victor/Victoria* is a woman pretending to be a female impersonator in 1930s Paris; conventionally, she falls in love with a he-man gangster (James Garner) after many mistaken identity subplots. In *Tootsie*, Dustin Hoffman’s character dons drag and is hired to star on a television soap opera; he too has a conventional heterosexual love interest amid all the jokes about gender. *Victor/Victoria* does include gay supporting characters (unlike *Tootsie*), most memorably Victoria’s best friend Toddy (Robert Preston), a mildly flamboyant but strongly centered gay man

at peace with his sexuality (in contrast to the other characters). Perhaps the film's most subversive moment is when the gangster's macho body-guard, played by former professional football star Alex Karras, is revealed to be gay.

The World According to Garp also centers on heterosexual characters but includes a male-to-female transsexual named Roberta, played by John Lithgow. Like Toddy in *Victor/Victoria*, Roberta fills the role of good friend to the lead heterosexual character (Robin Williams) and provides for him a grounded emotional dignity.²⁹ The film is one of the few mainstream Hollywood films (still) to depict a transgendered person in a complex and sympathetic way, and in publicity interviews, John Lithgow made a point to raise awareness about transsexualism.³⁰ Yet, while trying to present a positive transgendered character, the film (and the John Irving novel on which it is based) came under attack as antifeminist. David Ansen in *Newsweek* thought that "Irving's real rage is reserved for the fanatical feminists he invents—the Ellen Jamesians, who have cut out their tongues to protest the rape and disfigurement of a little girl. One is meant to be appalled by their perversion of feminism, but their appearance on screen boomerangs: I was more appalled by the imagination that conceived them."³¹ Feminist novelist Marilyn French also railed against the text's sexist stance,³² pointing out the centrality of bodily mutilation and castration imagery in the film, suggesting that the story is really about male castration fears in the wake of the women's liberation movement. As such, male-to-female transsexual Roberta can also be understood as a fearful example of male castration anxieties.

Personal Best, written and directed by Hollywood heterosexual Robert Towne, is a story about two female track athletes who fall into and out of a relationship with one another. While many lesbians were thrilled to see two women onscreen in romantic and sexual situations, others complained that the film was shot in an exploitative manner. Images of women's bodies—particularly a montage sequence of high jumps that uses repeated close-ups of the athletes' crotches—were felt to exemplify Hollywood cinema's fetishistic "male gaze." Some critics believed that this sort of objectification carried over into the scenes of lesbian sex, which looked very like traditional "girl-on-girl" softcore pornography to them. Even straight male reviewer Vincent Canby, in his *New York Times* review, thought that male director "Towne treats the story of the lesbian love affair with something that passes so far beyond understanding that it begins to look like undisguised voyeurism."³³

Personal Best's storyline also displeased lesbian critics, since Chris (Mariel Hemingway) breaks up with her female lover (Patrice Donnelly) to be with a man, a narrative that seemingly endorses the old canard that lesbianism is

simply a phase women go through as they mature into heterosexuals. Nonetheless, a *Village Voice* writer reported that “a friend who recently saw *Personal Best* at the Greenwich Theater, with an audience consisting largely of lesbian couples, said that spontaneous applause and cheering broke out after the initial lovemaking scene.”³⁴ As happens repeatedly with queer film reception, lesbian spectators of *Personal Best* “[skewed] their interpretation to a lesbian reading even to the point of ignoring the film’s heterosexist denouement,”³⁵ hypothesizing that the two women would eventually reignite their romance.

Of all the queer Hollywood films of 1982, 20th Century Fox’s *Making Love* was the most specifically centered on homosexuality—two of its three lead characters are gay men. It was meant to be, in the words of its gay screenwriter Barry Sandler, “the first mainstream Hollywood film to deal with the subject of homosexuality in a positive way, offering positive role models.”³⁶ Sandler used elements from his own life as a somewhat closeted gay man growing up in the 1960s and 1970s to tell the story of Zack (Michael Ontkean), a married doctor coming to terms with his homosexuality. In the process, Zack leaves his wife Claire (Kate Jackson) and tries to establish a relationship with Bart (Harry Hamlin). Importantly, the movie does not shy away from same-sex intimacy. The scene in which the two men tenderly undress one another before hitting the sheets is still arguably one of the most erotic depictions of male-male romance and sexuality ever to be depicted in a mainstream Hollywood film.

Even so, *Making Love* parallels the year’s other queer films in its concern to play to straight viewers. Its makers set out to create a sensitive, caring, and politically correct “issue of the week” melodrama, complete with a user-friendly realist style (rather than the excessive hyperrealist style sometimes associated with melodrama). Screenwriter Sandler underlined his desire to reach heterosexual audiences when he said, “I wanted my film to show that being gay didn’t mean that you were the criminal or the degenerate that Hollywood had portrayed us as since the beginning of time. I really wanted to show that there were doctors and lawyers and teachers and policemen and accountants who were gay too. I wanted to make this a breakthrough to *heterosexual* consciousness.”³⁷ The title of the film itself indicates how the script nods to bourgeois heterosexist conventions by stressing the desirability of “making love” rather than “having sex.” Zack wants a traditional monogamous partnership while Bart rebels against such conventionality, and the film clearly sides with Zack. Zack is also shown to have internal strength and fortitude, while beneath his pretty playboy exterior, Bart is depicted as insecure and angst-ridden. By the end of the film, Zack has found a new partner and



Making Love (1982) was a rare Hollywood attempt to tell a gay love story to a mainstream audience; many straight audiences of the era couldn't handle it. 20th Century Fox / The Kobal Collection

established a marriagelike commitment, a move that allegedly makes homosexual relationships more acceptable to the mainstream by showing that they are just like heterosexual ones. Bart returns to the twilight world of gay bars and one-night stands, a choice that the film represents as a sort of ethereal netherworld via the use of hazy, out-of-focus city lights that symbolically seem to swallow up Bart's very identity.

Although the film takes great pains to distance itself from a medical model of homosexuality (at one climactic moment Zack asserts to Claire that his newfound homosexuality is “not an illness—I’m not gonna change”), psychiatric explanations of homosexuality seem to lurk around the edges of the film. (Indeed, screenwriter Sandler himself went through many years of psychotherapy.) Bart is revealed to have been a precocious child who wrote about incest as a ten-year-old. As an adult, he is a frequent drug user, a hypochondriac, and a narcissist obsessed with his own reflected image. Both Bart and Zack have trouble relating to their fathers, one alleged “cause” of homosexuality according to twentieth-century psychiatrists. When Zack

finally confesses to Claire that he has homosexual desires, he runs through a litany of psychobabble about it, ruminating on whether his condition was genetic or acquired and his suspicions that his desires perhaps stem from his need for another man's "strength," "attitude," and "approval." Thus, rather than deconstruct patriarchal assumptions about male dominance (as queer theory would attempt to do), *Making Love* tends to reaffirm the essential centrality and desirability of masculine privilege. Furthermore, despite the apparent fluidity of his sexuality, the film presents Zack as being "truly" homosexual once he realizes it. The more complex possibilities of bisexuality or some other queer formulation of sexual desire are not addressed.³⁸

Mainstream audiences stayed away from the film in droves. Sandler himself later explained what happened at one public preview he attended: "when [Zack and Bart] started undressing, you would think someone yelled 'Fire!' in the audience. There was absolute pandemonium. The audience reacted with such hostility and turned so ugly toward the movie, it became unbearable, and I had to leave the theater. They became an angry mob. People were leaving; they just couldn't deal with two men showing affection toward one another."³⁹ Homophobic catcalls, shocked screams, and conspicuous walkouts were commonplace among straight moviegoers, who obviously felt very threatened by the film.⁴⁰ Reactions from queers were not as violent, but they were decidedly mixed. Many complained about the film's bland tone and its endorsement of traditional patterns of romantic coupling (ironically, almost the opposite complaint of the one lodged against *Cruising*). Reviewer Christopher Escher complained that "for all its radical subject matter, *Making Love* remains a piece of reactionary schlock. . . . The problem with *Making Love* isn't a biased vision of gays, but a totally ignorant and inappropriate refusal to acknowledge the painful reality of anti-gay discrimination."⁴¹ On the other hand, however, "the diversity and general contentedness of gay men is made apparent."⁴² By shooting in actual West Hollywood gay bars, the film achieves some degree of verisimilitude, creating a record of gay men's habits, fashions, and behaviors.⁴³ And, even in its whitewashed way, its visual affirmation of gay men, gay love, and gay sex reached audiences that would never have seen anything like them before.

The production, marketing, and reception of Hollywood's queer films of 1982 reveals much about how sexuality was understood in Hollywood (and the nation) during that era. For example, *Making Love*'s screenwriter Barry Sandler was the only openly gay person involved in the production. The film was cast with television actors because no leading film stars would consider appearing in a gay movie.⁴⁴ The actors who played gay in these films also repeatedly stressed in publicity interviews that they themselves were not ho-

mosexual.⁴⁵ Furthermore, as with Allan Carr denying that *Can't Stop the Music* was gay themed, studio publicists often tried to distance these films from their queer content. As Stephen Farber noted, "It's revealing that most of the filmmakers and studio executives involved with these projects insist that they are NOT making films about homosexuality."⁴⁶ Robert Towne, the writer/director of *Personal Best*, strongly asserted that lesbianism "isn't the subject of the movie."⁴⁷ Producer Aaron Russo claimed that *Partners* was simply a farce. Sherry Lansing, then president of 20th Century Fox, claimed that *Making Love* was about "a woman's loss" more than a husband's coming out of the closet. Clearly, there was still a great deal of discomfort surrounding the topic of homosexuality.

The "Great Hollywood Gay-Movie Caper" of 1982 did not last long, and the writing was on the wall even before some of them were released. Homophobia was still commonplace and usually went unchallenged in both Hollywood as well as the rest of the nation. The nation was in the midst of a reactionary backlash against gay liberation. As one gay viewer commented about *Making Love*, "It surprises me a little bit that they've made a film like this during a conservative period."⁴⁸ Stephen Farber expressed the same viewpoint in *Saturday Review*: "This assault on conventional mores is especially surprising in the era of Ronald Reagan and the Moral Majority."⁴⁹ Furthermore, there was at least one other reason why Hollywood's new "gay positive" films did not last very long: the growing AIDS crisis. If Hollywood was uncomfortable about homosexuality, it was hysterical about AIDS, and most filmmakers kept their distance from the subject well into the 1990s.

Thus, by the mid-1980s, homosexual characters in Hollywood film were either downplayed or removed altogether. Gay male kissing or overt eroticism was definitely out—as they basically still are in mainstream Hollywood films. Softcore lesbian erotics could be tolerated, but revolutionary dyke characters or queer central characters could not. For example, the central transformative lesbian relationship of Alice Walker's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Color Purple* was reduced in the film version (1985) to several chaste kisses, and even that was apparently too much for some audiences. The film of the long-running Broadway musical *A Chorus Line* (1985) deleted a large portion of one gay character's monologue about his relationship with his family. One of the best queer representations of the era, according to many critics, was Cher's portrayal of a lesbian coworker and friend to Meryl Streep in *Silkwood* (1983), a film about a criminal cover-up at a nuclear power plant. Rather remarkably for a Hollywood film, Cher's character is integrated into the story as a whole human being—neither a stereotype nor a problematic issue waiting to be resolved.

Yet, such portrayals were exceedingly rare. As Vito Russo concluded about popular films of the 1980s,

anti-gay prejudice may be more prevalent now than at any other time in our history. Never have Hollywood screenwriters felt so secure in their belief that it is acceptable to insult homosexuals, and nowhere has fear and hatred of gay people been more evident than in commercial, mainstream motion pictures. . . . The use of the word *faggot* has become almost mandatory. Outright slurs that would never be tolerated in reference to any other group of people are commonly used onscreen against homosexuals.⁵⁰

Actual homosexual characters may not have been a part of the era's Hollywood films, but homophobic posturing clearly was.

The Rise of (Gay and Lesbian) Independent Filmmaking

The 1980s saw the explosion of both cable television and home video markets, new ways for motion pictures to be distributed and exhibited. At first, Hollywood studios were wary of how these technologies might affect their profits—would people stop going out to movie theaters? It soon became apparent that both cable television and home video would boost film revenues, since they allowed a single movie to be sold over and over again: first to theaters, then to cable channels, and then to home video consumers. In fact, cable and home video grew so quickly that demand began to outpace supply. The twenty-four-hour schedules of cable networks and the vast shelves of video stores constantly called for more product than the Hollywood studios could produce. As a consequence, the 1980s saw a boom in independent film production. Smaller and cheaper films could be made and sold for a profit by appealing directly to specific target groups. While filmmakers of all persuasions took advantage of this new cinematic marketplace, the development especially helped to create opportunities for minority filmmakers. African American, Asian American, Latino, and queer filmmakers began to document their communities in a series of well-received independent films. The rise of independent film festivals helped to publicize and promote these films, and theaters devoted to screening foreign and independent films were built in many urban areas.⁵¹

The differences between Hollywood films and independent films are not always apparent, nor are they strict. Sometimes successful independent filmmakers go on to sign deals with major Hollywood companies, and many Hollywood employees dabble in independent production. Also, while some in-

dependent filmmakers consciously deviate from classical Hollywood styles, others closely adhere to them. Unlike avant-garde or underground cinemas, independent films are still created with the hope of making money, just as Hollywood films are. But unlike Hollywood films, which have established networks to distribute them to theaters across the globe, independent films need to sell themselves to specialized distributors (often by first gaining attention at festivals). One of the best ways to distinguish between Hollywood and independent films is to see where they are playing. If a film is playing on thirty-five hundred screens at once, in every multiplex across the nation, it is probably a Hollywood film. If it is playing at one theater in selected large cities, it is probably an independent film. As the next few chapters explore, the vast majority of queer films made in the last thirty years have been independent films; thus, while there are now literally thousands of queer films in circulation, their ability to be seen has usually been limited to film festivals, urban theaters, home video, and some cable television channels.

Many of the first queer independent films of the 1980s boom were directed by heterosexual men well known for their challenging and intelligent film work. Robert Altman directed two independent films with very queer themes, both based on successful stage plays. In *Come Back to the 5 and Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean* (1982), Karen Black plays a postoperative transsexual who returns to a small town in Texas for the reunion of a James Dean fan club. In *Streamers* (1983), based on a play by David Rabe, Altman dramatizes a Vietnam-era military barracks, exploring complex issues of race, masculinity, and (homo)sexuality. Similarly, John Sayles wrote and directed *Lianna* (1983), a film about a married woman (Linda Griffiths) coming out of the closet. The film is one of the few to feature a working-class lesbian protagonist, perhaps unsurprisingly, since John Sayles often deals with class (as well as race, gender, and sexuality) in his independent films. Chris Holmlund's research on lesbian films of this period explores how queer audiences reacted to films such as *Personal Best* and *Lianna*: they often saw them as films made by straight white men and aimed at straight white men. The lesbian publication *Off Our Backs* complained that *Lianna* was a film "about and not for lesbians."⁵² And as with the critique of *Personal Best*, some of *Lianna's* detractors thought that Sayles was guilty of creating an "embarrassingly voyeuristic sex scene" and upholding the patriarchal objectification of women.⁵³ On the other hand, *Gay Community News* found *Lianna's* lesbian love scene to be "realistic."⁵⁴

The independent queer film hit *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (1985) was also directed by a heterosexual, Hector Babenco, although it was based on a novel by gay author Manuel Puig. The film details the relationship between a gay

designer named Molina (William Hurt) and a political activist named Valentin (Raul Julia), two men who are incarcerated in an unnamed South American jail. Molina is in prison for being a homosexual, and the film links his sexual dissent with Valentin's political dissent, dramatizing the fact that social and political oppression come in various but related forms. While initially antagonistic, the two men come to form a strong emotional bond, partly due to the stories that Molina tells as a way to pass the time and to comfort Valentin (who is being tortured for information). The stories—drawn from Molina's memories of old motion pictures—are fantastic tales of escapism with dual, if not antagonistic, effects. The stories nourish dreams and transport the men out of their brutal surroundings (as films historically did for pre-Stonewall queers), but *Kiss of the Spider Woman* also suggests that such fantasies can and do alienate people from their political reality, encouraging them to turn a blind eye to actual human suffering. Valentin and Molina eventually make love, and the two share an onscreen kiss. When Molina is released, he tries to help Valentin's cause, but caught between governmental agents and underground spies, Molina is shot and killed.

Kiss of the Spider Woman is an important film for several reasons, not the least of which is that William Hurt won a Best Actor Oscar for his performance as Molina, the first ever to go to someone playing an openly homosexual character. It is also a very thoughtful film that comments on the links between sexual, social, and political oppression, a theme highly relevant in the Reagan eighties and one that would become a cornerstone of the New Queer Cinema movement a few years later. Yet, while mainstream critics praised the film, many gay male viewers were more ambivalent about it. Molina was, for some viewers, yet another version of the sad, tragic, effeminate gay man who dies at the end of the film after lusting for a straight guy. And, while William Hurt plays Molina as intelligent and proud, one never seems to lose sense of the fact that one is watching a straight Hollywood actor playing gay—a fact that might comfort heterosexual audiences (while aggravating gay ones).

The other queer art house hit of the year, *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985), was also directed by a heterosexual, Stephen Frears. *My Beautiful Laundrette* centers on a young man of Pakistani descent (Gordon Warnecke) and a white street punk (Daniel Day-Lewis) who fall in love and decide to open the titular business establishment. Originally shot on 16 MM for British television's Channel Four, a state-subsidized channel specifically dedicated to airing work by and about minorities, the film became an art house hit in North America and helped make Daniel Day-Lewis a star. Like *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, *My Beautiful Laundrette* is about more than just homosexuality; rather, it is about the social and historical connections between all sorts of

various identities in our multicultural Western capitalist society—themes that Frears would visit again in later films, such as *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (1987) and *Dirty Pretty Things* (2002).

My *Beautiful Laundrette* was just one of many queer British films that arrived on American shores during the 1980s. *Privates on Parade* (1982) was a comedy about a World War II military unit formed to give theatrical shows to the troops. Ismail Merchant and James Ivory—the filmmaking couple best known for their “tradition of quality” literary adaptations, such as *A Room with a View* (1985) and *Howard’s End* (1992)—made a film based on E. M. Forster’s *Maurice* (1987). The novel had been posthumously published because of its gay content, and like the book, the film examines the limited options facing homosexual men in Edwardian England. Ken Russell, the British director who had dared to out Tchaikovsky in his film *The Music Lovers* (1970), made several queer films in the 1980s. *Gothic* (1986) was his take on the Mary Shelley–Lord Byron–Percy Bysshe Shelley ménage à trois during the weekend that produced *Frankenstein*, while *Lair of the White Worm* (1988) was a deliberately campy horror film about a vampiric snake-woman (Amanda Donohoe) out to sacrifice a nubile young virgin (Catherine Oxenberg). Russell’s *Salome’s Last Dance* (1988) imagines a private performance of Oscar Wilde’s banned masterpiece, complete with a transgendered “Dance of the Seven Veils.” Other British films of the era recounted the lives of actual queer figures. Cold War spy Guy Burgess is at the center of *Another Country* (1984), and playwright Joe Orton is the subject of *Prick Up Your Ears* (1987). The British, French, and American coproduction *Waiting for the Moon* (1987) centers on poet Gertrude Stein and her partner Alice B. Toklas.

Other queer foreign films of the era included Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s final film, *Querelle* (1982), a steamy homoerotic phantasmagoria based on a Jean Genet novel and starring queer actor Brad Davis. *Merry Christmas Mr. Lawrence* (1983) was directed by Nagisa Oshima, a Japanese director whose work frequently explored sexual politics and starred international queer icons David Bowie and Ryuichi Sakamoto. *Mishima* (1985), an American film written and directed by Paul Schrader, is an interesting meditation on the life and literature of Japanese author Yukio Mishima. Even though Mishima’s widow demanded that the film not dwell on her late husband’s homosexuality or his ritualistic suicide, the film remains a curious peak into one man’s sado-masochistic sexuality. *Dona Herlinda and Her Son* (1985), an offbeat gay comedy from Mexico, tweaks Latino machismo and the Catholic Church. The French film *Entre Nous* (1983) was also very popular with many queers and left audiences guessing about the exact nature of the relationship between its two female leads: are they a lesbian couple, or are they just good friends?²⁵⁵

One thing notable about most of these films is that they tend to avoid contemporary issues, including the AIDS crisis. Most of the British films (aside from *My Beautiful Laundrette*) are period costume films that layer their queerness underneath high production values, heavy costumes, and impeccable manners. The coming attractions trailer for *Maurice* even refused to tell the audience precisely what the movie was about. People marketing these films were happy to have them be perceived as vaguely queer but not be labeled as exclusively gay or lesbian. That strategy extended to their participation (or lack thereof) in lesbian and gay film festivals. In 1987, the Los Angeles Lesbian and Gay Film Festival was disappointed to discover that the producers of *Prick Up Your Ears* did not want their film to premiere at a gay festival. *Waiting for the Moon* and *Maurice* were also withheld from the festival.⁵⁶ Partly in response to such reticence, and also because of a felt need to deal with contemporary queer lives and issues, a new generation of gay and lesbian filmmakers emerged. These men and women were proud to make films that would be labeled as gay or lesbian, and the growth of film festivals and home video helped their films find wider audiences.

Among the first queer American filmmakers making gay fictional films in the 1980s was Arthur J. Bressan. Bressan was the director of the earlier documentary *Gay USA* (1978), and he also directed a number of gay-male porno films. His first fictional feature, *Abuse* (1983), centered on a relationship between a thirty-five-year-old man and a fourteen-year-old boy. The film premiered at Chicago's lesbian and gay film festival, but despite some good reviews, its controversial subject matter led to sparse distribution. (It had already been rejected by approximately thirty-five other distributors before it was released by Cinevista.)⁵⁷ Bressan's next film, *Buddies* (1985), dealt with the AIDS crisis, as did Bill Sherwood's *Parting Glances* (1985), two independent gay features discussed in the next chapter.

Desert Hearts (1985), directed by lesbian filmmaker Donna Deitch, was one of the most successful films of this wave of gay and lesbian independent filmmaking. Deitch had studied at University of California, Berkeley, and earned a graduate degree from the Film School at the University of California, Los Angeles. While working in the Hollywood industry she made experimental and documentary films, including *Portrait* (1971) and *Woman to Woman* (1975), work that "combines an activist's passion with an artist's discipline and imagination . . . richly diverse in regard to age, sex, and even sexual preference."⁵⁸ In 1979, she began to plan a film based on Jane Rule's classic lesbian novel *Desert of the Heart*. Without Hollywood support, it took almost three years to raise the funds necessary to make the film, with much of the money coming from lesbians who contributed what they could to help

finance a film version of their favorite novel. Deitch also managed to get some money from the National Endowment for the Arts. *Desert Hearts* ended up costing about \$1.5 million, and it would eventually gross over \$2.5 million, a good profit for a small independent film of the era.

Like many of the era's gay and lesbian features, *Desert Hearts* was written and directed in a fairly realist, straightforward style, not that different from Hollywood style. The film is both a coming-out story and a lesbian romance set in late 1950s Nevada. Helen Shaver plays an uptight college professor named Vivian Bell, who comes to Reno to get a divorce. There she meets a free-spirited lesbian artist named Cay Rivers (Patricia Charbonneau), and the two eventually fall in love and begin an affair. Although it looks as though Vivian will leave Cay behind when she returns to her Eastern university, the film's final moments provide a happy ending: Cay joins Vivian on her train, and the two decide to give their relationship another chance.

Reactions to the film were, as usual, mixed. Obviously the film turned a profit, and many lesbian moviegoers enjoyed the film's mix of knowing humor, passion, and sexuality. When it was previewed at the Dinah Shore Open (a golf tournament in Palm Springs that attracts a sizable lesbian constituency), it got rave reviews.⁵⁹ Both *The Advocate* and *Off Our Backs* gave the film enthusiastic reviews, and B. Ruby Rich called it a "lesbian heart-throb movie."⁶⁰ Yet, some queer viewers complained that the film was historically inaccurate—that Vivian and Cay would have encountered far more opposition to their relationship than the film allows. Writing about the film a few years later, Mandy Merck argued that in "order to succeed as a popular romance, *Desert Hearts* was divested of any social or political ramification or context that would restrict its generality. . . . *Desert Hearts* is set in a fantasized Wild West (where anything goes, pardner) in an idealized retro-chic fifties, without any of the fifties' circumstances which would have contributed to the guilt and pessimism represented in Rule's novel."⁶¹ Chris Holmlund thought that the film did not go far enough, especially in its one moment of lesbian intimacy: "the caress, the kiss, and the gaze are all that count. In a slow progress of shots moving ever closer, occasionally punctuated by Vivian's sighs and shivers, the two kiss each other on the lips and on the breasts, first one, then the other on top, and that's it, the scene fades to black."⁶² Similarly, Jackie Stacey wrote that "if this is the first lesbian romance which offers its spectators an unapologetic celebration of lesbian love, then it is also, sadly, a film which does so at the expense of the emotional intensity we have come to expect from such genres."⁶³

Similar criticisms were sounded about *Torch Song Trilogy* (1988), a film based on Harvey Fierstein's Tony Award-winning play. Much of the intense

drama and humor of Fierstein's somewhat experimental four-hour, three-act play are missing from the film, primarily because Fierstein reworked his play into a conventional cinematic narrative that was rather blandly directed by television director Paul Bogart. For the film, Fierstein re-creates his role as professional drag queen Arnold Beckoff and even adds several drag queen colleagues played by Ken Page and Charles Pierce. Over the course of his ten-year story, Arnold deals with an on-again, off-again bisexual boyfriend (Brian Kerwin), the hate-crime murder of his lover Alan (Matthew Broderick), his adopted son (Eddie Castrodad), and his overbearing mother (Anne Bancroft). Ultimately, *Torch Song Trilogy* is about every human's need for dignity and the ways and means of coping with the vicissitudes of life. The film also engages with the era's "family values" debate, as Arnold wants nothing more than to settle down with a good man and raise a child. Unfortunately, the film is a weak rendition of the original theatrical experience.

The 1980s gay and lesbian films illustrate a common problem with queer filmmaking in America: even independent films need to attract a sizable audience in order to be profitable. As such, they often downplay or sanitize the more radical aspects inherent in queer sexualities, hoping to draw in all types of lesbians and gay men as well as have some potential crossover appeal to straight audiences. The era's gay and lesbian films were easy to follow and contained (mostly) sympathetic characters but were then often accused of being bland and conciliatory. As the *Los Angeles Times* said of *Desert Hearts*, "for all its love of risk, it's a remarkably old-fashioned, cliché-fettered work."⁶⁴ Yet, presenting subject matter that was considered out of the mainstream in a manner that was very much within the mainstream may be a radical gesture in and of itself, a sort of retroactive queering of straight filmmaking conventions. Many queer audiences of the 1980s were happy to see conventional films that affirmed their lives and loves, and the success of these films helped lay the groundwork for edgier films in the early 1990s.

Notes

1. For more on this era's backlash against the sexual revolution, see John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Friedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 344–54.

2. Reported in Boze Hadleigh, *The Lavender Screen: The Gay and Lesbian Films: Their Stars, Makers, Characters, and Critics* (New York: Citadel Press, 1993), 133–34. Vito Russo quotes gay writer Bruce Vilanch (coauthor of *Can't Stop the Music*) as saying that the film "was never conceived as a gay project. The few gay characters in the film will not appear in any sexual situation unless it's a heterosexual one." Russo,

“The Closet Syndrome: Gays in Hollywood” (no source, ca. early 1979, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences [AMPAS] files, Beverly Hills, Calif.).

3. Wayne Malin wrote on the Internet Movie Database, *Can't Stop the Music* is “atrocious and a must see . . . bad film (especially for gay men)!” www.imdb.com/title/tt0080492/#comment (accessed May 20, 2005).

4. For more on the era’s “sex wars,” see Lisa Duggan and Nan D. Hunter, *Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1995); and Lillian B. Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), 246–70. Both sides published key works explaining their views: for the antiporn stance, see Laura Lederer, ed., *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography* (New York: William Morrow, 1980); for a critique of the antiporn stance, see Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson, eds., *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983).

5. Carol J. Clover, “Her Body Himself; Gender in the Slasher Film,” in *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 75.

6. “Morrissey Exits Warhol Factory for Warner Pic?” *Variety*, 18 October 1972 (AMPAS files).

7. Richard Goldstein, “Why the Village Went Wild,” *Village Voice*, 6 August 1979 (AMPAS files).

8. Alan Richman, “Homosexuals Ask City to Ban Filming of ‘Cruising,’” *The New York Times*, 26 July 1979 (AMPAS files).

9. Arthur Bell, “Bell Tells,” *Village Voice*, 16 July 1979 (AMPAS files).

10. Richman, “Homosexuals Ask City.”

11. Army Archerd, “Just for Variety,” *Variety*, 6 September 1979 (AMPAS files).

12. “‘Windows’ Enrages N.Y. Homosexuals” *Variety*, 23 January 1980 (AMPAS files).

13. Charles Schreger, “Debate Heating Up over Depiction of Homosexuals,” *Los Angeles Times*, 26 January 1980, 2-8.

14. “Secret Love,” *Village Voice*, 22 October 1979 (AMPAS files).

15. *Windows* production notes, 20 December 1979, 1 (AMPAS files).

16. Stanley Kauffman, “Secret Lives,” *New Republic*, 1 September 1979, 22, describes a television interview with Weintraub making this remark.

17. “Largest Theater Chain Rejects Film ‘Cruising,’” *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*, 31 January 1980 (AMPAS files), details the refusal of General Cinemas to run the film. Jonna Jefferis, “‘Cruising’ Sparks Booker Apologies, Patron Complaints,” *Box Office*, 10 March 1980 (AMPAS files), tells of United Artists theaters trying to back out of signed bookings of the film.

18. Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987 [1981]), 259.

19. Michael Sragow, “‘Cruising’: It’s Got a Sexual Identity Crisis,” *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*, 15 February 1980, 3. The article also describes the film’s only advance press

screening, held in New York City. Friedkin answered questions (and complaints) but surprisingly claimed not to know who killed the neighbor. Judging by some of his other answers, the ambiguity of the film is not intentional—Friedkin himself did not know what was going on!

20. Roger Angell, “The Current Cinema: Mean Streets,” *The New Yorker*, 18 February 1980, 126; Frank Rich, “Cop-Out in a Dark Demimonde,” *Time*, 18 February 1980, 67

21. John Devere, “On the Set,” *Mandate* (February 1980): 6.

22. Devere, “On the Set,” 6. The issue also includes statements by six extras in “The Men of *Cruising*,” *Mandate* (February 1980): 10–15.

23. Donna Minkowitz, “The Mirror Crack’d,” *The Advocate*, 25 July 1995, 80.

24. Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 58–69.

25. Gerard Walker, “Letter to the Editor,” *Village Voice*, 3 September 1979 (AMPAS files).

26. David Denby, “Whose Sex Is It Anyway?” *New York*, 22 March 1982, 58–59.

27. Stephen Farber, “Hollywood Comes Out of the Closet,” *Saturday Review* (October 1981): 48.

28. Sheila Benson, “Blake Edwards’ ‘Victor/-ia’: A Fresh Look at Sexuality,” *Los Angeles Times Sunday Calendar*, 14 March 1982 (AMPAS files), for example, judges that “if anyone needed proof that you can accomplish more through humor than from all the earnest polemics stretched end to tedious end, then Blake Edwards’ ‘Victor/Victoria’ would be the summation argument.”

29. Judith Crist, “The Flowers (and Weeds) of Spring,” *Saturday Review* (March 1982), says that *Victor/Victoria*’s Toddy emerges “finally—and unexpectedly—as the one person on hand at peace with himself, aware of who and what he is.” Similarly, Andrew Horton, “Getting a Hold on Garp,” *American Film* (July–August 1982), 39, refers to Roberta as “perhaps the one level-headed, stable person in *Garp*.”

30. Arthur Bell, “Bell Tells,” *Village Voice*, 15 June 1982 (AMPAS files); and Andrew Horton, “Getting a Hold on *Garp*,” *American Film* (July–August 1982): 45, where Lithgow is quoted as saying, “Transsexuality . . . is about the basic mystery of life. What is it like to get inside the body, the nature, of someone of the opposite sex? Love is in part the attraction to that mystery. Transsexuals are those who have gone ahead and crossed the line.”

31. David Ansen, “T.S. Garp Rides Again,” *Newsweek*, 26 July 1982, 78.

32. Marilyn French, “The ‘Garp’ Phenom,” *Ms.*, September 1982, 14–15.

33. Vincent Canby, “‘Personal Best’: Olympic Love,” *New York Times*, 5 February 1982 (AMPAS files).

34. Laurie Stone, “‘Personal Best’: What’s New in Towne,” *Village Voice*, 16 March 1982, 52.

35. Clare Whatling, *Screen Dreams: Fantasising Lesbians in Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 32n6. The essay that discusses this phenomenon more fully is Elizabeth Ellsworth, “Illicit Pleasures: Feminist Spectatorship and *Personal*

Best," *Wide Angle* 8, no. 2 (1986): 45–56. A similar reading is done by Shameem Kabir, *Daughters of Desire: Lesbian Representations in Film* (London: Cassell, 1998), 53–63.

36. Sandler, quoted in Eric Marcus, *Making History*, 380.

37. Sandler, quoted in Eric Marcus, *Making History*, 383 (italics added).

38. Perhaps one of the most interesting artifacts related to *Making Love* is a user comment posted on the Internet Movie Database. Under the title "Makes Me Cringe," DannyBoy-17 relates how the film is still too painful to watch because of his own uncle's similar coming-out process. Most queerly, DannyBoy-17 then goes on to suggest, "In my own attempts to understand 'bi'sexuality [sic] and how it might apply to me, I have come across the fear that one day if my wife died or cheated on me, or hurt me so badly that I might not be able to trust again, that I might turn to homosexuality." While Hollywood films such as *Making Love* seem to suggest a fairly strict line between heterosexuality and homosexuality, DannyBoy-17 seems to imply something else altogether—that should his heterosexual relationship not work out, he might easily turn to homosexuality (<http://us.imdb.com/title/tt0084293/usercomments?start=20>; accessed May 20, 2005).

39. Sandler, quoted in Eric Marcus, *Making History*, 385.

40. Reported in Hadleigh, *Lavender Screen*, 188.

41. Christopher Escher, *Making Love* review, *San Francisco*, March 1982 (AMPAS files).

42. Hadleigh, *Lavender Screen*, 187.

43. Call sheets for the film indicate shooting on location at Los Angeles Athletic Club, Mother Lode, Sundance Café, and "'Machismo' at San Vicente" for camera tests (February 17, 1981); and Mother Lode (April 7, 1981), Spike and Machismo (April 14, 1981), Cowboy Bar (April 1, 1981), and Sundance Café (April 22, 1981). *Making Love* production files, AMPAS.

44. While one would like to think that this situation is no longer tenable in Hollywood, the producers of *Queer as Folk* (Showtime, 2000–) allege that they encountered the same reticence almost twenty years later when casting their project. Reported in the liner notes for the *Queer as Folk* soundtrack CD (season one).

45. Publicity releases on actors Harry Hamlin and Michael Ontkean for *Making Love* always include mention of their heterosexuality (*Making Love* production files, AMPAS). In Michael Sragow, "First Time Director Robert Towne Comes Up a Winner," *Rolling Stone*, 15 April 1982, 94, actress Patrice Donnelly from *Personal Best* says, "I had to believe that I could be attracted to Mariel's character in order to play those scenes, but that doesn't make either me or my character a lesbian," thus even trying to deny her *character's* lesbian identity.

46. Stephen Farber, "Hollywood Comes Out of the Closet," *Saturday Review*, October 1981, 48.

47. Gregg Kilday, "'Their Movement Is Their Character': Director/Writer Robert Towne Talks about the Hurdles He Faced," *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*, 5 February 1982 (AMPAS files).

48. Elaine Warren, "Making Love Passes First Test before Gay Audience," *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*, 4 February 1982, C1.
49. Stephen Farber, "Hollywood Comes Out of the Closet," *Saturday Review*, October 1981, 48.
50. Russo, *Celluloid Closet*, 250–51.
51. John Pierson, *Spike, Mike, Slackers, and Dykes: A Guided Tour across a Decade of American Independent Cinema* (New York: Hyperion/Miramax, 1995).
52. Angela Marney, "Lianna: A Move toward Better Things," *Off Our Backs* 13, no. 4 (April 1983): 18.
53. Marla Bishop, "Lianna," *Spare Rib* 111 (1984): 44.
54. Cindy Rizzo, "Love and Learn," *Gay Community News*, 19 February 1983, 7.
55. Chris Holmlund, "When Is a Lesbian Not a Lesbian? The Lesbian Continuum and the Mainstream Femme Film," *Camera Obscura* 25–26 (January/May 1991): 145–79.
56. Richard Labonte, "Giant Film Fest Offering," *Update*, 18 February 1987, A16.
57. Russo, *Celluloid Closet*, 273.
58. Kevin Thomas, "Movie Review: Feminist Works at Filmforum," *Los Angeles Times*, 3 December 1979, 18.
59. "Movie Night, Part II," *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*, 21 April 1986.
60. B. Ruby Rich, "Desert Heat," *Village Voice*, 6 April 1986, 73.
61. Mandy Merck, "Dessert Hearts," in *Queer Looks: Perspectives on Lesbian and Gay Film and Video*, ed. Martha Gever, John Greyson, and Pratibha Parmar (London: Routledge, 1993), 380.
62. Holmlund, "When Is a Lesbian?" 159–60.
63. Jackie Stacey, "Desert Hearts and the Lesbian Romance Film," in *Immortal Invisible: Lesbians and the Moving Image*, ed. Tamsin Wilton (London: Routledge, 1995), 111.
64. Sheila Benson, "2 Brisk Parts Can't Stir Pulse in *Desert Hearts*," *Los Angeles Times*, 25 April 1986.

CHAPTER NINE



A Matter of Life and Death: AIDS, Activism, Film, and Video



The NBC television movie *An Early Frost* (1985) followed traditional movie-of-the-week formulas but did humanize its gay man living with AIDS (Aidan Quinn, seen here surrounded by the supporting cast). NBC-TV / The Kobal Collection

In 1981, an article appeared in the *New York Times* reporting that doctors in New York City and Los Angeles were becoming aware of a strange new disease that mostly seemed to be afflicting gay men. Initially dubbed GRID (gay related immune deficiency), the name of the disease was soon changed to AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome). Its cause was eventually shown to be a blood-borne virus (HIV; human immunodeficiency virus) that impairs the body's ability to fight off other diseases. It was rare diseases such as the skin cancer Kaposi's sarcoma, *Pneumocystis carinii* pneumonia, cytomegalovirus, and toxoplasmosis that brought AIDS to the attention of doctors in the first place. During the 1980s and 1990s, hundreds of thousands of people died from AIDS, and today it is arguably the greatest global health threat, with millions of people infected with HIV worldwide. Although many people with HIV in Western nations now have access to newer drug regimens that work to stave off opportunistic infections and prolong the quality of life, AIDS has not been cured.

The early years of the AIDS crisis were often filled with hysteria and fear because people were unsure what they were dealing with: although there were indications that the syndrome was spreading through gay male sex, the exact nature and route of transmission was at first unclear. The tabloids had a field day, fanning into flames possible "suspected" routes of transmission, such as mosquito bites, sloppy caterers, dentists, simple kisses, and handshakes.¹ People stopped frequenting restaurants, bars, and other public places that they knew to be owned or staffed by gay men. Homosexual men were figured as diseased and deadly contagions, a sentiment that lingered even after educational campaigns eventually convinced most Americans that AIDS could be acquired only through the exchange of bodily fluids in sex, intravenous drug use, or medical transfusion. Thus, despite its name change, AIDS was still thought of largely as the "gay disease." As Jan Zita Grover put it, the "American medical, political, and social responses to AIDS were dominated by the hypothetical equation of AIDS and homosexuality, an association that also had long-term effects on how the syndrome was depicted visually."²

The first few years of the AIDS crisis were chronicled by journalist Randy Shilts in his best-selling book *And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic*.³ (The book was also turned into an HBO television movie in 1993.) *And the Band Played On* was a scathing attack on the various forces that Shilts saw to be colluding to impede adequate medical response to the epidemic. Shilts argued that America's generalized culture of homophobia was contributing to its poor response to the disease. The medical-industrial complex, its scientists, and bureaucratic red tape were excoriated for the ways

in which they were failing to address the crisis. Shilts also attacked members of the gay community, those who refused to believe that the disease was spread through unprotected intercourse or who ran businesses that profited from such activities. Shilts was also one of the first people to report widely on “Patient Zero,” a Canadian airline attendant so-named by the medical community. Researchers had traced a great number of Patient Zero’s sexual contacts to “prove” that AIDS was sexually transmitted, and in the process he became known as the man responsible for spreading AIDS throughout North America. (Patient Zero’s story is told from a less-demonizing, more queer-friendly point of the view in John Greyson’s New Queer film *Zero Patience* [1995], discussed in the next chapter.)

AIDS awareness shifted a great deal around 1985, when classical Hollywood actor Rock Hudson acknowledged in the press that he was dying of AIDS. Suddenly there was a face to the crisis that was recognizable to most of America (as opposed to shadowy homosexuals and drug users), and media coverage of the syndrome increased. Images of sick and dying gay men now proliferated in the press, on television, and even in art galleries and advertising campaigns. People of color with AIDS were rarely as visible as white homosexual men in these campaigns, despite the fact that women and men of color continue to be at statistically greater risk for contracting HIV than do white gay men.⁴ However, rather than treat people with AIDS as integrated human beings living with illness, the media focused on sensationalistic tropes of death, decay, victimization, and isolation.⁵ The media also tended to configure people with AIDS as either innocent (women and children who had gotten the disease inadvertently from blood transfusions) or deserving (intravenous drug users and sexually active gay men whose allegedly chosen “aberrant lifestyles” had caused their illness). Mass media narratives about contagion, cure, plagues, and monsters were repeatedly invoked, as was a polarizing discourse about “us” (clean-living heterosexuals) versus “them” (disease-ridden queers). Such rhetoric could often be seen in newspaper and magazines when the question of heterosexual transmission was raised. The “general population” was always constructed as straight America, threatened from inside or outside by insidious Others, a trope that drew upon decades-long association between queers and monstrous aliens.

As has been asserted repeatedly, the federal government was slow to respond to the crisis, and when it did, its response was more likely to be colored by homophobia than either scientific jurisprudence or common compassion. In 1986, in the *Bowers v. Hardwick* decision, the Supreme Court of the United States upheld a Georgia statute that outlawed private consensual sodomy and justified that decision on the grounds that the law would help

control AIDS. (In another portion of the court's decision, one justice even referred to consensual homosexuality as a crime worse than rape.)⁶ President Reagan did not give a speech on the subject of AIDS until 1987, and in that speech he called for mandatory testing of all immigrants and prisoners. (By 1987 there were over thirty-six thousand Americans diagnosed with AIDS.)⁷ The Reagan administration opposed bills in Congress that were designed to prohibit discrimination against people with AIDS, and Congress repeatedly hobbled the work of the Centers for Disease Control by refusing to fund comprehensive surveys on Americans' sexual habits. Also in 1987, Congress passed the infamous Helms Amendment, making it a federal law that no funds provided to the CDC could be "used to provide AIDS education, information, or prevention materials and activities that promote, encourage, or condone homosexual sexual activities or the intravenous use of illegal drugs."⁸

The religious right, which continued to grow in strength throughout this period, constantly equated AIDS with divine retribution for the sin of homosexuality. Televangelists built vast empires on the money they raised by demonizing gay men and people with AIDS. An inflammatory antigay video, *The Gay Agenda* (1993), was produced by a California ministry and circulated widely; it argues that homosexuals are depraved creatures not deserving of basic civil rights protections. Other right-wing spokesmen of the era had equally disturbing ideas on how to control the epidemic. Conservative pundit William F. Buckley suggested that gay men with AIDS should have their HIV status tattooed on their buttocks, supposedly to warn away potential sodomites. Lyndon LaRouche argued that gay men with AIDS should be quarantined in modern-day concentration camps. Pat Buchanan, who became a Republican presidential candidate in 1996, also favored the concentration-camp approach, avowing that "promiscuous homosexuals appear literally hell-bent on Satanism and suicide."⁹

Hollywood and AIDS

Hollywood's response to the AIDS crisis during the 1980s mirrored much of the nation's response. Within the industry, there was fear, hysteria, rumor-mongering, and renewed homophobia. As *TV Guide* put it in 1988, "Denial, secrecy, dread. These are the hallmarks of homosexuality in Hollywood today. Gone are the comparative openness and liberalism of the 70s, and in their place is a climate of fear."¹⁰ Actresses refused to work with leading men they knew to be gay, and kissing scenes were scrapped from many projects over AIDS fears. Since an AIDS diagnosis would also most likely mean a

public outing, performers such as Liberace and Anthony Perkins went further into the closet, going to their graves without acknowledging that they had AIDS. Such closets often outlived the performer: deaths from AIDS were routinely concealed in order to protect an actor's "heterosexual" legacy. The executors of Liberace's estate, for example, tried to deny that he had AIDS even after his death. Marriages of convenience suddenly were "in" again, and stars who had been rumored to be queer got married in highly publicized ceremonies. Producers stopped hiring gay actors whose illness, if discovered, could scuttle their projects or cause untoward medical expenses. People in Hollywood took pains to project an aura of vigorous health, and many actors and actresses went so far as to deny in public that they had AIDS, reasserting their heterosexuality as well as their healthiness.

The story of actor Brad Davis provides a good example of this new Hollywood climate. A self-identified bisexual, Davis had gained public acclaim in *Midnight Express* (1978), the story of real-life bisexual Billy Hayes and his incarceration in a Turkish prison. (For the film, Hayes was turned into a heterosexual, a still-common practice in Hollywood films based on actual queer lives.) Brad Davis also starred in German director R. W. Fassbinder's last film, the very queer *Querelle* (1982), as well as a number of made-for-television movies. Davis discovered that he was HIV positive in 1985 but kept this a secret for six years, until his death in 1991. Interviewer Boze Hadleigh describes that "although a dues-paying member of three actors' unions, [Hayes] had paid his own bills and insurance out of fear that his medical status would otherwise be discovered and his career ended."¹¹ Davis was also angry that the industry had made him feel so closeted about the illness—and left behind a scathing attack on how Hollywood treated people with AIDS that was published posthumously.¹²

Throughout the entire decade of the 1980s, the major Hollywood studios refused to bankroll a film dealing with AIDS. Largely, executives thought that AIDS was not "box-office" material. Many closeted homosexual producers in Hollywood also refused to make any work about the disease for fear of being "outed" through mere association. However, "pseudo-AIDS" films began to crop up everywhere. The most prevalent type of crypto-AIDS film was the slasher film. Cheap and easy to make, its repeated message equating sex and death seems an obvious displacement of AIDS-era fears. Following the success of literally hundreds of these films, major Hollywood projects such as *Fatal Attraction* (1987) and *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) also equated unsanctioned sexuality with death, madness, and horror. There were also other horror films centered on monstrous biological contagions. In *The Kiss* (1988), a deadly African parasite is passed from woman to woman via an open-mouthed kiss. In *The Fly* (1986), a bit of foreign DNA gets inside a

healthy man and slowly turns him into a monster. The HBO science fiction film *Daybreak* (1993) imagines a futuristic New York City where a sexually transmitted disease (never named) causes the fascistic government to track down, tattoo, and quarantine those found to be “positive.”¹³ Similarly, the various *Alien* sequels began to be discussed in terms of AIDS metaphors, and viruses—both computer and organic—showed up with alarming regularity in science fiction films and television shows.¹⁴ *A Nightmare on Elm Street, Part 2: Freddy’s Revenge* (1985), one of the most overtly queer horror films of the era, features the monstrous male rape of a sadistic gay gym teacher, as well as imagery that suggests AIDS-related night sweats.¹⁵

More realistically, and perhaps more offensively to actual people living with AIDS, were Hollywood films such as *Dying Young* (1991) and *The Doctor* (1991), each about nice white heterosexuals coping with a tragic disease that most pointedly was not AIDS. In *Forrest Gump* (1994), Forrest’s one true love (Robin Wright) dies from an unnamed disease she caught while sleeping around and doing drugs. *Prelude to a Kiss* (1992), written and directed by Craig Lucas and Norman René (the duo who made the independent AIDS drama *Longtime Companion* two years earlier—discussed later) is also a fantastic, heterosexualized AIDS allegory. Hollywood could muster up sympathy for upper-class professional white heterosexuals dying from unnamed diseases at this point in time but not for people with AIDS of any class or color.

Possibly the first actual mention of AIDS in a major Hollywood film did not occur until 1986—and then only as a passing joke. In *Down and Out in Beverly Hills* (1986), Bette Midler’s character, a spoiled rich woman, is aghast when her husband (Richard Dreyfus) gives mouth-to-mouth resuscitation to a homeless man who has tried to commit suicide in their pool, screaming that he will get AIDS from putting his lips on the other man’s mouth. While the joke is partly meant to criticize the insensitivity and selfishness of Midler’s character, the fact that the only way Hollywood could acknowledge the existence of AIDS was through a demeaning joke infuriated a number of people. Vito Russo was HIV positive when he updated his book *The Celluloid Closet* in 1987 and made certain to single out the film and the joke’s homophobic implications.¹⁶ Clearly, if AIDS was going to be dealt with responsibly and in all its complexity onscreen, it was going to have to begin outside of the Hollywood studios.

The First AIDS Features

While Hollywood effectively ignored AIDS (or used veiled references) during the early years of the pandemic, there were several smaller independent

films that explored the contemporary crisis and its impact upon queer lives. These features are part of the rise of gay and lesbian independent narrative filmmaking, as discussed in the last chapter. And while a number of those films about gay men or lesbians were created by heterosexuals, independent films about AIDS were almost exclusively made by gay men—often men who were themselves living with AIDS. These first few independent AIDS dramas generally used conventional storytelling forms and techniques in order to move their audiences' emotions. Rather than challenge spectators about their perceptions of AIDS or sexuality by using a radical or experimental style, these first features tell easy-to-follow stories that center on likable main characters (almost always handsome young white men) who struggle with HIV and AIDS. Although these films have been criticized by many for their “tragic, dying wealthy white gay man” formula, they had a basic goal in mind: to humanize people with AIDS in the midst of widespread cultural demonization. As social problem films designed for wider audiences, one of their goals was to educate people about the disease in order to ease the hysteria and homophobia that was running rampant.¹⁷

Arthur Bressan Jr.'s *Buddies* (1985) has been called “the first American film to dramatize the AIDS crisis.”¹⁸ Distributed by New Line, *Buddies* focuses on the relationship between an AIDS patient and the volunteer “buddy” assigned to help him by the local AIDS outreach group. (The “buddy” phenomenon was/is a small example of the queer community's personal response to the crisis.) Although the dying man has been a political activist for most of his life, and his caretaker is a somewhat naïve “guppie” (gay urban professional), the two develop a relationship as the disease slowly takes its toll. Exploring gay friendship, romance, responsibility, and love, *Buddies* captures the intense emotions and daily issues that many gay men were facing during the early years of the crisis.

Another one of the first narrative films about AIDS was—perhaps rather remarkably—an NBC television movie. *An Early Frost* (1985), written by Ron Cowen and Daniel Lipman (who would later bring *Queer as Folk* to Showtime), was nominated for and won a host of Emmy Awards. By being broadcast on a major network instead of shown only at film festivals or in a few art house theaters (like *Buddies*), *An Early Frost* demonstrated to many Americans that people with AIDS were human beings and not just statistics. The film stars Aidan Quinn as Michael, a young lawyer diagnosed with AIDS. When he goes home to be cared for, family drama ensues. His parents (Gena Rowlands and Ben Gazzara) have to come to terms with his homosexuality as well as his medical condition, as do his sister and grandmother. (Such mainstream dramas often ultimately center on heterosexual characters

and how they are forced to “deal with” the problems of homosexuals.) Still, as Michael undergoes bouts of *Pneumocystis carinii* pneumonia and toxoplasmosis, the film educates viewers about the nature of AIDS. It also dramatizes the prejudices and fears common to the era among friends, families, and even medical health professionals, as when an ambulance crew refuses to transport Michael. And although the film is centered on Michael’s suburban family and their reaction to his illness, Michael’s lover Peter is also a central character, and the film ends with the two of them resuming their life together in Chicago.

Writers Cowen and Lipman later recounted what they had to go through in order to get the movie made. Their scripts were constantly being rejected by network executives as being too “pro-homosexual,” and they were forced to dilute overtly political points and provide “balance” to the script by giving equal air time to homophobic views. The NBC executives were also very nervous about any physical contact between Michael and his lover, and they only allowed some rather platonic hugging and touching. And although the executives had no trouble with the rather stereotypical AIDS patient played by John Glover (because he died and was therefore “punished”), a major controversy erupted over whether or not the film could show Michael’s grandmother kissing him on the cheek. Eventually, the Centers for Disease Control had to be consulted, and they told the network that it was very important to show such a kiss, to show America that one could not get AIDS through such casual contact.¹⁹ Although faulted by some activists for being too mainstream, *An Early Frost* did dramatize the AIDS crisis in an educational and emotionally involving way.

Covering similar ground the next year was the made-for-television movie *As Is* (1986), a film based on William M. Hoffman’s award-winning play. Television, and especially cable television, has done a better job of responding to AIDS than has Hollywood filmmaking, in part because the made-for-television movie has a history of dealing with topical social problems, including health and justice issues. In fact, network television was quick to turn celebrity AIDS deaths into television movies, such as *Liberace* (ABC, 1988), *Liberace: Behind the Music* (CBS, 1988), *The Ryan White Story* (ABC, 1989), and *Rock Hudson* (ABC, 1990). HBO also chronicled the life and death of Roy Cohn in *Citizen Cohn* (1992) and produced the adaptation of Randy Shilts’s *And the Band Played On*. PBS helped produce and air the fictional drama *Andre’s Mother* (1990), and ABC offered *Our Sons* (1991), starring Julie Andrews and Ann-Margret. More recently the USA Network has aired *A Mother’s Prayer* (1995) and *Breaking the Surface: The Greg Louganis Story* (1996). While some of these projects undoubtedly had their exploita-

tive aspects, they nonetheless presented people with AIDS in mostly sympathetic terms.

Parting Glances (1986), written, directed, edited, and scored by Bill Sherwood, was another early independent theatrical feature to deal with AIDS. Like many of these first gay independent AIDS features, *Parting Glances* centers on relatively wealthy white gay men, but those were the people with the money and the clout to make a film like this one happen. For example, Sherwood raised the money needed to make his film (about \$250,000), mostly from friends and family, and he based his characters on those same people. *Parting Glances* depicts a day in the life of Robert and Michael, a gay couple living in New York City. Robert is about to leave town (and his partner) for work abroad, while Michael cares for his friend Nick, who has AIDS. As played by Steve Buscemi in his first screen role, Nick is a fully developed character living with AIDS, not the tragic victim stereotype so often proffered by the mass media. One of the highlights of the film is an extended party sequence in which a range of loving, funny, human people interact with one another, regardless of their sexual orientations. Like Arthur Bressan before him, Bill Sherwood died of AIDS; *Parting Glances* was his only film.

Longtime Companion (1990) tells a similar story, although it was more highly budgeted (at about \$1.5 million) and more widely distributed to North American art house theaters by the Samuel Goldwyn Co. after it won the Audience Award at the U.S. Film Festival. (No major Hollywood studio would consider distributing the film.) Like *Parting Glances*, *Longtime Companion*—the title refers to the euphemism most newspapers of the era used to describe the surviving partner of a deceased gay man—centers on a group of mostly well-to-do white gay men in New York City during the first decade of the AIDS crisis. Structured historically, the film dramatizes gay New York's response to the first announcement of the disease in the *New York Times*, through disbelief, fear, and paranoia and eventually to understanding and activism. *Longtime Companion* attempts to combat homophobia as well as AIDS to "say that gay people are not [that] different from heterosexuals."²⁰ Director Norman René felt the need to show that queers "have their day-to-day intimacies and feelings about one another . . . that two men or two women can feel the same way about one another as a man and a woman."²¹ Screenwriter Craig Lucas also sounded a similar note: it was "very important to Norman and to me that we not make people more afraid with this movie. We wanted to make them feel some sort of common humanity."²² *Longtime Companion* mostly succeeds at those goals, especially in its intimate scenes of caring, compassion, and love. In one memorable scene, Bruce Davison plays a man who "coaches" his lover through his death, helping him to

accept the inevitable and simply “let go.” Davison’s work earned him a Best Supporting Actor Oscar nomination that year, a development that also helped the film be seen by a slightly wider audience. Although it remained mostly marginalized on art house circuit, the film’s impact was felt by many.

While the writing, directing, and acting in these independent AIDS films transform a terrible reality into powerful art (one reviewer described *Longtime Companion* as “agony wrapped in silk”),²³ their goals were often focused on winning the sympathies of the dominant heterosexual society. As such, these films took pains not to offend straight audiences. Dealing with upscale urban white men and their friends aided this aim. So did film critics, such as Karen Kreps in *Boxoffice*, who thought it was their duty to warn readers that some of these films contained scenes of “homosexual foreplay which may dismay some viewers.”²⁴ However, such scenes were usually minimal and done within certain standards of taste and discretion; thus, *Longtime Companion*’s sex scenes were “foreplay” and not actual sex. By the end of the 1980s, a growing number of AIDS activists began to criticize these films for allegedly lacking a political agenda. However, while they were rarely confrontational, these first gay features about AIDS did help form a foundation from which more radical queer cinema could and did emerge.²⁵

The documentary video *Silverlake Life: The View from Here* (1993) is one AIDS feature not concerned with pulling its punches. It gets much of its power from the audience’s knowing that the people in it are not pretending. *Silverlake Life* documents the daily lives of Tom Joslin and Mark Massi, a gay couple with AIDS. Although Tom Joslin was the filmmaker who began the project, Mark Massi took it over as Joslin became increasingly ill. When Massi himself succumbed to the disease, friend and colleague Peter Freidman completed the film, and *Silverlake Life* went on to win the Best Documentary Feature Award at Sundance.²⁶ It was also aired on the PBS series *Point of View* and had a small release in art house theaters.

Using a self-reflexive cinema-verité style, *Silverlake Life* captures the pain, anger, frustration, hope, and love shared by the two men. Simple tasks such as running to the market become agonizing ordeals. As Tom’s condition deteriorates and he becomes bed-ridden, Mark continues to videotape him in scenes of gut-wrenching intimacy. When Tom dies, the video camera is also there, and it records his emaciated body as it is placed into a body bag and driven away. While this may seem clinical and cold, Tom’s death is humanized by the grieving Mark, who sings to Tom and asks the viewer to see the beauty that he can still see in Tom’s ravaged face. The film ends with footage from a much earlier project showing Tom and Mark dancing and singing together, suggesting the importance of filmmaking as both historical record and

as personal documentation of the lives and loves that continue to be ignored by most mass media. *Silverlake Life* is about middle-class white gay men, but it refuses to shy away either from the realities of AIDS or the depth and complexity of Tom and Mark's relationship. By 1993, the year of its release, a number of other queer artists had turned to low-budgeted videomaking in order to have their own say about the AIDS crisis—and if people got bothered by their work, so much the better.

