# Film

by Mark Finch



A film still from Magnus Hirschfeld's *Different from the Others* (1919). Archiv für Sexualwissenschaft, Berlin.

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In the spring of 1991, the production of Carolco's *Basic Instinct* moved to San Francisco for some necessary location shooting. Directed by Paul Verhoeven, *Basic Instinct* is a nasty drama about a homicidal lesbian and her beautiful, deranged bisexual girlfriend; Michael Douglas plays the investigative heterosexual hero.

Even before the crew's arrival, San Francisco's lesbian and gay activist groups were prepared. Earlier complaints about Joe Eszterhas's script--mean and misguided even beyond the standard exaggerations of Hollywood fiction--had gone unreplied. On the first night, filming was interrupted by a furious crowd of protestors who came armed with ear-splitting whistles. Riot police made a number of arrests.

Despite a court restraining order, local news coverage encouraged attendance and continued disruption of the shooting. Photocopies of the script were circulated on Castro Street.

The protests against *Basic Instinct* were neither new--New York had seen the same thing in 1980 when William Friedkin's *Cruising* hit the gay bars--nor especially successful in effecting changes to the finished film, but they summarize the feeling of American lesbians and gays in the early 1990s. "Hollywood only understands money," declared one speaker at the *Basic Instinct* demonstration. "If they're going to make films that endanger my life, they better budget for my anger."

It is true. If Hollywood merely offered career advice, gay men and women would be better off on unemployment. Mainstream movies have presented gays with a repetitive and sinisterly limited range of job opportunities--as spinster school teachers and sly spies; as hairdressers, fashion photographers, gossip columnists, and worried politicians with sweaty brows and secrets to hide; as gossipy best friends, sneaky butlers, poor show prostitutes, twisted prison wardens, serial killers, and assorted borderline psychotics.

But this persistent belittling belies Hollywood's real agenda. In films as different as *Adam's Rib* (1949) and *American Gigolo* (1980), *A Florida Enchantment* (1914) and *The Hunger* (1980)--from Laurel and Hardy to lesbian vampires--since cinema began, Hollywood has been fascinated with finding ways of representing gayness.

It is a part of popular cultural mythology that homosexuals are meant to be obsessed with Hollywood--all those queens crying for Judy, dykes swooning for Garbo. What is much less remarked upon is precisely the reverse: Hollywood's obsession with homosexuality.

**Representations of Gay Men and Lesbians**

Confronted by this torrent of lesbian and gay images, subtexts, and sensibilities, the question is not whether Hollywood's homosexuals have matched up to real life, but rather, how has sexuality been

represented on the screen? What are the defining characteristics and how do they relate to common ideas about gay men and women?

There are essentially two ideas behind the label "gay cinema": first, that Hollywood's images of homosexuals are worth investigating and, second, that gay filmmakers themselves have been working independently--and in opposition--to these images.

Thus, there are two strands to a gay film history, which only really intertwine in the last two decades, when independent films such as *Longtime Companion* (1990), *Desert Hearts* (1986), and *Parting Glances* (1986) proved that gay and lesbian culture has what Hollywood cutely calls "crossover" potential.

Despite the critical and commercial success of these films, lesbian and gay cinema is not something that happened only since gay liberation--although politicization has provided the impetus to sift through history and tease out what was previously concealed.

**Romance and Sympathy**

A 1916 Swedish film, *The Wings,* seems to be one of the first overt gay screen romances; based on Herman Bang's novel, *Mikael*, it races through the melodrama of sculptor Claude Zoret and the elusive youth of the title. Anticipating the dominant theme of mainstream cinema over the next fifty years, their romance ends unhappily, with adopted son Mikael provoking his patron and lover to a feverish death. In *The Wings* at least Zoret dies of a broken heart, a genuinely romantic demise; more often, gay characters have died out of guilt or punishment.

Meanwhile, in Weimar Germany, a second version of homosexual tragedy was being played. Magnus Hirschfeld's Institute for Sexual Science in Berlin initiated the first campaign for decriminalizing homosexuality; *Different from the Others* (1919), starring Conrad Veidt, explicitly pleaded for tolerance. A tale of blackmail and suicide, prefaced by a direct-to-camera monologue by Hirschfeld, *Different from the Others* set the standard for liberal tolerance and for a durable new genre of gay sympathy films.

