

Looking in a mirror or through a window: mainstream audiences and gay men portrayed in film and television

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Abstract

As 21st century LGBTI emancipation continues apace, screen representations are following suit. But all too often gay-themed films attract only gay audiences, and so tend to “preach to the converted” rather than supporting that emancipation by attracting mainstream, heterosexual audiences.

In this paper I look at how, in the past, films on gay themes that have appealed to the mainstream, for example *Philadelphia* and *Brokeback Mountain*, have tended not to feel entirely authentic in their representation, seeming “watered-down” or “heterosexualised” to make them acceptable to mass audiences. In the case of these two films, they are also seen to have reassured those audiences because, although sympathetically told, both stories end with the death of one of the lovers, subtly reinforcing a homophobic message.

I also look at two recent British TV dramas, *Cucumber* and *London Spy* that have taken a different approach, offering an “exotic otherness” in the world they present, making gay men seem somehow exciting in their difference. But these are, arguably, equally inauthentic.

I have written a contemporary, gay, screen version of *Madame Butterfly* which I would like to put into production. My intention is to offer a mainstream audience an authentic insight into a gay world, but the story involves aspects of gay behaviour which might alienate such an audience. So do I make a niche film which will easily attract a gay audience but “preach to the converted”? Do I tone it down to make it more palatable to the mainstream, or, conversely, do I exaggerate and “exoticise” it, both of which risk rendering it inauthentic?

I argue that there remains a challenge in addressing the issue of diversity in contemporary screen production—persuading audiences to not simply look in a mirror at a reflection of themselves, but rather to look through a window at others—and I report on one recent initiative which might be beginning to address that issue.

As Vito Russo made so clear in *The Celluloid Closet* (1987), the representation of gay men on the screen was, until the late 20th century, almost entirely negative or, at best hidden or coded. Contemporary LGBTI emancipation has changed that, and clearly that emancipation is fuelled by greater understanding and openness, which can be helped by screen representations. But that requires a mainstream audience to come in to see those representations.

This paper examines strategies that have been used to attract mainstream audiences to gay-themed films and looks at the extent to which that has required compromise, or a less than authentic representation of gay life, or a clear and reassuring sense of otherness—a sense that the gay world is something strange and extra-ordinary, and at a safe distance. As the “coming-out” story begins to retreat into history to be replaced by films where sexual identity is not the focus of the story, but simply one aspect of some, or all, of the characters, I ask how such films can reach the mainstream and thus broaden understanding and help emancipation. And although the focus is on gay men, it serves as a case-study for the wider issues of diversity and representation of all kinds of minorities.

In *The Celluloid Closet*, inspired by Russo’s book and made by Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman in 1995, the character Harvey Fierstein gives voice to his generation of gay men’s experience of growing up without representation:

All the reading I was given to do in school was always heterosexual, every movie I saw was heterosexual. And I had to do this translation – I had to translate it to my life rather than seeing my life. (1995).

Richard Corliss noted in *Time*, in an article about this film and the roughly contemporary movie *The Birdcage* (Mike Nichols’ remake of the 1978 French classic, *La Cage Aux Folles*)

The movies, as commentators of every political stripe have noted, are a glamorous mirror of society. Growing up, we all find ourselves, in part, by finding aspects of ourselves onscreen. Gays didn’t. (1996).

Needham offers a précis of Brett Farmer’s argument, in *Spectacular Passions* (2000), that lack of representation did not prevent gay men enjoying movies

The gay spectator is defined through receptions (of Hollywood genres), negotiations (camp strategies), and identifications (with the maternal) that characterise a special set of relations between gay men and the cinema (Needham 2010, 100).

But with the dearth of gay stories—and almost complete absence of positive representations—gay men had little option but to read codes, or to translate from the heterosexual.