AIDS Activist Video

Throughout the 1980s, in response to governmental inaction and ineptitude, gay men, lesbians, and their straight friends organized their own response to the AIDS crisis. One of the first groups to be founded was Gay Men's Health Crisis in New York City in 1982. The San Francisco AIDS Foundation and Aids Project Los Angeles were also quickly formed. Soon, community-based AIDS resource groups could be found in most major cities across North America. These groups, staffed with health care professionals, lawyers, and community activists, worked as clearinghouses, helping people with AIDS find the resources and information they needed in order to survive. As the 1980s progressed and government apathy turned at times toward outright hostility, many of these groups became more energized and activist in nature. The first chapter of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) was formed in 1987. Queer Nation, RAGE, the Lesbian Avengers, and OUT-RAGE were similar groups formed across North America and in Europe to combat not only the lack of response to the AIDS crisis but also the general climate of casual homophobia that had been renewed throughout the decade. These broad coalitions of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and straight people began using the term *queer* as a collective noun in describing their groups and their goals. Radical AIDS activism thus reversed the previous decade's balkanization of queer communities by bringing divergent groups together in a shared struggle—one that was literally about life and death. Together, such activist groups fought for increased and better health care for people with AIDS, and they helped to lay the groundwork for future civil rights struggles. Through their media collectives, they also changed the way that America looked at AIDS and contributed to a renaissance in queer video and filmmaking.

One of ACT UP's better known slogans, "Silence = Death," was meant to attack the homophobic status quo and exhort queer people to come out and voice their concerns. AIDS activist video was one important way to break the silence in a mass-mediated form, and it flourished in the late 1980s and

early 1990s as a grassroots, artisanal, and noncommercial media practice. Its broad goals were at least threefold. The first was to document and share information about the AIDS crisis, to provide a sort of “counter memory” of the AIDS crisis different from the one created by the mainstream media. The second goal was countersurveillance—to police the police with video cameras—because, as one activist put it, “the cops who patrol our protests and arrest us like to do it with a heavy dose of gratuitous force.”²⁷ (AIDS activist videos were sometimes used in court to acquit protestors of trumped-up “resisting arrest” charges.) The third goal was more diffuse and personal: to educate and inform, engage and enrage those who saw them. AIDS activist videos were used for empowerment and recruitment. They were shown wherever they could be: on public-access cable channels, in bars and nightclubs, and at activist meetings. They played at gay and lesbian film festivals throughout the United States and were the focus of panel discussions and workshops about how film and video could be used to fight the AIDS crisis.²⁸ They were used at teach-ins and fund-raisers, were shown in gallery installations, and housed in free lending libraries. They were distributed throughout the country via activist networks and were sometimes shown on television in other nations. As one videomaker described it, “AIDS activist video is produced in a dialogue with the social movement to end government inaction. The documentation of protests is one form of direct action; distribution of these tapes are demonstrations.”²⁹

AIDS activist videos were sometimes made by individuals but more regularly by short-lived collectives whose members often overlapped as the groups formed and dissolved. Some of the better-known AIDS activist video collectives include Testing the Limits, House of Color, Paper Tiger/Southwest, DIVA-TV (Damned Interfering Video Activist Television), and Gran Fury (mostly known for their poster art campaigns). A few representative titles include *Testing the Limits: NYC* (1987, Testing the Limits collective), *Safe Sex Slut* (1988, Carol Leigh), *Living with AIDS: Women and AIDS* (1988, Alexandra Juhasz and Jean Carlomusto), *DiAna's Hair Ego: AIDS Info Up Front* (1989, Ellen Spiro), *Stiff Sheets* (1989, John Goss), *Rockville Is Burning* (1989, Bob Huff), *Target City Hall* (DIVA-TV, 1989), and *Keep Your Laws off My Body* (1989, Zoe Leonard and Catherine Saalfeld). A number of future New Queer directors made AIDS activist videos as well. Isaac Julien made *This Is Not an AIDS Advertisement* (1988); Tom Kalin directed *they are lost to vision altogether* (1988); and John Greyson made *The World Is Sick [sic]* (1989).

The roots of AIDS activist video practice are multiple and complex. In a certain way, the alternative methods of producing, distributing, and exhibit-

ing them mirrored those of 1960s underground filmmaking, although that cinema's goals were never as explicitly political. AIDS activist video also has ties to 1970s queer experimental filmmaking; for example, many of Barbara Hammer's films and videos of the 1980s, such as *Snow Job* (1986), are AIDS activist videos. Other politically revolutionary cinemas have also been credited with influencing AIDS activist videomaking—particularly via the concept of collective filmmaking. Some point to the “imperfect” Third Cinema movement of the 1960s, and others to 1960s leftist filmmaking groups such as the Dziga Vertov Collective and Newsreel.³⁰ At least one videomaker acknowledged the importance of famed Chicano activist group El Teatro Campesino on his work.³¹ AIDS activist video also had direct links to its era's politically committed public-access video shows and networks, such as Deep Dish and Paper Tiger Television.

Regardless of its antecedents, AIDS activist video tended to be unruly, confrontational, and more than willing to break with the usual conventions of cinematic or televisual form. These pieces rarely have any desire to tell conventional narratives with an easy-to-follow beginning, middle, and end. Each of them has its own *raison d'être*, and each follows its own stylistic muse. Some serve explicit educational goals (how to practice safe sex, how to organize a protest) while others are organized as argumentative essays against government policy, scientific research methods, and corporate marketing strategies. They often blend historical or news footage with fictional scenes that take ironic or satiric jabs at individuals and institutions ignoring or demonizing the crisis. Agitprop theatrics are joined with abstract video graphics in an effort to depict frustration, anarchy, and rage. Surveying the field in 1990, Catherine Saalfield noted that “AIDS tapes vary widely in originality, accuracy, and cultural sensitivity, differing in every way possible. New tapes are produced almost daily, ranging from 15-second public service announcements to two-hour documentaries and dramas.”³² What they had in common was the goal of saving people's lives.

Voices from the Front: America 1988–1991 (1991) compiles various short videos shot by the Testing the Limits collective into a feature-length documentary. The tape chronicles three years of protests held at the Federal Drug Administration, the Centers for Disease Control, the New York City Stock Exchange, Grand Central Station, various international AIDS conferences, and even a baseball game at Shea Stadium. It records the efforts of a multitude of activist groups, including ACT UP New York, Gay Men's Health Crisis, PWAC (People with AIDS Coalition), and PISD (People with Immune System Disorders). It documents how the ABC news show *Nightline* invited an AIDS activist to be heard on the air but then limited his ability to speak

by shutting off his microphone. In short, it succeeds at what most AIDS activist videos set out to do: it documents protests, educates its viewers about governmental inaction, provides images of the AIDS crisis not usually seen in the mainstream media, and uncovers media bias as well as more general police abuse.

Stop the Church (1990)—“a Robert Hilferty Inquisition”—centers on the controversial protest that disrupted church services at Saint Patrick’s Cathedral on December 10, 1989. (DIVA-TV’s *Like a Prayer* [1990] also covered the event.) *Stop the Church* documents the planning of the protest and includes footage from the actual event, shot both inside the church and in the streets outside. It begins with various people answering the question “What is the Catholic Church?” and segues into a sequence meant to mock church rituals, edited to the music of Tom Lehrer’s “Vatican Rag.” Different opinions are expressed about the proposed event. Some activists feel uncomfortable about disrupting a church service, while others feel the action is necessary given the church’s historical record of abuses against women, people of color, and queers of all sorts. One woman stresses that the protest should be aimed at the church’s homophobic leadership—particularly Cardinal O’Connor—and not its parishioners, many of whom already disagree with the church’s official teachings on (homo)sexuality. The video documents the beginning of the protest, as activists storm the police barricades and demonstrate closer to the church. Then, on the inside, activists stage a “die in” during the service and are carried out by the police. As intended, the Stop the Church protest and the *Stop the Church* video garnered national media attention, raising issues as well as ire across the United States.

One of the better-known and more personal works to emerge from AIDS activist videomaking is Gregg Bordowitz’s *Fast Trip, Long Drop* (1993). Bordowitz was a founding member of both Testing the Limits and DIVA-TV. His piece premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in 1993 and even received a (very) limited theatrical release. Like much queer documentary work, *Fast Trip, Long Drop* is very autobiographical, even as it also makes use of fictional vignettes, found footage, and activist video shot at AIDS demonstrations. It centers on Bordowitz and his family with unflinching intimacy. We learn that he tested positive for HIV in 1988 at the age of twenty-four and that he thinks he contracted the virus via unprotected receptive anal intercourse while under the influence of alcohol. We learn that his grandparents emigrated to America from a Jewish ghetto in Europe and that his father was killed in a freak accident at the age of thirty after watching motorcycle daredevil Evel Knievel attempt to jump the Snake River Canyon. (The video’s title, *Fast Trip, Long Drop*, is drawn from a newspaper headline about that

crash.) Archival footage of Knievel's disaster is intercut throughout the piece, as are grainy black-and-white images of other crazy stunts, suggesting that risk and chance have always been central components of American, if not global, culture.

Throughout the tape Bordowitz reveals himself to be—in turn—angry, tired, sick, resigned, optimistic, hopeless, and bitter. He critiques the mainstream media's coverage of the AIDS crisis via a fake news reporter who baldly states, "I'm reporting on behalf of the uninfected—and we know who we are." Bordowitz also skewers some of the more visible voices in the fight against AIDS, calling their simplistic "positive messages" into question. For example, he angrily confronts the obsequious host of a faux television show called *Thriving with AIDS* about the fact that he is not, indeed, thriving. In another vignette, a character named "Hex Larsen" (meant to be Magic Johnson) spouts empty sports metaphors about how he will be a "winner" and "beat" the disease. "Charity Hope-Tolerance" (satirizing Mary Fischer, a heterosexual woman with AIDS chosen to speak at the 1992 Republican Convention) also parrots liberal platitudes and asks that she be accepted because she is "straight, white, and rich: I have privilege, and I have AIDS. Feel sorry for me." Even Larry Kramer, playwright and cofounder of both Gay Men's Health Crisis and ACT UP, is parodied via the whiny and self-serving "Harry Blamer," a man (as Bordowitz sees him) intent on dividing the AIDS community rather than uniting it.³³

Bordowitz explained his take on AIDS activist video in the *Queer Looks* anthology (1993), arguing that it should draw on impulses similar to those found in the work of Charles Ludlum, founder and creative force behind New York City's Ridiculous Theater Company: "Ridiculous theater questioned notions of sincerity, authenticity, and truth. AIDS activists also need to question sincerity, authenticity, and truth, but, unlike ridiculous theater, AIDS activist videos cannot sabotage all emotional effect. Ultimately we die, and the US government does nothing. The situation is obscene. It's ridiculous. . . . For Ludlum, 'What was funny was evident: the ridiculous obscenity of the human race.'"³⁴ Like the street protests and zaps enacted by previous generations of queer activists, AIDS activist videos were meant to effect change via confrontational shock effects—to entertain and educate but also to educate about the very nature of entertainment.

Conclusion

AIDS activist videos and the first independent features about AIDS served somewhat different needs for mostly different audiences. The first AIDS

features, while still wanting to educate their viewers about the nature of the disease, were often more conciliatory in tone because they were aimed at a wider audience. They rarely mentioned the work of AIDS activists and instead made emotional appeals about the disease. And while these first AIDS features can and do make calls for sympathy, tolerance, and the need for education, they can also be seen—because there were still so few films about queers in the first place—“as reinforcing a homophobic conception that ‘gay equals AIDS’—that is, that gay sex is simply a route to infection of both the individual and the social body. Conversely, and quite possibly simultaneously, the [films] can be read as ‘AIDS equals gay,’ eliding the fact that many communities are affected by the pandemic and dangerously bolstering the idea that the ‘general’ public can contain AIDS by containing gays.”³⁵

Activist videos, on the other hand, were usually made for the benefit of other AIDS activists—or to help initiate others into activism. They were designed to educate, agitate, and document queer communities’ responses to the crisis. Their makers purposefully forsook the politeness and decorum common to theatrical independent films about AIDS in favor of “in your face” theatrics and polemics; deference was not seen as an option. Also, the full range of those affected by the pandemic—men *and* women, straight *and* gay, white *and* nonwhite—was more likely to be represented in AIDS activist videos than in film or on television. AIDS activists themselves were a coalescence of diverse identities who often used the term *queer* when describing themselves. And by the end of the 1980s, the term *queer* was traveling beyond radical activist collectives and into the lesbian and gay community at large, into the academic world, and quite noticeably into a new movement of independent filmmaking that would become known as New Queer Cinema.

Notes

1. An excellent analysis of how the press in Great Britain figured the early years of the AIDS crisis can be found in Simon Watney, *Policing Desire: Pornography, AIDS, and the Media* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

2. Jan Zita Grover, “Visible Lesions: Images of the PWA,” in *Out in Culture: Gay, Lesbian, and Queer Essays on Popular Culture*, ed. Corey K. Creekmur and Alexander Doty (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995), 360.

3. Randy Shilts, *And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1987).

4. For a firsthand account of the issues facing women and people of color with AIDS during the 1980s, see the ACT UP/NY Women and AIDS Book Group, *Women, AIDS, and Activism* (Boston: South End Press, 1990).

5. See Grover, "Visible Lesions," 354–81.
6. Chief justice Warren Burger, "Bowers, Attorney General of Georgia v. Hardwick et al.," *United States Reports 478: Cases Adjudged in the Supreme Court at October Term, 1985* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1989), 197.
7. Nan D. Hunter, "Contextualizing the Sexuality Debates: A Chronology," in *Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture*, ed. Lisa Duggan and Nan D. Hunter (New York: Routledge, 1995), 26.
8. For an overview of the actual (and greatly disturbing) congressional debate, see Douglas Crimp, "How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic," *October* 43 (Winter 1987): 237–71. This special issue of *October* is also available as Douglas Crimp, ed., *AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1988), and is an excellent overview of the issues.
9. Quoted in Aslan Brooke, "The Killing Fields: Can Gay Genocide Happen in America?" *Frontiers* 14, no. 20 (9 February 1996): 30.
10. Mary Murphy, "The AIDS Scare," *TV Guide*, 22 October 1988, 6.
11. Boze Hadleigh, *Hollywood Gays* (New York: Barricade Books, 1996), 71.
12. Davis's wife, Susan Bluestein Davis, used his writings as part of her biography of him, *After Midnight: The Life and Death of Brad Davis* (New York: Pocket Books, 1997).
13. The film is based on Alan Bowne's play *Beirut*. For a discussion of it, see Kylo-Patrick Hart, *The AIDS Movie: Representing a Pandemic in Film and Television* (New York: Haworth Press, 2000), 87–9.
14. For more on queer AIDS horror films of the 1980s, see Andrew Parker, "Grafting David Cronenberg: Monstrosity, AIDS Media, National/Sexual Difference," in *Media Spectacles*, eds. Marjorie Garber, Jann Matlock, and Rebecca L. Walkowitz (New York: Routledge, 1993), 217–18. See also Katherine Park, "Kimberly Bergalis, AIDS, and the Plague Metaphor," in the same book, 232–53; Edward Guerrero, "AIDS as Monster in Science Fiction and Horror Cinema," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 18, no. 3 (Fall 1990): 86–93; and Ellis Hanson, "Undead," in *inside/out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (London: Routledge, 1991), 324.
15. For more on this aspect of the film, see Christopher Castiglia, "Rebel without a Closet," in *Engendering Men: The Question of Male Feminist Criticism*, ed. Joseph A. Boone and Michael Cadden (New York: Routledge, 1990), 207–21.
16. Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1987 [1981]), 256.
17. For an overview of AIDS movies, see Kylo-Patrick Hart, *The AIDS Movie: Representing a Pandemic in Film and Television* (New York: Haworth, 2000).
18. Review of *Buddies* on PopcornQ, www.planetout.com/popcornq/db/getfilm.html?891 (accessed May 20, 2005).
19. These anecdotes were all related by Cowen and Lipman during a Museum of Television and Radio (Los Angeles) web-seminar panel discussion, "The History of Gay and Lesbian Images on Television," March 25, 2004.

20. Norman René, quoted in David J. Fox, "They Found Out How Tough a Sell AIDS Really Is," *Los Angeles Times Calendar*, 13 May 1990, 97–98.

21. Quoted in Fox, "They Found Out."

22. Quoted in Fox, "They Found Out."

23. Richard Alleva, "Death in a Time of AIDS," *Commonweal*, 13 July 1990, 422.

24. Karen Kreps, review of *Longtime Companion*, *Boxoffice*, April 1990, R33.

25. Bruce Davison specifically addresses complaints by radical activists against *Longtime Companion* in a letter to the editor: "The Beneficial Effects of *Companion*," *Los Angeles Times*, 22 April 1991.

26. Beverly Seckinger and Janet Jakobsen, "Love, Death and Videotape: *Silverlake Life*," in *Between the Sheets, in the Streets: Queer, Lesbian, and Gay Documentary*, ed. Chris Holmlund and Cynthia Fuchs (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 150.

27. Catherine Saalfield, "On the Make: Activist Video Collectives," in *Queer Looks: Perspectives on Lesbian and Gay Film and Video*, ed. Martha Gever, John Greyson, and Pratibha Parmar (London: Routledge, 1993), 29.

28. As just one example of such events, Richard Labonte, "AIDS Panel Part of Gay Film Fest," *Update*, 18 February 1987, A20, describes a two-day symposium at the Los Angeles Lesbian and Gay Film Festival on "the representation of AIDS and cultural empowerment in the media." Tom Waugh, Isaac Julien, B. Ruby Rich, Richard Fung, John Greyson, Cindy Patton, and Robert Epstein were among the speakers.

29. Greg Bordowitz, "The AIDS Crisis Is Ridiculous," in Gever, Greyson, and Parmar, *Queer Looks*, 213.

30. Saalfield, "On the Make," makes reference to the influence of Julio Garcia Espinosa's famous Third Cinema manifesto "For an Imperfect Cinema," reprinted (among many other places) in *Film and Theory: An Anthology*, ed. Robert Stam and Toby Miller (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 287–97.

31. Ray Navarro, "Eso, me esta pasando," in Gever, Greyson, and Parmar, *Queer Looks*, 39.

32. Catherine Saalfield, "AIDS Videos by, for, and about Women," in ACT UP/NY Women and Aids Book Group, *Women, AIDS, and Activism*.

33. See also Cynthia Chris's excellent review of *Fast Trip, Long Drop*, "Documents and Counter-documents: AIDS Activist Video at the Crossroads," *Afterimage*, November 1994, 6–8.

34. Bordowitz, "AIDS Crisis Is Ridiculous," 223.

35. Seckinger and Jakobsen, "Love, Death and Videotape," 152–53.

CHAPTER TEN



Hollywood Is Burning: New Queer Cinema



Jennie Livingston's documentary *Paris Is Burning* (1990) explored the unique subcultures created by some of the era's urban queers of color. Off White Prod. / The Kobal Collection

At the start of the 1990s, festival-goers and critics noticed a trend toward queer independent films and videos that were increasingly edgy, angry, and theoretically rigorous. These works were unapologetic in their frank look at sexuality and combined stylistic elements drawn from AIDS activist videos, avant-garde cinemas, and even Hollywood films. They eschewed “positive images” and “happy endings” in favor of more complexly queer musings on the nature of gender and sexuality. Critic Karl Soehnlein noted this trend in 1990, when he wrote that an “emerging flock of filmmakers is using provocative subject matter—transgression, gender-bending, and rude activism—to create challenging visions of sexual identity.”¹ The first wave of these films and videos, which quickly became known as the New Queer Cinema, includes *Tongues Untied* (1989), *Looking for Langston* (1989), *Dry Kisses Only* (1990), *Paris Is Burning* (1990), *Swoon* (1991), *Edward II* (1991), *Poison* (1991), *Khush* (1991), *The Hours and the Times* (1991), *My Own Private Idaho* (1991), *The Living End* (1992), *Zero Patience* (1993), *Go Fish* (1994), and *Watermelon Woman* (1995).

Film critic B. Ruby Rich was another of the first writers to champion these new works; she documented how they were received at international film festivals and helped to conceptualize them as a new cinematic movement.² New Queer films and videos won many festival awards, and a number of them found independent distributors, allowing them to be more widely seen in art house theaters. Yet, not everyone was wholly enthusiastic about New Queer Cinema. Right-wing pundits and politicians lambasted the films as pornographic and used them as “bad objects” in the fight to defund public art projects. Some queer audiences found the films boring and overly intellectual; others found them awash with negative images. Still others complained about the sexist and racist dynamics that seemed to be at play within the movement. This chapter aims to discuss New Queer Cinema as a type of film and videomaking practiced by queer artists during a specific historical moment. While New Queer Cinema might be conceptualized as a movement continuing into the twenty-first century—a film such as *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2001), for example, has much in common with New Queer Cinema—this chapter examines the important films and filmmakers of its first phase, the early-to-mid-1990s.

Overview and Reaction

One of the most important things about New Queer Cinema was its energy—its irreverence, brashness, and defiance.³ In many cases, that assertiveness was directly related to the AIDS crisis and the era’s renewed sense

of lesbian and gay activism. Indeed, at least one account of New Queer Cinema defines it as “a form and expression that emerges from the cataclysm of AIDS in the Western world.”⁴ AIDS activist videos—with their reappropriation and pastiche of mainstream imagery as well as their desire to shock and confront—might be thought of as the blueprint for New Queer Cinema. In fact, many of the people who became leading figures in the New Queer Cinema movement were involved in AIDS activism; and AIDS issues and imagery—whether directly invoked or subtly implied—permeate New Queer films. As Monica B. Pearl suggests, time, death, history, responsibility, and representation were key concerns of both AIDS activist videos and New Queer Cinema. According to her formulation, “New Queer Cinema provides another way of making sense out of the virus, [one] that does not placate and does not provide easy answers—that reflects rather than corrects the experience of fragmentation, disruption, unboundaried identity, incoherent narrative, and inconclusive endings. It is a way of providing meaning that does not change or sanitize the experience.”⁵

The defiance of New Queer Cinema was not only aimed at the homophobic practices of mainstream Western culture; it was also aimed at bourgeois gay men and women and the very nature of homosexual identity itself. As Michele Aaron has noted, the films “were defined as much, if not more, by their opposition to gay culture as to straight.”⁶ New Queer characters are a far cry from the polite, desexualized, inoffensive homosexuals found in most Hollywood and gay and lesbian independent films of the 1980s. New Queer films and videos flaunt “negative” images in order to critique the idea that there are “correct” lesbian or gay identities and behaviors. They explode taboos, raise controversial issues, and celebrate a variety of queer sexualities. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the films that focus on queer criminals, including *Swoon*, *Poison*, and *The Living End*. Such “inappropriate” characters challenge restrictive definitions of sexuality and force audiences to confront the diversity and fluidity of desire. New Queer films also underline the social and historical forces that regulate sexuality in the first place. However, some audiences thought that such works were merely recirculating “negative” stereotypes in unthinking ways. Why should queers champion a queer movie about murderous homosexuals but protest Hollywood’s use of the same stereotype?

Part of the answer to that tricky question lies in the intent of New Queer Cinema. Unlike mainstream Hollywood films, or even 1980s gay and lesbian independent films, New Queer Cinema seeks to do more than just entertain viewers with interesting stories. New Queer films seek to make their viewers think about the ways and means those stories are told. Many of the works

mix together documentary and fictional styles or hybridize two or more genres in order to show how the very form of cinematic storytelling impacts upon its meaning. Others use campy excess and performative styles to set themselves apart from realistic dramas. In other words, New Queer Cinema is a metacinema that simultaneously represents queer characters and concerns but also comments upon the form of those representations. This project is quite clearly tied to queer activism and queer theory. Both activists and theorists had seen the importance of breaking beyond stable identity categories and using confrontational tactics. Thus New Queer Cinema actively breaks down filmic categories such as genre, fiction, realism, and documentary—as well as deconstructs essentialist concepts of history, race, nation, gender, and sexuality.

New Queer Cinema is an intellectual cinema, partly because many of its practitioners had been exposed to concepts of contemporary cultural theory in activist collectives and university film schools. For example, producer Christine Vachon, who has been instrumental in nurturing many New Queer projects, studied film theory at Brown University and spent a year in Paris with noted cultural theorists Julia Kristeva and Christian Metz.⁷ Todd Haynes, who went to Brown with Vachon and helped cofound her first production company, recalls that both of them were “interested in the ways in which narrative films can still challenge dominant traditions and take you somewhere new while still being able to draw you in.”⁸ Vachon’s production company, Killer Films, was founded with that mission and became a bedrock for the New Queer Cinema movement. (Vachon has sometimes been referred to as the movement’s “Godmother.”) As Vachon herself describes her philosophy, queer films should borrow “as heavily from the avant-garde as from classic cinema. I want to make very film-literate films—but films that are somehow transcendent or transforming.”⁹

New Queer Cinema had its detractors among gay and lesbian viewers because of its intellectual rigor. Audiences who wanted “feel good” romances and comedies about nice gay men and wholesome lesbians were often disappointed in New Queer films. As one critic remembers his first exposure to them, they “seemed relentlessly miserable, dry, and pretentious. . . . I’d already seen enough grim movies about homosexuality to know that, according to filmmakers, being gay is a pretty miserable state of affairs. Did we really need a bunch of ‘queer’ directors to tell us the same?”¹⁰ Lesbian filmmaker Joy Chamberlain concurred: “I think [deconstruction] is very useful as an analytic tool, but I don’t think it works as a tool for making an interesting film. The film medium is about empathy, it is about catharsis, it is about being drawn in, and identifying with the characters and with the

story.”¹¹ Consequently, while New Queer films were praised by many queer theorists, activists, and critics, they were not always pleasing to more general gay and lesbian audiences, let alone straight ones. Exemplifying the issue, the Hollywood trade magazine *Boxoffice* complained that the New Queer film *Edward II* was “more an ideological statement than a film . . . a political piece on homoerotics that challenges its audience to pay attention.”¹²

If New Queer Cinema disappointed some gay and lesbian audiences, it positively infuriated conservative politicians, such as California congressman Dana Rohrabacher and North Carolina senator Jesse Helms. During this era, many queer artists and their works (including the photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe, the performance art of Holly Hughes and Tim Miller, and some New Queer films and videos) came under right-wing attack because they had been funded in part through the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). On the floor of the Senate, Helms expressed outrage that taxpayers’ money was being used to produce what he felt was “sexually explicit” filth, and he and his allies were able to pass a law that applied antiobscenity controls to the NEA’s appropriation bill. In 1990, the San Francisco International Lesbian and Gay Film Festival came under federal investigation. Members of the NEA went to the festival in order to examine the alleged “quality of works shown.”¹³ While the NEA eventually exonerated the festival, public pressure caused by Rohrabacher, Helms, and other right-wing agitators led the festival to withdraw future grant applications.¹⁴ Thus, while some of the first works of New Queer Cinema had been produced in part with federal funds, those sources quickly became scarce.

Yet, New Queer Cinema flowered in spite of this resistance and possibly because of it: the NEA funding controversy made many people more aware of and curious about these works, and queer organizations and individuals stepped in to help fund new projects. Frameline, the group that had helped to organize the first San Francisco International Lesbian and Gay Film Festivals, began offering completion funds to queer independent film projects in 1991.¹⁵ As various queer filmmakers became more established, they too helped others produce queer work. For example, Tom Kalin (who directed *Swoon*) has served as a producer on other queer films, including *Go Fish* and *I Shot Andy Warhol* (1996). New Queer director Gus Van Sant helped produce *Speedway Junky* (1999) and *Tarnation* (2003), while producers such as Christine Vachon continue to foster new film and video projects. Like underground film and AIDS activist video before it, New Queer Cinema was purposefully variegated and uncontainable as a movement. Its various practitioners produced unique, creative, and diverse works—films and videos that frequently challenged, confused, and delighted both straight and gay audiences.

Derek Jarman and *Edward II* (1991)

Derek Jarman was one of the most prolific queer filmmakers ever, having directed over fifty films and videos throughout his long career. Most of his work predates and presages the advent of New Queer Cinema, although *Edward II* was a defining film of the movement. Jarman was born in London but grew up in Great Britain, Italy, and Pakistan.¹⁶ He studied history, art, and painting and cited among his influences the work of Robert Rauschenberg, Kenneth Anger, William S. Burroughs, and Anselm Kiefer. His own work exhibits a collage aesthetic, blending styles, forms, and even historical periods. For example, one of his first forays into professional filmmaking was his “Medieval Mod” set designs for Ken Russell’s *The Devils* (1970), a film exploring the connections between religious hysteria and repressed sexuality. Throughout the 1970s, Jarman made 8 MM experimental shorts, and his first feature film, *Sebastiane*, was released in 1976. Unabashedly homoerotic, *Sebastiane* was a largely unscripted film about the Catholic martyr whose spectacular death (his torso was pierced by arrows) has become a central motif in gay-male visual culture. Shot in Latin, on the beaches of Sardinia, with a cast of naked young men, the film played to packed art houses in London and America, providing a vision of queer desire not otherwise accessible to the gay communities of the era.¹⁷

Jarman’s interest in collage often resulted in films that straddled categories (part avant-garde, part historical epic, part agitprop) and focused on sexuality in relation to class and national identity. *Jubilee* (1978), for example, was an attack on the lingering effects of the British aristocracy, and *The Last of England* (1987) was a critique of the conservative social policies of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. Jarman’s *The Tempest* (1979) was a highly stylized updating of the Shakespeare play, but it was *Caravaggio* (1986), loosely based on the life of the titular late-Renaissance painter celebrated for his realist style, that cemented his reputation in art house cinemas. Like most Jarman films, *Caravaggio* makes use of experimental techniques and nonrealist styles: it seeks to question the very nature of cinematic representation. It is filled with intertextual references, in this case to actual paintings (by Caravaggio and others), as well as deliberate twentieth-century anachronisms meant to question the realism inherent in both Caravaggio’s work and the “tradition of quality” cinematic style usually associated with “great artist” biopics. In one scene, an art critic is shown typing a negative review of Caravaggio’s latest work while sitting in a bathtub, a deliberate nod to Clifton Webb’s evil queer art critic Waldo Lydecker in the classical Hollywood film *Laura* (1944). Jarman caps the joke as the critic slumps into the tub so that

the shot may visually quote Jacques-Louis David's famous painting "The Death of Marat." As this single scene attests, Jarman's work—like much New Queer Cinema—becomes substantially richer when one gets the in-jokes. Meanwhile, true to queer formulations, the exact nature of Caravaggio's sexuality is left indeterminate.

