

WHAT'S A GOOD GAY FILM?

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Every year, when gay and lesbian film festival season strikes, I watch this buoyant community turn out in public to celebrate itself. Marquee madness rules, celluloid obsessions alternating with the hope of celebrity spotting and the guaranteed satisfaction of in-line cruising. Queer audiences want to be entertained. But many still scan the offerings for positive values, fret over lesbians who die on screen (“Not that old stereotype again!”), and lament the predictability of mainstream script fashion (“Not another faggot best friend!”). They prefer the girl-gets-girl and boy-gets-boy movies, where heart meets heart and flesh meets flesh. Yet more and more I feel isolated there in the dark, the dyke done in by the critic in my cerebellum. I wait, dreading another bad movie that the body in the next seat will cheer, fearing that mediocrity has come to roost now that the barricades have come down.¹

Mostly I shut my mouth. Grumbling about commercialization, selling out, or going mainstream are the defenses of leftover radicals intent on remarginalizing our community in the face of success, right? Wasn't it only a short while ago that no such images could be found on movie screens at all? Not so long ago, the major problem was invisibility and its consequence: a sad vacuum of the imagination and the marketplace both. But I'm not sure I like this current moment, when we have the marketplace without the imagination. Hasn't anyone noticed that some distinctions need to be made between films that pander and films that inspire, between our highest common denominator and our lowest? Where are our cultural standards? And what are they, anyway?

In the fabled 1970s, when the first gay and lesbian film festivals started and the first round of self-consciously up-front homopolitico films began playing to audiences whose very act of identification was deeply ideological, a model was established. Everything took place on the fringe, disconnected from mainstream popular culture both by choice and by exclusion. This oppositional culture was deeply tied to the political debates of the time, aiming to eradicate “prejudice” and instill “pride.” The emphasis was on documentary, the agenda was civil rights, and status depended on claiming an identity as an oppressed class. True, it was also the era of celebration and sexuality, whether Olivia Records or backroom sex, whether cruising the piers or cruising womyn’s events, but the contradictions remained off-screen.

Moments of origin always cast a long shadow. Today queer film and video still bear a birthright linked to the umbilical cord of post-Stonewall gestation. There’s a generation of elders that expects film and video to toe an eternally prescribed line of righteousness and legitimacy, while ever new and needy generations recycle the old and add their own requirements. These queer publics want films of validation and a culture of affirmation: work that can reinforce identity, visualize respectability, combat injustice, and bolster social status. They want a little something new, but not too new; sexy, sure, but with the emphasis on romance; stylish, but reliably realistic and not too demanding; nothing downbeat or too revelatory; and happy endings, of course. It’s an audience that wants, not difference or challenge, but rather a reflection up there on the screen of its collective best foot forward. Part of the audience also wants higher production values than the independents can deliver: a queer Hollywood, popcorn movies for a fun Saturday night out.

But I’m an old-time outlaw girl. I love the films that push the edge, upset convention, defy expectation, speak the unspeakable, grab me by the throat and surprise me with something I’ve never seen before. “That’s not what we want!” cry the feet leaving the theater during my favorite films. And who can blame them? Why should I expect more of queer audiences than I expect of any good-time heterosexual crowd at the multiplex? But I do. Alas, nowadays, if the world portrayed by a film is alien or unwanted, if the view is dark instead of light, if there’s tragedy at the end of the tunnel instead of an embrace or a coming out, then the queer audience reneges on its half of the contract and refuses acquiescence. “No, that’s not me!” they silently scream as they exit the theater in anger. And the film suffers the hostile word of mouth that’s poison at the box office.

Of course, the problem can’t be blamed simply on gay and lesbian au-

diences. Hollywood studio execs hardly envision producing any groundbreaking movies to warm my heart either. At the Outfest in L.A. in 1994, I moderated a panel of lesbian studio execs and producers, whose blonde girlfriends sat in the audience applauding. The she-exec predicted the next wave of crossover movies: lesbian romantic comedies, which they were busily optioning. Not a single one made it out of development hell. I'd insisted on titling the panel "The Lesbian Minute Comes to Hollywood" because I figured that was about how long it would last.² Sadly, I was right. The filmmaker Elaine Holliman told me she remembered going from studio to studio with an actress dressed in a bridal gown, pitching a romantic comedy based on her short documentary *Chicks in White Satin* (1994). The result? No green light, but "I gave them the idea for *My Best Friend's Wedding*."³ In Hollywood even the lesbian romantic comedy that's pablum to me evidently pushes the proverbial envelope too far and can't be made.

