WINTER BOOKS

by Dennis Peterson

SYNOPSIS

"In 1911 12 copies of a mysterious volume without author's or publisher's name and bearing the title C.R.D.N., appeared in France . . . The second edition in 1920, consisting of twenty-one copies, was again not for sale. It appeared under the title *Corydon*, but was still without name of author, . . . the first published edition was that of the *Nouvelle Revue Francaise* in 1924, under the title *Corydon* and with the name of the author." [Publisher's Note]. The author was Andre Gide, famous French existentialist author, playwright, and essayist. It is one of the first modern defenses of homosexuality and is as interesting for its faults as for its virtues.

"The final format of the book consists of four dialogues between the narrator and Corydon, a man with whom the narrator had been friends ten years before. Corydon's reputation caused him to break off the relationship. A sensational trial brought him back "realizing that the right to condemn or condone lay with reason and not with sentiment."

Starting with Walt Whitman as natural man, Corydon says he wishes to deal with normal homosexuals, not those ashamed, pitiful, or sick. He finds it grotesque when the papers express righteous astonishment at the virile appearance of the accused at some of the trials for homosexuality. "There is only one thing in the world that I admit is not natural: a work of art. Everything else, whether one likes it or not, belongs to the natural order, and since we are no longer regarding it from a moralist's point of view, it is best to consider it from a naturalist's. . . . I maintain that the act of procreation in Nature, so far from being the only 'natural' factor, is, to a disconcerting degree, usually nothing but a fluke."

In the second dialogue, Corydon quotes from Pascal and Montaigne, who say that what passes for nature may be nothing more than custom, and furthermore, "Nothing can be made natural. Nothing natural can be made to lose its nature. . . . But sometimes Nature overcomes [custom], and confines man to his instinct." [Pascal] Gide does not "believe that wisdom consists of abandoning oneself to one's natural instincts and giving them free rein; but . . . that before attempting to subdue and tame them, it is essential to understand them fully. . . ." Heterosexuality is not the only natural inclination.

The narrator objects that homosexuality is not "a spontaneous taste, except in people who are inverted, degenerate or sick." Corydon responds, "Here you have this taste, this propensity, which everything tries to conceal and thwart, which is not permitted to appear in art, in books or in life; which if it does not appear, falls immediately under the axe of the Law and is exposed in the pillory of public disgrace, a butt for cheap jokes, insults and almost universal contempt. It must be profoundly *natural* to withstand so much abuse and utterly refuse to disappear."

In human beings, attraction of the male to the female is not dependent on seasons and not governed by ovulation. Perhaps it is purely aesthetic reasons that account for the almost constant preference of Greek art for the figures of boys and young men, and for the obstinate shrouding of the woman's body. . . . And when the day comes to write a history of homosexuality in relation to the plastic arts, it will be seen to flourish not during the periods of decadence, but, on the contrary, during those glorious, healthy periods, when art is most spontaneous and least artificial." Perhaps this is why woman's beauty is enhanced by makeup and a man's detracted.

In the "Fourth Dialogue," discourse starts from a tract on *Marriage* by Leon Blum. He proposes a return to sanctioned multiple relationships to meet the male's far more expendable sexual energy than is actually required to meet the demands of the reproductive function of the opposie sex and to ensure the reproduction of the species. *Corydon* offers instead a return to the Greek institution of reserving heterosexual unions for children and homosexual unions for dissipation of excess sexual energy.

Do you refuse to recognize any direct connection between the flower and the plant that bears it: between the essential quality of its sap and its behavior and formation? Will you try and persuade me that a people which was capable of offering the world such a picture of wisdom, strength, grace and happiness did not know how to conduct its own affairs — did not know, first of all, how to apply this wisdom and harmony to its own life and to the ordering of its morals?"

ANALYSIS

I hope that at this point you do not see quotation marks dancing in your head. This book is so beautiful stylistically and relies so heavily on quotes from authorities, that I felt a complete paraphrase would not capture its nature. I do hope that some of you will see fit to read the book yourselves, particularly the Fourth Dialogue, which conveys a view of ancient Greek culture with its sexuality intact.

First Dialogue

A good deal of the banter between Corydon and the narrator is cynical and ironic. It is reminiscent of Oscar Wilde's banter during his court trials. Drinking in this ambience helps remind us of how oppression becomes internalized and colors the mood of the oppressed, but I can't help feel it is excessive when the narrator repeatedly interjects comments like, "Of course it needed nothing less than a homosexual to discover a magnificent truth like that." It wins us over to the "other" side by empathy rather than reasoning.

Second Dialogue

The discussion of whether homosexuality is "unnatural" can be dismissed quite well in the manner Gide employs, but since "we can never learn an 'ought' from an 'is' [Hume], that is since science can show us the way things are but not the way things should be, it would be more to the point to show how homosexuality could fit into a new morality to begin with, rather than deferring to the Fourth Dialogue. Even there it is shown how it fit into an old moral code, which is instructive, but you can't go home again. New wine requires new sacks.

Frank Bench, a Yale Professor of Psychology in 1949, comments on the Second Dialogue, which serves as one of the appendices to the 1950 Farrar, Straus and Company edition. He agrees that people who say that homosexual activities are biologically abnormal and unnatural are wrong. Bench states that although males do outnumber females in a few species, for the vast majority of animals, the sex ratio is very nearly one to one. Abortive sexual contacts between males are not more common in one class than the other and are sometimes due to the inability to recognize the sex of another individual. Gide suggests that even in cases where males and females are present in equal numbers, homosexuality is still natural because there is an inequality of need. The amount of seminal fluid in the masculine generative tract has nothing to do with sexual response or capacity. Furthermore, both males and females are sexually inactive during most of the year.

