

BOOKS

# Hollywood queer

The good, the bad and the unauthorized in queer film books

BY CHRISTOPHER MCQUAIN

To consecutively read William J. Mann's *Behind the Screen: How Gays and Lesbians Shaped Hollywood 1910-1969* (Viking, 2001) and John M. Clum's *He's All Man: Learning Masculinity, Gayness and Love from American Movies* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2002) is to make a study in contrasts. One is a cornucopia of legitimate, rigorously researched history; the other is a purportedly "intellectual" tome that's often so pretentious, self-indulgent and just silly as to be laughable.

Mann's book is, for the most part, a pleasure to read. His mission is not so much to show us how homosexuality was depicted by Hollywood as to illustrate how it was lived in Hollywood—from the silent era through the eventual collapse of the studio system in the '60s.

Though gay and lesbian actors and actresses do pop up with some frequency, their stories play second fiddle to those of the throngs of queer screenwriters, set decorators, makeup artists and directors who (in true pop culture tradition) hadn't a fraction of the celebrity the public afforded to movie stars.

*Behind the Screen* is a true queer movie education. Meticulously documented via newspaper clippings, personal letters, biographies, film magazines and the author's own interviews are the work, lives and loves of queer directors and producers like George Cukor, James Whale, Clifton Webb, Vincente Minnelli, Dorothy Arzner and Ross Hunter.

Screenwriters are included, too, like Zoe Akins and DeWitt Bodeen, and so, of course, are the myriad gay set designers, costumers and choreographers. (Mann provides valuable context regarding the division of labor and how it came to be, for males especially, that one could be more openly gay in the fashion and design departments, whereas a queer screenwriter had to be much more circumspect.)

It's to Mann's credit that almost every page offers something enlightening or tantalizing. I never would have thought reading about a movie called *Curse of the Cat People* would make me want to see it so badly. And who knew that William Reynolds, the editor who cut both the beloved *Godfather* and the notorious *Ishtar*, was gay?



The ebb and flow of what Mann sees as Hollywood's essential contradiction—a colony of creative freethinkers who (at least during the time period covered by the book) had to present an image to please conservative heartland denizens—runs throughout, from the relatively queer-lib Roaring '20s to the varying types and degrees of repression during the subsequent Depression, Decency Code and McCarthy eras.

*Behind the Screen* offers, along with its juicy-but-true movieland stories, a fascinating look at the way America's political

moods directly affect the entertainment industry and, by immediate extension, the level of honesty, comfort and even safety with which gay men and lesbians working in the movies could live their lives.

My only complaints are that Mann is intermittently too reverent, as if determined to turn each and every Hollywood nonheterosexual into a saint, and that his final chapter flirts with bland modern identity-politicking. Though his point that pre-Stonewall Hollywood had queers less pigeonholed than it did throughout the '70s and '80s is well taken, I could've done without yet another rote, blanket proclamation that William Friedkin's *Cruising* is "offensive to gays."

One feels uncomfortable, however, harboring any reservations about Mann's very valuable and readable book after reading Clum's floundering dip into the deconstructive pool.

"*He's All Man*"—with its embarrassingly inept deployment of fancy terms such as "domestic space" and "male

gaze"—basically consists of a fourth-rate application of the theories in Laura Mulvey's extremely influential 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." But where Mulvey used sophisticated language to convey sophisticated (if debatable) ideas, Clum uses unnecessarily pretentious verbiage to convey literal-minded, reductive ones.

The author systemically traces representations of gender and sexuality in American films—from '50s Westerns to present-day gay-produced romantic comedies—under the misguided notion that people should go to the movies to be "affirmed" and that movies that don't affirm us—that don't show the world the way it "should" be—are deficient.

To be fair, Clum's assertions aren't all inaccurate. Certainly, there has been more than a tinge of homophobia in the sly depictions (or, more usually, the absence) of gay men and lesbians in many Hollywood movies. His passages dealing with the ideas of gender order in the works of Tennessee Williams and the way in which the more radical notions were purged from screen versions do make for interesting reading.

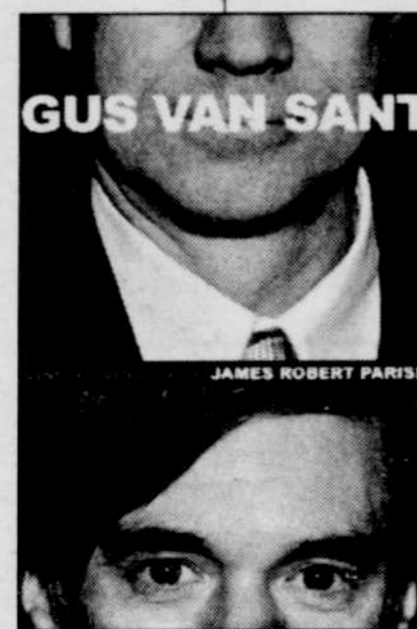
It's Clum's tone that irks to distraction; his paranoia finds homophobia, heterosexism and patriarchy (or corrective subversions thereof) in every movie about which he writes. With his rambling, humorless jargon, he's able to suck all the richness out of even the finest films: the great 1946 noir *Gilda*, Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope*, Alan Pakula's *Klute*.

Worse still, he ignores the superior artistry and craft of those works because he simplistically and (especially in the case of *Klute*) incorrectly views them as anti-gay or misogynist.

He disses David Mamet but gives credence to the genuinely crappy 1999 gay indie *Rites of Passage* on the basis of its poorly delivered "message" that "the manhood [the characters]

espouse is destructive." And is American cinegod Martin Scorsese's complex, ambiguous *After Hours* really nothing more than "an amusing picture of straight male anxiety"?

I was actually insulted by the anti-art, histrionically overpoliticized presumptuousness of Clum's book. I'm only relieved that most queer cinephiles I know aren't nearly as solipsistic and cloistered in their thinking as he is.



Entertainment reporter James Robert Parish's *Gus Van Sant: An Unauthorized Biography* (Thunder's Mouth Press, 2001) details the life and aesthetic of a gay filmmaker (and former Portland) who lives in a universe where Clum's arbitrarily picky rules simply wouldn't apply.

More Andy Warhol than Spike Lee, Van Sant—whose gayest movie is the fine, melancholy *My Own Private Idaho* and whose best is *To Die For*—has never considered himself a role model or an activist, and his simultaneously anarchic and shoulder-shrugging attitude toward his sexuality is cool and liberated.

Parish's book is frequently disingenuous and in desperate need of some vigorous copy editing, but it's hard not to believe that his slightly yellow *Hollywood Babylon*-lite style isn't at least somewhat intentional. A former entertainment reporter, a regular celebrity biographer and himself openly gay, Parish hilariously lets the reader know just what kind of audience he's writing for when, for instance, he refers to a Van Sant boyfriend as his "special friend."

Despite slyness verging on cattiness, he does manage to be respectful and provide a detailed run-through of the director's life and each of his films. He also generally avoids sycophancy or timidity toward Van Sant's upper-middle-class dilettantism and voyeuristic attraction to drugs, hustling and much younger men.

Whereas "*He's All Man*" offers a clear illustration of the difference between a critical approach based on love of the medium and one based on love of the self, Parish's book, like Mann's, accomplishes the goal of any good movie book, be it an in-depth study or a breathless, breezy bio. While reminding us why we care about the movies, they inspire a deep desire to revisit films we already know in a fresh context or, better yet, to explore the unfamiliar. [M]

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