# Bartel, Paul (1938-2000)

by Gary Morris

Filmmaker Paul Bartel's career is in many respects typical of the modern independent auteur. His filmography as a director is slight (ten features and a couple of television shows between 1969 and 1993). He tended to work when and where he could, with very low budgets, in disreputable genres, often writing and acting in his films and in those of others and calling on friends such as actress Mary Woronov to bring what star power they could to his work.

That Bartel was openly gay was not the issue in the independent film world that it would have been in mainstream film, which has so much more invested culturally and economically in the heterosexuality of its interpreters.

In a 1998 interview in *The Advocate,* Bartel said "I go to commercial Hollywood films and often think how glad I am that I didn't pursue a career in that kind of filmmaking"--a statement that may say as much about the opportunities available to openly queer filmmakers in Hollywood during his heyday as about where his own interests lay.

Born in Brooklyn on August 6, 1938, Bartel was the classic future filmmaker, creating marionette shows at the age of five, discovering movies and directors as a teenager, and by sixteen shooting his own animated shorts.

Early on he evinced a talent for obtaining resources for little or no money--persuading his father to buy him a 16mm camera and conning a high school teacher into excusing him from a semester to work on an elaborate animated project (a 3,000-cel undertaking that Bartel convinced the whole class to work on). This talent would serve him well throughout a flashy but far from lucrative career outside the mainstream.

After high school, Bartel worked in the Army Signal Corps Pictorial Center in Queens as a script clerk and assistant director on training films and documentaries. Fluent in French and Italian, he studied theater and film at UCLA and won a Fulbright scholarship that brought him to work at Rome's Cinecitta Studios.

Bartel moved to New York City in the early 1960s, where he met future collaborator Mary Woronov and by the end of the decade had made his first feature, *The Secret Cinema* (1969). *The Secret Cinema* is a black-comic tale of a woman whose fears that her life is being filmed for the entertainment of her friends turn out to be true. The film presaged the sardonic tone of most of his later work, though he would mostly abandon *Secret Cinema*'s experimental aspects in favor of linear narratives with perverse touches.

Three years later the director made *Private Parts* (1972), another black comedy whose title was sometimes printed as *Private Arts* or *Private Party* by skittish newspapers. *Private Parts* introduces a typical Bartel tableau, a depraved San Francisco hotel riddled with leather queens, transvestites, runaways, and other social deviates, all treated as amusing denizens of the demimonde.

Bartel's career was kick-started the following year by his association with exploitation maestro Roger

Corman, for whom he made *Death Race 2000* (1973). Bartel's vision of a future world in which drivers get points for running down pedestrians became a cult favorite and triggered a sequel, *Cannonball* (1976).

Six years later came *Eating Raoul,* the 1982 film that remains, to most Bartel watchers, his best. This edgy comedy features Paul and Mary Bland (played by Bartel and Mary Woronov), a nerdish, sex-hating couple who realize their dream of opening a restaurant by murdering and robbing swingers.

*Eating Raoul's* satirical take on marriage, adultery, cannibalism, the cult of "good taste," entrepreneurship, and swinging won it more critical and commercial success than any of his other films. It was chosen for such prestigious venues as Cannes and the New York Film Festival.

*Eating Raoul* did not catapult Bartel out of the minor leagues, however, perhaps because he had no more interest in the mainstream than the mainstream had in him. He made a few more films, some of them, such as *The Longshot* (1986) and his last effort, *Shelf Life* (1993), barely released.

Fans of Divine gave *Lust in the Dust* (1985), a comic western promoted as a kind of queer *Blazing Saddles,* a modicum of notoriety. In addition, Bartel gained some cachet from *The Class Struggle in Beverly Hills* (1989), where he had a larger (but not *large*) budget and better-known actors such as Jacqueline Bisset. The film was not successful, but it was hailed in some quarters for its caustic humor, political savvy, and casual introduction of a heated sex scene between Robert Beltran and Ray Sharkey.

Bartel's ultimate importance may lie less in his directorial efforts, which are variable in quality, than in his unwavering presence as an inspiring figure in the independent film world, particularly to queer filmmakers, an image reinforced by his genial, bear-like demeanor and eagerness to help struggling young auteurs.

He probably survived as much through his acting in both mainstream and independent films--*Heart Like a Wheel*, *National Lampoon's European Vacation*, *Rock and Roll High School*, *Basquiat*, and *Billy's Hollywood Screen Kiss* are among his 77 acting credits--as through his own films.

Bartel died on May 13, 2000 of a heart attack two weeks after undergoing surgery for liver cancer. At the time of his death, he was preparing a sequel to *Eating Raoul*, set twenty years after the original.

**Bibliography**

Duralde, Alonzo. "End of the Reel," *The Advocate* (July 4, 2000): 53.

Murray, Raymond. *Images in the Dark: An Encyclopedia of Gay and Lesbian Film and Video.* New York: Plume, 1996.

O'Haver, Tommy. "Two of a Kind." *The Advocate* 764 (July 21, 1998): 69.

**About the Author**

**Gary Morris** is the editor and publisher of *Bright Lights Film Journal*, now online as brightlightsfilm.com. Author of *Roger Corman*, he writes on film regularly for the *Bay Area Reporter* and the *San Francisco Weekly.* He serves on the editorial advisory board of www.glbtq.com.