When Jarman learned that he was HIV positive in the late 1980s, he retreated to a cottage on England's Dungeness coast, where he made *The Garden* (1990), a feature-length experimental film about queer culture, homophobia, desire, and AIDS. His next film, *Edward II*, partly funded by the BBC, was based on Christopher Marlowe's play and makes explicit the romantic and sexual relationship between King Edward II (Steven Waddington) and his lover Piers Gaveston (Andrew Tiernan). The film combines minimalist set design, fabulous costumes, and historical anachronisms meant to draw parallels between the homophobia of Edward's era with that of the early 1990s. For example, Edward's loyal followers are represented as AIDS activists, while those who seek to depose him are figured as contemporary members of the armed forces, the police, and the church. Edward's nemesis Lord Mortimer (Nigel Terry) is imagined as a hypocritical "special operations" military officer, while Edward's wife Isabella (Tilda Swinton) is ultimately figured as a vampire. When Edward is forced to banish his lover Gaveston, Annie Lennox appears to sing Cole Porter's "Ev'ry Time We Say Goodbye." At the climax of the film, Jarman creates a dual fate for Edward: is he executed via a red hot poker driven into his rectum, or does the executioner kiss him and free him? (The real Edward II died in prison under mysterious circumstances.) One last laugh belongs to Jarman though, as he shows Isabella and Mortimer imprisoned by Edward's son, a proto-queer boy himself who, in earrings and high heels, flits atop their cage to Tchaikovsky's "Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy."

Like much New Queer Cinema, *Edward II* was controversial, and audiences (both straight and gay) reacted in diverse ways.¹⁸ While many were thrilled by the film's brutal, unsympathetic, sexy, and defiant nature, other viewers complained about the exact same things. Some critics thought that the film was misogynist (because of Isabella's monstrosity),¹⁹ but in fact none of the characters are especially likable. Jarman did not want his characters to be sanitized positive images; he wanted their queerness to be a taunt and a challenge to the dominant straight society.²⁰ *Edward II* is dedicated to the "repeal of all anti-gay laws," but Jarman suggests that they should not be repealed because queers are such model citizens but rather because they are just as human and fallible as anyone else.²¹ Many (presumably straight) critics could not get over their aversion to seeing two men on screen in romantic

and sexual situations. *Variety* charged that Jarman failed to make his film “accessible to heterosexual male audiences” and that it seemed intent on “provoking straight viewers.”²² Indeed, that was Jarman’s intent, and in some interviews he even proclaimed his movie “heterophobic.”²³

Derek Jarman’s final years were marked by a huge creative output. He wrote and published several books and diaries, and his artwork as well as his films received countless exhibitions and revivals. *The Garden* and *Edward II* were followed by more music videos, short films, and features. *Wittgenstein* (1993) is about the famed linguist-philosopher, while *Blue* (1993), made as Jarman was going blind, is an aural meditation composed of words and sounds and set against an unchanging blue screen. Jarman remained a bold and socially committed artist to the end of his life, having blazed a creative trail that both inspired and embodied New Queer Cinema.

Tom Kalin and *Swoon* (1991)

Tom Kalin came to New Queer Cinema via AIDS activist video. A founding member of the Gran Fury collective, Kalin’s early work includes *Puppets*, *Finally Destroy Us*, *News from Home*, and *they are lost to vision altogether*. Receiving some funding from the American Film Institute and the NEA, Kalin wrote, directed, produced, and edited *Swoon*, his feature film debut. *Swoon* sparked immediate controversy because it told the fact-based story of Leopold and Loeb, two queer men who in the 1920s killed a young boy merely for the thrill of it. The story had been told before in Hollywood: first by Alfred Hitchcock in *Rope* (1948) and then by Richard Fleischer in *Compulsion* (1959). While those films could only hint at the sexuality of their protagonists, Kalin’s *Swoon* makes Leopold and Loeb unequivocally queer. According to Kalin, “[I] wanted to show a homosexual couple who had pathological behaviors [but] not pathologize homosexuality.”²⁴ However, many critics, both straight and gay, thought that he failed to achieve that goal. *Boxoffice* wrote that the film “links homosexuality with deviance and criminality,”²⁵ while the *Los Angeles Times* opined that “Kalin’s moral stance may bewilder some audiences, who are, after all, being asked to sympathize with the propagators of a heinous crime.”²⁶ Indeed, many gay and lesbian viewers questioned Kalin’s choice of subject matter in the first place: why make yet another film about killer queers? Summing up the controversy and its political ramifications, the critic for the gay magazine *Update* wrote that “if *Swoon* had not been made by gay filmmakers, it would be the kind of movie we should picket. But since it was, it’s worth seeing, but not by straight audiences.”²⁷

Swoon is cold, elegant, daring, dangerous, and above all beautiful: cinematographer Ellen Kuras won a prize at the Sundance Film Festival for her black-and-white cinematography. And the film does attempt to deconstruct the meaning of the queer-killer stereotype rather than reinscribe it, even if many filmgoers failed to appreciate that point. *Swoon*, like many other New Queer works, foregrounds the historical and social construction of deviance. Kalin opens his film with a self-reflexive grouping of “beautiful young things” reading Leopold Von Sacher-Masoch’s *Venus in Furs*, the novel that gave rise to the term *masochism* (via its author’s name). Cecil B. DeMille’s silent film *The Ten Commandments* (1923)—replete with its master-and-slave imagery—is referenced repeatedly as a node of Leopold’s homoerotic obsessions. Links between love, desire, power, violence, and criminality are also made via the recurring use of a period song that compares matrimony to a prison sentence. Indeed, in Kalin’s version of the events, Leopold and Loeb seem to commit murder mostly as a way to commit themselves to one another.

Swoon also uses deliberate anachronisms to question the transparency of both film style and the historical record. For example, a court stenographer is played by an African American woman (an unthinkable position in the 1920s), while other characters use push-button phones and modern tape recorders—devices that suggest a continuity between the past and the present as well as the impact of technology on our understanding of the world. *Swoon* also dramatizes how psychiatry and the now-discredited science of phrenology worked to link homosexual behavior—Leopold and Loeb’s “desire to satisfy unnatural lusts”—to murderous criminality. The film underscores the historical practice of equating homosexuality with pathology when “bachelor school teachers” are rounded up and questioned about the murder.²⁸ By using actual court transcripts for dialogue, the film also reveals how the trial often became more about Leopold and Loeb’s “perverted” desires than about the murder they committed. To underline that point, Kalin films the two men in bed together in *the courtroom* to suggest visually exactly what behavior is really being adjudicated.

Perhaps most important, the final prison sequences of *Swoon* examine how Leopold and Loeb’s behaviors—deemed monstrous in open society—are tacitly accepted by most people when they take place behind bars. Leopold continues to use his influence to force other inmates to have sex with him, while Loeb is brutally murdered by an inmate whose sexual advances he has rebuffed. Twisting the facts to make it seem as if Loeb had been trying to rape the other inmate, the crime is reported in the press as “just desserts” for Loeb, and his murderer is found not guilty, having justifiably killed a “pervert.” Harsh and thought provoking, *Swoon* is prototypical New Queer filmmaking.

(It also features witty cameo appearances by queer media cognoscenti Gregg Bordowitz, Todd Haynes, and Douglas Crimp.) Since *Swoon*, Tom Kalin has directed several short films, produced others, and is working on another film based on a real-life murder case, *Savage Grace* (expected in 2005).

Todd Haynes and *Poison* (1991)

Todd Haynes remains one of the most interesting and commercially successful writer-directors of the New Queer Cinema. He was raised in suburban southern California where, as a nine-year-old, he made a *Romeo and Juliet* home movie in which he played both roles. At Brown University he studied semiotics and cultural theory, got involved with ACT UP, and began to make short films. Citing among his influences the perverse melodramas of Ingmar Bergman, Douglas Sirk, and Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Haynes's films explore the cinematic representation of queer desires by foregrounding both film history and film style. His films often pastiche or hybridize Hollywood genres in order to make his viewers aware that they are watching a highly stylized movie—thus queering any sense of reality within the story. Summing up his strategy, Haynes has noted that there “are a lot of films with gay subjects—like *Longtime Companion* or *Making Love*—that are formally very straight and don't challenge the dominant ways of representing the world. And films like some of Hitchcock's or Sirk's that have these weird, perverse, complex perspectives that can be far more gay than most movies about gay themes—because they're coming from an outsider's perspective and change how you see things.”²⁹

The first Haynes film to garner attention was *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (1987), a forty-five-minute biopic that explores the life and death (from anorexia nervosa) of 1970s pop-singer Karen Carpenter. Audaciously, the film reenacts Karen Carpenter's story with Barbie dolls; her plight is intercut with documentary-like inserts that describe and explore the medical and social implications of anorexia. While the very premise of *Superstar* suggests a campy tone, the film is far from facile or condescending toward its subject matter. Instead, the film's hybrid form asks its viewers to consider the connections between cultural ideals of feminine beauty, celebrity, mental illness, and the repression inherent in white middle-class culture. Its unlicensed use of the Carpenters' music (and perhaps its unflattering portrait of Karen's family) led to a lawsuit, and the film remains in legal limbo, making it difficult to see.

Haynes's first feature film, *Poison*, helped to define New Queer Cinema. Produced on a small budget of about \$250,000, it recalls the formal audacity

of *Superstar*, interweaving three separate but related stories, each shot in a different cinematic style. The first, "Homo," is based on the works of Jean Genet and explores the violent and homosocial sexuality of men in prison via both gritty realist and fantastically lush visuals. The second, "Horror," filmed as a pastiche of a 1950s black-and-white monster movie, is about a scientist who accidentally ingests an experimental sex-hormone serum that turns him into a killer. The third story, "Hero," is told in pseudodocumentary style and centers on a young boy who shoots his abusive father and then miraculously flies away from the scene. In cutting back and forth between these three stories, *Poison* challenges the spectator to compare their thematic and stylistic meanings, to see the similarities between their outcast characters, and to speculate on the various types of "poison" that fill our social and cultural landscape: discrimination, fear, sexual repression, xenophobia, AIDS, and violent masculinity itself.

Even before its release, *Poison* was embroiled in controversy. At the Sundance Film Festival, it won the Grand Jury Prize for Best Dramatic Feature, but it also caused walkouts during a scene in which prison inmates spit on and into the open mouth of a young man they have been systematically abusing. Then, based upon a review of *Poison* in *Variety*, Donald Wildmon (leader of the fundamentalist Christian watchdog group the American Family Association) protested that the film was pornographic. This was an especially egregious offense (in his eyes) since federal tax dollars had been used to fund part of the film (a \$25,000 grant from the NEA). Perhaps unsurprisingly, once it was released to art house theaters, audience reaction to *Poison* was mixed. While many mainstream critics and gay and lesbian audiences complained that the film was a very unpleasant experience and were turned off by the film's complex cerebral demands, academic critics championed its formal and theoretical rigor.³⁰

Such criticisms did not hinder Haynes's career, and he has gone on to larger and larger projects, working with increasingly important Hollywood actors. *Safe* (1995) stars Julianne Moore as a woman suffering from a viral-like illness that may or may not be psychosomatic. Exploring issues of contamination, isolation, and the toxic atmosphere of everyday life, *Safe* is both a critique of American narcissism and an AIDS allegory. *Velvet Goldmine* (1998), another queer art-house hit, examines the 1970s glam rock phenomenon in relation to sexuality, celebrity, and style. In it, Haynes combines a prologue about Oscar Wilde with a narrative structure borrowed from *Citizen Kane* (1941). *Far from Heaven* (2002) (discussed in chapter 12) received even more acclaim and wider distribution, as well as several Oscar nominations. In varying ways, Haynes's work continues to explore the intersection of film

form and film content, showing how the discourses of cinematic style create, contain, or otherwise impact upon the representation of queer desires. While such a project will undoubtedly keep his films out of most multiplex theaters, he remains one of the most engaging and interesting queer filmmakers in contemporary America.

Gus Van Sant and *My Own Private Idaho* (1991)

Gus Van Sant was perhaps the most well-known New Queer filmmaker in 1991, having just made the art house hit *Drugstore Cowboy* (1989), a stylish film about heroin addicts starring Matt Dillon and Kelly Lynch. Today, Gus Van Sant maintains that most-well-known status, having been the only New Queer director (as of this writing) to cross-over into mainstream Hollywood filmmaking, as director of *Good Will Hunting* (1997), *Psycho* (1998), and *Finding Forrester* (2000). Once described by Robin Williams as “a cross between Mister Rogers and William S. Burroughs,” Van Sant has made music videos for David Bowie, Elton John, the Red Hot Chili Peppers, and Hanson and is also a published author, musician, and photographer. Like Andy Warhol before him, Van Sant has been able to work in various media while walking the fine line between art and commerce. Thus, while he has made Hollywood films aimed at broad audiences (films that are mostly devoid of queer content and style), he has also continued to make smaller, independent films (*Gerry* [2002], *Elephant* [2003]) that queerly challenge mainstream assumptions about form and content.

Gus Van Sant was born in Kentucky but moved around a lot as a child; his father was a traveling salesman. He studied painting at the Rhode Island School of Design and earned a bachelor of fine arts in film. He briefly made ads for Madison Avenue before settling in Oregon, where he began to make short films, videos, and eventually feature films. One of his first, *Mala Noche* (1985), is a black-and-white 16 MM feature about a man who falls in love with a teenage hustler. It garnered attention at queer film festivals, but it was the success of *Drugstore Cowboy* that helped him raise the funding for *My Own Private Idaho*, another film about teenage hustlers. Van Sant cast then-rising stars River Phoenix and Keanu Reeves in the central roles and wrote a hybrid script that crossed the buddy/road movie with story elements from Shakespeare’s *Henry IV* (especially the relationship between Prince Hal and his roguish mentor Falstaff). The resulting film was another art house hit that examines and blurs the various types of relations that exist between men—as fathers and sons, brothers, lovers, friends, mentors, and even as commodities.³¹

The complex sexuality of the film's hustlers is one of its queerer aspects. Although narcoleptic Mike (River Phoenix) and Scott (Keanu Reeves) have sex with both men and women for money, Mike comes closest to being traditionally gay, and halfway through the film he confesses his love and desire for Scott. Scott, on the other hand, is more firmly enmeshed within the power dynamics of male homosociality. He has conflicted power struggles with his two Shakespearean father figures, street mentor Bob (the Falstaff character) and his actual father, the mayor of Portland. Scott is only "playing at" being a hustler, and when he assumes his privileged position of wealth and class at the end of the film, he cruelly abandons both Bob and Mike. Scott marries as his social status dictates, just as earlier he had rebuked Mike's amorous advances with the heterosexist assertion that "two guys can't love each other." Ultimately, Mike's search for love (represented as his search for his lost mother) leads him back to where he started, neither richer nor much wiser.

Because the director and his stars were so "hot" at the time, there was a great amount of publicity surrounding the making and reception of *My Own Private Idaho*. Columnists and reviewers praised Phoenix and Reeves for taking such parts in the first place, breathlessly noting that they researched their roles by hanging out with actual street hustlers in Hollywood, stopping just short of actually getting into cars with clients.³² *Us* magazine did an on-the-set preview story about the film but conspicuously chose "heterosexual" photos of the young stars to illustrate the article.³³ Then, a small controversy occurred when the filmmakers decided not to let the film be shown at the Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Film and Video Festival. Reflecting the era's baseline homophobia, *Idaho* publicist Mickey Cotrell was reported as saying, "The distributor doesn't want the film positioned as a gay film. . . . Then many people would be frightened away."³⁴ Ultimately, despite its mainstream pretensions, *My Own Private Idaho* is an intriguing and thoughtful film for culturally literate viewers willing to engage with its theoretical and stylistic experimentation.

Van Sant next directed an adaptation of Tom Robbins's cult novel *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* (1993). He then crossed into the Hollywood mainstream with *To Die For* (1995), a comedic thriller starring Nicole Kidman and Matt Dillon, and his direction of the Oscar-winning *Good Will Hunting* assured him his pick of mainstream film projects. Curiously, Van Sant chose to do a shot-by-shot remake of Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), a project that allegedly made more money than all of Van Sant's previous films combined. Many critics were baffled by the project, and some queers were angry that he had chosen to remake one of Hollywood's most queerphobic films. Had Van Sant sold out to Hollywood? While Hollywood produced

the remake for its usual reason—money—it is possible to see the film as a sort of Warhol-inspired copy, a commercial art film that raises questions about authenticity and repetition in the postmodern age. The success of Van Sant's more recent independent films (*Elephant* won the Golden Palm at the Cannes Film Festival) suggests that he will continue to make important forays into queer filmmaking, even if he also continues to make more mainstream Hollywood films.

Gregg Araki and *The Living End* (1992)

Gregg Araki is another important and controversial filmmaker of the New Queer Cinema. His films, which draw broadly on issues related to young multicultural postpunk queers, are raucous and edgy and in some ways less intellectually demanding than those of his New Queer peers. Araki grew up near Santa Barbara, California, where he drew comic books and wrote short stories. Like Todd Haynes, Araki was exposed to cultural theory in university film schools, and it was from such programs that his own guerilla style—a mixture of Bertolt Brecht, Jean-Luc Godard, Andy Warhol, and John Waters—was forged. Araki's first features were highly individual and artisanal: *Three Bewildered People in the Night* (1987) and *The Long Weekend o' Despair* (1989) were each made for mere thousands of dollars, shot in black-and-white 16 MM without synch sound.

Araki's breakthrough film, *The Living End* (originally titled *Fuck the World*), is a queer reappropriation of the classical Hollywood buddy/road movie formula. It focuses on two HIV-positive lovers, Jon and Luke (a reference to Jean-Luc Godard), who, feeling as though they have nothing left to lose, hit the road with guns and a gun. The world they traverse is a bleak wasteland, filled with empty pop culture signifiers and burnt-out industrial landscapes. They encounter—and beat back—gay bashers, sex freaks, and lesbian serial killers, one of whom is played by former Warhol Superstar Mary Woronov. Jon and Luke discuss the nonexistence of God and listen to nihilistic music, referencing then-popular gloom rockers Nine Inch Nails, the Smiths, and Joy Division. Quoting the flatly ironic catch phrase of cult comic-strip character Zippy the Pinhead—"Are we having fun yet?"—the film suggests that no one can have much fun in the age of AIDS. The best one can manage is a sick and tired, cynical humor. Toward the end of the film, as Jon begins to get sick, Luke becomes more violent and suicidal, and the film ends ambiguously with them alone together on a deserted beach.

Shot on color 16 MM film stock for a mere \$20,000, *The Living End* was a hit at film festivals and in art house theaters; it even received a positive re-

view in *Newsweek*.³⁵ However, many gay and lesbian audiences were divided over *The Living End*. Some praised its audacious form and content, while others were offended by its alleged misogyny. *Frontiers*, a Los Angeles gay magazine, ran two opposing reviews. The negative review was concerned that the film's disparate elements did not cohere and that its nihilistic stance would dishearten those living with AIDS.³⁶ Araki admitted that his film was deliberately “irresponsible” but also symbolic of the rage people were feeling at the time.³⁷ He also linked its sensibility to those of activist groups such as Queer Nation and ACT UP, and Araki ends his film with the following dedication: “to craig lee (1954–1991) and the hundreds of thousands who have died and the hundreds of thousands more who will die because of a big white house full of republican fuckheads.”³⁸

Like many New Queer films, *The Living End* campily lurches from atrocity to absurdity, its queer camp being both “serious *and* silly, political *and* irreverent, contemporary *and* historically informed, elitist *and* open.”³⁹ That style also describes Araki’s *The Doom Generation* (1995) and *Nowhere* (1996), two more violent road movies that focus on the alienation of teenage queers, a



Gregg Araki’s *The Living End* (1992) is an important film of the New Queer Cinema movement. Araki (center) is seen here clowning on the set with his two lead actors (Mike Dytri and Craig Gilmore). Strand/Desperate Pictures / The Kobal Collection

theme also central to his film *Totally Fucked Up* (1994). In contrast to those films, Araki's *Splendor* (1999) downplays its homoeroticism, even as it focuses on a ménage à trois. *Splendor* was criticized by many queers as being too mainstream, while, conversely, many mainstream viewers found it far too queer. Except for a pilot for an MTV series that the network declined to pick up, Araki did not complete another project until *Mysterious Skin* (2004), a film about a teenage hustler and a young man obsessed with UFOs.

John Greyson and *Zero Patience* (1993)

Canadian director John Greyson, like Tom Kalin, came to New Queer Cinema via AIDS activist videos such as *The AIDS Epidemic* (1987) and *The World Is Sick [sic]* (1989). Greyson is also a teacher and an author and in 1993 helped to coedit *Queer Looks: Perspectives on Lesbian and Gay Film and Video*.⁴⁰ A self-taught filmmaker and intellectual, Greyson makes films that eschew or question cinematic realism in favor of more overtly queer styles. As he has noted, "Realism doesn't deliver that much happiness in this world, so why not just abandon it when possible?"⁴¹ While Greyson is relatively celebrated in Canada—his feature film *Lilies* (1996) was nominated for fourteen Genie Awards, the Canadian equivalent to the Oscar—his work is not very well known in the United States, playing mainly at festivals or on video. The complexity of Greyson's work, as well as his desire to tackle subjects that are often uncomfortable even to some gay audiences, seems to frighten away American film distributors.

Greyson's films are excellent examples of New Queer Cinema—they frequently create postmodern hyperspaces wherein historical characters interact with fictional ones, where film styles and genres mesh and blend, and where issues of queer sexuality are centrally staged in provocative and sometimes outrageous ways. Greyson's *Urinal* (1988), for example, uses a cast of fictional and real-life queers (including Sergei Eisenstein, Frida Kahlo, Yukio Mishima, Frances Loring, Langston Hughes, and Dorian Gray) to explore the ethics of police surveillance and public sex in Canadian washrooms; the film won the Best Gay Feature Award at the 1991 Berlin Film Festival. *Uncut* (1997) is a documentary about foreskin as well as the story of three different men named Peter. Greyson's short film *The Making of Monsters* (1991) uses music and Marxism to explore how homophobic cultures literally create monstrous acts of violence.

As a short film, *The Making of Monsters* was overshadowed in 1991 by other New Queer features, and its length worked against its finding distribution. However, Greyson's next film, *Zero Patience*, is one of his most auda-

cious and innovative works: a ghost story musical about AIDS. It tells the fictionalized story of “Patient Zero,” a character based on Gaetan Dugas, the French Canadian flight attendant who was accused of bringing AIDS to North America. In the film, Zero returns to life as a ghost, wanders about his old haunts, and encounters Sir Richard Burton, the nineteenth-century British explorer and author who is somehow still alive and working in the Toronto Museum of Natural History. Greyson uses both Zero and Burton as mythic figures and through them explores AIDS activism, corporate greed, ethnic and sexual scapegoating, human loss, desire, love, and even epistemology—the study of the nature and grounds of knowledge, that is to say, how it is we know what we know.⁴² As the film’s opening number (a Busby Berkeley–inspired water ballet) suggests, we know the world through the stories we tell, “just like Scheherazade.” *Zero Patience* asks its audience to think about who tells stories and why, and how narrative forms (such as the musical, the ghost story, or the documentary) might frame those stories in certain ways.

Sir Richard Burton was (and, in the world of the film, still is) a Victorian-era ethnographer who translated and told stories about other people and other cultures, mostly African and Middle Eastern.⁴³ As a scientist, Burton believes that the natural world can be explained through scientific methodologies, in this case his “objective” observation. In his first song he announces his intentions:

Let’s all be empiricists, victors of the brain
Through our wit and brilliance, we can know the world again
We’ll classify and label, find the answers out
A culture of certainty will banish every doubt.

But since the film is highly critical of Burton’s scientific methodology (as well as its corporate sponsorship), the second chorus of the song is rewritten, and Greyson inserts an upside-down shot of Burton to suggest that his methods are out of balance and spring from patriarchal desires to dominate others:

Let’s all be empiricists, victors of the brain
Rulers of the stupid, leaders of the blind
An empire of knowledge will conquer all the rot
A culture of certainty will put us back on top.

Zero Patience also directly critiques notions of documentary objectivity and exploitation, as when Burton reedits an interview with Zero’s mother to

make it say what he wants to hear—that Zero was indeed “the Devil.” In another scene, as Burton cruises a gay bathhouse looking for evidence, his video camera appears quite literally as his phallus—a probing, controlling technology associated with masculine dominance of the Other. Much is made of the fact that Zero cannot be seen by anyone except Burton and that Burton cannot record or capture Zero with his video camera, suggesting the failure of patriarchal media practices to represent or visualize queer men in the first place.⁴⁴ Indeed, as Christopher Gittings has argued, “Greyson’s narrative is fraught with tension between visibility and invisibility, sight and blindness: Zero’s former lover George is losing his vision because of retinitis, and the public is blinded by the media’s dominant inscription of Dugas as the monster Zero.”⁴⁵ Ultimately, Zero is made visible on video only after he is splashed in the eye with HIV—a comment on how the virus was one of the few things that could make gay men “visible” during the first decade of the epidemic.

Probably the film’s most notorious scene is its “Butthole Duet”—a fanciful musical number performed by Zero and Burton’s anuses (actually elaborate puppet masks that allow the actors’ mouths to appear as their buttholes). Yet rather than be merely a clever homage to the singing asshole in John Water’s *Pink Flamingos*, the lyrics of the number engage with psychoanalytic theory and argue that patriarchal power is dependent upon being the dominant, masculine *fucker* and not the passive, feminized *fuckee*:

The law of the father doesn’t recognize the hole,
The phallus is the ruler—it’s the cock who’s in control. . . .
If the asshole ain’t so special than the phallus can’t be either.
Patriarchy would crumble if we started getting wiser.

When Burton refuses to let himself be penetrated by Zero, the lyrics link his reticence to both Freudian paradigms and his masculinized notion of his national culture:

That makes me juvenile, I’m a polymorphous mess
Oedipus is weeping when my butt I do caress.
I lie down and think of England, toot that horn and bang that drum
It’s an insult to the Empire when I take it up the bum.

Zero then offers the assertion that “sodomy ain’t so symbolic, your rectum ain’t a grave”—a direct allusion to a controversial essay by Leo Bersani that explored the semiotic and cultural connections between anality and death.⁴⁶

Zero Patience, like many other New Queer films, has been called pretentious by some moviegoers because of its theoretical aspirations. That, coupled with its low budget and hybrid form, might make it difficult viewing for some. Yet the film has many pleasures as well as theoretical insights to offer—its musical numbers rework generic conventions to focus on male bodies and gay romance, and the utopic theme present in many musicals is especially poignant in light of the AIDS epidemic. Part activism, part reappropriation, and all singing-and-dancing queer theory, *Zero Patience* stands as a defining film of the New Queer Cinema movement.

Race and the New Queer Cinema: Marlon Riggs and *Tongues Untied* (1989)

B. Ruby Rich's landmark essay on New Queer Cinema, while celebrating its audacity and energy, also noted that most of its films centered on white men. Other critics' work, such as that of filmmaker and theorist Pratibha Parmar, also questioned just how "queer" New Queer Cinema could be if it ignored the issues of women and people of color.⁴⁷ Although such critiques seemingly overlook the Asian heritage of Gregg Araki, they do reveal a structural bias in the funding and distribution of New Queer Cinema (one that mirrors a similar bias in dominant American filmmaking). In fact, New Queer works by women and people of color were much more likely to be shorter than feature length or shot on video and therefore less likely to earn theatrical releases. Pratibha Parmar's *Khush* (1991), for example, is a short experimental video documentary about queers of Asian descent, and it definitely partakes of New Queer form and content. Isaac Julien's forty-five-minute film *Looking for Langston* (1989) is also New Queer in its concerns, and it caused a furor at the New York Film Festival because it dared to suggest that Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes was less than straight.⁴⁸ Perhaps the best-known work of the era that queerly focuses on race and sexuality is Marlon Riggs's short experimental video documentary *Tongues Untied*.

Part autobiography, part sociological study, and part free-form avant-garde essay, *Tongues Untied* mixes documentary footage with scripted scenes, using such queer stylistics to explore the media's ability to shape identity. The video includes meditations on race, sex, AIDS, gender, and religion; and one humorous highlight is a segment on snap queens, complete with footage from the faux-scientific "Institute of Snap!thology." *Tongues Untied* takes its title from the multiple voices it employs, all speaking about different aspects of being black and gay in America in the 1980s. It explores how black gay men are often isolated from the larger social networks in which

they allegedly belong: many experience homophobia within African American communities and racism within white gay communities. The piece concludes with footage of queer black men congregating at bars, community centers, and pride marches, while Riggs's ultimate message is spelled out for the viewer in both words and images: "Black Men Loving Black Men is *the* Revolutionary Act."

