Film Directors

by Deborah Hunn

A portrait of actor Jack Larson (left) with director James Bridges and their dog Max by Stathis Orphanos.
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Gay, lesbian and bisexual film directors have been a vital creative presence in cinema since the medium's inception over one hundred years ago. Until the last two decades, however, mainstream directors kept their work (and not infrequently their lives) discreetly closeted, while the films of underground and experimental creators, although often confrontational in theme and technique, had limited circulation and financial support.

More recently, new queer filmmakers have capitalized on increased (although by no means unproblematic) public acceptance to win critical recognition and commercial viability for their projects.

The Hollywood Golden Era

In the so-called Golden Era of Hollywood, there were a number of famous directors privately known for their alternative sexual preferences. These included George Cukor, Edmund Goulding, Mitchell Leisen, F.W. Murnau, Mauritz Stiller, James Whale, and Dorothy Arzner, who functioned with varying degrees of success in the industry.

Cukor (1899-1983) is primarily famous as a prolific and assured director of women's films. His sexuality was a well known secret in Hollywood, and while it did not do substantial harm to his career, it is generally believed that his "fairy" reputation cost him the directorship of *Gone With the Wind* (1939), following objections from macho star Clark Gable.

Although Cukor's work never overtly addresses gay issues, later critics and viewers have come to appreciate its many queer subtexts: Katharine Hepburn's cross dressing in *Sylvia Scarlett* (1935); the gloriously camp bitchiness in the dress and dialogue of the all women cast of *The Women* (1939); the effete figure of Kip in the classic *Adam's Rib* (1948).

Less discreet and, as a consequence, less fortunate than Cukor, James Whale (1893-1957) moved from the English theater to Broadway and then to Hollywood. Although he directed a range of genres, including the first version of the musical *Showboat* (1936), Whale's reputation as a director rests on his quartet of horror classics: *Frankenstein* (1931), *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935), *The Dark House* (1932), and *The Invisible Man* (1933). These films, with their grotesque ambience and alienated protagonists, have been interpreted as offering metaphoric expression of queer suffering.

Whale's career collapsed at least in part because of his refusal to tone down his openly gay behavior, and the last two decades of his life were spent on the Hollywood margins. The circumstances of his death by drowning in his swimming pool remained unresolved until only recently, when his suicide note was made public. His last months provided the basis for Bill Condon's 1998 film *Gods and Monsters*, based on the novel *Father of Frankenstein* by Christopher Bram and starring Ian McKellen.

It has sometimes been said that the lesbianism of Dorothy Arzner (1897-1979) afforded her a certain license as "one of the boys" in a fiercely male dominated profession, but the road for one of only two successful female directors in Hollywood's Golden Era was not easy.

Censorship codes and convention no doubt prevented Arzner from undertaking overtly lesbian themes. Nevertheless, critics have noted such touches as the sensuous handling of women's friendships in *The Wild Party* (1929) and the focus on such strong, albeit constrained, women as Hepburn's Amelia Earheart-like aviator in *Christopher Strong* (1933) and Joan Crawford's shoulder-padded businesswoman in *The Bride Wore Red* (1937). Forced to retire after ill health in the 1940s, Arzner made occasional television commercials in the 1950s and later taught film at UCLA in the 1960s.

Avant-Garde, European, and Underground Film

Developments in experimental film from the 1940s onwards, as well as the influence of European cinema, led ultimately to the formation of what is commonly known as underground cinema--the term coming from the screening context of small, alternative, sometimes illicit venues--that burgeoned in the 1960s.

In this subcultural space, (primarily male) homosexual directors forged a quirky mixture of aesthetic experimentation, kitsch, and homoerotic iconography into what was to become, ultimately, a highly influential set of cinematic techniques.

The doyen of this tradition is undoubtedly Kenneth Anger (b. 1927), a child prodigy who grew up in Los Angeles and started shooting 16mm shorts at the age of fourteen. While attending the University of Southern California film school, Anger began to create what became an influential series of eclectic films, including *Fireworks* (1947), *Eaux d'artifice* (1953), and *Kustom Kar Kommandos* (1965).