I don't want to make the mistake of falling into that comfortable old victim box, complaining of absence in the midst of presence. We're not invisible anymore. We can now write a queer cinematic history that stretches way back. I can even celebrate a shining lineage of films that combine the creative spark that I crave with the groundbreaking stories that audiences have loved. In the indie boom years of the 1990s, I could hardly keep up with the U.S. films alone: *Poison*, *Paris Is Burning*, *Swoon*, *The Incredibly True Adventure of Two Girls in Love*, *Go Fish*, *All over Me*, *The Delta*, *The Watermelon Woman*, *Safe*. And, yeah, I'm still waiting along with the rest of you to see the long-promised crossover movie that pleases "us" as well as "them" and makes a bundle of money.⁴

The cranky critic in me remains unsatisfied. Why are filmic representations so often out of date, stuck in the past, tied to outmoded ideas about representation? Is complication so terrifying? I like edgier films and I always have, all the way back to my adolescence, when I escaped curfew to see *Scorpio Rising* (1964) or felt racy watching *Emmanuelle* (1974). When I think of lesbian and gay films that I love, they are always films that go beyond identification, oppression, or coming-out stories to tap into larger issues or deeper emotions. And if their aesthetics take advantage of the opportunity to depart from realist norms, so much the better.

I examine my own favorites, looking for clues. In Diane Kurys's delicious *Entre Nous* (1983), it was the clothes. That's what got me: two sexy women, admiring each other in the mirror, designing clothing for each other and luxuriating in fabrics and colors to satiate their senses. The tease didn't hurt

either, never does. In Stephen Frears's *Prick Up Your Ears* (1987), I loved not only its tragic ending but especially its dissection of Joe Orton's life with his lover: the jealousy, the fame, and the price people were willing to pay for celebrity. And when the New Queer Cinema came along, I was thrilled with filmmakers like Rose Troche and Todd Haynes for breaking aesthetic barriers and taking the queer audience along for the ride.

And in 1997? My favorite film in years, of any kind, from any place, was *Happy Together* by the genius Hong Kong filmmaker Wong Kar-Wai. In this male melodrama, two lovers leave Hong Kong for Argentina with dubious results. After the hot sex of the first five minutes, it all goes wrong and they fight like bats out of hell for the rest of the movie. But oh, how familiar is the way they fight! "We were just like them," said one friend to me, explaining why he and his boyfriend split. "Oh, my god, he's just like me," said my ex-girlfriend halfway through the screening. "Hmmm," said Wong Kar-Wai to the outraged Asian fans incensed by the gay content. "Just come in five minutes late. They're brothers."⁵

Happy Together is a poem to frustrated desire, grief, longing, exile, cultural displacement, and sexual commerce, all timed to a brilliant tango beat. Wong's cameraman, Chris Doyle, finds a visual register for every chord of emotion. And Wong's longtime collaborator William Chang—editor, art director, and the only gay member of the triumvirate—has a genius for the emotional weight of location, planting all the right trappings to snag our hearts. It's an ode to love that shows us what happens when love rots and vanishes, leaving tragedy in its wake.⁶

And what a deep wellspring of emotion is tapped with this tale of two guys who just, well . . . can't live with him, can't live without him. It's very much a gay story—and one that no gay director has dared to show us. Why is that? Why are we still covering up the realities of our lives in order to present a respectable image in public? "Why are the women in these awful lesbian movies completely unlike any lesbian I've ever known?" wrote a straight filmmaker to me, seeking my supposed expertise. No easy answer. Hmmm. Rent *Happy Together*, I am tempted to say, and pretend they're women.

Then I was captivated by the summer release of *High Art*, the indie film hailed as Ally Sheedy's comeback and writer and director Lisa Cholodenko's breakthrough. Sure, it's a love story in which girl kinda gets girl, or at least is on her way to it until death interrupts the plan. But it is equally a cold-eyed view of other emotions entirely: ambition, greed, emotional blackmail. Lesbian characters move within a sophisticated milieu that exceeds yet includes

them. At the same time, the film offered a sexy read of a triangulated lesbian relationship such as we've never seen before on screen.

