

SHOW ME A HAPPY HOMOSEXUAL

BY

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Despite queer cinema's relevance and popularity in post-AIDS crisis America, homosexual men have been written into history as contagious, promiscuous, effeminate characters through the use of film. What began as an effort to shun homosexuality and incite homophobia has developed into a method of rebuilding a broken identity. This homophobia, however, was altered by forming a counterpublic,¹ by which homosexuals gained positive representation in film, and therefore achieved the power of organization. Film has been a form of discourse used by homosexual males to redevelop their historical identity in post-AIDS crisis America through a series of heterosexually identifiable changes.

Michael Warner's *Publics and Counterpublics* asserts that a public is created by texts. These texts can range from public speeches to pamphlets distributed at rallies. Film is a form of text and acts as a discourse that can circulate through many publics and counterpublics, forming both collective and individual identities. To be a part of a public is to inhabit a certain social world or space. Film can navigate these various social spaces due to its nature of distribution and popularity. Warner also asserts that transforming identity is central to sexuality movements. This includes unconscious manifestations, the vision of good life embedded in them, and the habits by which people continue to

¹ Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 56-57. Warner defines a counterpublic as a public "defined by their tension with a larger public. Their participants are marked off from persons or citizens in general. Discussion within such a public is understood to contravene the rules obtaining in the world at large...this kind of public is, in effect, a counterpublic: it maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status...this status does not simply reflect identities formed elsewhere; participation in such a public is one of the ways by which its members' identities are formed and transformed."

understand themselves and embodiments as public or private.² A movement around homosexual representation in film attempts to alter the public's perception of their various embodiments and identities.

Films produced before the AIDS crisis were able to shun homosexuality and incite homophobia due to the nature of productions. Studios were run by conservative, rich, white men who could control the representation of characters in their films. From the 1950s through the 1970s, homosexual characters frequently committed suicide or faced savage beatings upon recognizing their sexuality. "The consequence of this realization of [his homosexuality] is that he promptly commits suicide, only one of many...gay characters of the period who take their lives when faced with the 'awful truth' about their sexuality."³ Most gay, male characters either suffered from "remaining in the closet," or suffered the pain of being shunned from society. Either way, 'coming out' was essentially "bad for one's health." Acknowledging or not acknowledging homosexuality would lead to the ultimate demise of a character, no matter what the situation entailed. "People feel that the price they must pay for social membership...is identification with the heterosexual life narrative; that they are individually responsible for the rages...and failures they experience in their intimate lives, while the fractures of the contemporary US shame and sabotage them everywhere."⁴ Films that portrayed gay men (during the period of pre-AIDS crisis, post-WWII America) as having nowhere to turn and nothing to safely identify with created a huge obstacle in the way of forming a counterpublic. The films were produced by members of a homophobic public, and therefore imposed identities. Although gay men had not yet formed a viable counterpublic, their entrance to the public was quite difficult. "...being in a public is a privilege that requires filtering or repressing something that is seen as private."⁵ In order to reflect the turbulent identity struggle of the time, gay male characters had to live on the fringes of society in a perpetual state of doom by repressing their private lives.

The 1955 film, *Rebel Without a Cause*, by Nicholas Ray featured a homoerotic relationship between Plato and Jim, the two main characters. Plato is characterized as an effeminate, emotionally unstable boy. He is extremely dependent on his friendship with Jim and idealizes his masculinity. Throughout the film, the two men are always framed

² Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 51.

³ Larry P. Gross, *Up From Invisibility: Lesbians, Gay Men, and the Media in America* (New York: Columbia UP, 2001) 60.

⁴ Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 198.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

together, staring into each other's eyes. In the shots that the two men share, they hold each other's gaze even if Judy (the female protagonist) or another woman enters the frame. In several shots, Judy is hanging off of Jim, almost begging for his attention, yet Jim is focused only on Plato. Although the film shows no romantic physical interaction between the men, it is clear that Plato is in love with Jim. In fact, the original edit included a kissing scene between them, but it was cut due to Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) restrictions. Their homoerotic interactions create sexual tension throughout the film, and Plato's obsession with Jim is often uncomfortable to watch. However, Plato suffers the ultimate demise common to many homosexual characters of the time, when he is shot and killed in the end. He dies in Jim's arms, and Jim places his jacket around Plato's dead body in a final expression of devotion. This image of Plato's untimely death reinforces the idea that coming out is 'bad for one's health.' When the film was made in 1955, gay men suffered untold amounts of hate crimes and unjustified violence. Although Nicholas Ray tried to include a more obvious romance between the two men, their painful interactions created discourse on where gay men stand in society. Therefore, to identify as gay meant identifying as a victim.