In one of the most powerful segments of the video, Riggs himself recounts his own childhood, noting that while many boys his age "traded sex" as part of their preadolescent play, he freely gave it away, having "heard his calling by age six." As Riggs narrates his developing sexuality, his monologue is increasingly intercut with extreme close-ups of black and white mouths spewing the epithets "punk," "homo," and "mother-fuckin' coon." Riggs recalls how the scorn he felt from both black and white communities led him into silence—silence that functioned as a shield to protect him from hatred but that simultaneously left him isolated and alone. As the homophobic and racist slurs of this sequence build to a crescendo, the video segues into an enacted representation of a physical gay bashing, drawing a firm link between hate speech and violence. Riggs then recounts his first crush on a white boy and how his feelings were both a blessing and a curse: a blessing because he learned to feel love and warmth toward another man but a curse because those same feelings caused him to devalue black gay men, including himself. A quick montage of gay erotic imagery underlines Riggs's point that gay desire is usually constructed by the media as desire for white men; to this day, erotic images of queer men of color are harder to find and generally patterned into certain stereotypes.

Unlike *Ethnic Notions* (1986), Riggs's Emmy Award-winning documentary on the lingering effects of nineteenth-century African American stereotypes, *Tongues Untied* created a fire storm of controversy. Because it had received some federal funding, it was denounced on the floor of the Senate by Jesse Helms. Curiously, Helms referred to the video as *Tongues United* rather than *Tongues Untied*, a slip that seems to indicate the senator's own fears about black or interracial sexuality as much as his opposition to federally funded art. Then, when the PBS *Point of View* series chose to air the documentary, many local stations refused to show it. Riggs also found himself open to criticism when it was discovered by the gay press that his own lover was white, a fact that seemed to run counter to the video's message about black men loving black men. Before his death in 1994, Riggs went on to complete several more highly acclaimed documentaries. *Color Adjustment* (1991) examines the representation of African Americans on television, while *Affirmations* (1990), *Anthem* (1991), *No Regrets* (1992), and *Black Is*,

Black Ain't (1994)—made while Riggs was dying from AIDS—explore topics especially pertinent to queer black sexualities.

Jennie Livingston and *Paris Is Burning* (1990)

In truth, one of the first major art house hits of the New Queer Cinema focuses on the queer intersections of race, gender, and class. *Paris Is Burning* won a slew of awards at various international film festivals, and when it was screened in New York City, it earned the highest one-day gross in the history of the Film Forum theater.⁴⁹ Eventually distributed by Prestige (a sidearm of independent distributor Miramax), the film became one of the few feature-length American documentaries to break through to a general audience. Both the subject matter of the film and the gender of its director challenge the assertion that New Queer Cinema was by and about only white men, for this exploration of African American and Latino drag cultures was made by a lesbian. A film school graduate, Jennie Livingston spent six years working on the film, having to stop at various points to raise more funds. It is true that her lack of funding was often due to her subject matter: when she applied for a grant from the Chicago Resource Center (a group that had helped to fund *The Times of Harvey Milk* [1984]), she was turned down twice and told not to bother applying a third time. “It didn’t fit . . . [the center’s] agenda,” Livingston reported. “The gay mainstream, which is essentially white and middle-class, doesn’t want to be shown drag queens.”⁵⁰ Even after the film’s rough cut began getting raves at various festivals, funds to finish the \$450,000 film were slow to materialize.⁵¹

Paris Is Burning is a queer documentary that problematizes concepts of reality by emphasizing the performative nature of human experience. As contestants at drag balls vie with each other in a variety of categories, they literally demonstrate how gender and sexuality, and even race and class, are constructed performances rather than innate or essential qualities. For example, the balls even have categories for the best rendition of masculinity, implying its social construction, as well as underlining how gay men have often learned how to “pass” for straight. While those at the balls stress the importance of “realness,” what is “real” becomes harder and harder to judge. Whether someone is really a woman or a man becomes blurred, particularly as some of the individuals featured are transgendered. When Livingston cuts from contestants at the balls to “normal” people walking around daytime Manhattan, the effect is jarring: the overly muscled calf of a woman or the ostentatious cigar chomping of a young businessman seem just as queer as the drag acts celebrated at the balls. *Paris Is Burning*’s ability to lay bare the

performativity of identity led Judith Butler, one of the most prominent academics working in queer theory, to devote an entire chapter of her book *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* to an analysis of the film.⁵²

Like other works of New Queer Cinema, *Paris Is Burning* was excoriated by conservative political groups. The Christian Film and Television Commission judged the film to be "unbelievably sordid and despicably evil" and urged a nationwide boycott.⁵³ Because Livingston got some money from an NEA grant, the film also figured in the campaign to restrict that organization's distribution of funds to queer artists. Arguments about the film also raged among leftist critics. In particular, African American social critic bell hooks published a withering attack, claiming that the film exploits and even celebrates "the way in which colonized black people (in this case black gay brothers, some of whom were drag queens) worship at the throne of whiteness, even when such worship demands that we live in perpetual self-hate, steal, lie, go hungry, and even die in its pursuit."⁵⁴

Furthermore, hooks also accused the film's white female director of objectifying and spectacularizing drag queens of color for a mostly wealthy white art-house audience.⁵⁵ However, the publicist for Film Forum told reporters that "*Paris* ticket buyers, though largely gay, are ethnically mixed,"⁵⁶ a contradiction that seems to suggest that hooks may have seen the film under specific conditions that could and did affect her response to the film. *Paris Is Burning* does emphasize how many of its subjects of color long for the "ideal" life of wealthy white people as presented on television and in fashion magazines. Yet, contrary to hooks's assertions, the film seems to be more readily critiquing this longing rather than celebrating it. The film's subjects buy in to the system that oppresses them, even as other aspects of their lives—their underground economy (including "mopping," or shoplifting), their play with gender and sexuality—attempt to subvert that same system.⁵⁷ Perhaps most important, while hooks concluded that the film in no way interrogates whiteness,⁵⁸ it can easily be understood as exposing racial identity itself as queerly performative and not essentialist.⁵⁹ In extending notions of queerness to racial identity, *Paris Is Burning* depicts how heavily intertwined the social constructions of race, gender, sexuality, and class actually are.

New Queer Lesbians: Rose Troche and Cheryl Dunye

New Queer films by and about women, regardless of their race or ethnicity, were marginalized in the first wave of the movement, a trend still extant today. For example, despite the commercial and critical success of *Paris Is Burn-*

ing, director Jennie Livingston has been unable to make another feature-length film, even though most of New Queer Cinema's male directors have made several. The relative dearth of lesbian films was not a new concern. In 1986, for example, the San Francisco International Lesbian and Gay Film Festival experienced a lesbian riot when, during a lesbian shorts program, the film *Ten Cents a Dance (Parallax)* (1985) included a scene of two men having sex.⁶⁰ Reacting to charges of gender imbalance within New Queer filmmaking, many queer producers and organizations have gone out of their way to promote work by and about queer women. Both Christine Vachon and Frameline have supported the completion of such films, including Rose Troche's *Go Fish* (1994) and Cheryl Dunye's *Watermelon Woman* (1995).⁶¹

Directed by Rose Troche and written by Guinevere Turner (who also stars), *Go Fish* began its life as a Chicago-based short film project entitled *Max and Ely*. Along the way it caught the attention of producer Christine Vachon, who guided the project through its final phases of production, its premiere at the Sundance Film Festival, and its sale to the Samuel Goldwyn Company. Touted as being the first full-length lesbian feature to be screened at Sundance, *Go Fish* became a profitable art house hit. Since then writer-director Rose Troche has made two other, little-seen independent films—*Bedrooms and Hallways* (1998), *The Safety of Objects* (2001)—and has also directed for queer cable hits *Six Feet Under* (2001–2005) and *The L Word* (2004–).

Go Fish is a good example of New Queer Cinema because it combines standard Hollywood narrative elements (a romantic comedy plot that features two women meeting and falling in love) with more avant-garde touches and musings on queer politics. Stylistically, the film often punctuates its realist narrative sections with experimental sequences. One such sequence explores the nature of marriage via multiple and overlapping audio and visual tracks. As different women in the film put on and take off wedding gowns, voice-overs comment upon the privileges and pressures of marriage as a patriarchal institution. Another sequence begins as an apparent gay bashing, but in it, a lesbian is harassed by other lesbians, who forcibly question their “victim” on how she can “really” be a lesbian if she has occasional casual sex with her male friend. Further deconstructing the realist space of conventional narrative cinema, the film employs a Greek chorus of characters (or are they the actors playing the characters?) that comments upon the developing romance. At another point, characters debate what responsibility queer filmmakers have to show positive images—and what exactly a positive or negative image might be. The film's cast of characters embodies this debate by presenting a variety of lesbian identities: “granola” lesbians, lipstick

lesbians, butches, as well as characters who embody various levels of openness. And although the central relationship is between two white women, their friends are of mixed races, ethnic backgrounds, class statuses, and professional abilities.

Cheryl Dunye's *Watermelon Woman* is the first queer feature film made by and about African American lesbians. Dunye is a Philadelphia-based filmmaker who was born in Liberia and then studied at Temple University and Rutgers. In the early 1990s, she made several short films—*Janine* (1990), *She Don't Fade* (1991), *The Potluck and the Passion* (1993)—before writing and directing her first feature film. An excellent example of New Queer Cinema form and content, *Watermelon Woman* is a pseudodocumentary that self-consciously mixes fact and fiction. It centers on a young filmmaker (played by Dunye herself) researching a black character actress from Hollywood's classical era. Credited only as “the Watermelon Woman” in the racist plantation melodramas in which she appeared, this (fictionalized) character suggests “real life” black actresses Hattie McDaniel and Butterfly McQueen. Dunye's character (or is it Dunye herself?) discovers that the Watermelon Woman had been romantically involved with a white film director (loosely modeled on Dorothy Arzner), although many surviving historians and family members seek to suppress that knowledge. As Dunye delves deeper into the mysteries surrounding the Watermelon Woman, she too begins an affair with a white woman (played by Guinevere Turner of *Go Fish*). Ultimately, Dunye's search for the Watermelon Woman is in fact a search for historical black lesbian cultures and identities, so long denied or willfully eradicated by both white and black historians.

Funny, sexy, and extremely clever, *Watermelon Woman* won many awards at national and international film festivals, including the Teddy Bear Award in Berlin. Sadly, it remains relatively unknown outside of queer film circles. *Variety* pronounced it “scarcely more substantial than a doodle,”⁶² a preposterous assertion that reveals that racist, sexist, and homophobic biases can still be found in Hollywood. Since *Watermelon Woman*, Dunye has directed a women's prison melodrama for HBO entitled *Stranger Inside* (2001) and the mainstream sex comedy *My Baby's Daddy* (2004), a film that despite some queer and multicultural touches was little better than the usual Hollywood sex comedy. It remains to be seen whether Dunye will live up to the promise she exhibited in *Watermelon Woman*.

Conclusion

Writing retrospectively about New Queer Cinema in 2000, B. Ruby Rich argued that it was always more of “a moment than a movement.” The queer

films that followed it, she asserted, have “become just another niche market, another product line pitched at one particular type of discerning customer.”⁶³ Perhaps she is right. The success of New Queer Cinema led Hollywood and other independent filmmakers to make more films about gay and lesbian concerns, although whether or not those films employ the styles and attitudes of New Queer Cinema is open to debate. As the next chapter explores, Hollywood’s attempt to mainstream the movement mostly fell back onto essentialist and stereotypical approaches to gay and lesbian lives. However, as the final chapter explores, many independent films—even those made by heterosexual directors—have continued to operate within queer modes. Perhaps most significantly, independent films made in the spirit of 1990s New Queer Cinema have recently been garnering high acclaim and ever-wider audiences. While queer films may indeed be a niche market, they are nonetheless being produced in unprecedented numbers, and they continue to influence the cultural meanings of human sexuality in America and around the globe.

Notes

1. Karl Soehnlein, “Homo Movies,” *Village Voice*, 11 September 1990, 66.
2. B. Ruby Rich, “New Queer Cinema,” *Sight and Sound* 2, no. 5 (September 1992): 32.
3. Michele Aaron, “New Queer Cinema: An Introduction,” in *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader*, ed. Michele Aaron (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 3, defines New Queer Cinema through “defiance” as well. At the time, Rich, “New Queer Cinema,” used the words *irreverent* and *energetic*. J. Hoberman, “Out and Inner Mongolia,” *Premiere* (October 1992): 31, describes the films as “proudly assertive.”
4. Monica B. Pearl, “AIDS and New Queer Cinema,” in Aaron, *New Queer Cinema*, 24. See also José Arroyo, “Death, Desire, and Identity: The Political Unconscious of ‘New Queer Cinema,’” in *Activating Theory: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Politics*, ed. Joseph Bristow and Angelia R. Wilson (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1993), 72–98.
5. Pearl, “AIDS and New Queer Cinema,” 33.
6. Aaron, “New Queer Cinema: An Introduction,” 7.
7. Christine Vachon, *Shooting to Kill: How an Independent Producer Blasts through the Barriers to Make Movies That Matter*, with David Edelstein (New York: Avon Books 1998), 7.
8. “Dialogue with Todd Haynes,” *Hollywood Reporter*, 25–27 April 2003, 2.
9. Quoted in Michele Kort, “Gone Fishing,” *The Advocate*, 8 February 1994, 61.
10. Glyn Davis, “Camp and Queer and the New Queer Director: Case Study—Gregg Araki,” in Aaron, *New Queer Cinema*, 53.

11. Joy Chamberlain, "Filling the Lack in Everyone Is Quite Hard Work, Really . . .": A Roundtable Discussion with Joy Chamberlain, Isaac Julien, Stuart Marshall, and Pratibha Parmar," in *Queer Looks: Perspectives on Lesbian and Gay Film and Video*, ed. Martha Gever, John Greyson, and Pratibha Parmar (London: Routledge, 1993), 43.

12. Marilyn Moss, "Edward II," *Boxoffice*, April 1992.

13. Allan Parachini, "NEA Investigation Exonerates S.F. Gay Film Festival," *Los Angeles Times*, 17 October 1990.

14. Dennis Harvey, "S.F. Gay Fest Has Big Slate despite Loss of NEA Grant," *Variety*, 15 June 1992.

15. Susan Stryker, "Festival—25 Years," Twenty-Fifth Annual San Francisco International Lesbian and Gay Film Festival program (2001), 123.

16. Chris Lippard, "Introduction," in *By Angels Driven: The Films of Derek Jarman*, ed. Chris Lippard (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1996), 2.

17. Lippard, "Introduction," 3.

18. Abbie Bernstein, "Edward II," *Drama-Logue*, 23–29 April 1992.

19. See Stephen Holden, "Historical Edward II and Gay Issues Today," *New York Times*, 20 March 1992.

20. Peter Rainer, "An Audacious Slant on Edward II," *Los Angeles Times*, 10 April 1992, F8.

21. Judith Lewis, "Timeless Perversions," *LA Weekly*, 10 April 1992, 17.

22. David Stratton, "Edward II," *Variety*, 16 September 1991.

23. Lewis, "Timeless Perversions," 17.

24. Quoted in Kris Kovick, "Inside the City," *The City: San Francisco's Magazine* (September 1992). As Kalin himself put it in a letter to the editor of the *Village Voice* about the film, "Leopold and Loeb's relationship involved homosexual acts rather than homosexual identity. Though the film invites a contemporary reading, we acknowledge this distinction to avoid grand metaphors of a universal or timeless homosexuality." Tom Kalin, "Killers' Instincts" (letter to the editor) *Village Voice*, 22 December 1992.

25. Karen Kreps, "Swoon," *Boxoffice*, July 1992.

26. Michael Wilmington, "Lust, Crime Unite Doomed Teen-Age Lovers in Swoon," *Los Angeles Times*, 25 September 1992, F8.

27. Steve Warren, "Swoon Revisits Famous Chicago Murder Case," *Update*, 23 September 1992, A23.

28. Kreps, "Swoon."

29. Quoted in John Powers, "Toxic Shock Syndrome," *LA Weekly*, 17 May 1991.

30. The film critic for *The Nation* called *Poison* "filmmaking at its most academic. . . . It's assumed you already know the meanings of these styles—at least, you do if you studied poststructuralist film theory at Brown, circa 1985 [as did Haynes]." Stuart Klawans, "Films," *The Nation*, 22 April 1991, 535.

31. For more on the film, see Robert Lang, *Masculine Interests: Homoerotics in Hollywood Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 243–62.

32. Jeff Schwager, "My Own Private Idaho," *Boxoffice*, October 1991, R73.
33. Dario Scardapane, "On the Set: Lost Boys," *US*, November 1991, 75.
34. Quoted in David J. Fox, "Gay Film Fest Loses Out on Four Films," *Los Angeles Times*, 9 July 1991, F4.
35. David Ansen, "The Living End," *Newsweek*, 31 August 1992.
36. "Audience pleasing romance is undercut by the political pretensions while the politics are decimated by the vicissitudes of romance." Brian Morgante, "The Living End," *Frontiers*, 28 August 1992, 44.
37. Quoted in Frank Sanello, "Hollywood Outlaws," *Frontiers*, 28 August 1992, 41.
38. Quoted in Sanello, "Hollywood Outlaws," 41.
39. Glyn Davis, "Camp and Queer and the New Queer Director: Case Study—Gregg Araki," in Aaron, *New Queer Cinema*, 63. See also James M. Moran, "Gregg Araki: Guerilla Filmmaker for a Queer Generation," *Film Comment* 50, no. 1 (Fall 1996): 18–26.
40. Martha Gever, John Greyson, and Pratibha Parmar, eds., *Queer Looks: Perspectives on Lesbian and Gay Film and Video* (London: Routledge, 1993).
41. John Greyson, quoted in Lisa Cohen, "By Any Genre Necessary," *Village Voice*, 5 April 1994, 70.
42. Paul Burston, "Film," *Time Out* (London), 3 August 1994.
43. Burton is perhaps best known for his translations of *The Arabian Nights* and the *Kama Sutra*. Certain aspects of his life are depicted in the film *Mountains on the Moon* (1990), including his reputation for shocking Victorian England with his studies on sexuality.
44. Christopher Gittings, "Zero Patience, Genre, Difference, and Ideology: Singing and Dancing Queer Nation," *Cinema Journal* 41, no. 1 (Fall 2001): 32.
45. Gittings, "Zero Patience," 32. For another analytical take on the film, see Monica Pearl, "Zero Patience: AIDS, Music, and Reincarnation Films," in *Musicals: Hollywood and Beyond*, ed. Bill Marshall and Robynn Stilwell (Exeter, Eng.: Intellect, 2000).
46. Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" *October* 43 (Winter 1987): 197–222. See also Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995).
47. Pratibha Parmar, "A Response to B. Ruby Rich," *Women and Film: A Sight and Sound Reader*, ed. Pam Cook and Philip Dodd (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 175–76.
48. The reaction to *Looking for Langston* is reported in "Production Report: *Young Soul Rebels*," *Screen International*, 25 August 1990.
49. Doris Toumarkine, "Paris Draws Raves but No Distributor," *Hollywood Reporter*, 22 March 1991.
50. Jennie Livingston, quoted in Paul Minx, "House Frau: *Paris Is Burning*'s Jennie Livingston," *Village Voice*, 26 March 1991, 54.
51. For a history of the film's many production hurdles, see Christopher Vaughn, "Paris Is Burning—Case Study," *Hollywood Reporter* (Independent Producers Special Report, August 1990), S98.

52. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

53. Colin Brown, "Church Groups Boycott *Paris Is Burning*," *Screen International*, 16 August 1991.

54. bell hooks, "Is *Paris Burning*?" *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 149.

55. Pepper LaBeija, although bothered that he did not become rich through his participation in the film, told a *New York Times* reporter, "I love the movie, I watch it more than often, and I don't agree that it exploits us." Quoted in Jesse Green, "Paris Has Burned," *New York Times*, 18 April 1993, sec. 9, 11. The article does detail the legal efforts by some of the people in the film to get recompense for their involvement in the film. Such litigation failed because they had all signed releases during the film's shoot. This may lend credence to hooks's accusations of exploitation, but before any litigation began, Livingston took \$55,000 of the money she eventually made from the film's success and divided it among the thirteen interviewees who contributed the most to the final cut.

56. Toumarkine, "*Paris Draws Raves*."

57. hooks does note the critical faculties of interviewee Dorian Carey, particularly how he "emphasizes the way consumer capitalism undermines the subversive power of the drag ball." hooks, "Is *Paris Burning*?" 155.

58. hooks, "Is *Paris Burning*?" 149.

59. For an extended analysis of the film in this vein, see Daniel T. Contreras, "New Queer Cinema: Spectacle, Race, Utopia," in *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader*, ed. Michele Aaron (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004).

60. Stryker, "Festival—25 Years," 19.

61. Notice in *Screen International*, 29 November 1996, reports, "To boost the entries, Frameline is offering grants of up to \$2,000 for projects in the final stages of production. In the past, grants have been awarded to Rose Troche's *Go Fish* and Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman*."

62. Joe Leydon, review of *Watermelon Woman*, *Variety*, 24 June 1996.

63. B. Ruby Rich, "Queer and Present Danger," *Sight and Sound* (March 2000).

CHAPTER ELEVEN



Queer Eye for the Straight Hollywood Executive



Heterosexual actors Wesley Snipes, John Leguizamo, and Patrick Swayze played desexualized drag queens in the mainstream film comedy *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar* (1995). Universal/Amblin / The Kobal Collection

Gay and lesbian people continued to become more visible in America of the 1990s, a trend that led some pundits to dub the decade as the “Gay Nineties.” The AIDS crisis had made many queers—even those who might have preferred to stay hidden—come out of the closet and become more vocal about their desires as well as their civil rights. President Bill Clinton courted the gay and lesbian vote by pledging to end discrimination based on sexual orientation. New Queer Cinema paved the way for more queer images in both Hollywood and independent films, as well as on television. “Lesbian chic” and a free-floating “queer style” permeated the advertising industry, as Madison Avenue began to use updated forms of connotative homosexuality to lure queer consumers without upsetting straight ones. Recording artists such as Melissa Etheridge, Elton John, George Michael, and k.d. lang came out of the closet without ruining their careers. And for a brief moment, men in drag became so popular that RuPaul not only became a top-ten singer but also hosted her/his own television show.

Yet, the 1990s also saw a renewed backlash against gay and lesbian equality, and the incidence of hate crimes increased. Conservative politicians and religious fundamentalists continued to demonize queers, alleging that gay men and lesbians could be (and should be!) cured by reparative therapy, even as the American Medical Association officially stated that such programs were the equivalent of consumer fraud. State laws against sodomy (which would not be declared unconstitutional until 2003) were used throughout the 1990s to uphold and justify discriminatory practices, such as various ballot initiatives seeking to revoke civil rights protections for queer Americans. One such initiative was narrowly defeated in Oregon, while the one that passed in Colorado was quickly declared unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court. However, that same Court ruled that it *was* constitutional for the Boy Scouts of America to discriminate against gays. Perhaps most infamously, the gays-in-the-military debacle of the 1990s resulted in the institutionalized discrimination of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” a “compromise solution” that actually created more discharges from the armed services for homosexuality than fewer.

This seeming paradox—queer inclusion and simultaneous backlash—is also apparent in contemporary Hollywood. By the mid-1990s, Hollywood was producing about one overtly gay film per year and featuring “incidental queers” in many more. Special, one-time gay and lesbian episodes of straight television shows were all the rage, until *Ellen* (ABC, 1994–1998) made history by coming out in 1998. Such changes in the industry were caused by evolving social attitudes about homosexuality but also by renewed queer activism against Hollywood. However, despite this new token visibility, Holly-

wood cinema remains resolutely heterosexist. Most gay and lesbian performers are still counseled to stay in the closet, and in trying to attract the largest audience possible, Hollywood films inevitably pitch themselves at the straight masses rather than the queer fringes. Furthermore, millennial fears both imagined (the Y2K computer crash) and actual (the September 11 terrorist attacks) have created a more cautious, conservative America. Today's Hollywood films are more likely to partake of jingoistic escapism than offer complex reflections on any subject, including human sexuality.

Protesting Hollywood

The queer activism that arose in response to the AIDS crisis also spilled over into other issues related to queer life in America. For example, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance against Defamation (GLAAD) was formed in New York City in 1985 to respond to homophobia and AIDS-phobia in the mass media.¹ GLAAD still acts a media watchdog, sniffing out and reporting on anti-queer expressions circulated through music, radio, newspapers, and magazines. Its Los Angeles chapter, founded in 1988, devotes most of its time to monitoring Hollywood films and television shows.

While GLAAD is usually content to work quietly for change within the media industry, other queer activist groups of the 1990s began taking more forceful steps. One of the more provocative strategies that radical activists began to use was "outing." Led in particular by writers for the magazine *OutWeek* (including Michelangelo Signorile, Gabriel Rotello, and Nina Reyes), queer activists began exposing closeted lesbians and gay men, particularly people of power who were either directly or indirectly impeding AIDS research or hiding behind a publicly homophobic persona. At first, politicians and business moguls were the targets of this strategy. But in 1990, a number of show business figures (including actor Richard Chamberlain, Cher's daughter Chastity Bono, and music producer David Geffen) were all outed. While a variety of circumstances led to the outing of Chamberlain and Bono, Geffen's was a conscious attack by queers who considered him a traitor because of "his defense of antigay band Guns 'n' Roses and his promotion of [homophobic comedian] Andrew Dice Clay."² By April 1990, Signorile was threatening all of Hollywood in the pages of *OutWeek* magazine: "EITHER YOU JOIN US OR WE WILL BEGIN IMMEDIATELY TEARING DOWN EVERY WALL, EXPOSING YOUR HYPOCRISIES."³

To many in the Hollywood industry, it seemed like the era of *Confidential* magazine had returned—but this time the threat of exposure was coming not from antigay forces but from queers themselves. By the summer of 1990, the

efforts of *OutWeek* and others began to spread—first to the tabloids (such as the *National Enquirer* and the *Star*) but then into the mainstream press. The *Los Angeles Times* noted that “Hollywood is grappling with the ethics, emotional impact, and economic consequences of publicizing the alleged homosexuality of celebrities.”⁴ Worried that a full-scale witch-hunt of major stars would destroy careers and multimillion-dollar studio projects, agents, publicists, and executives started to address the activists’ complaints. After feminist and queer activists further targeted Andrew Dice Clay—painting lurid graffiti on billboards all over Los Angeles that were advertising his new album—Clay was dropped from the Geffen label. Barry Diller, a gay executive at 20th Century Fox, abandoned the last two films of a three-picture contract with Clay.

Seeing the power that such tactics held over Hollywood, queer activists increased their efforts, particularly in reaction to some very high-profile Hollywood films. *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), for example, enraged many queer activists because its serial killer Buffalo Bill is some sort of violent transsexual psychopath with a poodle named Precious. Audiences are encouraged to find Buffalo Bill as nothing else but monstrous, especially in relation to the film’s more erudite serial killer Hannibal Lecter, played by Anthony Hopkins. (This dual-psycho formula—one overtly queer and one less so—is also present in *Hannibal* [2001], the film’s sequel.) Director Jonathan Demme (and his supporters) tried to claim that Buffalo Bill was not meant to be homosexual, and perhaps he is not, yet his gender-bending makes him quite clearly queer. Many viewers seemed unable to make such a fine distinction, allegedly screaming “Kill the faggot!” during screenings of the film.⁵ Even after *The Silence of the Lambs* was released, activists repeatedly “zapped” Demme, star Jodie Foster, and distributor Orion Pictures by jamming their phone and fax lines with messages condemning the film and their parts in making it.⁶ Michelangelo Signorile began to out Jodie Foster, reporting information on her sexuality from people who went to college with her at Yale; even today, Foster has repeatedly refused to acknowledge or respond to the rumors that she is a lesbian.

A few months after the release of *The Silence of the Lambs*, *Basic Instinct* (1992) began shooting on location in San Francisco, and queer activists again leaped into action to hamper the filming, just as they had done with *Cruising* over a decade earlier. *Basic Instinct* is yet another Hollywood thriller made by heterosexual men about killer queers; it stars Sharon Stone as a lethal bisexual. The activist group Queer Nation did succeed in shutting down the production at one point, and one of the organization’s subgroups, Lesbian and Bi Women in Action (LABIA), hounded the production for

weeks, resulting in arrests on at least one occasion.⁷ The protests garnered major media coverage, leading director Paul Verhoeven and screenwriter Joe Eszterhas to meet with members of Queer Nation and GLAAD to discuss possible changes to the script (although only a few were actually made). The film's premiere was greeted by protestors holding signs that revealed the mystery's ending, in hopes of dissuading people from buying tickets. However, as with *Cruising*, reaction to *Basic Instinct* was not uniform among queers: many lesbian viewers enjoyed the film as a fantasy of female empowerment, and many gay men enjoyed the film as camp.⁸

Even the Academy Awards ceremony was targeted by queer activists during these years. In 1991, ACT UP sent out a thousand letters to Academy members asking them to speak about AIDS during their acceptance speeches and to wear a "Silence = Death" button, also included in the mailing. Only *Longtime Companion* Oscar-nominee Bruce Davison and Susan Sarandon wore the buttons to the ceremony. Most of the protestors at the ceremony were kept outside the hall. A few activists in formal dress jumped out of a limousine shouting "Lights, camera, AIDS action now!" At least one protestor actually made it into the auditorium and began making a commotion, but security hustled him out without interrupting the flow of the show. Activists also protested outside Oscar parties, waving large banners at the guests as they hurried from their limousines into trendy Los Angeles restaurants.⁹

One year later, the entire town went on high alert when various media sources reported that queer activists would again be converging on the Academy Awards.¹⁰ A number of nominated films that year were especially homophobic, and critic Gene Siskel agreed, telling CBS *This Morning* that "Hollywood is getting what is coming to it."¹¹ In addition to *The Silence of the Lambs* (which would eventually win Oscars for Best Picture, Best Director, Best Actor, Best Actress, and Best Screenplay), Oliver Stone's *JFK* (1991) features incidental gay men as part of a conspiracy surrounding the presidential assassination, and *Fried Green Tomatoes* (1991) degays its central premise, turning the novel's lesbian lovers into just good (straight) friends. The rumors of protests had the industry running scared, and, just days before the ceremony, a front-page headline in *Variety* reported that the "Academy Asks Gay Orgs for Restraint."¹² Perhaps as a potential appeasement, many of the 1992 attendees sported red AIDS-awareness ribbons, and host Billy Crystal took time to explain their significance during the broadcast. In the end, while protestors gathered in large numbers chanting and picketing outside, no attempts to infiltrate the auditorium succeeded. While many queers thought that the red ribbons were a pitifully small (or even empty) gesture to make, for a few years they became necessary fashion accessories at Hollywood galas.