Why doesn't anyone ever want to tell the truth about lesbian relationships? Behind every "life partner" granola couple, there are twenty kinds of dysfunctional pairs with details that would make your hair curl. I want to see the power-tripping girlfriend, the suicidal boyfriend, the adulterous neighbor, the abusive partner . . . the whole cast of characters currently being swept under the carpet.

Here's a game to play: try to imagine what movies with gay and lesbian characters and plots would look like if someone pulled out all the stops and then financed the visions. What if, just for one glorious minute, we tried to imagine the absolutely fabulous film we could see if "they" let us. What would it be? Isaac Julien, the British filmmaker honored in 1998 by the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies at the City University of New York's Graduate Center, says it would be "something cheesy about the family. Cheesy because that's what it takes to get the queer audience to come out to see it. And about the family, because that is the great unspoken subject in queer culture, the site of trauma that no one has talked about."⁷ John Waters, devilish as usual, elaborates a fantasy: "All nude heterosexual Hollywood movie stars trying to win the Oscar by playing gay parts and failing miserably." And Donna Deitch, still worshipped for her classic, *Desert Hearts* (1985), admits her own preference up front: whatever the subject, "it better be hot."

Gus Van Sant, holed up on the set of *Psycho* and already planning his film about gay cowboys, says he's never had to cut any shots from any of his films due to their being gay. But his wish list? "In fantasy, it would be great to have a full-budget Disney animated feature with gay leads: *The Prince and the Stableboy*, or *Peter Pan: Love in Never-Never Land*, or *The Little Mermaid 2: Ariel and Samantha*. All with full promotions, y'know, McDonald's Happy Meals with the characters. And love songs between the two. It would be great."

Closer to home, Mary, raised in the 1960s, wants an old-fashioned musical with tap-dancing nuns and Cheryl Ladd (*Charlie's Angels*) as a novice. My friend Catherine, raised in the 1970s, thinks differently: "Forget gay pride for a while. I want to bring back gay shame." And me? I have lots of ideas, from the mundane to the epic. I want a post-coming-out, post-get-it-together kind of movie, something full of sex, romance, tragedy, and life outside The Relationship. I want to see the evil girlfriend manipulating some sweet thing into that special dyke circle of hell. I want to see the gold-digging boy-toy out trolling for a new daddy. I want the curtain raised on all the dirty lesbian secrets: the

power plays, the naked lust, the sick transference, the poaching of friends. And I want the intimate familiarity of daily life reinvented aesthetically, remodeled for us. I want clues, signposts, prophecies, playfulness, and revelations.

Is your heart beating fast? What kind of movies and videos do you want? Does it matter? Yes, it does. In the world of desire and evolution, we can only get from here to there over the bridge of our imaginations. If we limit ourselves to what we see in the mirror, we're lost. If we're scared of anything new or different, or made uneasy by films and videos that challenge our notions of the homonatural universe, we'll be stuck with the status quo. If queer audiences stay away from controversial groundbreaking work, then the distributors and studios, those who watch the box office like a seismologist watches the Richter needle, will pull out completely. And the queer community will be abandoned, condemned to a static universe, comforted only by the sure knowledge that the earth, alas, won't move under our feet.

Notes

This chapter originally appeared as "What's a Good Gay Film?," *OUT* 60 (November 1998), 58.

1. This article is dedicated to the memory of Sarah Pettit, for her work as an editor and for her life as an exemplary homo girl. I was commissioned to write it for *Out* magazine when she was still its editor in chief; her subsequent firing marked a low point in gay and lesbian journalism. Pettit, who had started her career at the feisty *OutWeek*, went on to become *Newsweek's* senior arts and entertainment editor, then died of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma in 2003 at the age of thirty-six. There's a fellowship in her name at Yale, her alma mater.

2. Thanks to Sande Zeig, who organized the panel, invited me to moderate, and kindly let me have my title.

3. Elaine Holliman, personal communication, 1997.

4. No, I didn't see *Brokeback Mountain* coming, even though Van Sant mentions his idea of making a cowboy movie toward the end of this very article.

5. Wong Kar-Wai, personal communication, 1997.

6. I should also note that the film has been widely interpreted as an allegory for the handover of Hong Kong back to China in 1997 (the passports at the beginning, the film's ninety-seven-minute running time, the shot of a television screen announcing Deng Xiaoping's death in 1997), in which case homosexuality is merely a stand-in. But what a stand-in.

7. This and all other quotations in this section were personal communications, gathered in person or via telephone or email, specifically for this piece.