**The Sissy**

While Hirschfeld was pleading for tolerance, Hollywood was playing for laughs. Hirschfeld's theories were based on the radical idea of a "third sex," whereas contemporary popular conceptions identified homosexuality as an inversion of ordinary gender: women in men's bodies, men in women's. Hence Hollywood's most enduring stereotype: the sissy.

In his benchmark history, *The Celluloid Closet,* Vito Russo, the prodigious researcher and author, picked out characters such as the dressmaker in *Irene* (1926), played by George K. Arthur, and Grady Sutton in *Movie Crazy* (1932) as early examples of the sissy type. In *Movie Crazy* Sutton shrieks and leaps on a table at the thought of a mouse; it is this sort of incongruous and effeminate behavior that marks the early characterizations.

In later films the shading of the sissy becomes more complex; the dialogue often juggles with their sexual ambiguity. Comedians Eric Blore, Edward Everett Horton, and Franklin Pangborn most often occupied these roles.

In *The Gay Divorcee*, Horton plays Fred Astaire's priggish friend Pinky, who enjoys some quick banter with Blore (tagged as having an "unnatural passion for rocks"); besides the innuendoes, the homosexuality of the sissies lies in their easy association and their comic conspiratorial conversation compared to the edgy air between would-be lovers Astaire and Ginger Rogers.

Naturally, most gay people would now dispute the causal connection between gender and sexuality, but

there is also something to celebrate in the sissy image. There is a flip-side to the sissy's intimations of conspiratorial behavior, over-emotionalism, and frivolous humor: companionship, sensitivity, and back-bite wit. David Wayne as Katharine Hepburn's best friend Kip in *Adam's Rib* (1949) is a shining example of these fairly noble qualities.

**Women Behaving Like Men**

If the sissy was premised on the idea of a man behaving like a woman, it did not work out so well the other way round. In *Turnabout* (1940), a convenient genie enables overworked husband John Hubbard and jejeune wife Carole Landis to swap bodies. Whilst Hubbard arrives at work with a clutch-bag and enjoys a bit of gossip with stockings salesman Franklin Pangborn, Landis takes to full-throated thigh-slapping, donning men's pants, and mountaineering on the roof of their Manhattan apartment. But the woman-in-man's-clothing gag lacked the longevity or easy humor of the male sissy; as an image it rarely attained sexual tenor.

According to archivist Andrea Weiss (in *Vampires and Violets: Lesbians in the Cinema*), lesbian interest in early Hollywood figured less on broad comedy and more on drama's major stars such as Garbo, Hepburn, and Dietrich--who all had their moments of cross-dressing in films such as *Queen Christina* (1933), *Morocco* (1930), and *Sylvia Scarlett* (1935)--and who in their combination of sexual objectification and stage-center action became pinups for women as much as men.

**The Tragic Homosexual**

The sissy is something that can be signaled immediately, in the flick of a wrist or a rapid sashay. The other predominant image in mainstream movies is a little more elusive. If the sissy belongs to the domain of farce and comedy, the tragic figure haunts the genres of crime, melodrama, and horror. As a stereotype, the tragic homosexual is to be found wherever Hollywood is required to signal shady bars on the wrong side of town, bohemian decadence, or the ill-effects of same-sex proximity.

As with the sissy, so much is signaled by certain visual conventions. With Gloria Holden in *Dracula's Daughter* (1936), Judith Anderson in *Rebecca* (1940), and, later, Sal Mineo in *Rebel without a Cause* (1955) and Robert Walker in *Strangers on a Train* (1951), the tragic homosexual's torture is concentrated in the eyes--sunken, searching out love, or, in the thrillers, young prey.

His or her most common profession is in roles of minor authority (schoolteacher, warden, housekeeper), or some equally small part in the criminal world (blackmailer, get-away car driver), or merely as devoted mother's boy or best friend. Often the male characters were pictured in a bohemian context--this is what writer and critic Richard Dyer has identified as the image of "the sad young man."