The pressure placed on Hollywood by queer activists led Sid Sheinberg (CEO of Universal) and Barry Diller (head of 20th Century Fox) to found Hollywood Supports, a group meant to counteract AIDS discrimination and homophobia in the film industry. By 1994, Hollywood Supports had held over eight hundred “AIDS in the Workplace” seminars and helped to supply legal fees for discrimination lawsuits.¹³ By the early 1990s, almost all of the Hollywood studios had amended their equal employment opportunity policies to include sexual orientation as a protected category. Many also began paying for AIDS medications as part of their employee health benefits. The presence of Hollywood Supports also influenced the establishment of lesbian and gay employee groups. For example, while meeting at a Hollywood Supports event in 1992, two employees of the Walt Disney Company hatched a plan to start LEAGUE (Lesbian and Gay United Employees) at the studio. Soon after LEAGUE’s debut, similar groups formed elsewhere, including LEAGUE MGM/UA, EAGLE (Universal/MCA), and Gay Men and Lesbians of Time/Warner.¹⁴

Something that both Hollywood Supports and employee groups such as LEAGUE worked hard to accomplish was the extension of employee benefits to domestic partners (just as they had been extended to heterosexual spouses for years). Under Sid Sheinberg’s guidance, MCA/Universal was the first to offer such benefits. In 1992, Fox and Columbia also extended benefits to their workers’ domestic partners. By 1994, Hollywood Supports announced that “we’ve had nine companies—with more on the way—adopt domestic-partnership benefit programs.”¹⁵ Because of worries about its family image, Disney held out for a long time, but with the rest of the industry already offering them, and with LEAGUE consistently lobbying for them, Disney finally capitulated in 1996. Part of the reason why the Hollywood studios began offering domestic partner benefits was the desire to attract and keep talented workers. Unlike the classical Hollywood era, when a person’s homosexuality was an “open secret” (if it was known at all), more and more people behind the camera in Hollywood today no longer feel the need to keep their sexuality closeted. By 1994, *Out* magazine could devote a special issue to “Out in Hollywood,” profiling a wide spectrum of openly queer people in the film and television industry. Some studios were even actively seeking out queer talent. Lauren Lloyd, for example, was interviewed for a job at the Walt Disney Company in 1994; she recalled one “Disney exec who carefully pronounced the word ‘minority’ when pushed to explain her attractiveness to [the] studio.”¹⁶

However, while more and more people in Hollywood can now live openly gay or lesbian lives, most of the films and television shows they create remain

steadfastly heterosexist (and even occasionally homophobic). Furthermore, the vast majority of these openly queer people are working behind the camera and not in front of it. Most gay and lesbian actors in Hollywood are still urged to stay in the closet for fear that American audiences will not accept known-to-be-queer actors in heterosexual roles. Such fears have led romantic leading men such as Tom Selleck and Tom Cruise to sue the tabloids for libel for publishing information suggesting that they were gay. When Anne Heche—who was then Ellen DeGeneres’s lover—starred opposite Harrison Ford in the romantic comedy *Six Days, Seven Nights* (1998), it was treated as something of a test case. Would mainstream American audiences accept Heche as Ford’s lover? The lukewarm reception to the film by both critics and audiences left the issue unresolved, and it was hard to tell if the film did poorly because audiences did not believe the Heche-Ford coupling or because the film was simply not very good. (After splitting up with DeGeneres, Heche subsequently married a cameraman, had a child, and began to reveal rather bizarre details about her private life, such as the alleged existence of her astral alter ego “Celestia.” She has continued to act, but major star status—for which she was once poised—now seems unlikely.)

Other queer actors in Hollywood negotiate their own idiosyncratic relations to the closet. Some are fairly open in their private lives even as they maintain “straight” public personas. Many people in Hollywood, for example, knew that Rosie O’Donnell was a lesbian long before she officially came out. Although her much publicized “crush” on Tom Cruise suggested that she was heterosexual, in hindsight perhaps it most clearly suggests how easy it is to pass as straight within a heterosexist culture. Since coming out, Rosie O’Donnell has become much more active in queer political causes, such as gay marriage and adoption rights. Significantly, openly queer Hollywood celebrities today—including Ellen DeGeneres, Wilson Cruz, Rupert Everett, Rosie O’Donnell, Alan Cumming, Nathan Lane, Harvey Fierstein, Mitchell Anderson, and Sir Ian McKellen—are often more associated with television and the theater than Hollywood film per se. And those who do make Hollywood movies are rarely asked to play romantic heterosexual roles. Even though the Hollywood industry has become more conscious of its queer employees, the demands of Hollywood narrative form and the generalized heterosexism of the nation continue to exert a powerful influence on queer performers.

Queers Characters in Hollywood Films of the 1990s

In the wake of the era’s activism and the economic success of New Queer Cinema, Hollywood once again attempted to include queer characters in its

films.¹⁷ Very few of these films earned the approval of many queer critics, even as some of them were box-office hits. *Philadelphia* (1993) was hailed as a breakthrough film because it was the first major Hollywood movie to deal with AIDS (some twelve years after the crisis was first publicized). Director Jonathan Demme and screenwriter Ron Nyswaner had worked on the project for four years, inspired by their experiences with close friends who had died from the disease. When the \$30 million picture was finally distributed throughout America by Sony/TriStar Pictures, it made over \$125 million. This was arguably because its producers had deliberately done everything they could to make the film as mainstream as possible. Gay intimacy, romance, and community are marginalized, and the broader political implications of the AIDS crisis are never addressed.

Philadelphia functions like an old-fashioned Hollywood social problem film with straight characters and actors serving as points of audience identification; gay actors were only hired for minor roles. Tom Hanks—one of America's most beloved (and known to be straight) actors—was cast as Andy Beckett, a white gay lawyer who is fired from his firm because he has AIDS. Denzel Washington plays the lawyer who eventually overcomes his own homophobia and helps Andy win his court battle. Antonio Banderas plays Andy's lover Miguel, but great care was taken to desexualize their relationship: they slow dance at one point but never share a kiss. Famous (straight) rock and roll stars Bruce Springsteen and Neil Young were hired to write songs for the film, and the result was, as *Variety* put it, "an ideal film for people who have never known anyone with AIDS . . . [an] extremely well-made message picture about tolerance, justice, and discrimination [that] is pitched at mainstream audiences."¹⁸

Many queers were disappointed with *Philadelphia*, angry that it ignored the heroic efforts of actual AIDS activists and community resource organizations. Writer and activist Larry Kramer denounced the film in a widely reprinted essay entitled "Why I Hated *Philadelphia*,"¹⁹ and gay "Kid in the Hall" Scott Thompson complained about the film's lack of verisimilitude: "Tom Hanks did not read gay remotely. There are many ways of reading gay, but there is nothing remotely gay about him."²⁰ Despite that criticism, Tom Hanks won an Oscar for his performance, as did Bruce Springsteen for his theme song. And whether or not one agrees with Kramer and Thompson that the film soft-pedals its issues, *Philadelphia* dramatized those issues for mainstream heterosexual (and perhaps even homophobic) audiences. It succeeded in doing exactly what it set out to do: bringing to light discrimination based on HIV status (and by extension sexuality in general) for people who may have never thought about such things before.²¹

While *Philadelphia* was the highest-profile gay project in Hollywood of the early 1990s, it was not the only one. A few other smaller releases acknowledged the more open parameters of sexuality being explored within queer theory and the New Queer Cinema. Both *Three of Hearts* (1993) and *Threesome* (1994) were comedy-dramas aimed at teenagers and twenty-somethings, and both films promised to titillate their audience with the prospect of sexual relationships that would defy homo-hetero binaries. However, both films fall firmly back onto Hollywood's need for happy heterosexual closure and work to reformulate sexual desire as really truly straight or really true gay. For example, *Three of Hearts*, about two women and one man, desexualizes the "real" lesbian while affirming the supremacy of heterosexual coupling.²² *Threesome*, about two men and one woman, turns melodramatic and moralistic at the end, clearly suggesting that only tragedy and heartache can result from such "youthful experimentation." And needless to say, heterosexual sex is far more prevalent onscreen in both of these films than is either homosexual or queer three-way sex. Somewhat laughably, in *Threesome*, the most sexual contact the "actual" gay man gets to have with the "experimenting" straight man is one rather bland touch of the stud's unmoving butt. In the end, *Three of Hearts* and *Threesome* pleased few moviegoers. Queers generally dismissed them, and straight teenagers avoided them like the plague. (The more recent film *The Rules of Attraction* [2002] suffered a similar fate.)

In its search for a viable queer formula, Hollywood turned to drag queens. Men-in-drag comedies had proved popular in Hollywood before, and independent queer hits such as *Paris Is Burning* (1990), *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994), and *Wigstock* (1995) seemed to attest to the topic's box-office potential. Actually, drag was briefly everywhere during these years. A number of celebrities, such as basketball star Dennis Rodman, New York mayor Rudy Giuliani, and radio shock-jock Howard Stern were all photographed in drag, and Holiday Inn even released an ad featuring a post-op transsexual booking a room—it ran, rather remarkably, during the Super Bowl. Hollywood's first drag comedy of the era was *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar* (1995), a film that borrowed heavily from the plot of *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*. Much as the makers of *Philadelphia* took great pains to soften their project's queerer content, Universal Pictures and Amblin Entertainment hired macho heterosexual actors Patrick Swayze, Wesley Snipes, and John Leguizamo to star in this story of three drag queens on a cross-country road trip. As with *Philadelphia*, real-life queers were relegated to minor roles, and the film was directed by a heterosexual, Beeban Kidron, who had previously helmed the lesbian-themed BBC production *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1990). The result was, again like *Philadelphia*, a

bland, politically correct movie that could play in middle-American shopping malls without threatening or offending anyone.²³ Actually, at least one person *was* threatened and offended: professional golfer Chi Chi Rodriguez sued Universal over the fact that John Leguizamo's drag queen character is also named Chi Chi Rodriguez. Claiming that the film was defaming his reputation, Rodriguez allegedly received an out-of-court settlement from Universal.

The differences between *Priscilla* and *To Wong Foo* are illustrative of the general differences between independent and Hollywood films dealing with queers. *Priscilla* speaks from a queer perspective to a queer audience, while *To Wong Foo* seems more bounded by straight sensibilities.²⁴ *Priscilla* features a transsexual character (played by Terence Stamp) and a gay parent, while the sexuality of *To Wong Foo*'s drag queens is barely acknowledged. As Anthony Lane, writing in the *New Yorker*, expressed it, "one of the creepy, disingenuous aspects of *To Wong Foo* is that it uses drag as a convenient way of not thinking about sex. From time to time, [drag queens] Noxeema and Vida drop the word 'gay' into the conversation, but that is the sole sign of anything stirring in the hormone dept."²⁵ In fact, *To Wong Foo*'s drag queens are more interested in upholding and validating heterosexual relations than they are any queer ones. They help steer a teenage boy toward heterosexuality (and away from themselves) and rescue a straight woman from her abusive husband. Surveying the mainstream appropriation of drag that was occurring during these years, Suzanna Danuta Walters has noted that "cross-dressing, straight-talking drag queens emerged as our national Dear Abbys—providing sassy but affectionate insight into the vicissitudes of heterosexual romance."²⁶

Hollywood also made its own version of the French drag comedy *La Cage aux Folles* (1978). *The Birdcage* (1996) stars Robin Williams and Nathan Lane as two older gay men who pretend to be straight so their son can marry the daughter of a right-wing politician. Much male and female impersonation follows, and the farce was popular with mainstream audiences: *The Birdcage* made over \$125 million theatrically. Typical of gay Hollywood films though, the film relies heavily on stereotypes, and its makers exhibited the usual reticence to engage with any overtly queer political issues. The film's producers seemed determined to situate their film within the family values debate swirling among the era's right-wing pundits. For example, the film's pressbook claims that "with a large helping of laughter and more than a measure of truth, Mike Nichol's newest comedy, *The Birdcage*, demonstrates that the value of family is far more important than anyone's notion of family values."²⁷ Much like those involved in the spate of Hollywood gay films in the

early 1980s, Nichols himself told an interviewer that “the story was not really about gay people, but about family.”²⁸

Perhaps unsurprisingly, queer critics were less thrilled with the film than were mainstream audiences, and even some straight mainstream critics began to echo the queer critiques. The *Times* (London) reported that the film “has left homosexuals in a huff. They feel betrayed. The film deals, they say, in dated, bitchy stereotypes and is unhelpful to the homosexual cause.”²⁹ Besides the flitty, effeminate drag-queen stereotypes, many queer critics were appalled by the mechanics of the plot, which revolve around the central premise that a straight couple’s wedding is more important than a gay couple’s dignity. Still others chastised the film for downplaying the romance between the two older gay men.³⁰ Summing up the debate, *Newsweek* noted that “Hollywood has embraced cross-dressing as the safest way to pitch gayness to a mass audience. Drag queens are the cinema’s favorite naughty pets, harmless if not quite housebroken.”³¹ In the final analysis, *The Bird Cage* exemplifies the typical Hollywood “gay film.” It soft-pedals politics in favor of light comedy, in effect minimizing real-life struggles. On the other hand, the film does present an image of gay male love—however comprised—that some audience members may have found inspiring.

Arguably one of the best Hollywood films of the era to feature a queer central character is Tim Burton’s *Ed Wood* (1994), partly because it does not make an issue of its protagonist’s transvestitism. This loving biopic about the infamous 1950s filmmaker garnered good reviews and won a Best Supporting Actor Oscar for Martin Landau (as horror film star Bela Lugosi). The angora-loving Ed Wood, portrayed by Johnny Depp, emerges throughout the film as a complex and driven visionary; the film handles his cross-dressing in a straightforward, nonexploitative manner. Similarly, Bill Murray as preoperative transsexual Bunny Breckinridge instills his role with warmth, grace, and humor. Sadly, *Ed Wood* did not do very well at the box office; its queer central character may have been distasteful to mainstream audiences (as was the film’s black-and-white cinematography). That the film was made at all is a testament to the clout that director Tim Burton then had in Hollywood: he had just directed the first two *Batman* blockbusters (1989, 1992). Burton, although apparently heterosexual, brings a queer perspective to many of his films. *Pee Wee’s Big Adventure* (1985), *Edward Scissorhands* (1990), and *Big Fish* (2003) all celebrate queerly coded figures and imaginative worlds while satirizing the banality and hypocrisy of “normality.” Although his films—aside from *Ed Wood*—rarely focus on overtly queer characters, Tim Burton’s films often feel steeped in queer sensibilities.

Hollywood also exploited the era's "lesbian chic" via the film noir thriller *Bound* (1996). Released widely by Gramercy Pictures, *Bound* was written and directed by the Wachowski Brothers, two writer-directors who would later create *The Matrix* film franchise (1999, 2003, 2003).³² *Bound* stars Jennifer Tilly and Gina Gershon as lesbian lovers who plot to steal millions from a mobster, played by Joe Pantoliano. A stylish and sexy thriller, *Bound* allows its queer couple to have an onscreen love affair and a happy ending, a fact that pleased many lesbians in the audience. The Wachowski Brothers' stated aim was to embrace and expand film noir, to make "something that could push the boundaries of a genre film and still remain entertaining. . . . We tried to play with people's expectations, their assumptions, and the clichés of a genre, including the sexual dynamics implied by these clichés."³³ They even hired queer sex guru Susie Bright to be the film's "technical advisor." However, it is also easy to see the film as yet another Hollywood made-by-and-for-men "lesbian" film (such as *Showgirls* [1995]), one that does little to challenge usual male fantasies about female sexuality.

Lending credence to that critique is the fact that *Bound* was heavily promoted to both lesbians *and* straight men. It was hyped to the queer community with lesbian bar parties and assorted tie-in gimmicks, but those same steamy promotional girl-on-girl shots were also used in straight men's magazines. GQ ran a special *Bound* contest, advertised with the titillating question "What's it like to be taken on by two women? To find out, see *Bound* . . ."³⁴ Costar Joe Pantoliano attested to the film's appeal to heterosexual men: "The fact that you get to watch Jennifer Tilly and Gina Gershon kiss is enough right there to bring the audiences in."³⁵ In a perceptive *Film Comment* article, Kelly Kessler praised the film's ability to merge mainstream (male) viewership with a subtle feminist critique, arguing that *Bound* "produces strong images of women/lesbians in a world that can be viewed as somewhat farcical due to the incompetence and ridiculousness of the male characters. While subverting the patriarchal system by providing for empowering images of lesbians, it also provides space for alternative readings."³⁶ Unfortunately, one of those alternative readings allows for audiences to celebrate violence against women by cheering on the gangsters as they brutalize the women.³⁷ (Gina Gershon's character does seem to spend much of the film getting knocked unconscious.) Whether or not *Bound* is a feminist reappropriation of film noir conventions or a "blatantly calculated, artistically bankrupt Hollywood calling-card" is perhaps in the eye of the beholder.³⁸ Within a few years of its release the San Francisco International Gay and Lesbian Film festival was describing it as "the sexiest, steamiest, hottest lesbian thriller in the history of movie making."³⁹

As *Bound* illustrates, Hollywood executives were reconceptualizing queerness as nothing more than multiple-target-group marketing, an attitude also evident in the Paramount Pictures comedy *In & Out* (1997). Directed by Frank Oz and written by gay playwright and screenwriter Paul Rudnick, *In & Out* was designed to attract straight audiences as well as queer ones. Based on an actual incident at the Oscars (when Tom Hanks, after his *Philadelphia* win, acknowledged and thanked his gay high school drama teacher), *In & Out* tells the story of Howard Brackett (Kevin Kline), a high school teacher so far in the closet that he is about to marry a woman. When Howard's former student Cameron Drake (Matt Dillon) wins an Oscar, he unwittingly outs Howard on national television. A media circus ensues, and Howard eventually comes out of the closet with a little help (and a kiss) from entertainment reporter Peter Malloy (Tom Selleck). Even more than *The Bird Cage*, *In & Out* endorses traditional middle-American values, representing the small town that Howard lives in as something out of a Norman Rockwell painting. Although openly queer Americans are often hounded out of such towns, almost everyone in *In & Out* unproblematically accepts Howard's homosexuality. In fact, at the end of the film the town shows its support for Howard by standing up and announcing that they too are "gay." While this moment comes close to blurring the boundaries between straight and gay sexual identities, it is also meant to underline the basic decency of the town's heterosexual population. The film even ends with a heterosexual marriage (as did *The Birdcage*), as Howard's parents (Debbie Reynolds and Wilford Brimley) renew their vows. Howard and Peter, good middle-class white gay men that they are, smile wanly from the sidelines.

Although some gay viewers were disturbed by the stereotypes they believed the film was reasserting (Howard's love for Barbra Streisand, for example), *In & Out* also satirizes cultural expectations about masculinity and heterosexuality. One highlight of the film finds Howard listening to a self-help tape called "Exploring Your Masculinity." The program encourages crotch grabbing and warns against dancing: real men "avoid rhythm, grace, and pleasure" at all costs. Pointing out the violence inherent in "traditional" masculinity, the tape exhorts Howard to "kick someone, punch someone, bite someone's ear!" Hollywood movies about queers also come in for satire: the film for which Cameron Drake wins his Oscar is a hilarious parody of a self-serving Hollywood social-problem film about gays in the military. Yet, aside from the kiss that Howard and Peter get to share, there is little in the film that might discomfort a heterosexual viewer, and much to placate one. In minimizing the actual homophobia that can still be found in small-town America, the film trivializes the coming-out process.

Another Hollywood strategy for reworking queers into films with crossover marketing appeal was evident by the end of the 1990s: buddy films about a gay man and his straight gal pal. Traditionally, such women have been called “fag hags,” a term indicative of patriarchal bias that simultaneously denigrates both women and gay men. Somewhat eschewing or redirecting such nastiness, Hollywood films such as *As Good As It Gets* (1997), *My Best Friend’s Wedding* (1997), *The Object of My Affection* (1998), *The Next Best Thing* (2000), and *De-Lovely* (2004) explore the close bonds of friendship and love that can exist between gay men and straight women. (The hit television show *Will & Grace* [1998–] also appears at exactly this moment in time.) These buddy films attempt to capture both a straight female and a gay male audience by dramatizing human relationships beyond the bounds of traditional heterosexual monogamy. Yet, while no one dies tragically in most of these New Age buddy films, they still tend to chafe at Hollywood’s demand for happy heterosexual closure. *The Next Best Thing* implies that the bonds between gay men and straight women can only lead to heartbreak and ugly courtroom drama. *De-Lovely* presents Cole Porter’s homosexuality as the “problem” his “True Love” wife must endure. *The Object of My Affection*, however, while still providing ample drama, ends with one big queer happy family made up of gay male lovers, straight female friends, gay male friends, straight male lovers, fathers, daughters, and assorted relatives. (It should be noted that most of the people in these particular films are able to bend the rules of traditional matrimony because of their status as wealthy educated urban white professionals.)

While *Philadelphia*, *The Bird Cage*, *Bound*, and *In & Out* were all moderate box-office successes, they failed to ignite any long-lasting cycle of gay and lesbian filmmaking by the Hollywood studios. In fact, many publicized Hollywood projects centering on queer protagonists, such as *The Front Runner*, *The Mayor of Castro Street*, *The Normal Heart*, and *Falsettos*, continue to languish in development hell. Instead, rather than produce films with lesbians, gay men, or transgendered people as protagonists, Hollywood has more often exploited token queers. Such characters are peripheral to the main (heterosexual) story, and, in worst-case scenarios, they function as the butt of jokes or the cause of terror, although more often they are used to bolster or comment upon the centrality of the heterosexual love story. A very partial list of Hollywood films that employ this strategy would include *Father of the Bride* (1991), *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993), *Clueless* (1995), *Home for the Holidays* (1995), *Boys on the Side* (1995), *Set It Off* (1996), *Slingblade* (1996), *The First Wives’ Club* (1996), *Election* (1999), *Big Daddy* (1999), *South Park: Bigger Longer & Uncut* (1999), *Wonder Boys* (2000), *Dr. T and the Women* (2000), *Gosford*

Park (2001), *Gangs of New York* (2002), *Under the Tuscan Sun* (2003), *The Stepford Wives* (2004), and *Catwoman* (2004). The same strategy can also be found in independent films, such as *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994) and *The Full Monty* (1997). In *Legally Blonde 2* (2003) the incidental queer character is Bruiser the dog, a joke that effectively banishes all possibility of queer realpolitik. As Suzanna Danuta Walters explains about such incidental queers, “individual gays, isolated from the ‘sin’ of gay community and politics and sexuality, can be loved by the pop culture consumers. But place those same gays in any larger gay world and gay community, and the twin dangers of sex and politics rear their uncomfortable heads.”⁴⁰

The use of incidental queers allows Hollywood to congratulate itself for being liberal on queer issues, that it is “doing its part” by showing queers as relatively realistic human beings. However, since the characters are frequently minor ones, the films often fall back on stereotypical signifiers to represent queerness. Or they present a false sense of solidarity, arguing that queers and straights are really just the same. The queer-straight friendships in these films can be fun and hip, but they can trivialize or block from view altogether the vast networks of social, political, religious, and corporate institutions (including those of Hollywood) that discriminate against queers on a daily basis, both overtly and covertly. For the frightened teenager or fundamentalist churchgoer who might still believe that queers have fangs and horns, the prevalence of these images can perhaps be understood as a “positive” development within Hollywood history. Yet their subordinate placement within Hollywood narrative formulas continues to uphold the centrality and desirability of heterosexuality at the expense of all other types of human relations.

If it is true that, since the 1970s, Hollywood has made movies primarily for the entertainment of teenage white boys, then one probably should not expect its stance toward (homo)sexuality to be much different than that found in a junior high school locker room: curious but phobic. Like teenage boys, most Hollywood films are fiercely determined to prove how truly masculine (that is to say how straight) they are. Action-and-adventure film heroes must never be gay, and damsels in distress must be passively feminine and ready to swoon in the arms of said heroes. (Oliver Stone’s historical epic *Alexander* [2004], which dared—cautiously—to depict its hero as bisexual, flopped at the box office.) In some ways, things have not changed all that much in mainstream Hollywood movies since the era of the Production Code. Homosexual content is still elided or written out of films based on real-life queers, as in the Oscar-winning film *A Beautiful Mind* (2001). *Troy* (2004) heterosexualized its famous queer hero Achilles, turning his lover

Patroclus into his “cousin.”⁴¹ Other popular Hollywood film genres, especially horror films and teen comedies, still raise queer bogeymen. *Apt Pupil* (1998), *Joy Ride* (2001), and *Jeebers Creepers II* (2003) dwell on homoerotic situations and queer monsters/killers hungry for sweet young boys. Comedies such as *American Pie* (1999), *Road Trip* (2000), *Dude, Where’s My Car* (2000), *Boat Trip* (2002), *American Wedding* (2003), and *Eurotrip* (2004) seem literally obsessed with gay male sex, as cute young men are literally made the butt of jokes about anal probes, the ingestion of other men’s bodily fluids, and “unwanted” gay advances. Even genre parody films such as *Evolution* (2001) and the *Scary Movie* films (2000, 2001, 2003) continually raise queer specters but do little to quell or deconstruct them.

Intriguingly, queer connotation and metaphor seem to be running rampant in Hollywood these days, perhaps because of the increased number of openly gay people working behind the camera. Queer connotation is used to expand characterization or subtext, especially in fantastic genre films such as *Batman and Robin* (1997), *X-Men* (2000), *Shrek* (2001), *X-2* (2003), *Pirates of the Caribbean* (2003), *Hellboy* (2004), *Shrek 2* (2004), and *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001, 2002, 2003). Yet, while many of these films assert that being monstrously different from the socially proscribed norm is a good thing, it remains to be seen whether or not mainstream audiences understand that those messages are applicable to actual lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered people. (Apparently, some homophobic groups have been able to read the subtext: *Shrek 2* was denounced upon its release as part of the “gay agenda” because of an incidental transgendered character.)⁴² However, just because a young boy idolizes a hypermasculine superhero such as *X-Men*’s Wolverine does not mean that he will not gay bash at school. Many people who have no trouble accepting love between two hobbits or two ogres still have difficulty accepting love between two men or two women.

Conclusion

While contemporary Hollywood now devotes some of its resources to queer causes, its relatively narrow approach to storytelling (male protagonist, female love interest) still makes it difficult to produce and market films about queers. Overtly gay and lesbian protagonists (let alone love interests) rarely appear in mainstream cinema, and those that do tend to be desexualized, depoliticized, and removed from any sociocultural context. They have been noble AIDS patients, witty next-door neighbors, sexy “bisexual” lesbians, and colorful drag queens—but rarely have they been complex characters dealing

with the realities of sexuality in America. Arguably, television has done a much better job bringing queer lives and queer issues to mainstream America, especially to viewers who would never go out to see a Hollywood film about queers (let alone an independent one). In terms of sheer numbers, there are definitely more gay and lesbian people on television than on multiplex screens; queers on television also tend to be more varied and complex, especially those appearing on pay cable and subscription channels.

But perhaps more important than a few openly queer celebrities or the handful of queer characters in Hollywood films is the fact that more and more people in Hollywood (as in America at large) now understand queer people as a minority group deserving of equal rights and protections under the law. As Suzanna Danuta Walters expresses it, “the attention to gays as a mis- and underrepresented minority marks a shift for the popular press. . . . Newspapers, magazines, industry journals, and newsletters regularly report on the dilemmas of depicting homosexuality in the cinema and publish quite stinging denunciations of Hollywood homophobia.”⁴³ In response to such ongoing criticism, and the continued integration of openly gay and lesbian filmmakers into the industry, Hollywood films will most likely continue to represent queers in ways both stereotypical and innovative. Independent filmmaking however, the subject of the next chapter, remains the far more vibrant medium for discussions of queer issues and aesthetics.

Notes

1. Michelangelo Signorile, *Queer in America: Sex, the Media, and the Closets of Power* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 289.
2. Signorile, *Queer in America*, 301.
3. *OutWeek* (ca. April 1990), quoted in Signorile, *Queer in America*, 301.
4. *Los Angeles Times* (ca. July 1990), quoted in Signorile, *Queer in America*, 299.
5. Signorile, *Queer in America*, 310.
6. Signorile, *Queer in America*, 310.
7. Signorile, *Queer in America*, 311.
8. Amy Taubin, “The Boys Who Cried Misogyny,” *Village Voice*, 28 April 1992, 35–36.
9. A more thorough description of this evening is provided by Signorile, *Queer in America*, 311–12.
10. Signorile, *Queer in America*, 314.
11. Quoted by Signorile, *Queer in America*, 316.
12. Reported in Signorile, *Queer in America*, 316.
13. Quoted in Ryan Murphy, “Out of the Closet, Onto the Screen,” *Out* 17 (November 1994): 141–42.

