

FILM

# You've come a long way, baby?

Life outside the celluloid closet poses new conundrums for queers looking for silver-screen mirrors

BY CHRISTOPHER MCQUAIN

During the early '90s, the time to which we can trace the increasingly queer-conscious sensitivity of many of today's films, a backlash against Reagan/Bush had created an atmosphere bordering on the reactionary.

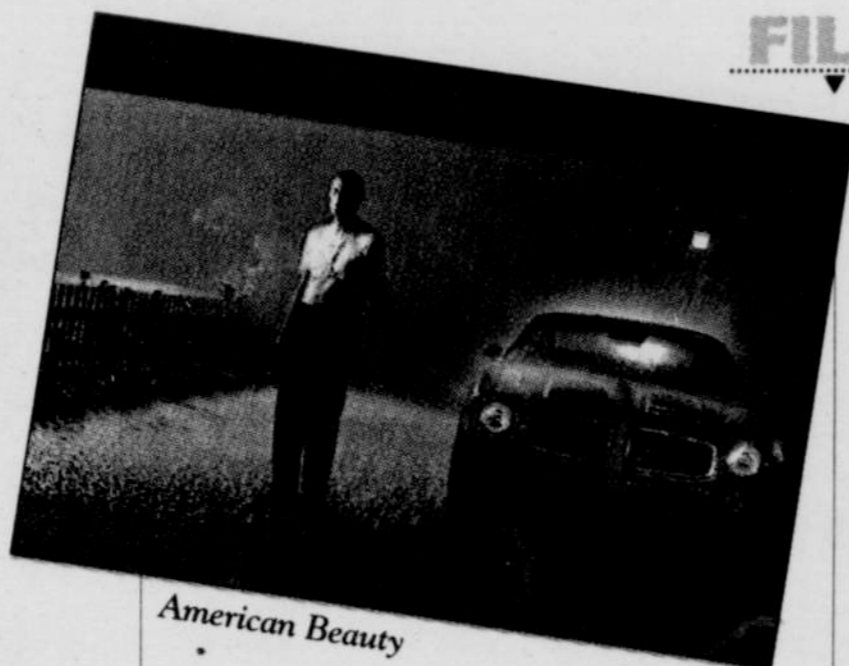
Political correctness was the controversy du jour, and films like Jonathan Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs* (which featured a psychotic transsexual) and Paul Verhoeven's *Basic Instinct* (psychotic bisexual) attracted small but loud boycotts from the queer community. These protests were—as is often the case regardless of which side one happens to be on—rather inarticulate and probably unwarranted, accomplishing nothing much more than providing free publicity for these supposedly “ignorant,” “dangerous” movies, both of which went on to become huge hits.

But underneath the apparently fruitless commotion, another trend began to snowball: Demme's next project was *Philadelphia*, an AIDS drama starring America's Everyman, Tom Hanks, as a gay lawyer who is clearly a protagonist with whom the audience—gay and straight alike—is meant to empathize. While promoting the film, Demme frequently implied that he chose the project specifically to disprove the idea that he was homophobic; Hanks later was given a Best Actor Oscar for the role.

This was also the period during which *Entertainment Weekly* named the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation one of Hollywood's most powerful entities. Then the *Los Angeles Times* described the organization, founded in 1985 to protest misinformation about AIDS, as possibly the most successful group ever to be formed for the purpose of lobbying the media for inclusion.

There was no mistaking it: Although queers certainly had played a behind-the-scenes part in the movies since their inception, the '90s was the decade we truly arrived, by way of the Santa Monica office and the Burbank boardroom, in Des Moines cineplexes and Peoria living rooms.

Flash-forward to the present: *Will & Grace* is one of the most popular shows on television; the queer-written *American Beauty* swept the 2000 Oscars. And happily, in addition to keeping the “gay film” genre well-stocked with small, independent romantic comedies and coming-out/coming-of-age stories that are “by gay, for gay” and demographically targeted as such, postmillennial Hollywood seems almost entirely unafraid of regularly presenting homosexuality as something palatable to middle America.



*American Beauty*

But to those unwilling to divide the film world into the simplistic, black-and-white categories of “positive” and “negative” representation, crucial questions remain unanswered: Is it enough, or even desirable, to have reassuringly “positive” (happy, well-adjusted, self-confident) queer characters populating the mostly heterosexual world of mainstream cinema? What constitutes a “responsible” depiction of us? Can heterosexual filmmakers making movies for a mostly straight demographic present authentically queer subject matter in a meaningful way? Who gets to decide what “queer-positive” actually means? Isn't Will Truman about as exemplary of gay male life as *The Cosby Show* was of the black male experience during the '80s?



*Basic Instinct*

The most frequent and easy way the entertainment industry has seen fit to include queers is through a phenomenon I call “sidekicking.” In many post-GAAD Hollywood films, the gay best friend frequently plays hag to the central character, often a heterosexual woman with problems.

Nathan Lane was Michelle Pfeiffer's sidekick in 1991's

*Frankie & Johnny*, Peter Friedman was Bridget Fonda's in 1992's *Single White Female*, and Rupert Everett, whose vocation seems to be that of The Gay Best Friend, has done it twice: for Julia Roberts in 1998's *My Best Friend's Wedding* and for Madonna in 2000's *The Next Best Thing* (both of which, aside from the dubiously trendy, superfluous, asexual and ultimately disposable nature of the sidekick roles, were terrible films). In a slight twist to the cliché, last year's *Bounce* featured a man (Ben Affleck) in the traditionally female role, taking advice on his love life from a gay character (Johnny Galecki) who seemed to exist for the sole purpose of uniting the straight couple.

