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The movies of the '80s

With no early box office breakouts, Hollywood rapidly lost interest in gays and lesbians as primary subject matter

BY STEVE WARREN

The success of *La Cage aux Folles* in American in 1979 — it was the highest-grossing foreign language film to that time — brought the movies into the '80s with a willingness to try gay and lesbian themes again. After a burst of interest at the end of the previous decade, they had pretty much ignored us (with a few significant exceptions, such as *Dog Day Afternoon*) through most of the 1970s.



Parting Glances

Hitting the screen in 1980 were the homophobic *Cruising* and the lesbophobic *Windows*, plus the first and better of two sequels to *La Cage*; but by 1982 we had the more thoughtful, if imperfect, *Personal Best* and *Making Love*. The former had Olympic hopeful Mariel Hemingway "outgrow" her lesbian phase after a hot affair with Patrice Donnelly; the latter was hopelessly bourgeois and sanitized by giving Middle America what someone thought it could handle in the story of Michael Ontkean leaving Kate Jackson for Harry Hamlin and both former spouses winding up happily remarried to professional men.

Nineteen eighty-two also brought us *Partners*, a throwback comedy from Francis Veber, author of *La Cage aux Folles*, with John Hurt as a stereotypical gay cop paired with and lusting after Ryan O'Neal, who was masquerading as an equally stereotypical gay in a murder investigation.

With no box office breakouts among the above films, Hollywood rapidly lost interest in us as primary subject matter, although foreign films (e.g., *Querelle*, *Caravaggio*, *Another Country*, *Colonel Redl*) didn't. American filmmakers, however, became increasingly aware that we weren't going to go away, and they began making more use of us in minor roles as part of the fabric of life. By 1988, probably the peak year for the phenomenon, roughly one film in four contained some lesbian or gay character, reference or plot element — though not always a positive one.

Because Academy Awards bestow a kind of validity (not always warranted) on the movies and performers they touch, we must consider as key events of the 1980s the Oscars to Robert Epstein and Richard Schmeichen for Best Documentary of 1984, *The Times of Harvey Milk*, and to William Hurt for Best Actor of 1985 as a gay character in Hector Babenco's *Kiss of the Spider Woman*.

A mini-wave developed mid-decade, with not only *Spider Woman* but Stephen Frear's *My Beautiful Laundrette*, Donna Deitch's *Desert Hearts* and Bill Sherwood's *Parting Glances* getting more than a handful of bookings. None of these low-budget films lost money, but none made enough to get attention in an era of blockbusters. Frears followed *Laundrette* with the Joe Orton biography *Prick Up Your Ears* before returning to his own preference in *Dangerous*

Liaisons; Deitch surfaced again on television in 1989 with *The Women of Brewster Place*, featuring a prominent lesbian relationship. The immensely talented Sherwood has not been heard from since, although one of his stars, Steve Buscemi, has been turning up regularly in supporting roles (*New York Stories*, *Mystery Train*, *Bloodhounds of Broadway*).

Torch Song Trilogy tried to be the *La Cage aux Folles* of the 1980s by giving America another drag queen to love; but many critics, gay as well as straight, felt Harvey Fierstein's pre-AIDS story was inappropriate in 1988.

That most prolific gay filmmaker, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, died in 1982. Two other prominent European directors, Franco Zeffirelli and Patrice Chereau, came out when reporters at film festivals happened to ask them if they were gay. Chereau's *L'Homme Blessé* was one of the best gay films of the '80s, but he's been concentrating on theater work since making it.

Buoyed by the success of *A Room with a View*, James Ivory threw caution to the winds in 1987 and made *Maurice*, from the gay novel that wasn't published until after author E.M. Forster's death. It was beautiful but dull — very *Masterpiece Theatre* — but Ivory added a brief political message to Forster's chaste gay romance.

Lesbian/gay film festivals that began in San Francisco and New York in the 1970s expanded rapidly in the '80s as the concept spread to dozens of other cities. Besides rediscovering classic films in closets within vaults, these festivals have unearthed gay and lesbian films from many countries, including Greece (*Angel*), Israel (*Drifting*), Taiwan (*The Outsiders*) and Hungary (*Another Way*), some of which went on to at least limited commercial release.