Anger's most famous film is undoubtedly *Scorpio Rising* (1964). Here, Anger anticipates forms subsequently perfected in the music video genre to effect a queer subversion of images of teen romance; for example, he juxtaposes homoerotically charged footage of male bikers with a soundtrack of 1960s pop and Rhythm and Blues songs.

Anger's name is sometimes grouped with his University of Southern California film school associate Gregory J. Markopoulos (1928-1992). Like the multi-talented Anger, Markopoulos also wrote, edited, produced, and occasionally acted in many of his own works. His aesthetic, however, is markedly more cerebral and lyrical than Anger's, reflecting the influence of Greek myth and classical motifs--as in *Psyche* (1948) and *Lysis* (1948)--and of French literature and avant garde culture.

Indeed, Markopolous, like Anger, spent time in Europe in the 1950s and was influenced by writer Jean Genet (1910-1986), as evidenced by the Genet-like title of *Flowers of Asphalt* (1949). Other Markopoulos films of note include *The Dead Ones* (1948) and *Twice a Man* (1963).

The influence of European film has been highly significant in the formulation of a queer cinema aesthetic. Genet's perverse aesthetic of the erotics of the Paris underworld is evident in his own 26-minute silent directorial effort, *Un chant d'amour* (1950). Primarily known as a playwright, Genet was mentored by flamboyant French director Jean Cocteau (1889-1963), who was also responsible for some of the foundational works of gay cinema--*Jean Cocteau, fait du cinema* (1925), *Le Sang d'un poète* (1930), *La Belle et la bête* (1946), and *Orphée* (1949).

The French tradition was a strong influence on the Italian director Luchino Visconti (1906-1976), an aristocrat whose early embrace of Marxism led first to the gritty realism in films such as *Ossessione* (1943) and later to such lavishly staged critiques of the Italian class system as *The Leopard* (1963). In 1971 Visconti made a sensuous adaptation of Thomas Mann's classic homoerotic novella, *Death in Venice*.

Pier Paul Pasolini (1922-1975) initially established himself as a writer before directing confrontingly queer adaptations of classics such as *Oedipus Rex* (1967) and *Medea* (1970). His final film, the controversial *Salo* or *The 120 Days of Sodom* (1975), was banned in many countries. His murder, shortly after the completion of *Salo*, has never been satisfactorily resolved.

German director Rainer Werner Fassbinder (1946-1982) paired cutting-edge techniques and themes to address post-war German concerns in areas of class, race, and sexuality. His *The Bitter Tears of Petra Von Kant* (1972), staring frequent collaborator Hanna Schygulla, is a powerful study of lesbianism, while *In A Year of 13 Moons* (1978) focuses on a doomed transsexual protagonist. Fassbinder's final film, before his drug overdose suicide, is *Querelle* (1982), an adaptation of the Genet novel that blends film noir grit with dreamy eroticism to explore the power/desire nexus of the Genet model of masculinity.

In the United States, the burgeoning of underground venues in the 1960s and 1970s provided forums for four multi-talented contributors: Jack Smith, Andy Warhol, Paul Morrisey, and John Waters.

A filmmaker, artist, photographer, writer, and occasional actor, Jack Smith (1932-1989) is a significant filmmaker primarily because of his camp hybrid *Flaming Creatures* (1962). This controversial work, subject to a number of legal actions to prevent its screening, was described by critic J. Hoberman as: "a cross between Josef Von Sternberg at his most studiously artistic . . . and a delirious home movie of a transvestite bacchanal."

By contrast to Smith, the film output of Andy Warhol (1928-1987) was prolific. Already successful in the art world for his pastiches of mass culture commodities, Warhol (who began his career in advertising) transferred his eclectic pop art aesthetic to film.

Innately voyeuristic, fascinated with the Hollywood star system and with the technical minutiae of the medium's reproductive capabilities, Warhol explored, sometimes in excruciating detail, the trash and banality of "everyday" life, as experienced by the "superstars" (drag artists like Candy Darling, or socialites like Brigit Berlin) who populated his alternative work space, the Factory.