Under some circumstances, male animals deliberately make sexual advances to other males. Males that are treated as females usually are unwilling participants. Occasionally an animal will respond in a manner characteristic of the female. This intensifies the masculine response. If a receptive female is introduced, both males will mate with her. They are therefore bisexual. Male monkeys that have formed an emotional attachment to each other sometimes engage in homosexual matings although feminine partners are available. Such alliances do not interfere with subsequent heterosexual activities. Nor are they as frequent or complete as male-female pairings.

One of the greatest shortcomings of Gide's zoological excursion is that he all but ignores the fact that homosexuality is not confined to males. His motivation in this is probably his reliance on the thesis that male homosexuality is natural because it is a means of channeling the male's excess sexual energy and the supposed male-female imbalance. How then can lesbianism be explained? Beach states that the display of masculine behavior by female animals is much more common than the execution of feminine responses by males.

Third Dialogue

The zoological weaknesses of the *Second Dialogue* impinge on the *Third*.A new topic of Greek society is introduced, to be developed fully in the *Fourth Dialogue*. This is the most substantive dialogue, and the most lovingly written. To form a new morality that would include or largely deal with homosexuality, it would do well to read this along with other works that treat the moral codes of ancient Greece. A new, integrated approach must be championed that would treat the human rights of all minorities to an unimpeded and accessible hand in a new moral order.

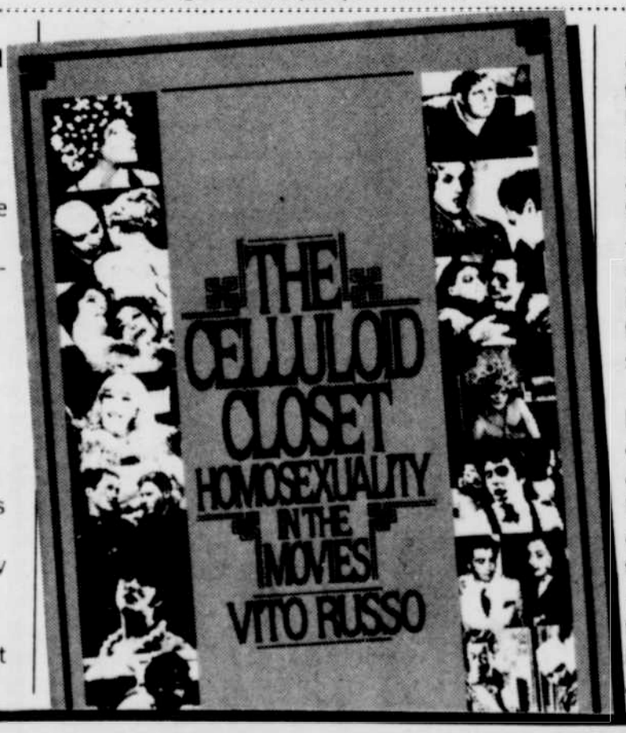
by Eve Sicular

THE CELLULOID CLOSET: Homosexuality in the Movies, by Vito Russo. Harper & Row, Publishers. 1981 (currently in print).

"There have never been lesbians or gay men in Hollywood films. Only homosexuals." With this as his premise, Vito Russo explores how gay themes and characters have been portrayed since the invention of cinema. *The Celluloid Closet* is a vibrant film history, exhaustively researched and devastatingly well written.

While the author drew on all sources available to him by 1981, his analysis focuses primarily on the images created and recycled by commercial film studios, since "the story of the ways in which gayness has been defined in American film is the story of the ways in which we have been defined in America." That is, for men, as sissies; for women, as really wanting men or losing out to them; and almost always for women and men alike, as monstrous, pathetic, self-loathing, or tragic. What other cultural history would include a necrology as well as a filmography?

The book's very existence is a gay-positive statement even while many of the things it documents are homophobic attitudes. Similar approaches have been made in Molly Haskell's *From Reverence to Rape*, about women in film, and in Jonathan Katz' *Gay Amerian History*, and like these, it is a welcome and necessary foray into an often depressing subject. Covering a field as wide as he does, it is particularly to Russo's credit that he remains entertaining as he continues to analyze the many, many examples with sufficient depth and insight. As in any worthy film history, the printed matter is frequently illustrated with photos including rare and never-before-published stills from scenes cut before films were publicly released. Russo



does include more items on the gay male in the movies, or the hints of his presence, than he does on lesbians, but far from slighting lesbians, he cogently shows how, like patriarchal culture of which they are part, most films have ignored the existence of women — identified women. Further he draws connections between misogyny and homophobia in many stereotypical plots, as of "buddy" films from the '30s onward, where real men stuck together.

There is plenty of material here on both lesbian and gay male appearances as screen characters. Early camp of the silent era included Chaplin, Stan Laurel, and Fatty Arbuckle, while Louise Brooks as *femme fatale* captivated both sexes. The sissy who became the stock "yardstick" (by whom others' masculinity was assured) is chronicled from film's earliest days. Hepburn's cross dressing in two memorable but rarely screened films is described and shown as finally unthreatening