In 1970, William Friedkin directed and released *The Boys in the Band*, a film detrimental to the formation of the gay identity. The film featured several friends at a dinner party, going through the "thralls of being gay."⁶ At one point, the main character says, "Show me a happy homosexual and I'll show you a gay corpse,"⁷ essentially arguing that there are no happy homosexuals. Throughout the film, various subplots of romantic desires would unfold to reveal a plethora of negative stereotypes. They were closeted men who were afraid to come out, and out men who were full of self-hatred. In every case, the men were completely miserable with their own identities. Again, this film reinforced the notion that coming out was 'bad for one's health.'

Each film containing gay male characters acted as a form of discourse among the emerging gay community. The discourse of the time belonged to the public and was handed down to the emerging counterpublic of gay men. Essentially, the homophobic public used film as a form of identity-constructing oppression. By portraying homosexuality as dangerous, people feared those who identified as gay.

⁶ *The Boys in the Band*, DVD, directed by William Friedkin (1970; Hollywood, CA: Cinema Center Films).

⁷ Ibid.

The images set forth by gay male characters were extremely negative stereotypes. They were portrayed as promiscuous, often prowling the streets and clubs in search of a “dangerous” one-night stand. Homosexuals were often portrayed as miserable and self-loathing, like *The Boys in the Band*. Finally, they were seen as emotionally unstable, characterized by wild mood swings and violent rages. Some stereotypes were positive, but still confining to a developing gay identity. The characters were effeminate, charming, physically attractive, had good taste and were frequently successful. Although these are good attributes to possess, they created a narrow identity that many gay men couldn’t identify with, therefore rendering the positive discourse useless. These stereotypes labeled gay men as different and therefore allowed for their stigmatization. “Through a discussion on stereotyping, the process of othering, the idea of identity archetypes, and the labeling of deviancy, it is suggested that homosexuals have been subject to these processes in a manner that has subjugated gay identity.”⁸ Offering the public a very limited view of gay men fostered a narrow, fearful, and not entirely understanding public perception.

The 1997 film *My Best Friend’s Wedding* by PJ Hogan is a more contemporary example that reinforces the stereotypes that are seemingly ‘positive.’ The film features a gay character named George. He is physically attractive, flamboyant, successful, effeminate and has great taste. We are meant to see these stereotypes as humorous, mood-lightening enhancements to the hetero-normative romance between the main characters, but George’s portrayal is still a confining one. His portrayal furthers the notion that gay men must identify with this specific stereotype in order to achieve an identity.

The 1996 film, *The Birdcage*, by Mike Nichols is a similarly comedic text in which the gay couple acts as the punch line for the entire film. The two men, played by Robin Williams and Nathan Lane, are an older gay couple living in Miami Beach. They are extremely flamboyant and effeminate. The two men fathered a ‘perfect hetero-normative son’ who brings home his fiancée and her parents to meet his own parents. This catalyzes a whirlwind of events in which the two gay men go to extreme lengths to hide their identities. Their flamboyancy becomes a danger to their son’s relationship; their relationship becomes an unacceptable spectacle. The two men create a gay male identity of almost-female gay men, unable to address their actual family dynamic for fear of rejection from a heterosexual couple. This film adheres to the stereotypes set forth

⁸ Christopher Pullen, *Documenting Gay Men*, 51.

by previous films, but also argues that those stereotypes can be detrimental to those around you. What the two men actually possess is an extremely stable home, a committed relationship and a fantastic son, but these are passed over by the comedic relief of gay men squealing at the color of furniture.

However, film portrayals of gay men began to shift at the advent of the AIDS crisis and the growing prominence of the homosexual film market. While homosexuality has always existed in society, post-WWII America shunned it in all social and political situations. In the second half of the century, gay men came together as a conscious group by taking on minority status. Doing this allowed for familiar rhetorical frames—decrying discrimination and demanding equal rights.⁹ This adoption of a percentage and an identity as a minority and counterpublic led to the emergence of queer cinema—cinema by queers, for queers. For the first time in film history, gay men were producing films about gay men for gay men, with an overarching goal of forming an identity that was in their control. Representation in the media gives power to counterpublics, and this adoption of minority status finally amounted to power.