Warhol's relentless focus on transgressive lives and desires forged an important archive of images for queer culture, from *Blow Job* (1963), a 35-minute single shot focusing on the expressions of a recipient of a blow job; to *My Hustler* (1965), a 70-minute film about a male hustler, shot on Fire Island; to *Andy Warhol's Lonesome Cowboys* (1968), a gay take on the Western, complete with ballet dancing cowboys; to the absurd confessional theatrics and squalid lesbian demimonde of *Chelsea Girls* (1968).

Many of the more famous films generally associated with Warhol from the late 1960s onwards, were actually primarily the work of his protégé Paul Morrissey (b. 1939). His influence as an assistant is apparent in the more developed narrative structure of the lengthy *Chelsea Girls* (1968). Morrissey went on to direct such underground classics as *Flesh* (1968), *Trash* (1970), *Heat* (1972), and *Blood of Dracula* (1974).

The contemporary heir to the Warhol/Morrissey tradition is John Waters (b. 1946), the Baltimore-based director sometimes referred to as the "Pope of Trash and The Sultan of Sleaze." Beginning with innovative shorts after dropping out of film school in the mid-1960s, Waters became a cult figure as a result of a major triumph, the trailer trash epic *Pink Flamingos* (1972), an exploration of the very queer underside of lower suburbia starring such Waters stalwarts as Mink Stole and outrageous drag performer Divine.

Waters, who frequently writes, edits and acts in his own films, continued his assault on family values in such works as *Desperate Living* (1977) and the hilarious take on 1960s teen conformity, *Hairspray* (1988), which featured Divine as the young Ricki Lake's mother. Recent films include *Serial Mom* (1994), *Cecil B Demented* (2000), and *A Dirty Shame* (2004).

Feminism and the Rise of Lesbian Experimental Film

Spurred on by the rise of the Women's Liberation movement, with its critique of the structure of patriarchy, lesbian filmmakers came to the fore in the 1970s. They found their central challenge in the conceptualization modes of visual representation that captured the eroticism of lesbian sexuality without objectifying the female body as spectacle or replicating patriarchal conventions.

Foremost amongst lesbian feminist filmmakers is the extraordinarily prolific Barbara Hammer (b. 1939). She employed an aesthetic of abstraction in a series of short films to shatter taboos associated with the representation of female bodies. Among this series are *Dyketactics* (1974), *Menses* (1974), and *Multiple Orgasm* (1976).

Hammer also explored themes of women's spirituality, whether located in primitive rites--*Stone Circles* (1983)--in myth--*Sappho* (1978)--or in nature--*Pearl Diver* (1984). In her first feature length film, the partial documentary *Nitrate Kiss* (1985), Hammer addressed themes of eroticism and aging. Her work in the 1990s included a series of acclaimed documentaries, most notably the study of hidden lesbian histories, *The Female Closet* (1998).

Hammer's early propensities towards abstraction and essentialist symbolism were not always shared by her feminist contemporaries. Jan Oxenberg's influential satirical short, *Home Movie* (1972), juxtaposes original home movie footage of the filmmaker's own adolescence (most notably, her activities as a school cheerleader) with an interrogative voice-over and additional footage of contemporary lesbian feminist cultural events, to question normative heterosexual socialization.

In subsequent shorts, *I'm Not One of Them* (1974) and *A Comedy in Six Unnatural Acts* (1975), Oxenberg skillfully deploys comedy to explore, challenge, and in some instances rather controversially celebrate lesbian stereotypes. More recently Oxenberg has moved into a successful television career, working on shows such as *Chicago Hope*.

Lesbian filmmakers building on the work of Hammer and Oxenberg have been united in their aim, in Andrea Weiss' phrase, "to control and define lesbian representation in terms other than those offered by the dominant media."

In the domain of documentary Weiss (b. 1956) and Greta Schiller (b. 1947) have, via their company Jezebel Productions, contributed numerous innovative documentaries that have uncovered hidden aspects of gay and lesbian history, including *Before Stonewall* (1984), *Paris Was a Woman* (1995), and *Escape to Life* (2000).

Su Friedrich (b. 1954) and Janet Baus co-directed the documentary film *The Lesbian Avengers Eat Fire Too* (1993), which provides entertaining insights on the performative strategies of this radical arm of 1990s lesbian political culture.