While Derek Jarman, Rosa von Praunheim and Pedro Almodovar have had some works shown widely, they can always count on festivals to exhibit their films that don't get distributed elsewhere.

Festivals also give American (Marc Huestis, Barbara Hammer), Canadian (John Greyson, Anne Claire Poirier), West German (Monika Treut, Alexandra von Grote) and British (Paul Oremland, Richard Kwietniowski) independent filmmakers a place to show their films and videos. Gus Van Sant parlayed festival showings of his *Mala Noche* into a contract to make *Drugstore Cowboy*, a nongay but hardly mainstream movie.



Vera

Van Sant's experience is indicative of the most significant trend of the end of the decade, the move toward the mainstream of gay-identified and gay-sensitive directors. John Waters, who had in 1981 progressed (?) from midnight cult films to the widely-seen *Polyester*, shocked everyone when his 1988 *Hairspray* got a PG rating. Suddenly it was OK for Divine to wear a dress, as long as he didn't say the F word. We'll see what

happens to Waters' *Cry Baby* in 1990.

Terence Davies, whose autobiographical *Trilogy* had been acclaimed, followed it in 1989 with the equally personal *Distant Voices, Still Lives*, this time omitting the gay aspects of his life.

Former Andy Warhol colleague Paul Morrissey released two pictures in 1988, the campy but somewhat homophobic *Beethoven's Nephew* and the campy but filled-with-lesbophobic-dialogue *Spike of Bensonhurst*. Both featured pretty but untalented leading men, and both failed to find an audience, offending the people most likely to appreciate them.

Pedro Almodovar did tremendous business with *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*, Spain's most successful film ever and one of Pedro's few with no gay characters or themes, though his gay sensibility shone through. So did Paul Bartel's, although his sex farce *Scenes from the Class Struggle in Beverly Hills* included only one bisexual character (Ray Sharkey) and one male-male liaison (Sharkey and Robert Beltran).

Mexico's Jaime Humberto Hermosillo segued from his breakthrough gay romantic comedy *Doña Herlinda and Her Son* to the barely-released *Clandestino Destino*, which had a bisexual plot but favored hetero sex scenes over gay ones. Bruce Weber showed less of what appeared to be a gay sensibility in *Let's Get Lost* than in his debut feature, *Broken Noses*. Multinational Argentine Martin Donovan will follow his homoerotic *Apartment Zero* in 1990 with the nongay *Close Enemy*.



Another Country

While there was no gay content in Derek Jarman's 1989 *War Requiem*, the music (Benjamin Britten) and poetry (Wilfred Owen) were by gay men and war as a cause of mass death was intended as a metaphor for AIDS.

AIDS films and videos became a genre of their own in the latter half of the decade. The late Arthur Bressan, Jr. started the ball rolling with *Buddies*, before the disease claimed him and one of his stars, Geoff Edholm. Rob Epstein worked on *The AIDS Show* and *Common Threads: Stories from the Quilt*, while John Erman reached the largest audience via NBC with *An Early Frost*. Micki Dickoff's concise drama *Mother, Mother* is touring the country in benefit showings for local AIDS organizations.

Here's the ultimate in subjectivity, with a long list of runners-up between the lines after each name on the list:

- Best Lesbian/Gay Films of the 1980s**
Best Gay Film (English-Language): *Parting Glances* (Bill Sherwood, USA)
Best Gay Film (Foreign-Language): *Tras el Cristal* (Augustin Villaronga, Spain)
Best Lesbian Film: *Vera* (Sergio Toledo, Brazil)
Best Documentary: *Before Stonewall* (Greta Schiller, USA)
Best AIDS Film: *Mother, Mother* (Micki Dickoff, USA)
Best Short Film: *Alfalfa* (Richard Kwietniowski, England)
Most Suddenly (and Happily) Dated Film: *Westler — East of the Wall* (Wieland Speck, West Germany)

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