The second half of the century saw a gay male identity slowly patched up through the use of film. It began with the AIDS crisis, which began to affect the population in 1981. It spread among gay communities, largely due to some sexual practices such as "barebacking," where two men engage in anal intercourse without a condom. The nature of how quickly it spread through the gay community led to a trigger-happy media label of "the gay plague." Cinema began to portray homosexual males as more than miserable, self-loathing, closeted individuals. This was due largely to the success of the gay activism that emerged from unfair treatment of AIDS victims and the media's trigger-happy labeling. However, this labeling created activism against perceived norms—the counterpublic demanded visibility, but visibility as humans, not as hopeless victims of a 'gay plague.' "Being publicly known as a homosexual is never the same as being publicly known as heterosexual; the latter always goes without saying and troubles nothing, whereas the former carries echoes of pathologized visibility."¹⁰ . The discourse of the organizations that fought for this formation of a counterpublic was empowering and led to the film industry's race to produce films about AIDS victims in a different light.

⁹ Larry P. Gross, *Up From Invisibility*, 261.

¹⁰ Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 52.

Touching portrayals of AIDS victims began to flood the media. These texts, especially the films, were sympathy-evoking stories intended to address the heterosexual public. The AIDS crisis and activism demanded visibility, gaining power for the gay, male counterpublic. These touching portrayals of victims allowed the characters to break many stereotypes. However, the public perception of AIDS towards the mid to late 1990s changed to sentiments that AIDS ‘could happen to anyone’; it essentially lost its label as a ‘gay plague.’ AIDS as a form of gay male identification was no longer as prevalent; heterosexuals and even children were affected and were also covered in the media.¹¹ These new characters were also more comfortable with their sexuality, were not shunned by their families, and were slowly breaking the stigmatization of having AIDS.

The 1993 film *Philadelphia* by Jonathan Demme was one of the most revolutionary films for gay male identity during the crisis. It portrayed a victim of AIDS who was successful, loved by his family, in a committed relationship and not at all flamboyant. It is widely considered the first film to truly shatter many gay stereotypes of the time. The most effective representation, however, is the relationship between Andy, the AIDS victim and protagonist played by Tom Hanks, and Joe, his homophobic lawyer played by Denzel Washington. The two men start off on a bad foot because Joe makes his fear of homosexuals and AIDS extremely obvious to Andy. However, Joe overcomes this fear to form a mutually beneficial relationship with Andy, one that could even be considered a friendship. His transformation begins in the scene in which Andy is studying in the library, trying to find material for his case against AIDS discrimination. The librarian approaches him and asks him to move to a private study room, but Andy refuses. Joe is also in the library, trying to avoid Andy, but witnesses the discrimination set forth by the librarian. In this moment, Joe decides to take the case and approaches Andy. This transformation is especially poignant for several reasons. Casting Denzel Washington, a black actor, as Joe draws a parallel between African American discrimination and homosexual discrimination, and offers the audience a simple association and a blatant message that any discrimination is wrong, no matter what your beliefs entail. Second, Joe is in essence the hardest public to access through a discourse that calls for acceptance of homosexuals: the powerful, homophobic man. By using a

¹¹ Randy Shilts, *And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic* (London: St. Martin's Press, 1987). Shilts explains the story of Ryan White, a boy with hemophilia who contracted the AIDS virus through a blood transfusion. The media's coverage of the boy helped alter the stigmatization of the AIDS epidemic as a 'gay plague.'

character that has to overcome the most opposing beliefs in order to achieve justice, Demme is providing a discourse that could access the most oppressive public to the gay male identity.

In the same scene, the librarian is shown through a low angle, making him look tall as he towers above Andy. Andy is shown through a high angle, making him look weak in comparison. This framing puts the two at opposition: Andy is the weak, oppressed homosexual, and the librarian is the oppressive homophobe. When Joe arrives at the table, the three men are framed in the same angle, essentially leveling their positions. The film's casting played a huge role in how it altered public perception. Casting a black man allowed access to the public of African Americans. Casting Tom Hanks as Andy allowed the audience to draw connections between him as Andy and his previous roles as a heroic, all American man. "After spending two hours with Tom Hanks in the role of Andy Beckett, an untold number of moviegoers became much more comfortable the next time they saw someone who looked like he might be gay or might have AIDS."¹² Hanks' performance gained public perception of an AIDS victim that was 'normal' and not dangerous. Movie viewers fell in love with Andy Beckett, and felt the pain of his loving family when he died.

This film sparked a change in how film portrayed gay men and therefore how the public perceived them. In present, post-AIDS crisis America, the films are more heterosexually identifiable. They feature characters that exemplify masculinity, underplaying flamboyancy or not incorporating it at all. Although Queer Cinema produces films that are not hetero-normative or heterosexually identifiable, mainstream cinema adheres to a stricter audience made up of hetero-normative members. These contemporary mainstream films featuring gay men are focusing on the individual, rather than the individual's sexuality. This creates discourse for the gay male counterpublic that allows for more identifying characteristics than just sexuality. It broadens the view of public perception by offering more characteristics to associate with homosexuality. "The Joe Miller character is critical to *Philadelphia*'s success, as millions of straight Americans can identify with him."¹³ As gay men formed a more solidified counterpublic, their representations in mainstream films were more applicable to both the public and the counterpublic, essentially fusing the two. The new gay characters could be

¹² Rodger Streitmatter, *From "perverts" to "fab Five": The Media's Changing Depiction of Gay Men and Lesbians* (New York: Routledge, 2009) 90.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 89.

men that hold high-level positions in corporate America or blue-collar jobs in the heartland.