More liberal contemporary attitudes have changed that, and Fierstein celebrates his new-found freedom to write from his own experiences: “You can take it and translate it for your own life. It’s very nice. But at last I don’t have to do the translating, you do.” (1995). And clearly LGBTI emancipation is helped by positive screen representations. As Ralph Roughton says in an article for the *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Mental Health*:

*The most important factor in changing attitudes ... is getting to know someone who is gay in a way that allows for real understanding and empathy rather than dismissive stereotyping. This transformative knowing can be with a real person or it can be with a believable fictional character. That is the basis for the extraordinary significance of *Brokeback Mountain* (2014, 85).*

That film was unquestionably ground breaking and did attract—and challenge—mainstream audiences. However, in other ways, I suggest, it could be said to have subtly reinforced a homophobic message.

Today there are increasing numbers of gay-themed films to be seen, with happier endings, and these are guaranteed an audience—of gay men. But if attitudes are to be changed, it needs the mainstream heterosexual audience to come into the cinema to see these films, but why should they when they have more than enough films available which reflect their own lives and experiences? Are audiences just interested in looking in Corliss’ “glamorous mirror”? How can we persuade them to look out of the window instead?

This investigation has been prompted by a wish to get my gay-themed film, *Bangkok Butterfly*, into production. This contemporary gay screen adaptation of the *Madame Butterfly* story is part of a project to make queer iconic heterosexual love stories in an attempt to demonstrate that gay relationships can be as deep, as romantic and as complex as straight ones, but that they tend to operate differently. Pearce and Wisker would term these “subversive romances”:

Romantic subversion is not....simply a question of retelling the same story with different players, or a different plot, or in a different context but of more radically disassociating the psychic foundations of desire from the cultural ones in such a way that the operation of the orthodoxy is exposed and challenged (1998, 2).

In that part of the purpose in writing these adaptations is to enlighten the straight world about gay lifestyles, they do not succeed if they cannot get a mainstream, heterosexual audience to see them. They are “preaching to the converted”.

Since the iconoclastic *Victim* (1961) there have been many films that have presented more or less sympathetic portrayals of gay men. The vast majority have been about gay men “coming out”, or facing some kind of adversity, that results from their sexual identity. This might be homophobia, or, controversially, AIDS, which is too often seen as a self-inflicted problem. Few films have simply told stories about men whose sexual relationships just happen to be with other men without that very fact being the source of the story. Of those that have been made the vast majority could be described as art-house, or niche with few gaining general release. This paper concentrates on some films that have been seen by the mainstream, and looks at how they achieved that.

Philadelphia (1993), starring the already-established Tom Hanks and the up-and-coming Antonio Banderas as gay lovers, and “widely regarded as Hollywood’s first all-star movie about AIDS” (Hart 2000, 54), was preceded in 1985 by the TV movie *An Early Frost*. Both were prompted by sympathy for the gay community following the beginnings of a recognition that gay men were victims, not the cause of the AIDS pandemic. A combination of Hanks and Banderas with the high profile of AIDS and the revelations it forced on the movie world (Rock Hudson died of the disease in 1985) helped to get the mainstream into cinemas to see *Philadelphia*, but, as Hart points out, as with *An Early Frost* before it, “little within the movie’s content reveals that these men are sexually involved lovers rather than very close room-mates or best friends” (2000, 54-5). There are no love scenes, no representation of physical attraction between the men. This is remarkable considering that the disease was acquired through having gay sex! The film was, arguably, neutered in order to make it acceptable to the mainstream.

It was another twelve years before *Brokeback Mountain* followed and this film was, as previously suggested, important and ground-breaking. Needham (2010) has explored how the film subverted, or queered the Western genre, and in that way succeeded in challenging an icon of American masculinity. As Roughton says:

Brokeback Mountain was much more than an artistic success. Most importantly, it evoked a national discussion about gender and sexuality, about love and homophobia. Cowboys are icons of masculinity, and here we have two cowboys in love, challenging the assumption that being attracted to another man unmans you—that you cannot both want a man and be a man (2013, 92).

Needham does report that the film's director, Ang Lee, saw it more as "a great romantic tragedy like *Romeo and Juliet*" (2010, 33) than as a Western. If he is right, it could also be seen as a subversive romance, except that even if the "orthodoxy is exposed and challenged" (Pearce and Wisker 1998, 2) it wins in the end. Perhaps this simply points out the limitations of categorising films by genre.