Friedrich as a solo director of short films has, since the late 1970s, extended Hammer's techniques of fragmentation, juxtaposition, and abstraction to evoke facets of lesbian identity and desire. Her most acclaimed film, *Damned if You Don't* (1987), uses four contrasting fictional mini-narratives about nuns to explore the conflict between lesbian desire, the gaze, and religious ideology.

Sheila McLaughlin's 1987 interracial romance *She Must Be Seeing Things* also attempts to subvert conventions of spectatorship in depicting lesbian desire.

Lizzie Borden (b. 1958), in such experimental filmic narratives as *Born in Flames* (1983) and *Working Girls* (1986), addresses social issues such as lesbian identity, racial difference, and the plight of sex workers.

Experimental lesbian filmmakers in America were strongly influenced by international trends, a process

exemplified in the work of American-born Yvonne Rainer (b. 1936), who assimilated European trends while initially working there as a choreographer. Rainer's filmic output has moved from general concerns of female sexuality and subjectivity to address lesbian themes in later films such as *Privilege* (1990).

Key European figures include Belgian-born Chantal Akerman (b. 1950) whose technically sophisticated and introspective films critically assimilate the aesthetics of French new wave directors such as Jean Luc Godard. Akerman's films include such explorations of the complexities of subjectivity and desire as *Je Tu Il Elle* (1974) (in which Akerman herself acted a key role, and which had a huge impact upon release in America) and *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* (1979).

In an altogether different mold, the surreally parodic historical fantasies of German director Ulrike Ottinger (b. 1942)--*Madame X: An Absolute Ruler* (1977) and *Johanna D'Arc of Mongolia* (1989)--have developed a cult following while forging a distinctive brand of lesbian camp.

Monika Treut (b. 1954), another controversial German director, has celebrated transgressive queer sexuality in films such as *Seduction: The Cruel Woman* (1985), a contemporary tale of sado-masochism. Her documentary *Female Misbehaviour* (1992) includes among its subjects academic Camille Paglia and performance artist Annie Sprinkle

In her first film, *A Question of Silence* (1982), Dutch-born Marleen Gorris (b. 1949) provoked debate with an unsparing critique of patriarchal oppression via a study of women driven to crime. Her other films include the much praised *Antonia's Line* (1995) and a version of Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1997), which skilfully employs flashback techniques to bring the novel's lesbian subtext to the fore.

Crossing Over

A major contribution to the integration of gay themes into mainstream cinema has been made by John Schlesinger (1926-2003), the openly gay British director whose films include *Darling* (1965); *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), which won the Best Picture Oscar; and *Sunday Bloody Sunday* (1971), a daring exploration of bisexuality.

Schlesinger's British contemporary, bisexual Tony Richardson (1928-1991), peppered an eclectic and distinguished career, which included a best director Oscar for *Tom Jones* (1963), with studies of sexual mavericks, as in his adaptations of Edward Albee's *A Delicate Balance* (1973) and John Irving's *Hotel New Hampshire* (1984).

More overtly avant garde and less commercially viable than his fellow Britons, Derek Jarman (1942-1994) specialized in visually lavish, outrageous yet fiercely intelligent productions of classics that bought subtextual queer elements to the fore in a way that emphasized their contemporary relevance: *Jubilee* (1977), *The Tempest* (1979), and *Wittgenstein* (1993).

Edward II (1991), based on Christopher Marlowe's play, exemplifies the Jarman touch via the skilful and provocative linkage of the persecution of Edward and his lover Piers Gaveston to the homophobic platforms of Margaret Thatcher's conservative government.

Another British filmmaker Terence Davies (b. 1945) came to the fore in the late 1980s with the first of his autobiographical films set in working-class Liverpool, *Distant Voices, Still Lives* (1988). This highly acclaimed film was followed by *The Long Day Closes* (1992). These "memory" films explore the dynamics of family relations in working-class Britain.

Davies then went on to make non-autobiographical works, such as *The Neon Bible* (1995), based on a novel by John Kennedy Toole, and *The House of Mirth* (2001), based on a novel by Edith Wharton.