14. For a history of the founding of LEAGUE at Disney, see Sean Griffin, *Tinker Belles and Evil Queens: The Walt Disney Company from the Inside Out* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 93–132.

15. Quoted in Murphy, “Out of the Closet,” 142.

16. B. Ruby Rich, “Lauren Lloyd: Disney’s Crossover Achiever,” *Out* 60 (November 1994): 81.

17. Soon after the establishment of Hollywood Supports, Barry Diller spoke to a reporter for *The Advocate*. Asked about Hollywood’s history of representing (or not representing) sexual diversity, Diller said, “I think it would be irresponsible for a senior executive in this community not to speak to the issue. As attention has focused on the responsibilities of the media, the people in the media should not remain silent. . . . This pointless acceptance about what an audience will or will not accept has got to stop. We’ve got to start busting the myth that audiences won’t accept gay material. We have no evidence of people running screaming from the theater.” Diller may have forgotten about the response to *Making Love* ten years earlier. . . . Reprinted in Signorile, *Queer in America*, 312–13.

18. Todd McCarthy, review of *Philadelphia*, *Variety*, 7 December 1993. McCarthy also noted that the film would “need top reviews and a superior marketing campaign to make this a must-see for members of the general public.”

19. Larry Kramer, “Why I Hated *Philadelphia*,” *Los Angeles Times*, 9 January 1994.

20. Quoted in Michael Fleming, “*Philadelphia* Draws Fire from Gay Kid in the Hall,” *Variety*, 24 January 1994, 2.

21. Indeed, the story was based on an actual incident, a fact its producers reluctantly admitted to after a lawsuit was filed by the estate of Geoffrey Bowers, a gay lawyer who died of AIDS in 1987.

22. Suzanna Danuta Walters, *All the Rage: The Story of Gay Visibility in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 167.

23. Emanuel Levy, review of *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar*, *Variety*, 5 September 1995.

24. Honey Glass, “Q for Queer,” *Sight and Sound* 7, no. 10 (1997): 38.

25. Anthony Lane, review of *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar*, *New Yorker*, 11 September 1995.

26. Walters, *All the Rage*, 140.

27. *The Birdcage* pressbook (on file at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills, Calif.).

28. Quoted in Martin Grove, “Hollywood Report: Caught Up in Humor of Nichols’ *Birdcage*,” *Hollywood Reporter*, 1 March 1996, 14.

29. Quentin Letts, “Out of the Cage, into Trouble?” *Times* (London), 23 April 1996.

30. “What’s being sold in *The Birdcage* is exotic plumage, not the love of two strange old birds.” Joe Morgenstern, “Film: *The Birdcage*,” *Wall Street Journal*, 8 March 1996.

31. David Ansen, “Movies: Gay Films Are a Drag,” *Newsweek*, 18 March 1996, 71.

32. The Wachowski Brothers are notoriously shy of publicity and do not give many interviews. Current gossip suggests that one of them is transgendered and in the process of transitioning to a woman. If that gossip proves to be true, public response to their popular films may shift a great deal.

33. The Wachowskis continued: "If people walked out of the theater talking about the roles of men and women in genre fiction, that would be cool. But we'd settle for 'That movie kicked butt, let's go see it again.'" Quoted in the *Bound* pressbook (on file at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills, Calif.).

34. *GQ*, October 1996, 122.

35. Quoted in the *Bound* pressbook (on file at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills, Calif.).

36. Kelly Kessler, "Bound Together: Lesbian Film That's Family Fun for Everyone," *Film Quarterly* 56, no. 4 (Summer 2003): 21.

37. We experienced that particular audience reaction at a multiplex theater screening in Santa Cruz, California, a lesbian-friendly town well known for its progressive university and liberal thought. One can only imagine what the audience response to the film may have been in other areas of the nation.

38. Nick Bradshaw, review of *Bound*, *Time Out* (London), 26 February 1997.

39. Review of *Bound*, San Francisco International Gay and Lesbian Film Festival program (2000), 42.

40. Walters, *All the Rage*, 161.

41. For more on contemporary Hollywood's reticence to deal with queer issues, see Michael Glitz, "The New Degaying of Hollywood," *The Advocate*, 14 September 2004, 40–44.

42. Reported in "Rants and Raves," *The Advocate*, 20 July 2004, 12.

43. Walters, *All the Rage*, 134.

CHAPTER TWELVE



Queer Independent Film at the Turn of the Millennium



Chloe Sevigny and Hilary Swank in *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), an Oscar-winning independent film based on the real-life murder of transgendered youth Brandon Teena. Fox Searchlight / The Kobal Collection / Bill Matlock

As the last chapter explores, queer characters—let alone queer issues—remain relatively peripheral to mainstream Hollywood filmmaking. However, a more diverse spectrum of cinematic sexualities can be found in contemporary independent cinema. Some of these films practice more radical “New Queer” aesthetics, while others opt for more conventional, user-friendly styles. As in the past, much of this independent work never finds its way beyond film festivals and limited art house releases. However, queer film is being increasingly distributed through new outlets, including the Internet, video and DVD, and cable and pay television. While literally hundreds of queer films have been made since the advent of New Queer Cinema, this chapter attempts to organize and introduce some of the more creatively important, influential, and popular titles. It then explores how the politics and poetics of New Queer Cinema have encroached upon Hollywood’s critical agenda, most spectacularly through Oscar recognition of queer film work. Finally, this chapter surveys recent attempts to distribute queer films to wider audiences, including the advent of gay television channels, a development that could radically change the way queer film is produced and consumed in America and around the globe.

Twenty-First-Century Queers

At the start of the twenty-first century, queer Americans enjoy more freedoms than ever before, even though discrimination still exists in multiple forms. The relatively liberal political climate of the “Gay Nineties” helped to create a more accepting environment for sexual minorities. Public education and various “drug cocktail” regimens devised throughout the 1990s have helped stem the tide of AIDS-related deaths, but AIDS is still an ongoing health crisis, especially internationally and for those Americans who cannot afford health care. Today there is a sense that queers have been constructed by dominant American culture as more of a target market than a political movement. Token queer inclusion within the public sphere has arguably lulled some people into a sense of complacency or at least changed the focus of the struggle. Grassroots activism as it was practiced during previous generations seems to have been replaced with more or less corporate strategies that attempt to effect progress for queers from within dominant institutions. Powerful lobbying groups, such as the Human Rights Campaign, and educational/support programs, such as those run by PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) and GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network) have to a great extent replaced militant marching in the streets. Americans are today encouraged to celebrate diversity and fight for civil rights through consumerism and check writing.

Lesbian and gay political strategies have become more assimilationist and less confrontational. Many queers now work to be accepted into traditionally heterosexist institutions rather than work to subvert them. For example, the fight to allow openly homosexual people to serve in the military implicitly endorses a militaristic mind-set—something that many gay liberation activists would never have done. Homosexual clergy and lay people are pressuring their various religions to accept queers, and one can even find gay Christian fundamentalists. Similarly, most gay and lesbian Republicans prefer to endorse the status quo rather than fight for dramatic social change. Probably the greatest shift in emphasis in queer politics has come about in relation to domestic issues, such as marriage and childrearing. Instead of championing a new sexual ethos, as did many gay liberationists and queer activists, many gay men and lesbians today are fighting for the right to settle down into traditional monogamous marriages. Politicians who had previously complained that queers were orgiastic heathens are now appalled that so many homosexuals seem to want the same things they want: white-picket fences, Sunday church services, and membership in the Boy Scouts. The gay marriage debate is the current “line in the sand” for heterosexist America, even as Massachusetts, Canada, and some European nations have already legalized it (without causing the collapse of Western civilization). Whether or not America decides to amend its constitution in order to ban gay marriage, the issue will most likely dominate civil rights struggles for many years to come.

The momentum of the marriage debate, as well as efforts by many queers to find acceptance within their religious faiths, indicates that a large section of today’s gay and lesbian population desires traditional American values. Although many queer activists and theorists still attempt to challenge those values and institutions, many other gay men and lesbians are content to seek a place within them. It is likely that the fight for civil rights will continue on both fronts: at times using confrontational and revolutionary tactics, while at other times being quietly assimilationist. At the dawn of the new millennium, and particularly after the events of September 11, 2001, America has arguably become more cautious and conservative, a trend that has affected how everyone—both traditionally heterosexual and variously queer—interprets ongoing debates about sexuality and gender.

Popular Genres of Contemporary Queer Filmmaking

The current media landscape exemplifies this growing emphasis toward assimilationist politics. For example, mainstream Hollywood film and television continue to envision gay and lesbian characters and issues through dominant

heterosexist lenses. And while some queer independent films still attempt to challenge preconceived ideas about human sexuality in multiple ways, many others are easy-to-take “feel good” films told in conventional ways. Just as many contemporary lesbians and gay men now desire traditional marriages and families, so do many contemporary queer audiences want to see films about themselves that for the most part feel like traditional Hollywood entertainments (and not radical experiments in form or theory). These queer independent films, even though their forms may be somewhat conventional, still stand in contrast to mainstream Hollywood films, because in most cases they are made by openly gay or lesbian filmmakers desiring to speak to gay and lesbian audiences.

One of the most popular genres of recent queer filmmaking, for example, is the “young love” or romance movie. These films generally provide “positive” and realist images of gay men and lesbians coming out or falling in love. They are especially important for young queers who may not see themselves reflected in any other mass media. Examples of the “young love” or romance movie include *Claire of the Moon* (1992), *The Sum of Us* (1994), *When Night Is Falling* (1995), *Beautiful Thing* (1996), *Edge of Seventeen* (1998), *Get Real* (1998), *Billy’s Hollywood Screen Kiss* (1998), *Better Than Chocolate* (1999), *Trick* (1999), *Big Eden* (2000), *Eban and Charley* (2000), *All over the Guy* (2001), and *Latter Days* (2003). Interestingly, as one critic has noted, the genre “necessitates both the dissolution and the maintenance of a distinction between homosexual and heterosexual.”¹ In other words, these films often represent “straight” characters that turn out to be “actually gay,” thus undermining presumptive heterosexuality but nonetheless reinforcing a straight-gay binary. Nonetheless, whether they are sweetly comedic or more dramatic, these gay and lesbian romances often afford queer spectators the chance to see images of themselves in more complex, less stereotyped ways.

One of the most charming of these “young love” films is *The Incredibly True Story of Two Girls in Love* (1995), based on writer-director Maria Maggenti’s first relationship. Like many queer filmmakers of her generation, Maggenti went to film school and made activist videos. But unlike many of her queer cohorts, Maggenti chose to make her first fictional feature a warm romantic comedy in the style of Preston Sturges or Billy Wilder. In the film’s publicity packet, Maggenti explains that *Two Girls in Love* is “a conventional narrative story shot in a relatively conventional way. The content is what’s subversive, not the form. This is part of what I think makes it accessible.”² Yet despite its reliance on conventional style, the film does engage forthrightly with queer concerns, including female sexuality, friendship, race, class, and the relationship between mothers and daughters.³ Playing against

stereotypes, the film's young lovers are a working-class white girl (who lives in a nontraditional family made up of lesbian friends, relatives, and ex-lovers) and an upper-middle-class black girl who lives with her mother in a more affluent suburb. Shot for around \$100,000, with an almost all-female crew, *The Incredibly True Story of Two Girls in Love* was a hit at Sundance and on the art house circuit.

Another good example of the "young love" genre is Jamie Babbit's *But I'm a Cheerleader* (2000), a film that weaves together coming out, first love, and social satire into a candy-coated rainbow tapestry. In the film, Natasha Lyonne stars as a high school cheerleader shipped off to a homosexual deprogramming camp called True Directions. Once there, instead of being "cured," she accepts her sexuality and falls in love with Graham (Clea Duvall), another young woman forced to attend the program by her homophobic parents. The style of *But I'm a Cheerleader* is deliberately and queerly campy. The True Directions program is color-coded in pinks and blues; its naïve director thinks that she can cure homosexuality by teaching the girls how to do housework, and the boys how to fix cars. Cult film stars Bud Cort, Mink Stole, Cathy Moriarty, and RuPaul Charles (playing a camp counselor—in pants!) are on hand to liven up the proceedings. Babbit described her film as "a unique feminization of the camp aesthetic," employing a sort of hyperreal style that lets "the humor and anger in my film touch ground in the real feelings of my characters."⁴ However, the film's queer camp was puzzling to many straight critics, most of whom did not seem to "get" the film at all. The film received a D grade in the *Dallas Morning News*, and even *Variety* opined that it would have "limited crossover appeal."⁵ The Hollywood ratings system also showed its bias against the film when it tried to rate it NC-17, apparently due solely to its subject matter.⁶ Ultimately, the film did receive an R, but even that rating seems harsh for this gentle story about teenage romance and the ignorance that undergirds much homophobia.

Love and romance also figure into another popular genre of independent queer filmmaking, a formula that might be dubbed the "Weekend in the Hamptons" genre. These films, which include *Bar Girls* (1994), *Lie Down with Dogs* (1995), *Everything Relative* (1996), *Love! Valour! Compassion!* (1997), *The Broken Hearts Club* (2000), *Punks* (2000), and *A Home at the End of the World* (2004)—focus on a small group of queer friends either vacationing together or living their lives in close proximity to one another. While romance does play a role in these films, their multiple-character structure parallels the pattern set down by *Boys in the Band*, dramatizing a microcosm of issues faced by larger gay male or lesbian communities. Themes such as fidelity versus sexual freedom, friendship versus love, the ongoing AIDS crisis,

drug use and abuse, coming out, and discrimination are explored within these films. However, while they usually attempt to present a cross-section of gay and lesbian lives and issues, many of the films center on fairly wealthy white queers. Perhaps in response to that, *Punks* centers on a group of gay African Americans in and around West Hollywood. However, although only one of the film's central characters is a drag queen, the advertising for the film implied that the whole movie was about black drag queens. The film itself attempts to move away from racial and queer stereotyping by representing different types of black gay men, but its advertising campaign reinscribed a common stereotype.

While AIDS can be an issue in many different genres of queer filmmaking, some films explicitly focus on the emotional toll taken by the epidemic.⁷ *Alive and Kicking* (also known as *Indian Summer*, 1996) is a British film about an HIV-positive dancer, while *The Trip* (2002) dramatizes a decades-long relationship between two men, one of whom eventually contracts AIDS. *The 24th Day* (2004) is a hybrid AIDS drama and psychological thriller. Other independent AIDS films address the ethics of (assisted) suicide. Both *It's My Party* (1996) and *The Event* (2003) are about a gay man dying of AIDS who decides to throw one last party for his friends and family—at the climax of which he will commit suicide. *The Event* delves even deeper into the ethics of assisted suicide, centering on a district attorney forced to prosecute a gay man's surviving friends and family. Significantly, most of these AIDS dramas follow classical Hollywood form: they make their points through conventional emotional appeals rather than employ the experimental styles of AIDS activist video or New Queer Cinema. *It's My Party* was even directed by a gay Hollywood filmmaker, Randall Kleiser (*Grease* [1978]).

The comedy *Jeffrey* (1995), a \$2 million film adapted from Paul Rudnick's award-winning off-Broadway play, combines gay male romance, queer satire, and AIDS. *Jeffrey* follows the trials and tribulations of a gay man who swears off sex, until he meets an HIV-positive hunk with whom he would like to get busy. Jeffrey and Steve are played by Steven Weber and Michael T. Weiss, two actors primarily associated with television because (as with *Making Love* over ten years before) major film actors were reluctant to star in the film. Speaking of the problems he encountered in getting the film produced, screenwriter Rudnick noted that even relatively inexpensive queer films often face the same problems as do their more expensive Hollywood counterparts. "Hollywood's terror of gay material can get irrational, especially when it comes to gay sexuality. An onscreen gay kiss is seen as more threatening than a mad bomber, a homicidal alien, or a vengeful single woman. It's kryptonite."⁸ At one point *Jeffrey* attempts to diffuse and satirize that terror.

When Jeffrey and Steve first share a kiss, the film cuts to a scene in a theater where two young heterosexual couples are supposedly watching the film *Jeffrey*: the women sigh while the men make their disgust known to those around them. Ultimately, *Jeffrey* was only a modest success, poised between the multiplex and the art house, between mainstream style and New Queer experimentation.

As *Jeffrey* shows, even queer independent films that try to follow classical Hollywood style sometimes include moments more commonly associated with New Queer Cinema, as in a spate of films that campily comment on Hollywood form and content. While mainstream films such as *Moulin Rouge* (2001) and *Down with Love* (2003) gently tweak the Hollywood musical and the 1960s sex farce, independent films such as *Psycho Beach Party* (2000) and *Die Mommie Die!* (2003) spoof Hollywood genre filmmaking from more overtly queer perspectives. Both *Psycho Beach Party* and *Die Mommie Die!* were written originally for the stage by drag artist Charles Busch. Busch has also written the off-Broadway hits *Red Scare on Sunset* and *Vampire Lesbians of Sodom*, and most of his plays follow in the tradition of Charles Ludlum's Ridiculous Theatre Company, satirizing Hollywood form and content via nostalgic pre-Stonewall camp sensibilities. Similarly, *Girls Will Be Girls* (2003), a comedy about three aspiring Hollywood actresses (all played by men), was the feature-film debut of television writer Richard Day. His most recent film, *Straight-Jacket* (2004), is a campy look at the Hollywood closet circa the 1950s. The film *Camp* (2003)—about a musical theater summer camp for kids—also engages with the politics and poetics of camp. However, *Camp* chose to focus not on the many queer denizens of its summer camp but on a straight white male character. Even independent queer filmmakers still sometimes center their stories on white heterosexuals, presumably thinking they can make more money at the box office in so doing.

Other queer independent comedies merge issues of sexuality with those of race, ethnicity, or region. Ang Lee's *The Wedding Banquet* (1993) was an early film of this type, and it became one of the most profitable independent films in history. In it, Mitchell Lichtenstein and Winston Chao play Simon and Wai Tung, a gay couple who must decide what to do when Wai Tung's parents arrive from China. A marriage of convenience between Wai Tung and Wei Wei (an Asian woman in need of a green card) is hastily arranged, and various comedic complications ensue. Similarly, *Kiss Me Guido* (1997) and *Mambo Italiano* (2003) draw humor from the clash between gay men and Italian American culture, while *Friends and Family* (2001) centers on a gay couple who happen to be hit men for the Mafia. The title of *Latin Boys Go to Hell* (1997) is self-explanatory, and the cult favorite *Sordid Lives* (2000) draws

its humor from white-trash trailer-park denizens and the queers they have spawned. The international hit *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002), directed by Gurinder Chadha, about a young British woman of Indian descent who wants to play soccer, explores the queer connections between race, class, gender, and sexuality. *A Touch of Pink* (2004) also explores nationality and sexuality in the Indian diaspora, while the more serious drama *The Business of Fancydancing* (2002), written and directed by Sherman Alexie, centers on a gay Native American poet. Each of these films, either explicitly or implicitly, asks its audience to consider how other discourses of social difference (such as race, class, and nationality) queerly impact upon the representation and understanding of sexuality.

Queer criminals and killers—particularly lesbians—are also staples of contemporary queer independent cinema.⁹ As always, such representations receive a great deal of attention from queer film critics regarding their positive or negative effects.¹⁰ Those who defend these films argue that they are told from their female characters' points of view, dramatize love and passion, and attempt to show what drives these women to murder in the first place, whether it be the repressive atmosphere of the closet or the outright hostility of men and male culture. Peter Jackson's *Heavenly Creatures* (1994) is one of the more powerful films of this genre. Based on an actual incident that took place in New Zealand in the 1950s, the film focuses on Pauline and Juliet, two teenage girls who kill Pauline's mother after she attempts to separate them. *Sister My Sister* (1994), one of the few of these films that was actually written and directed by women, is also based on a historical event, wherein two servants rebelled against their cruel mistress. In *Fun* (1994) and *Butterfly Kiss* (1995), young women murder out of a more generalized existential rage. The ongoing success of this genre is exemplified by *Monster* (2003), a film that won an Oscar for Charlize Theron as real-life queer serial killer Aileen Wournos. *Monster* suggests that Aileen's violence was the result of her systematic abuse by men and male-dominated culture.

Yet another popular genre of recent queer independent film centers on hustlers—queer men who may not identify as gay even though they engage in homosexual sex for money. Such so-called trade has been a part of gay male culture for decades, but films about hustlers blossomed in the wake of the New Queer hit *My Own Private Idaho* (1991). Contemporary hustler films vary a great deal in tone and quality. Some are documentaries, such as *101 Rent Boys* (2000), while others are small dramas such as *Johns* (1996), *Speedway Junky* (1999), and *Twist* (2004). *Star Maps* (1997) focuses on a Latino teenager in Los Angeles who is forced into hustling by his unscrupulous father. Among the more interesting and provocative films about hustlers

and their aficionados are *No Skin off My Ass* (1991), *Super 8 1/2* (1993), and *Hustler White* (1996), three films by Canadian author and filmmaker Bruce La Bruce. Darkly funny and uncompromising, sexually explicit but occasionally warm and fuzzy, La Bruce's films push the boundaries of both queer form and content. His most recent film, *The Raspberry Reich* (2004), furthers his obsession with the sexualities of skinhead punks.

Other independent films of the era—including many made by self-identified heterosexuals—queerly merge or complicate generic forms in their exploration of sexual desire. For example, Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game* (1992) begins as a thriller but evolves into a more serious drama about the borders we create in order to maintain control over race, nationality, gender, and sexuality. *The Opposite of Sex* (1998) begins with a young woman seducing her gay brother's boyfriend but winds up as a black comedy satirizing all forms of sexual hypocrisy. *Carrington* (1995), a lush "tradition of quality" film, explores the lives and loves of author Lytton Strachey and painter Dora Carrington; their marriage to each other is in a way the queerest part of their story. Similarly, Sally Potter's *Orlando* (1992), based on the Virginia Woolf novel, follows a gender-bending soul through several centuries of British history. Maggie Greenwald's *The Ballad of Little Jo* (1993) is a revisionist western about a woman who passes for a man in the Old West, secretly carrying on an interracial relationship with her Chinese ranch hand.

As the films just described exemplify, some queer independent films are dedicated to exploring the complex sexualities of people who identify as heterosexual. Both *Chasing Amy* (1997) and *Kissing Jessica Stein* (2002) explore the fluid sexualities of contemporary urbanites. Neil LaBute's *Your Friends and Neighbors* (1998) is a dark sex comedy with lesbian pairings and a remarkable scene in which a "straight" man eerily recalls that the best sex he ever had was when he raped a teenage boy. Todd Solondz's *Happiness* (1998) is a bitterly ironic film that features a creepy pedophile father who drugs his son's friends at sleepover parties. *L.I.E.* (2001) also centers on an aging pedophile in the suburbs, while *Love and Death on Long Island* (1997) is about an aging professor (John Hurt) who develops a serious obsession with a pretty-boy movie star (Jason Priestly). Larry Clark's *Kids* (1995) and *Bully* (2001) also explore the undefined and often unknown sexuality of teens living in suburban/urban wastelands. *Chuck and Buck* (1999), once described as a "comedy about a gay stalker with a mental age of about 12," dares to suggest that many "straight" men have had same-sex relationships in their past.¹¹

Today's queer independent filmmakers have infiltrated just about every genre of American filmmaking. Besides comedies and dramas, there are queer

mysteries and films noir (*The Monkey's Mask* [2000], *The Deep End* [2001]), queer musicals (*Velvet Goldmine* [1998], *Camp* [2003]), and even queer cartoons (*Queer Duck* [2000], *The House of Morecock* [2001]). The incredibly prolific David DeCoteau continues to produce and direct low-budget horror films aimed at queer audiences, including *The Brotherhood* trilogy (2000, 2001, 2002), *Leeches!* (2003), and *The Sisterhood* (2004). Queer independent filmmakers at the turn of the millennium draw upon the queerness inherent in many classical Hollywood genres but find new ways to redefine them via queer camp, through generic hybridization, or simply by placing forthrightly gay and lesbian characters into traditionally heterosexual formulas.

Queer Documentaries and Foreign Films

The production of queer documentary work—both on film and video—has also exploded in the wake of New Queer Cinema. Many of these documentaries do important historical work: they research and reclaim forgotten (or in many cases deliberately ignored) aspects of twentieth-century queer culture. For example, *Last Call at Maud's* (1993) is an intimate film about a historic lesbian bar in San Francisco. *When Ocean Meets Sky* (2004) documents the development of Fire Island's queer communities. *Desire* (1989), *Paragraph 175* (1999), and *Hidden Fuhrer: Debating the Enigma of Hitler's Sexuality* (2004) explore queerness in historic Germany. *Paris Was a Woman* (1995) centers on the queer writers and artists who gathered there between World Wars. *Hope along the Wind: The Story of Harry Hay* (2002) retells the story of the man who founded both the Mattachine Society and the Radical Faeries. *The Cockettes* (2002) is about the legendary 1970s drag troupe, while *Wigstock: The Movie* (1995) is a chronicle of a more recent drag festival in New York City.

While many of these documentaries make use of conventional cinematic forms, their subject matter queerly explores a range of desires and identities that complicate the homosexual-heterosexual binary. For example, *Southern Comfort* (2001) centers on transgendered people living in the deep South, while *Venus Boyz* (2002) explores female-to-male gender-benders in New York and London. The failure of "ex-gay" ministries to convert Christian homosexuals was the subject of *One Nation under God* (1993), and Jewish queers found themselves the subjects of *Treyf* (1999) and *Trembling before G-d* (2001). Other documentaries broaden conceptions of homosexuality by focusing on subcultures within larger lesbian and gay communities. *Daddy and the Muscle Academy* (1992) is about hypermasculine gay men and Tom of Finland's erotic artwork. *When Boys Fly* (2002) is about the circuit party

scene, and *Party Monster* (1998) is about a real-life “club kid” who brutally murdered his drug dealer. (The film was remade in 2003 as a feature film starring Macaulay Culkin and Seth Green.)

Still other documentaries are queer in form as well as content. Mark Rappaport’s *Rock Hudson’s Home Movies* (1992) combines an actor playing Rock Hudson with clips from Hudson’s films in order to examine what his closeted Hollywood life may have been like. Rappaport’s *From the Journals of Jean Seberg* (1995) and *The Silver Screen: Color Me Lavender* (1997) use similar devices to explore gender and sexuality in historical Hollywood. *The Laramie Project* (2002), about the murder of gay college student Matthew Shepard in 1998, is also a queerly formed “documentary.” Writer-director Moises Kaufman created the work by recording interviews with the residents of Laramie, cutting them together, and then having them performed by professional actors. *Beefcake* (1998), a scripted retelling of the life of pioneering physique photographer Bob Mizer, is intercut with interviews and film footage of real people. The queer blending of fiction and nonfiction also extends into a number of “mockumentaries” (scripted films that pretend to be documentaries), such as *Man of the Year* (1995), *Waiting for Guffman* (1996), *Best in Show* (2000), *Showboy* (2002), and *A Mighty Wind* (2003)—all of which play with audiences’ expectations about documentary form as well as sexuality.

Most of the films discussed in this chapter were made in English-speaking nations and center on Western queer identities. However, each year more and more queer films are produced around the globe and distributed to American art house theaters.¹² Many of these films display models of sexuality that differ (to greater or lesser degrees) from those of the West. For example, contemporary German filmmaker Monika Treut examines marginalized queer sexualities such as female S&M and transgenderism in films like *Female Misbehaviour* (1992) and *Gendernauts* (1999).¹³ Oscar-winning queer director Pedro Almodovar (*Law of Desire* [1997], *All about My Mother* [1999], *Bad Education* [2004]) lives and works in Spain, while Francois Ozon (*Water Drops on Burning Rocks* [2000], *Eight Women* [2002]) lives and works in France. Both men produce films that regularly defy binary accounts of human sexuality and dramatize the impact of national culture on sexuality. Similarly, Ferzan Ozpetek, a Turkish filmmaker who works in Italy, has made queer art house hits such as *Hamam* (1997, aka *Steam: The Turkish Bath*) and *His Secret Life* (2001). *Ma Vie en Rose* (1997), a French film about a young boy who wants to be a girl, was a modest art house hit in North America, as was *Yossi & Jagger* (2002), a film about two lovers in the Israeli army. Latin American queer films, including *Strawberry & Chocolate* (Cuba, 1994), *Burnt Money* (Argentina, 2000), and *Our Lady of the Assassins* (Columbia, 2000), explore

the intersection of male homosexual desire and Latin machismo.¹⁴ The Thai film *Iron Ladies* (2000), based on a real-life transvestite volleyball team, suggests that Western models of gay identity have operated in a diasporic fashion, influencing indigenous Asian models of queerness.

Producing, distributing, and exhibiting queer films in other parts of the world can often be very difficult. Southern Italy, for example, is still said to be very homophobic. *Screen International* reports that Italy has no theaters dedicated to queer films, that cities the size of Naples have no gay bars, and that a gay male film can only hope to attract between forty thousand and fifty thousand Italian filmgoers. Lesbian films fare even worse.¹⁵ In places such as Malaysia and Singapore, homosexuality is still illegal. And although China has decriminalized homosexuality and no longer considers it a mental disorder, discrimination and censorship are still rampant there and elsewhere. As recently as 1997, South Korean police shut down a queer film festival. To many in these and other nations, homosexuality is viewed as an “invention” of the West. Queerphobic politicians and religious leaders in many of these countries sometimes even deny that same-sex desires do currently or did historically exist within their national borders, seeing them instead a form of Westernized decadence and imperialism.