The film starred Jake Gyllenhall and Heath Ledger, both established Hollywood names, and achieved mainstream, as well as Academy and BAFTA recognition, but, as Simon Callow points out: "not a single gay person had anything to do with *Brokeback Mountain*, from the author of the original novella, to the director, to the actors" (2008, 10). That is significant, and is evident in the film. Although the main characters, Jack and Ennis do at least make love on screen it is not a convincing portrayal of gay sex. *Philadelphia* (1993) was similarly made entirely by straight people. These are both films made by sympathetic heterosexuals about gay men in adversity. And in that both end with the death of one of the lovers they could both be seen as surreptitiously reinforcing that homophobic message - 'we're very sorry about you being gay and having to suffer for that'. Neither film reveals anything about happy and fulfilled lives lived by out, and unashamed, gay men. And it seems likely that that is why they were felt to be acceptable and safe for the mainstream. They do not actually challenge the heteronormative perspective – they merely offer sympathy for those who do not conform to it and suffer as a result.

The Birdcage (1996) is a rare example of a high profile mainstream film that offers a positive ending for homosexual characters. The success of this film with the mainstream was most likely attributable to the casting of Robin Williams at the height of his fame, the classic status of the French original and the outrageousness of the camp gay men. This is the gay stereotype of generations—the descendants of the early Hollywood sissies—albeit presented in a sympathetic and entertaining light. Albert and even Armand are safe, they are feminine, they are "other".

This gently supportive comedy about gays, a sweet parable of family values, has Robin Williams and Gene Hackman for star quality, writer Elaine May and director Mike Nichols for comedy know-how, and a famous property for box-office insurance - the hit French play and film La Cage aux Folles. In short, this new version is no more threatening to mainstream American sensibilities than the pro-Indian Pocahontas (Corliss 1996).

Suggesting that "the concept of the Other has tended to displace the older concept of the stereotype" (2001, 47) Pickering describes how social groups "in the interests of a unified collective identity" might exclude those they perceive as 'other' because of:

a fear of what cannot be admitted into an ordered identity or a critical lack, an absence in the presence of identity which demands that the Other be turned into an object of happy assimilation, as a spectacle, an exhibit, a source of entertainment, or as fantasy. The Other can be drawn into fantasies of desire, longing, envy and seduction in the interests of compensating for some perceived deficiency of cultural identity, or estrangement from inherited cultural values (2001, 49).

It could be argued that this concept of otherness goes a long way towards explaining mainstream audience's responses to gay, and other minority interest films. As long as what they are seeing is something clearly *not* of their world they feel safe and unthreatened and can enjoy the spectacle. After all fantasy and science fiction movies constantly attract large audiences that enjoy the escape to a different world. Hart (2000) relates the otherness of science fiction to the otherness implicit in AIDS movies, such as *Philadelphia* (1993). It is when the characters are close to home that they are threatening. Needham points out one of the aspects of *Brokeback Mountain* which challenged heterosexual audiences: "That Jack and Ennis are 'regular guys' is for many an anxiety inducing wake-up call that homosexuality is frequently non-indexical and non-stereotypical." (2010, 43).

Television is, of course, different from film. First, because television beams drama directly into your living room and so the story is there for you—to try free—and to switch off if it does not appeal. It does not require you to go out and spend money, and also to identify yourself in public as someone interested in a gay-themed film. I still recall the apprehension and guilt I felt going into a cinema in the 1970s to see Warhol's *Flesh*, Jack Hazan's *A Bigger Splash*, even Visconti's *Death in Venice*. As Needham says:

Brokeback Mountain did a good job in making apparent the often closeted and closeting nature of cinema-going for gay and lesbian spectators. Brokeback Mountain contributes to thinking about the closet not only through the film's dramatisation of the closet, but in terms of how much one is compelled to reveal, as a gay spectator or otherwise; to respond with tears, to even ask for a ticket; in the potentially unsafe and homophobic spaces of the multiplex cinema (2010, 1-2).