James Bridges (1935-1993) first made his name as a television writer for *The Alfred Hitchcock Hour* during the early 1960s. He made his film directorial debut with *The Babymaker* (1970), which tackled the then controversial subject of surrogate motherhood. Bridges' first big success was *The Paper Chase* (1973), featuring Timothy Bottoms as a first-year law student and John Houseman as his rigorous professor. Bridges had another success with *The China Syndrome* (1979), featuring Jack Lemmon, Jane Fonda, and Michael Douglas.

The film of Bridges that may be the most homoerotic (despite its determinedly heterosexual plot) is *Urban Cowboy* (1980), featuring John Travolta and Debra Winger. Bridges' final film was the disappointing, *Bright Lights, Big City* (1988).

While Bridges never made an issue of his homosexuality, he lived openly with his longtime partner, actor Jack Larson. He died of cancer in 1993.

Colin Higgins (1941-1988) may be best remembered for writing the Hal Ashby-directed cult film *Harold and Maude* (1971), a black comedy that violates all kinds of sexual boundaries. He wrote the screenplays for a number of other films, including Arthur Hiller's *Silver Streak* (1976). His directorial debut was *Foul Play,* featuring Goldie Hawn and Chevy Chase, which was a surprise hit. He went on to co-write and direct two Dolly Parton vehicles, *9 to 5* (1980) and *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas* (1982). He died of AIDS-related complications in 1988, aged 47.

German director Wolfgang Peterson (b. 1941) first gained international attention for *Die Konsequenz* (1977), a discreet and subtle study of homosexuality that he wrote as well as directed. But his great crossover film was *Das Boot* (1981), a nail-biting wartime drama told from the perspective of the average German submariner. Peterson has gone on to make a number of mainstream Hollywood films, including *In the Line of Fire* (1993), *Air Force One* (1997), and *The Perfect Storm* (2000).

Randall Kleiser (b. 1946) worked in television during the 1970s. His first feature film was the hit musical *Grease* (1978). This success was followed by such teen (heterosexual) romance films as *Blue Lagoon* (1980) and *Summer Lovers* (1982) and popular comedies such as *Big Top Pee-Wee* (1988) and *Honey, I Blew Up the Kid* (1992).

In *It's My Party* (1996), however, Kleiser abandoned heterosexual comedy to make one of the most powerful AIDS films. Centered around Nick Stark (Eric Roberts), a man who is about to lose his long battle with the AIDS virus and decides to host a two-day farewell party for his family and friends after which he will commit suicide, the film is emotionally searing but finally consoling. Featuring excellent performances by Roberts and Gregory Harrison (as Stark's former lover), Lee Grant and Marlee Matlin, among a host of others, the film is based on the death of Kleiser's own lover.

In the late 1990s and the early years of the twenty-first century, writer and directer Bill Condon came to prominence with several successful projects based on gay or queer-inflected subject matter. In addition to directing a number of television movies and writing the screenplay for Rob Marshall's *Chicago* (2002), Condon scored hits with *Gods and Monsters* (2002), based on the life of James Whale, memorably portrayed by Ian McKellen, and *Kinsey* (2004), based on the life of sex researcher Alfred Kinsey, brilliantly performed by Liam Neeson. Condon wrote the screenplays for the films.

Independent Films

Over the last two decades a crop of young, openly gay and lesbian directors have obtained success through critically acclaimed independent films, some of which have obtained a degree of mainstream marketability.

The early works of American director Gus Van Sant (b. 1952) include such offbeat films as *Mala Noche* (1985), *Drugstore Cowboy* (1989), and *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* (1993), based on Tom Robbins' novel.

But his masterpiece is *My Own Private Idaho* (1994). Here he expertly blends the genre of the road film with Shakespeare's *Henry IV* to present a compelling study of young gay hustlers, played by Keanu Reeves and the late River Phoenix.

Since *Idaho,* Van Sant has moved more fully into the mainstream with mixed results. *To Die For* (1995) and the Oscar-winning Ben Affleck/Matt Damon buddy film *Good Will Hunting* (1997) were critically successful. The 1998 remake of Hitchcock's *Psycho*, paying slavish attention to the original, was generally deemed disappointing.