Perhaps the most poignant contemporary film to transcend gay stereotypes is the 2003 film *Brokeback Mountain* by Ang Lee. The film features two men working blue-collar jobs in the heartland. The setting of the film is the first feature to stand out. Gay men are typically associated with the urban lifestyle. However, this film takes place in rural America, where homophobia is believed to exist most prevalently. The film is revolutionary in its assessment of a homosexual romance. The two men fall in love, but the film centers on a simple love story rather than an exploitation of homosexual themes. The sexual content of the film was unique in itself. While most films featuring homosexual romances used to exploit the sexuality of it, playing up the 'naughty sex,' and playing down the exchange of intimacy, this film allowed heterosexual people to feel the love between the men as something different. The men, Ennis and Jack, are frequently framed from behind with the sweeping frontier landscape in the background. This framing exaggerates the fact that the first half of the movie shows only them in the middle of nowhere. The vastness of the landscape contrasts their closeness, both mentally and physically, and the audience finds comfort in it.

Jack is murdered in a hate crime at the end of the film. Ennis goes to see him and finds out that he is dead. The final scene shows Ennis in Jack's room, looking at his things where he finds in Jack's closet a shirt that he had given him years before. It hangs in the very back next to a postcard that Ennis sent, tucked away neatly. "Many reviewers found the final scene of *Brokeback Mountain* to be the most poignant as it provides a dramatic plea for American society to put an end to hatred of gay people."¹⁴ The emotion of the final scene resonates with the public as it shows the pain felt when love is lost, rather than the pain brought on by identifying as homosexual. This film addresses no new theme, however, as it centers on two men who fall in love and the pain felt by that love. However, it communicates a message that hidden sexuality hurts yourself and others and argues that homophobia is the danger, not homosexuality. The film accesses a masculine, homophobic public as well as a homosexual counterpublic. It is this kind of discourse, a fusion of public and counterpublic, which achieves success in redeveloping broken identities.

The public's perception of gay men in post-WWII, pre-AIDS crisis America was turbulent. Many people feared homosexuality and viewed coming out as 'bad for one's health.' When the AIDS epidemic

¹⁴ Rodger Streitmatter, *From "Perverts" to "fab Five"*, 174.

struck the nation, activism emerged and addressed the public through touching portrayals of victims. In the 1990s, gay men adopted a percentage giving the group minority status and establishing a counterpublic that could circulate discourse effectively. This acts as a marker for when films began to positively portray gay men. It also marks the shift from gay men as 'outside the mechanism' to becoming 'a component of the machine.' Films were no longer used to impose an identity and oppress an emerging counterpublic. They were instead used by a counterpublic as a form of discourse to effectively form a collective identity and alter the public's perception. Finally, contemporary film has successfully fused the fluidity of discourse between the heterosexual public and the homosexual counterpublic. This supports the ability of film to address a wide audience and alter the public's perception, adhering it to the identity chosen by the counterpublic. The journey of the gay man through film is a turbulent one, but promises an achievement of a fusion of public to counterpublic, gay to heterosexual, and finally to simply human.

Visual media is no longer solely an imposition on the gay male counterpublic by a predominately homophobic public. "The gay male is no longer a lone subject of derision or entertainment (identified in binary opposition to the contented heterosexual couple); instead he plays a central role, involving themselves in the performance of 'self-representation.'"¹⁵ Before the AIDS crisis, gay men were the punch line to the heterosexual couple's joke. In contemporary films, however, gay men are representing themselves and forming an identity that can alter the public perception in a mutually beneficial way. The movement from 'outside' the mechanism to a 'component' of the engine reveals a new engagement of gay social identity.¹⁶ The gay character no longer lives on the fringes of society, no longer represents a danger to society and no longer adheres to a narrow stereotype. This transformation of public perception and identity-forming discourse is unique to the form of media used. "Where printed public discourse formerly relied on rhetoric of abstract disembodiment, visual media...now display bodies for a range of purposes: admiration, identification...and so on."¹⁷ The alteration of public perception was achieved due to the nature of visual media as accessible and entertaining forms of discourse.

¹⁵ Christopher Pullen, *Documenting Gay Men*, 71.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 214.

¹⁷ Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 169.