Television also offers soap operas that address all kinds of social issues, including diversity, because they are able to slip the stories in alongside the mainstream ones. And there have been plenty of gay stories; following the UK's first, highly controversial, chaste onscreen gay kiss on the forehead between Gary Hailes and Michael Cashman in *Eastenders* in 1987 (it was two more years before they kissed on the lips, and another 11 years before the US managed the *Dawson's Creek* gay kiss). Secondary gay characters have been seen in the movies too, where gay characters are there but not centre-screen, as in *My Best Friend's Wedding*, or *Four Weddings and a Funeral*. Is it just coincidence that the one funeral in the latter is for one of the gay characters?

Two gay-themed TV dramas were aired on British television in 2015, both enjoying considerable success, but it is interesting to note that both presented images of gay men which were quite deliberately extreme, emphasising otherness. Russell T. Davies' *Cucumber* offers an exaggerated, almost cartoon image of gay men's lives, in sharp contrast to his ground-breaking *Queer as Folk* from 20 years earlier which presents a startlingly authentic picture of gay life. Both series were successful, and attracted mainstream audiences. Wollaston's *Guardian* review of the later series was typical:

I'm not gay (there, I've said it). This/these show/s is/are, very. Gloriously, explicitly, triumphantly, cucumberly. Gay to the core. But I never once felt left out, or that this wasn't relevant to me (on the contrary, I felt a worrying connection with Henry). As you'd expect from Davies, it's also dead funny and – most of all – very, very human (2015).

What is attracting the audience is clearly a combination of otherness with Davies' very human, and always original and entertaining, writing. One could ask whether *Cucumber* would have been commissioned had it not been for the success of his earlier, more authentic series. But *Queer as Folk*'s success was largely due to its breaking new ground in terms of what was deemed broadcastable at a time when any homosexual attraction was perceived as other. In his 2003 interview in *The Guardian* Davies describes the extraordinary media response to that show, but perhaps 15 years later, with the shock value spent, he had to go further, to offer something more other, to attract an audience.

Later in 2015 *London Spy*, starring the openly gay Ben Whishaw, was broadcast on BBC1. While centring on a loving gay

relationship, this again presents an extreme image of gay life, suggesting that drug-fuelled sado-masochistic orgies are normal practice among gay men. Again it is as if commissioners of programs do not believe that ordinary gay men's lives and experiences will attract a general audience. Of course drama must feature extraordinary events happening to ordinary people, but surely the spy story in this series was extraordinary enough. Why did the gay central character's lifestyle also have to be presented as extreme, as other?



Fig 1: Chris New and Tom Cullen in *Weekend*

Andrew Haigh's 2011 film *Weekend*, is an example of a beautifully played, deeply insightful and thoroughly authentic story of two men falling in and out of love. *Weekend* gives a genuine insight into gay men's lives and how homosexual love affairs are, in some respects the same, but in others different from heterosexual ones. The actors, Chris New and Tom Cullen, were established but not major stars and while *Weekend* received considerable acclaim, its box office was very modest and it was only screened in art houses. *Weekend* was perceived as offering an accurate representation of gay life, but there is little evidence that significant numbers of heterosexual people have seen it.

Using established stars, such as Tom Hanks, Robin Williams, Jake Gyllenhall and Heath Ledger, is clearly one way to get the mainstream in, particularly if the story is sanitised to make it straight-friendly, or if it emphasizes otherness. But even that cannot be guaranteed. The 2013 film *Behind the Candelabra*, stars two Hollywood A-listers (Matt Damon and Michael Douglas) and was directed by Oscar-winning filmmaker Steve Soderbergh. *Behind the Candelabra* tells the story of another superstar and darling of mainstream audiences—Liberace—but was famously denied theatrical release in the US and went straight to television there, although it did very well in cinemas in the UK. “Nobody would make it. We went to everybody in town,” Soderbergh told *The Wrap*. “We needed \$5 million. Nobody would do it... They said it was too gay.” (Jagernauth 2013). *Behind the Candelabra* offers an image of gay men which is as other as *The Birdcage*'s, with the added otherness of AIDS, as identified by Hart. But even in 2013, with Damon and Douglas, it was not considered bankable in the US. The UK audiences proved more accepting:

Initially opening on a relatively tight 131 screens, Candelabra achieved the highest screen average in the market over the first seven days, grossing more than £1 million. The film then expanded in weeks two and three, reaching £2.44 million at press time (Gant 2013).