Gregg Araki (b. 1959), another graduate of the University of Southern California school of cinema and television, has won critical acclaim for his frequently bleak filmic landscape that explores the post-AIDS experiences of alienated young queers. His work includes a pseudo documentary *Totally F***ked Up* (1993) and the road movies *The Living End* (1992), *The Doom Generation* (1995), and *Nowhere* (1997).

Todd Haynes (b. 1961) began his career with the innovative documentary, *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (1987). Featuring Barbie Dolls in the central roles it was subsequently banned via legal technicalities raised by its subject's brother, Richard Carpenter. In the 1990s Haynes moved onto such hard-edged studies of popular culture as *Velvet Goldmine* (1998), a fictionalized exploration of the polymorphous sexualities of 1970s glamrock.

In his Oscar-nominated *Far From Heaven* (2002), Haynes achieved mainstream success. Paying homage to the style of 1950s auteur Douglas Sirk, he skillfully draws out and makes explicit the homosexual subtexts latent in Sirk's melodramas.

In 1986 director Donna Deitch (b. 1945) adapted Jane Rule's classic lesbian novel *Desert of the Heart* as *Desert Hearts*. A full-length feature, it was perceived by many lesbian critics as too implicated in the aesthetics and values of traditional heterosexual romances; however, it won and maintained a strong following by lesbian viewers.

Deitch, meanwhile, has moved into television work, directing numerous high profile dramas such as *NYPD Blue*, *Murder One*, *ER,* and *Crossing Jordan*. In the television movie *Common Ground* (2000), she returned to gay and lesbian themes.

The success of Rose Troche (b. 1964) was established with the experimental *Go Fish* (1994). Made on a shoestring budget in black and white, it flirted with avant garde editing techniques and "queer sensibilities," examining, for example, the lesbian who sleeps with a man and butch/femme role-playing. Troche's next effort, filmed in Britain, *Bedrooms and Hallways* (1988), was an enjoyable romantic comedy with the focus this time on gay male relationships.

In 2001, Troche scored a critical success with her film based on A. M. Homes's provocative collection of short stories, *The Safety of Objects.* In the last few years, she has worked mainly in television, most notably as writer and director for the lesbian-focused drama *The L Word.*

Patricia Rozema (b. 1958). a Canadian film director, began her career with the gentle, offbeat *I Heard The Mermaids Singing* (1987). This film was followed by a depiction of lesbian awakening in *When Night Is Falling* (1995). Rozema's latest work--an intelligent, elegant film of Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1999)--brought the classic novel's queer subtext to the surface, eliciting a mixture of critical alarm and praise.

Lisa Chodolenko (b. 1964) is a newly emerging writer/director. Her 1998 film *High Art* was a big winner at the Sundance film festival. It offers witty nods to Warhol and Fassbinder. Her second film, *Laurel Canyon,* strring Frances McDormand as a record producer, focuses on conflicting values in Los Angeles.

Director Kimberly Peirce (b. 1967) has received critical plaudits for her *Boy's Don't Cry* (1999), a film based

on the case of murdered transgendered lesbian Teena Brandon. After Hilary Swank won an Academy Award as best actress for her stunning performance as Teena Brandon, the film achieved considerable mainstream success.

Spanish director Pedro Almodóvar (b. 1951) deploys a surreal, iconoclastic blend of comedy and drama to map subcultures of sexual dissidence in post-Franco Madrid. Beginning with the comic short *Film Político* in 1974, Almodóvar has made numerous films, including *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1988), *Tie Me Up, Tie Me Down* (1990), *The Flower of My Secret* (1995), and *A Bad Education* (2004). *All About My Mother* (1999), a tragi-comic study of a "straight" woman's love for a transsexual, won the Academy Award for best foreign film.

Almodóvar's distinctively queer filmic universe has obtained widespread critical acclaim and a broadly based following. His success may offer a happy augury for the growing recognition of quality gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and queer cinema.

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About the Author

Deborah Hunn is a Lecturer in Communication and Cultural Studies at Curtin University of Technology, Western Australia. She has taught English, Media Studies, and Women's Studies in several Australian universities.