The Sad Young Man was not merely an invention of Hollywood; like the sissy, which can be traced back to nineteenth-century images of the fop and dandy, it already existed in literary and art history. The Sad Young Man is part Dorian Gray, part Narcissus. In *Now You See It,* his exhaustive study of the American lesbian and gay underground, Dyer finds the image in the films of Kenneth Anger and Gregory Markopoulos.

Anger's *Fireworks* (1947), one of the first, widely-screened gay underground movies, is the imaginative and seemingly masochistic sex fantasy of its slim solitary dreamer.

Fifteen years later, Markopoulos's New York-set *Twice a Man* (1962) exploits the image seemingly without irony: Paul, the melancholic, suicidal hero, literally weeps his way through the Oedipal drama.

**Underground Film**

Dyer relates the rise of the male gay underground to the popularization of Freudianism (which, however

fumblingly, emphasized the idea of unconscious and therefore unwilled attraction), to the war (which brought large numbers of gay men and women together in single-sex environments), and to the boom in paperback publishing (where exposes of homosexual lives were frequently accompanied by the first illustrations of the gay milieu).

These same latter factors also led to the widescale distribution and manufacture of gay pornography. From beginnings with the Athletic Model Guild--a studio devoted to male photography based in Los Angeles--an empire was quickly assembled.

AMG auteur Richard Fontaine started making short, silent posing-pouch snapshot films in the mid-1950s and moved on to sound titles like *In the Days of Greek Gods* (1958) and *Muscles from Outer Space* (1962), which featured narratives as well as nudity.

Fontaine's films are among the first gay-campaigning documents in American cinema--he often managed to include references to the lowly status of the homosexual. His first feature-length erotic film, *In Love Again* (1969), is more like propaganda than porn.

Dyer has characterized the gay images--and there are many--of the 1960s underground as "listless and inconsequential." Warhol's films very much capture the essence of this limp mode; his stars are passive hustlers--Joe Dallesandro in *Blow Job* (1969) or drugged drunken queens (Taylor Mead in any title).

In the late 1960s, it is only the works of less-well-promoted directors such as George Kuchar, Curt McDowell, and John Waters that allow the appearance of energetic, lusty gay protagonists.

Lesbian underground filmmakers took a different route. As it is with the history of all independent cinema, there is less work by women at this time, for obvious economic reasons. Apart from an exceptional moment of semi-seduction in Maya Deren's *At Land* (1945), it was left to 1970s filmmakers such as Constance Beeson and Barabara Hammer to break new ground.

Hammer's films--among them, *Superdyke* (1975), *Labryis Rising* (1977), and *Women I Love* (1976)--express a metaphoric, collective lesbian iconography: instead of the individualistic narratives of the male underground, they try to present new images for all lesbians.

Hammer's work since then has persistently continued this devotion to new vocabulary, and in the 1980s she starts to look back at the success of the lesbian avant-garde, by reprocessing and juxtaposing footage from both decades. Hammer's most recent film re-cuts a classic of the gay male underground: Melville Weber and James Sibley Watson's *Lot in Sodom* (1930).

**Sad Young Men (and Women)**

For mainstream cinema, as for popular culture in general, the late 1950s and 1960s were times for the tragedy of the homosexual experience. As the censorship systems in Britain and the United States were found to be more malleable, the image of the Sad Young Man (and Woman) figured in narratives.

Movies were suddenly keener to diagnose the condition of their characters. Studio executives, however, read the boom in pop psychology and hand-me-down Freud a little differently from the intellectuals of the underground. Films such as *Tea and Sympathy* (1956), *The Children's Hour* (1962), *Suddenly Last Summer* (1959), *Boys in the Band* (1970), and, from Britain, *Victim* (1960) and *The Killing of Sister George* (1968) set about creating a narrative context for the stereotype.

These films focused on the loneliness of their homosexual figures, but their vision was blurred by a double movement of sympathy and voyeurism. *Victim* ostensibly credits the anomie of gay men to their illegality and sets out to prove that their susceptibility to blackmail and imprisonment ensures a miserable life.

Designed therefore as a campaigning, liberal film, *Victim* also ends on an image of unbearable isolation.