It is clear that, as with the TV representations I mentioned above, the UK is well ahead of the US in regard to film, and it is interesting to compare the number of openly homosexual actors to be found in the UK and in Hollywood.

My screenplay *Bangkok Butterfly* offers a contemporary gay take on the story of sex tourism made famous by Puccini in his opera *Madama Butterfly*. The echoes in modern Bangkok of what was going on in turn-of-the-19th-century Nagasaki are resounding, and it can be hoped that the fame of its literary ancestor might do something to attract audiences. *Bangkok Butterfly* offers an insight into the gay world that seeks to be both authentic and informative, and the story is not about coming out, not about the simple fact of men being gay but about gay men falling in love. The adaptation could equally well have featured a heterosexual couple, albeit that would have had substantial differences, as I suggest in my PhD by practice (2016), for which *Bangkok Butterfly* was the artefact. But this story involves aspects of gay behaviour that might alienate a mainstream audience, including:

- a sexually open relationship
- recreational sex
- a relationship with a wide age gap
- gay men becoming parents.

Since, using Pearce and Wisker's (1998) definition, it "exposes and challenges the orthodoxy" it could be defined as a subversive romance. The ending is bittersweet—with something of the tragedy of its ancestor—but also a good outcome for some of the characters. It is less obviously gay and other than *Behind the Candelabra*, *Cucumber* or *London Spy*, but that just might be the problem. The American film *4th Man Out* was released in 2015. It is a coming out comedy telling the story of Adam, car mechanic and "regular guy" (just like his cinematic predecessors, Jack and Ennis, in *Brokeback Mountain*), who reveals his homosexuality to his straight friends. The film then follows how his friends deal with Adam's coming out as much as how he deals with it. The majority of the characters are straight, and it is a film that should be seen by those who identify with the straight friends as much, or more than, seen by the gay men who identify with Adam. When *4th Man Out* screened in March 2016 at BFI Flare, the LGBT film festival in London, the audience was probably 95 percent gay men, which is unsurprisingly given the nature of the festival. Director Andrew Nackman, in answer to a question about the extent to which the film was targeted at the mainstream, said:



Fig 2: John Gabrus, Parker Young, Evan Todd, Chord Overstreet in 4th Man Out

as we read the original draft, the script was definitely attempting to appeal to mainstream audiences. So we didn't have to change the focus in the development process. This aspect of the script was one of the main reasons why we were interested in making it from the outset (Personal Communication, April 6 2015).

But while *4th Man Out* has been seen in selected theatres in the US, it has now gone to Video on Demand and Netflix worldwide. There is no evidence of theatrical release in the UK, perhaps because, even though British audiences have demonstrated greater liberality than US audiences in the past, it lacks the star names of *Behind the Candelabra*. So how can the people, who should see *4th Man Out* and other films of its kind, be persuaded to watch it? What will persuade people to come and see *Bangkok Butterfly*?

Clearly a famous name would help. Had Nackman managed to get A-listers for *4th Man Out*, or Haigh for *Weekend*, they might have reached those elusive mainstream audiences. If we look at other examples of minority representations in the cinema, it is clear, for example, that, despite protestations at the time that a cerebral palsied actor should have been cast as Christie Brown in the 1989 film *My Left Foot*, Daniel Day-Lewis undoubtedly brought audiences in and enlightened them about that disability. Eddie Redmayne did the same for Motor Neurone Disease in *The Theory of Everything* (2014), albeit helped by arguably the world's most famous disabled man – Stephen Hawking. And had Jack managed to achieve the happy life with Ennis that he dreamed of in *Brokeback Mountain*, then that film might have achieved even more by way of LGBT emancipation with A-list actors bringing an audience to a gay movie with a happy ending.