Despite being directed by tediously inoffensive television graduate Garry Marshall (*Pretty Woman*), *Frankie & Johnny* stood out in the queer-sidekick category, as the play upon which the film was based (by Terrence McNally, author of *Love! Valour! Compassion!* and the gay world's resident feel-good playwright) at least spared Lane's lovable downstairs neighbor



*Philadelphia*

from total neutering by tossing in a blink-and-you'll-miss-him boyfriend.

*Single White Female* and *Bounce* were singularly disappointing; both had characters whose queerness was pointless to the film except as an empty PC badge, and both had scripts by Don Roos, an openly gay screenwriter whose directorial debut, 1998's sardonic, earthily hilarious *The Opposite of Sex*, proved he was capable of creating a genuinely intelligent and honest celluloid world that included complex, flesh-and-

blood queers possessed of flaws, feelings and a sexuality that extended to the bedroom. More recently, Sandra Bullock's *28 Days* was buoyed by a silly German queen who popped up amid the alcoholism and drug addiction whenever comic relief was needed, and a fading-pop-star sidekick appeared in *Bridget Jones's Diary* just long enough to be gay before being buried by the film's real story.

On a slightly higher plane, there's the “ennobling” story, the film that painstakingly goes out of its way to placate a gay audience and make the straight audience feel progressive and liberal. *Philadelphia*, the quintessential ennobling movie, made admirable strides toward complex characterization and rightly made the point that no person with AIDS “deserves” the disease.



*Wonder Boys*

The film's problem was more subtle and insidious than the obvious patronizing of the sidekick flicks; it was a picture of suffering so glamorized and Ralph Lauren-tasteful that any real pathos was lost. Hanks played a comfortable, well-off WASP-bred professional who found himself on the wrong side of a system that previously had enabled him to live a gratifying guppie lifestyle.



*Bridget Jones's Diary*

Opting to ignore the brutal ironies inherent in the story, which practically begged for further-reaching social commentary or even black humor, the filmmakers allowed it to become a Hallmark-sentimental bit of fluff that inadvertently trivialized the Big Issues it wanted to drive home. Demme might have meant for *Philadelphia* to be an olive branch to the gay community, but in retrospect, *Lambs* is by far the better, more authentic film.

Lesbians achieved the same quasi-noble status in films such as *The Other Sister*, another Garry Marshall greeting card in which



*The Silence of the Lambs*

Diane Keaton generously acknowledged that, like her mentally disabled daughter (Juliette Lewis), her lesbian daughter also was worthy of acceptance. In last year's *Dr. T & the Women*, Liv Tyler and Kate Hudson played a couple whose secret relationship and its accompanying worries, like the cares of most of the women in the film, were really nothing more than silly ephemera to be suffered gracefully by the noble male characters.

The most reassuring, genuinely queer-inclusive attempts in cinema have seemed to come with a newfound worldliness on the parts of some writers and directors who've created stories wherein characters' homosexuality is a simple fact that is not their only defining characteristic and neither impedes nor assists their place in the film's milieu. Kathy Bates' smart, strong-willed Washington lesbian in *Primary Colors* and Paul Reubens' hip queer drug dealer in *Blow* are not “gay characters” added for spice or grandiosity; they're characters who are both essential to their films and simply happen to be gay.

Homosexuality is similarly a nonissue in films like last year's acclaimed *Wonder Boys* and the works of hypercreative writer/director Paul Thomas Anderson (*Boogie Nights*, *Magnolia*). In the former, worldly but world-weary college professor Michael Douglas thinks nothing of finding a student (Tobey Maguire) in bed with his editor (Robert Downey Jr.); it's quite in character for both of them. In Anderson's films, the homosexuality of the fraught and somewhat desperate gay characters causes no perceptible contrast or conflict with their fraught and somewhat desperate heterosexual counterparts.

Neil LaBute's 1998 effort *Your Friends & Neighbors*, a satire of the atrocities of modern love, included the twisted relationship of a lesbian couple (Catherine Keener and Nastassja Kinski) that equaled the film's straight relationships dysfunction for dysfunction.

In the crowded and lively small-budget gay independent film world, the most advanced, interesting fare is not the ubiquitous, celebratory romantic comedy (*trick*, *Jeffrey*, *The Broken Hearts Club*, *Better Than Chocolate*) but works that challenge audience expectations and redefine the boundaries of what a “gay film” is and should be.

Rose Troche and Guinevere Turner, the team behind *Go Fish*, 1995's lesbian cinematic precursor to *Sex and the City*, moved on to more complicated stories; Troche directed 1998's *Bedrooms & Hallways*, a sophisticated social satire and comedy of manners dealing with bisexuality and postmillennial gender roles. Turner co-wrote and starred in Mary Harron's film adaptation of *American Psycho*, turning what many thought was a misogynistic novel into a story of class and sexual warfare with a decidedly queer/progressive perspective.

The important thing for the queer surveyor and consumer of pop culture to remember, however, has less to do with subjective assessments of “positive,” “negative” and “accurate” representation than with the fact that no fiction ever can reflect identically the multifarious real-life experiences of a community as diverse as ours. Acknowledging the pleasing and still relatively new openness toward queers can and should be accompanied by the healthy skepticism that inspires those who continue to feel

marginalized to tell their own stories. Our need for cultural mirrors is inevitable and human; our task is to create or lobby for the creation of a spectrum of reflections as prismatic as possible. We've come a long way, but we still have a long way to go. [7]

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