Similarly, in the final frames of *The Children's Hour,* after Shirley MacLaine hangs herself, wrongly labeled lover Audrey Hepburn walks proudly and tearily down a desolate tree-lined avenue; after ejecting and humiliating his dinner party guests, *The Boys in the Band*'s host Kenneth Nelson wipes a tear and takes another tranquilizer.

One of the most dour denouements belongs to a British film, *Walk a Crooked Path* (1969), in which a married gay teacher is abandoned by the schoolboy he adores, after having engineered the murder of his wife. He sits alone in his now-still home and the image changes from color to black and white as the film flashes through long shots of each deserted room.

Yet these intensely melancholy fantasies were of course rooted in real-life homophobia, legislation, and social stigma. Just as musicals capture moments of ecstasy and community, *Victim* and *The Children's Hour* exaggerate isolation and injustice to a degree that is recordable, palpable, and undeniable.

**Gay Bar Scenes**

Another key moment in films of the 1960s and 1970s is the gay bar scene. *The Detective* (1968) pitches Frank Sinatra in pursuit of a homosexual killer and comes up with a crawl tour of New York's gay dives. There is a self-consciousness not just in the representation of "casual" gay social life but also in the camera pans and overhead shots, a sense in which the film is proud to present something so explicitly, and yet still be bewildered by what it sees.

*The Detective* was not the first film to peek inside a gay bar (Vito Russo pinpoints this to *Call Her Savage,* a 1932 Clara Bow drama), but it typified the realist trend of the next decade.

Each gay-themed film made a special claim to authenticity. For example, *Sister George*'s publicity made much of the fact that its bar scenes had been partly filmed at London's famous Gateways Club. Ten years later, William Friedkin took to Manhattan leather bars in search of real-life clubbers for *Cruising.*

The mid-1960s films often used the device of an investigative figure delving into the gay scene in order to resolve a mystery, a commentator to a criminal kind of *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*. Later, *Investigation of a Murder* (1973), *Partners* (1982), and *Cruising* made their heroes literal detectives.

The bar scene is also constructed to confirm culture's queer conspiracy theory, which goes something like this: "Homosexuals have a secret code and a secret meeting place, just below the surface of ordinary social life."

Yet for gay viewers the bar scene may function as a vision of utopia, a restorative after all the hours of miserable, cinematic isolation. The self-consciously casual scenes of 1970s social life potentially offered the pleasure of recognition for lesbian and gay audiences. Not for the first time, Hollywood's homosexual images can be experienced differently, and in complex ways, by a gay audience.

***Making Love***

By 1980, however, the curiosity of gay viewers had been both sorely tested and exploited. Twentieth Century-Fox released *Making Love* (1982) with much self-generated excitement. Penned by openly gay writer Barry Sandler, and promoted as the first honest look at gay relationships, *Making Love* is best remembered for a sex scene of astonishing discretion.

More interesting than the movie itself--a TV-movie tale of broken marriage and bisexuality, with Kate Jackson as the hurt wife on the trail of her husband's nighttime liaisons--was the narrative of the film's

marketing. Aside from the standard campaign, which presented *Making Love* as an old-fashioned women's picture and bleached away the gay theme, Fox also ran a separate campaign for the gay community.

This latter involved preview screenings for gay journalists and other community "opinion-makers," as well as a new poster picturing Harry Hamlin undressed and embraced by Jackson's movie husband, with Kate herself banished to the background.

*Making Love* was a failure with both constituencies, gay and non-gay. Against that film's much derided middle-class coziness, the plurality of lesbian and gay lifestyles was apparent in the increasing vigor of the American gay movement.

**Documentary Films**

In the 1970s, independent documentarists had tried to get at this diversity. *A Position of Faith* (1973), *Gay USA* (1977), and Peter Adair's hands-across-America panorama *Word is Out* (1977) all attempted not just to explain the premise of gay liberation, but showed it too. When interviewees in *Word is Out* claimed, "We're just like you," audiences could see that it was true.

Later nonfiction features achieved this mission more succinctly: *The Times of Harvey Milk* (1984) is a persuasive political tearjerker, while *Before Stonewall* (1984), made the same year, is an elegant family album of archival footage; both films, like the documentaries of the 1990s--*Tongues Untied* (1990) and *Voices from the Front* (1991)--still rely on the truth of personal testimony to move, or forge identification with, their audiences.