Fig. 3: *Holding the Man* - poster

Kylie du Fresne (2016) of Goalpost Pictures reports how when undertaking the task of filming Timothy Conigrave's 1995 novel about love and loss in the era of AIDS, *Holding the Man*, which was released in 2015, she needed to ensure that the film appealed to a mainstream audience in order to recoup the AU\$7 million budget which the three historical periods necessitated. She knew that Australian gay men, for whom the novel, already adapted into a successful stage play, was iconic, would be a guaranteed audience, but also that a niche gay audience would not bring in the box office returns they needed. The film was therefore sold as "a love story for everyone" quite specifically to attract, additionally, an older female demographic. The poster says "romantic" more than it says "gay". Du Fresne also anticipated the need to have major names fill the two central roles, with all the possible changes to the script and the presentation of a gay relationship that might require. But in the event, a major \$1 million investment from gay property magnate Cameron Huang obviated that necessity. Director Neil Armfield, whose successful track record in both theatre and film was also a considerable help in financing the project, was able to cast freely. The central roles of Tim and John were played by Ryan Corry and Craig Stott. One gay and one straight, and both reasonably well-established in Australia but not yet international stars. The casting of Guy Pearce and Geoffrey Rush in cameo roles provided established names in support.

With a gay director and cast members the film is able to offer a genuine authenticity in terms of its representation of the sex as well as of the emotional relationship, and provides an authenticity which, as suggested, was sometimes missing from earlier gay-themed films aimed at the mainstream. Worldwide release is underway, and in the UK, interestingly, the distribution is by Peccadillo Pictures, whose audience is primarily gay men, as is also the case with Strand Releasing handling the American distribution. However, du Fresne reports that in Australia, while some cinemas did reject the film because of its subject matter, in general the AU\$1.2 million Australian box office returns from a 30-40 screen theatrical release was in line with other films she has produced, which might similarly be described as "art-house", that had more mainstream themes. Although gay audiences clearly attended as expected, there is evidence that word of mouth and social media also brought in a younger, more general audience as well as the older female demographic she was targeting.

In the 21st century context, du Fresne's strategy of emphasising the emotional nature of a film, rather than its sexuality, has clearly met with some success. But perhaps there is another way. Odeon Cinemas has recently introduced *Screen Unseen*, a scheme whereby audiences pay a reduced cinema ticket price because they do not know what film they will see. The advertising promises that:

They're all guaranteed to be advance previews - so you'll be one of the very first to see the releases.

They're all guaranteed to be films we believe are 5 Star future classics.

And they're all guaranteed to inspire conversation.

(Odeon Cinemas 2016).

This is an example of the kind of response it evokes:

I may not have chosen to see some of these movies had it not been for Screen Unseen. Take Room, for an example. I wasn't sure about this film. I was worried that it would be too upsetting to see in a cinema. But now I am so glad that I did - indeed, Room is now one of my favourite films. (500 Days of Film 2016).

If some gay-themed films were shown in this way, could it perhaps help broaden an audience's horizons?

It cannot be doubted that audiences in general will show up to look in Corliss' "glamorous mirror" (1996) – at reflections on screen of their own life and experiences. They will also look "out of the window" at the far horizon and enjoy a complete escape from their own world. What they seem reluctant to do, or at least film commissioners and distributors seem to believe they are reluctant to do, is to look at what is just outside the window, and just possibly that is because they might also catch an uncomfortable glimpse of themselves reflected in the window.

Driven by a need to recoup their budgets, producers have used many strategies, including star names, and carefully worded log-lines, to persuade audiences to look away from the mirror and out the window. But success has been limited, and more initiatives like *Screen Unseen* are needed. So, too, are more openly gay actors on both sides of the Atlantic, or A-list straight actors who do not feel their careers will be compromised by playing gay characters. Emancipation has happened in society because gay people have felt able to be more visible, and I argue that movies can, and should reflect and support that process.

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Figures

Fig. 1: Chris New and Tom Cullen in *Weekend* – reproduced with kind permission of The Bureau

Fig. 2: John Gabrus, Parker Young, Evan Todd, Chord Overstreet in *4th Man Out* – reproduced with kind permission of Andrew Nackman.

Fig 3: *Holding the Man* – poster – reproduced with kind permission of Kylie du Fresne and Goalpost Pictures.