The production and reception of Deepa Mehta's *Fire* (1996), an internationally financed film set in India, provides a casebook study of many of these issues. *Fire* centers on two married couples who share a residence and a business together. Radha and Ashok, the older couple, live together asexually because Radha cannot have children; Ashok, who believes that “desire is the root of all evil,” considers sex with Radha to be pointless and therefore sinful. Sita and Jatin, the younger newlywed couple, are cold and distant to each other because their marriage has been arranged for them against their own desires. Jatin has a Chinese girlfriend whom he truly loves, but she will not marry him because she knows that marriage would necessitate the end of her acting career. Overseeing the drama is the ever-present Biji, an old woman who has suffered a stroke and cannot speak, and the servant Mundu, a man who sees nothing wrong with masturbating to porno videos in front of Biji. As *Fire* develops, the two wives, Radha and Sita, slowly develop a loving relationship. When Mundu exposes their affair, the two women flee the household, and the film ends on an ambiguously hopeful note: Radha and Sita have escaped from their oppressive marriages, but exactly what will the future hold for them in a culture so traditionally hostile to independent women?

Fire was a minor art house hit in many Western nations, including the United States, but in India its reception was steeped in controversy and vi-

olence. Despite having been passed by the Indian censorship board—twice—the film was protested in the streets and viciously denounced by social commentators. Theaters showing the film were vandalized by rioting mobs. (A similar fate befell the more recent Hindi film *Girlfriend* [2004].)¹⁶ While many women and younger Indians supported the film and enjoyed its critique of dominant culture, older men and conservative religious groups decried its very existence. The film was swept up into larger battles between the Hindu and Muslim religions, because director Mehta uses her contemporary cast to rework mythic figures and rituals in a satiric manner. Both Sita and Radha are named after Hindu goddesses, and in Mehta's version of things, they emerge as strong independent women who love and support one another, not devoted wives and mothers who care only for the men in their lives. Hindu fundamentalists saw *Fire* as part of a larger plot to discredit their religion, and Deepa Mehta has conceded that, had she been a Muslim (and not a Hindu), she probably would have been assassinated.¹⁷ The clash between conservative religious traditions and contemporary sexual mores continues to shape our understanding of human sexualities, in both local and global contexts.

New Queer Cinema Goes to the Oscars

One interesting development in queer independent filmmaking is its increasing validation by critical and professional institutions, such as the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences. During the 1980s, queer work began to be honored by the Academy: *The Times of Harvey Milk* (1984) and *Common Threads: Stories from the Quilt* (1989) each won an Oscar for Best Documentary Feature. Throughout the early 1990s, films such as *The Crying Game* and *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994) were acknowledged by Academy voters in a range of categories. However, by the end of the 1990s, independent queer films were winning an unprecedented number of Oscars. In many ways, these Oscar-winning films are the direct descendants of New Queer Cinema: many were made by New Queer filmmakers, and most are queer in form as well as content. And while winning an Oscar does not necessarily mean that one film is actually better or more important than another, it does usually mean that a film can be more widely distributed and thus seen by larger audiences. For example, the charming short film *Trevor* (1994), about an adolescent boy who ultimately realizes it is OK to be gay, might have been consigned to the dust bin of film history (as most short films tend to be), had it not won an Oscar for Best Live Action Short.

The year 1997 produced several Oscar-nominated Hollywood films that dealt with queer subject matter (*In & Out*, *As Good As It Gets*, *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*), but it was the arrival of Bill Condon's *Gods and Monsters* in 1998 that seemed to herald a sea change. This independently made film, queer in both style and content, won an Oscar for Best Adapted Screenplay. Based on Christopher Bram's novel *Father of Frankenstein*, *Gods and Monsters* is about the final days of classical Hollywood filmmaker James Whale, played in the film by gay actor Sir Ian McKellen (who was also nominated for an Oscar for his role). Queerly stylized, the film flips back and forth in time, between memory and the present, between "reality" and the bizarre worlds depicted in James Whale's horror films. The electrical "storm" inside Whale's head (that causes him to hallucinate) is compared to the electrical storm that gives life to the Frankenstein monster, who is then made manifest via the character of Boone (Brendan Fraser), Whale's gardener and object of attraction. The film wittily alludes to Una O'Connor's crazy comedic maids in Whale's *The Invisible Man* (1933) and *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935) via the character of Hanna, Whale's own housemaid, played by Lynn Redgrave (and also nominated for an Oscar). Writer-director Bill Condon had honed his craft creating small stylish genre films throughout the 1980s and 1990s, but his Oscar win allowed him to branch out into new subjects and bigger films. His Oscar-nominated script for *Chicago* (2002)—like that for *Gods and Monsters*—seamlessly weaves together fantasy, memory, and reality. Condon also wrote and directed *Kinsey* (2004), a queer film about the famous postwar sexologist that garnered much acclaim but disappointing box-office revenues.

Oscar was also queer in 2000 when *American Beauty* (1999) swept the awards, including Best Picture. Written by gay screenwriter Alan Ball (who has since gone on to create *Six Feet Under* [HBO, 2001–2005]), *American Beauty* was released fairly widely by Dreamworks. The film is about repression—including sexual repression—and though it centers on heterosexuals, it uses its incidental queer characters in important ways. The brutality and violence of the film's retired marine (Chris Cooper) is shown to be the result of his repressed homosexuality, while the gay couple next door (Scott Bakula and Sam Robards) are the most well-adjusted characters in the film, a fact repeatedly decried by homophobic critics.¹⁸ Repression of homosexual desire was also central to *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1999), itself nominated for five Academy Awards.¹⁹ *Being John Malkovich* (1999)—another film with queer couplings, queer styles, and a working model of performative identity formation—was nominated for three Oscars. Also that year, Hilary Swank won the Best Actress Oscar for her role as Brandon Teena in *Boys Don't Cry* (1999).

While there had been a few attempts to make films about transgendered people throughout the mid-1990s (*Different for Girls* [1996], for example, is a British film about a male-to-female transgendered person), the success of *Boys Don't Cry* undoubtedly helped to spread understanding about transgendered people to middle America. Based on actual events, the film tells the story of a female-to-male preoperative transsexual named Brandon Teena who, when his secret was discovered, was brutally raped and later murdered by the same people who had previously befriended him. Directed by Kimberly Peirce and produced by Christine Vachon, *Boys Don't Cry* may have gone the route of most queer independent films, had not the film been recognized by the Academy and then more widely distributed. Like most New Queer films, *Boys Don't Cry* complicates issues of gender and sexuality and acknowledges how other realms of social difference—in this case class—affect identity. Everyone in *Boys Don't Cry* is seemingly living at or below the poverty line: they are trapped, limited, and uneducated. The Nebraska they inhabit is a world of trailer parks, drug and alcohol abuse, and dead-end jobs. Brandon lies about his gender and says he is in the process of having a sex-change operation, but it is clear that he will never have the money to pay for one. And so he remains a target of queerphobic violence.

One year before *Boys Don't Cry* was released, a documentary version of the events was produced by filmmakers Susan Muska and Greta Olafsdottir. Their film, *The Brandon Teena Story* (1998), makes use of existing photographs, court records and recordings, and interviews with all the surviving members of the tragedy. In many ways, *The Brandon Teena Story* is more compelling—and more disturbing—than *Boys Don't Cry* because the real-life issues were (and are) more complicated. For example, it was not just Brandon and his friend Candace who were murdered but also John DeVine, an African American acquaintance who happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time. The film points out that small-town Nebraska is as hostile to nonwhite people as it is to queers, and everyday citizens are shown voicing their common bigotry. When transgender activists come to town for the murder trials, one angry young local is recorded on camera sputtering the nonsensical non sequitur “If God had wanted there to be homosexuals, he wouldn't have created women.” The abuses of the police force are also more amply documented in *The Brandon Teena Story*. While both films play out the questioning of Brandon after the rape in almost word-for-word faithfulness—showing the extreme insensitivity of the investigator—the documentary makes a much stronger case for criminal police negligence. Although Brandon was raped on Christmas Eve and even named his attackers, the police

never bothered to arrest them, and they were still at large one week later when they murdered Brandon, Candace, and John.

Oscar honored another independently made queer biopic the following year when Spanish actor Javier Bardem was nominated as Best Actor for his work in *Before Night Falls* (2000), based on the life of Cuban poet and novelist Reinaldo Arenas. The next year David Lynch was nominated for Best Director for his queerly surreal art house melodrama *Mulholland Drive* (2001). However, the Oscars for the year 2002 were probably the queerest ever, with *Chicago*, *Far from Heaven*, *The Hours*, *Frida*, *Talk to Her*, and *Y Tu Mama Tambien* dominating the proceedings. Best Picture winner *Chicago* and historical biopic *Frida* may have downplayed their lesbian characters, but Pedro Almodovar's *Talk to Her* (which won for Best Original Screenplay) is a stylish melodrama that queerly defies all attempts at classification. *Y Tu Mama Tambien*—also nominated for Best Original Screenplay—is a road movie from Mexico that explores the sexual experimentation of two teenage boys. But it was the multiple Oscar nominations for *Far from Heaven* (four) and *The Hours* (nine) that most strongly suggest that New Queer Cinema style and content had finally “arrived” in Hollywood.

Written, directed, and produced by New Queer filmmakers Todd Haynes and Christine Vachon, *Far from Heaven* is a gloss on the form and content of the classical Hollywood melodrama; its very title and basic situations are a homage to Douglas Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows* (1956). As with the best of Haynes's films, *Far from Heaven* is a comment on cinematic style as much as it is a queer exploration of race, class, gender, and sexuality. It is a meticulous re-creation of a 1950s melodrama that pointedly deals with issues a 1950s melodrama could never acknowledge under the dictates of the Production Code. The film centers on a “perfect” suburban couple, Frank and Cathy Whitaker (Dennis Quaid and Julianne Moore). However, Frank is a closeted homosexual, and when Cathy catches him with another man, their marriage begins to unravel. Frank sees a psychiatrist, but he continues to drink heavily and becomes abusive. Cathy turns to her African American gardener, widower Raymond Deagan (Dennis Haysbert), for support and begins to fall in love with him, a scandalous state of affairs that causes outrage in the narrow-minded town of Hartford, Connecticut. Ultimately, Frank accepts his homosexuality when he falls in love with a young man, but Cathy and Raymond are forced apart by social forces. The film ends with Raymond and his daughter Sarah taking a train to start life anew in Baltimore; Cathy sees him off at the station, but her future is left open to speculation.

Although it takes place in the late 1950s, *Far from Heaven* is also about contemporary America. As Haynes described his project, to “impose upon

the seeming innocence of the 1950s themes as mutually volatile as race and sexuality is to reveal how volatile those subjects remain today—and how much our current climate of complacent stability has in common with that bygone era.”²⁰ In other words, the film asks its viewers to contemplate just how much things have—or have not—changed throughout the last half of the twentieth century. Small-town gossip and hypocrisy, marriages of convenience and the closet, and de facto if not de jure segregation are all still a part of twenty-first-century America. By foregrounding the formal conventions of classical Hollywood melodrama, *Far from Heaven* also asks its viewers to think about how past and current film genres shape our ways of thinking about race, class, gender, and sexuality.

Reactions to *Far from Heaven* varied a great deal, just as they did for the first works of New Queer Cinema. Many filmgoers thought the film too cold and intellectually challenging, while others failed to understand it in relation to both film form and social history. Missing that it was a pastiche of 1950s film melodramas and not 1950s “reality,” some viewers complained that the film was stylistically unrealistic (which is part of the point). Other viewers, expecting a nice old-fashioned Hollywood-style film, were horrified to discover it dealt with topics as distasteful to them as interracial romance and homosexuality. Of course, interracial relationships and homosexuality *did* exist in the 1950s, but they could never be visualized in Hollywood films, a point missed by still other filmgoers who seemed to think that Hollywood filmmaking is a historically accurate record of the times. For example, one angry letter to the *Dallas Morning News* complained that the film was unrealistic because there were obviously no such things as gay bars in the 1950s! In fact, Haynes’s re-creation of a cruisy movie theater and a shadowy back-alley bar are among the film’s more accurate touches, bringing to light forgotten aspects of gay history.

The Hours was another queer take on the melodrama, and it was honored with nine Oscar nominations (and one win, for Nicole Kidman’s Best Actress turn as Virginia Woolf). Based on Michael Cunningham’s Pulitzer Prize-winning novel of the same name, *The Hours* is structured a bit like Todd Haynes’s seminal New Queer film *Poison* (1991): it intercuts three different but thematically related stories, each focusing on a single day in the lives of three different women living in different times and places. What emerges is a historicized look at the possible lives and relationships that women across one hundred years of Western history have had available to them. The first story follows author Virginia Woolf (Nicole Kidman) through a day on which she struggles to work on her novel *Mrs. Dalloway*. She feels trapped in her suburban housewife’s environs, controlled by her husband, her doctors,

and even her servants. The second story is about a 1950s housewife named Laura Brown (Julianne Moore), who is reading *Mrs. Dalloway* and contemplating suicide. The film suggests that she has denied her own same-sex attraction and married her husband out of social obligation. The third story is an updating of the Woolf novel and follows a contemporary urban lesbian named Clarissa Vaughan (Meryl Streep) as she prepares to give a party in honor of her friend Richard (Ed Harris). Clarissa has put her life on hold in order to care for Richard, a writer dying of AIDS.

Despite the film's focus on suicide (it begins and ends with Virginia Woolf taking her own life), the film is a powerful drama about the sociocultural forces that narrow everyone's (but especially women's) chances of happiness in life. It is also a meditation on unfulfilled expectations, self-worth, the meaning of life and death, and its relationship to art and creation. It is about the difficult choices that everyone is forced to make in life and the need to accept life for what it is and then to be able to "put it away." Thoughtful viewers generally applauded *The Hours*, while others dismissed it as a pointless "chick flick."²¹ Audiences expecting an old-fashioned melodrama were shocked by the film's queer content, especially that the film featured "lesbian" kisses. In fact, the kisses are meant to suggest how the very meaning of a same-sex kiss can change over the years and within different contexts. For Virginia Woolf and her sister, one kiss is affectionate and another a gesture of defiance. For Laura Brown and the ill neighbor to whom she is attracted, the kiss is one of compassion, friendship, but also desire. Finally, Clarissa's kiss with her lover at the end of the film expresses an understanding of mature love. Complex and uncompromising, *The Hours* is an excellent example of how queer work has become increasingly mainstreamed.

Into the Future: Distributing Queer Films

Intriguingly, *The Hours* was a coproduction between Miramax (an "independent" production company) and Paramount Pictures (a major Hollywood distributor), suggesting a new strategy for marketing queer independent films to broader audiences. During the 1990s, almost all of the major Hollywood studios acquired various independent companies (Miramax was bought by Disney, and Fine Line was purchased by Time/Warner), or else they established their own vaguely separate "independent" distribution outlets, such as Sony Pictures Classics and Fox Searchlight. The Hollywood studios did so in the name diversification: while they still crank out mainstream blockbusters under their usual brand names, they now also want to earn money from distributing more independent fare. Corporate interest in independent film is

manifest at lesbian and gay film festivals, and Los Angeles's Outfest is now a major industry event. Tellingly, the 1997 San Francisco International Lesbian and Gay Film Festival included a panel entitled "Selling Out: The Marketing of Queer Cinema," staffed with representatives from both Hollywood and more independent media companies. Lesbian and gay film festivals also attract corporate sponsors (Absolut vodka, Verizon Wireless, Avis) who hope to be perceived as gay-friendly, whether or not they actually are.

Such developments blur the distinctions between Hollywood and independent filmmaking. One result of this is that many contemporary queer films (including *The Hours*, *Monster*, and *Kinsey*) are not marketed as queer films per se but rather as art films or auteur projects that just happen to have queer content. Many distributors are still loathe to label their films as gay, lesbian, or queer because of persistent homophobia among mainstream heterosexual filmgoers.²² Thus, while queer independent filmmaking may be thriving, it rarely generates much revenue for its financial backers when it is ghettoized as a gay or lesbian film. For example, the highest-grossing queer-identified independent films of 2003 were *Camp* (from IFC Films) and *Mambo Italiano* (from Samuel Goldwyn Films), and they both grossed only \$1 million to \$2 million at the art house box office.²³ (Compare those numbers to the hundreds of millions of dollars that a Hollywood film such as *Philadelphia* or *The Birdcage* can earn.) As Jon Gerrans—copresident of Strand Releasing, one of the oldest U.S. distributors specializing in gay movies—puts it, "most of the time you lose money on theatrical [releases]," despite the fact that there are at least thirty million queers in America with an alleged annual buying power of \$500 billion.²⁴ Why don't queer movies make more money at the box office?

One obvious reason is that Hollywood keeps a corporate stranglehold on film distribution, making it difficult to see *any* independent or foreign films (queer or not) outside of selected urban art house theaters. Another is that despite queer subject matter, smaller independent films without Hollywood stars may not attract queer viewers. Most gay and lesbian filmgoers—as opposed to queer ones—want films made in the Hollywood mode and will often patronize Hollywood films before they do independent queer ones.²⁵ Another reason for the relative financial failure of theatrically released independent queer films may be the persistence of the closet: many gay men and lesbians may choose not to attend a queer film for fear of being publicly outed. As *Screen International* expressed it, "the reality of the gay market in the US is that . . . many men and women are closeted or live in areas where they don't have access to theatres playing a gay movie, or video stores which will stock a gay film."²⁶

As such, income from direct-to-home-video and DVD sales and rentals are surpassing theatrical revenues for queer independent films (a fact that is also true of most mainstream films). Specialized mail-order video companies such as TLA, Wolfe Video, and Culture Q Connection have been marketing to the queer community for many years now, and they are also moving into film production, helping to fund projects that they will then release through their mail-order catalogs. Just as physique films and underground cinema helped lead the way for more open representations of homosexuality on mainstream movie screens, the gay (and, to a much lesser degree, lesbian) porn industry has blazed these trails first. Rather than deal with the shame and embarrassment of going to a public place to watch pornographic films, the rise of home video, cable pay-per-view, and the Internet provides access to such images within the privacy of one's own home. And with the advent of the new millennium, all types of queer shorts, videos, and features (whether sexually explicit or not) are increasingly being distributed to consumers through such private—rather than public—venues.

Furthermore, independent queer filmmaking, videomaking, and television programming may be on the verge of merging. Much of the best work focusing on queer lives and issues is now being either produced directly for television or financed by television channels such as HBO and Showtime. Their television movies and miniseries—such as *More Tales of the City* (1998), *Common Ground* (2000), *If These Walls Could Talk 2* (2000), *Soldier's Girl* (2003), *Normal* (2003), and *Angels in America* (2003)—explore aspects of queer lives in ways that would never be allowed on network television or in mainstream Hollywood films. HBO and Showtime have also produced groundbreaking queer television series, including *Six Feet Under*, *Queer as Folk* (2000–) and *The L Word* (2004–). Bravo has aired gay film festivals and created shows such as *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (2003–) and *Gay Weddings* (2003). Furthermore, two cable channels devoted to showing independent and foreign films, IFC (the Independent Film Channel) and the Sundance Channel, regularly screen queer work that could otherwise not be seen outside of queer film festivals or urban art house theaters.

These developments have led to the idea of all-gay television channels. As C. Jay Cox, director of *Latter Days*, put it, “having a network exclusively devoted to gay subject matter will make it possible for gay indies to find an audience and hopefully make it easier to get these movies made.”²⁷ One of the first developments in this area was Here! TV, a twenty-four-hour Dish Network channel “offering exclusively gay content in VoD [video on demand], SVOD [satellite video on demand] and premium cable formats.”²⁸

Here! TV, launched in 2003, is an offshoot of Regent Entertainment, a company that already has a stake in the production, distribution, and exhibition of independent queer films. Paul Colichman, chairman of Regent Entertainment and president of Here! TV, explains that the presence of gay television channels may be able to overcome homophobic practice in retail outlets: "I don't want to have to rely on the video retailer to put the product in the store. They're not serving the niche yet. The Wal-Marts of this world don't stock gay product. Here! TV gets round that."²⁹ Throughout 2003 and 2004, Here! TV offered queer movies via pay-per-view, including *The Brotherhood* films, *When Boys Fly* and *Circuit*, and short film compilations such as *Boys Life 4* and *Watching You*. Plans are set to "launch a linear premium network that will show a 24/7 schedule of movies, original series and classic films and TV shows. On one platform or another, Here! TV was projected to be available in nearly 40 million homes" by the end of 2004.³⁰

Another gay channel slated to premiere in 2005 is LOGO. LOGO was created from within the corporate giant Viacom, and as part of the MTV Networks, it will be aimed at gay and lesbian consumers aged twenty-five to forty-nine.³¹ As an advertiser-supported, basic or expanded cable channel, LOGO will probably not feature the kinds of explicit content a pay-per-view channel could (although plans are afoot for LOGO to offer a companion subscription video-on-demand service).³² Initially, according to its designers, "LOGO will offer a mix of 25% original and 75% acquired content. The network already has 40 shows in development, with 20 at the pilot stage—including projects in collaboration with sister networks CBS News, Comedy Central, MTV, Showtime, and VH1."³³ Additionally, deals are in place to acquire and air over one hundred gay-related movies from both Hollywood majors and independent distributors. Viacom executives expect robust sponsorship in the form of thirty-second spots, product placement, editorial segments within programs, online integration, and the promotion of contests and sweepstakes.³⁴ However, the threat of boycotts against advertisers has already been raised by right-wing groups such as the Traditional Values Coalition.³⁵ And considering that many advertisers are still reluctant to feature their products on Showtime's *Queer as Folk*, LOGO's executives may be overly optimistic about their sponsorship possibilities. The future of queer television in America remains to be seen. Queer television could revolutionize the media industries by funding and distributing queer independent films and by creating new forms of hybrid queer media yet to be imagined. Or it could fail to attract substantial numbers of viewers and sponsors, serving only a relatively ghettoized, low-budget niche market.

Conclusion

In reviewing the New Queer film *Edward II* (1992), critic Peter Henné suggested that “explicit gay films in the 90s will be like explicit hetero films in the 60s: they will be fresh and cause heart flutters and eventually be accepted.”³⁶ Contrary to that assertion, that day of acceptance has not yet come. Mainstream films are still quite squeamish when it comes to representing queer images, explicit or otherwise. Stereotypes that have influenced depictions of homosexuality in past decades have persisted to the present day. Producers in Hollywood still worry that queers are not good box office, and such worries help keep people in the industry closeted about their own sexuality. Despite the many gains that have been made in terms of queer civil rights, many cultural critics are wary about announcing a new era of openness and equality: “Let us not forget that for all the media popularity of lesbians and gays, recent years have also brought us more troublesome attention, including the odious Defense of Marriage Act, a rise in anti-gay hate crimes, and a continuing wave of anti-gay referenda. Gays may be the new niche marketing phenomenon, but that doesn’t stop the power and presence of active homophobia—in the family, the workplace, the streets, the government.”³⁷ Hate crimes are still committed by ignorant and unbalanced people; fundamentalists of all ilk use religion to justify their bigotry; and the everyday heterosexism that pervades most American institutions is rarely even noted.

Yet, things *have* changed across a century of motion picture history. Rather than the dusky connotative closets in which queer characters existed during the Production Code era, there are a number of openly lesbian and gay characters in films and on television and even some transgendered characters. Although they are still often marginalized to art house theaters or pay television channels, the number of films and television programs that include queer characters and dramatize queer issues has increased dramatically over the past twenty years. And as the quantity has increased, so have the quality and range of queer images expanded. We are no longer in an era where *The Killing of Sister George* (1968) or *The Boys in the Band* (1970) stood relatively alone and were held responsible for representing (or failing to represent) every possible facet of queer life. However, this does not mean that all aspects of sexual diversity are granted the same amount of attention: there are still more films and television shows about gay men than about lesbians; there are more representations of white queers than queers of color. When and if that will change remains unknowable. How America’s queer communities will continue to evolve is beyond our ability to predict—although events seem to

be moving faster today than many people could ever have imagined. Whatever the coming years reveal, queer film in America will continue to represent and impact upon the changing nature of human sexuality.

Notes

1. James R. Keller, *Queer (Un)Friendly Film and Television* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2002), 9. Keller devotes an entire chapter to gay-male romance films, positioning them within larger cultural assumptions about heterosexism. Keller also suggests that their “coming out” imperative may be naïve or dangerous for young queers living in places such as Mississippi, where Keller himself lives and works (44).

2. Maria Maggenti, quoted in the film’s pressbook (on file at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences [AMPAS], Beverly Hills, Calif.).

3. Maggenti, quoted in the film’s pressbook (on file at AMPAS).

4. Jamie Babbit, quoted in the film’s pressbook (on file at AMPAS).

5. Emanuel Levy, review of *But I’m a Cheerleader*, *Variety*, 27 September 1999.

6. For more on how the Motion Picture Association of America’s ratings system discriminates against queerly themed projects, see Amy Taubin, “The Pleasure Police,” *Village Voice*, 3 August 1999, 57.

7. For an overview of films that deal with AIDS up until the late 1990s, see Kyo-Patrick Hart, *The AIDS Movie: Representing a Pandemic in Film and Television* (New York: Haworth Press, 2000).

8. Paul Rudnick, quoted in the film’s pressbook (on file at AMPAS).

9. Anneke Smelik, “Art Cinema and Murderous Lesbians,” in *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader*, ed. Michele Aaron (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 71.

10. For a sample of these reflections, see Michele Aaron, “Til Death Us Do Part: Queer Cinema’s Couples Who Kill,” in *The Body’s Perilous Pleasures: Dangerous Desires and Contemporary Culture*, ed. Michele Aaron (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999); Helen Birch, ed., *Moving Targets: Women, Murder, and Representation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Cathy Griggers, “Phantom and Reel Projections: Lesbians and the (Serial) Killing Machine,” in *Posthuman Bodies*, ed. Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingston (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1995), 162–76; Deborah Jermyn, “Rereading the Bitches from Hell: A Feminist Appropriation of the Female Psychopath,” *Screen 37*, no. 3 (1996): 251–67; and Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre, and the Action Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1993).

11. Tom Charity, review of *Chuck and Buck*, *Time Out* (London), 8 November 2000.

12. For an overview of global queer cinema, see Claire Jackson and Peter Tapp, *The Bent Lens: A World Guide to Gay and Lesbian Film* (St. Kilda: Australian Catalogue Company, 1997).

13. Anat Pick, "New Queer Cinema and Lesbian Films," in Aaron, *New Queer Cinema*, 112. For more on queer German films, see Alice A. Kuzniar, *The Queer German Cinema* (Stanford, Calif.: University of Stanford Press, 2000).

14. For more on Latin American queer film, see David William Foster, *Queer Issues in Contemporary Latin American Cinema* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003).

15. Louise Tutt, "Western Europe and Australia: The Art of the Matter," *Screen International* 2 July 2004, 15.

16. Liz Shackleton, "Asia: The Final Frontier," *Screen International* 2 July 2004, 15.

17. The history of *Fire*'s reception is covered in detail on the ancillary documentary material located on the *Fire* DVD release.

18. For a brief discussion of this dynamic, see Keller, *Queer (Un)Friendly Film*, 175–83. The role of repressed homosexual desire in homophobic assaults has been explored in recent documentaries, such as Arthur Dong's *Licensed to Kill* (1997) and the PBS Frontline documentary *Assault on Gay America* (2000).

19. *American Beauty* and *The Talented Mr. Ripley* have also been understood by some as further examples of Hollywood movies that represent "negative" images of queer killers. Such critics fail to see how the films explore the psychological dynamics of sexual repression, including the effects of the closet on queer identity formation. For a discussion of how *The Talented Mr. Ripley*'s queer project was received by actual filmgoers, see Harry M. Benshoff, "Reception of a Queer Mainstream Film," in Aaron, *New Queer Cinema*, 172–86. See also Keller, *Queer (Un)Friendly Film*, 68–81; and Chris Straayer, "The Talented Poststructuralist: Heteromascularity, Gay Artifice, and Class Passing," in *Masculinity: Bodies, Movies, Culture*, ed. Peter Lehman (New York: Routledge, 2001), 115–32.

20. Todd Haynes, quoted in the film's pressbook (on file at AMPAS), 4.

21. One reviewer (mm-39) on the Internet Movie Database complained, "Unwatchable movies from unreadable books. What worse than watching this movie. . . . The story has very little explanation or direction. Focuses on depression with out reason. To dry for me [sic]," www.imdb.com/title/tt0274558/#comment (accessed May 20, 2005).

22. Tutt, "Western Europe and Australia," 15.

23. Mike Goodridge, "Gay and Lesbian Films: Coming Out Soon," *Screen International* 2 July 2004, 12.

24. Jon Gerrans, quoted in Goodridge, "Gay and Lesbian Films," 12.

25. Tom Abel, head of United Kingdom's Parasol Peccadillo Releasing, quoted in Tutt, "Western Europe and Australia," 15.

26. Goodridge, "Gay and Lesbian Films," 12–13.

27. C. Jay Cox, quoted in Michael Burr, "Gay Programming," *The Hollywood Reporter* 8 July 2004.

28. Goodridge, "Gay and Lesbian Films," 13.

29. Paul Colichman, quoted in Goodridge, "Gay and Lesbian Films," 13.

30. Burr, "Gay Programming."
31. Goodridge, "Gay and Lesbian Films," 14.
32. Burr, "Gay Programming."
33. Burr, "Gay Programming."
34. LOGO press release located at www.viacom.com/press.tin?ixPressRelease=80304155 (accessed May 20, 2005).
35. Goodridge, "Gay and Lesbian Films," 14.
36. Peter Henné, "Passion Play: Derek Jarman Discusses Reinventing Christopher Marlowe's *E2*," *Village View*, 17–23 April 1992.
37. Suzanna Danuta Walters, *All the Rage: The Story of Gay Visibility in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 84.



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