**The Blur between Hollywood and Independent Films**

In the 1980s and 1990s, gay-themed fiction commanded a high profile. In *Parting Glances* (1986), *Desert Hearts* (1986), and *Lianna* (1986), the blur between Hollywood and independent produced narratives that addressed both gay and non-gay audiences. Many of these were directly the result of filmmakers' experience in the 1970s with international work made and screened exclusively for gay men and women.

For American audiences, annual gay film festivals (in San Francisco, New York, Los Angeles, and other cities) discovered European directors such as Eloy de la Iglesia (*The Deputy*, 1979), Monika Treut (*Seduction: The Cruel Woman*, 1986), and Alexandra von Grote (*November Moon*, 1984) or otherwise reclaimed the lesbian and gay "sensibility" of avant-gardists like Ulrike Ottinger, Isaac Julien, and Rosa von Praunheim.

Crucially, dedicated researchers such as Richard Dyer, Vito Russo, and Andrea Weiss brought new perspectives to the work of earlier filmmakers.

**Eroticism**

Eroticism features strongly in today's mainstream gay movies. AIDS has moved gay-themed films once again away from realism, has clarified that films are indeed fictions. Whether it is boredom with heterosexuality or another burst of voyeurism, Hollywood seems captivated by what gay people do in bed, hence *Lianna, Longtime Companion* (1990), *Maurice* (1987), and *Torch Song Trilogy* (1988), all made independently but picked up by major distribution companies.

Of course, it would be unfair to claim that eroticism is the sole project of any of these films, but it is true to say that the bed scene has replaced the bar scene.

**Gay Themes and Diverse Responses**

As Hollywood claws back and reconstitutes the novelty of lesbian and gay culture, and as independent gay filmmakers confess to the pleasure of mainstream genres such as romance, gay themes and influences cluster in increasingly bizarre regroupings.

Among these themes and influences are the adoration of the male body/buddy (Schwarzenegger, Cruise; *My Own Private Idaho*, 1991); the mass marketing of camp (*Too Much Sun,* 1990; *Pee Wee's Big Adventure*, 1987; *Soapdish*, 1991); ceaseless homosexual subtexts about Oedipal indecision in teen movies such as *Fright Night* (1985) and *Point Break* (1991); the reappearance of the destructive film noir lesbian (*Slamdance,* 1986; *Bellman and True*, 1987; *Basic Instinct,* 1992); the dominance of educational-TV movies (*An Early Frost*, 1986; *Consenting Adult*, 1985; *Andre's Mother*, 1990); AIDS and associational imagery in horror (*The Fly*, 1986; *Lifeforce*, 1985); homosexual serial killers and their newly graphic crimes (*The Krays*, 1990; *Silence of the Lambs*, 1991).

Oppositional work is also thriving, either as agitprop or avant-garde. Video allows for fairly instant responses to issues: there are now hundreds of tapes around AIDS, and within a few months of Britain's new anti-gay legislation in 1988, eighteen campaigning tapes had been logged.

At the same time, a new kind of underground cinema is identifiable; filmmakers like Su Friedrich (*Sink or Swim*), Gregg Araki (*The Living End*), Tom Kalin (*Swoon*), and Todd Haynes (*Poison*) are unarguably at the vanguard of a playful new aesthetic.

**Conclusion**

The tentative and fractious nature of these recent groupings is proof that heterogeneity is still the norm. For as long as homosexuality occupies the same difficult ideological position that it does--ceaselessly yoked with anxieties about disease, reproduction, and contamination; bound in with legislative and civil rights discourse; shaped by sociological surveys and celebrity scandal--filmmakers will undoubtedly continue to produce consistently provocative and complex images.

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**About the Author**

**Mark Finch**, former Exhibitions and Festival Director for Frameline and the San Francisco International Lesbian & Gay Film Festival, was a seminal figure in international gay and lesbian cinema. A native of Manchester, England, he worked for the British Film Institute and programmed the London Gay and Lesbian Film Festival before moving to San Francisco in 1991. He wrote extensively about film for a number of publications, both mainstream and gay and lesbian. He ended his own life, jumping from the Golden Gate Bridge in 1995.