

## **Can commercial films help change negative attitudes toward homosexuality?**

The films selected to assist in attitudinal shifts concerning homosexuality range from domestic to international productions executed during a time span of over 20 years. Taken as a body of work, these films successively move toward a higher level of acceptance, greater openness and increased levels of physical intimacy displayed by the main characters. Even a decade ago, it would have been unthinkable to screen close-ups of an Academy Award-winning actor such as a nude Sean Penn kissing and fondling another male, as was done in the biographical motion picture *Milk* (Black & Van Sant, 2008). But the most powerful aspect in this story of the first openly gay San Francisco Supervisor during the 1970s is not in the sexual scenes or even in the romantic interludes that show the slain politician's tender side – it is in the notion that a group of every-day people who have been stigmatized, legislated against, abused and killed in hate crimes, can rise up together in a grassroots movement, organize their efforts and effect legislative change that transcends sexual orientation for the greater good of society. *Milk* is unapologetic in its agenda to show that homosexuals have the right to be open about their love lives, angry about discrimination and willing to fight for their rights. The film is an inspiration to any and all who are marginalized, and to those who wish to understand and empathize. By the end of the film, the sexual orientation of the characters is immaterial. It is their political and historic legacy that is important, humbling and bound to change the attitudes of those who are unsure or unwilling to grant civil rights to any minority group.

Prejudice, fear and lack of acceptance toward homosexuality often arise in societies where the social transmission of negative attitudes begins at home and continues in schools and the workplace.

One point at which to intercept this cycle of contempt is to engage older children and early teenagers in accepting diverse sexualities, particularly since it is during these years that the unconscious template for sexual expression is being cemented. The Swedish film *Show Me Love* (Moodysson, 1998) is highly appropriate for this purpose. Agnes is a 13-year-old sensitive, shy and unpopular girl who writes poetry and is derided in school for being “a lesbian.” Elin is 14, cute, hangs with a fast crowd and is in serious need to stir it up in her small home town where the excitement does not extend beyond going to beer parties and engaging in sexual experimentation with the local boys. On a bet and a dare, Elin kisses Agnes passionately and finds that she actually likes the experience. Agnes does not believe her luck and retreats, while Elin is shocked at her own response and first backs off. But despite the potential of losing her boyfriend and the status of “it” girl among her peers, Elin decides to honor these unfamiliar but exciting feelings and slowly makes the decision to pursue Agnes. The story twists and turns through many universal aspects of teen angst: uncomprehending parents, the taunts of classmates, the slings and arrows of unrequited love and the defiance in becoming a new kind of Romeo and Juliet. There is delight and recognition for many teenagers who are able to mirror themselves in the characters. The film ends on a positive note with the duo declaring their status as “lesbians in love” to astonished teachers, fellow students and “the rest of the world.” Their innocence, hope for the future and their honest and open approach to their feelings serve to connect the audience with the universality of falling in love despite all odds, independent of sexual orientation or stereotypical gender roles.

Suffused with pain, trapped in their culture where the unspoken truth is conscripted to collude with their powerful religious community – these are the deeply religious gays and lesbians among the ultra-Orthodox Jews who are portrayed in Sandi Simcha Dubowski's documentary *Trembling Before G-d* (2001). The film revolves around Hasidic Jews living in the United States, London and Israel, and their profound emotional and philosophical conflicts in reconciling the love of God with the harsh Biblical proscriptions of homosexuality. It is not just the silhouetted image of the wife who quietly speaks of her daily struggle in a marriage where procreation is a duty and where antidepressants have become a necessity in order to endure the suppression of same-sex feelings, nor is it just the young physician who desperately has sought to rid himself of "the evil" for years by aversive conditioning; prominent rabbis, psychiatrists and other mental health professionals in the Jewish Orthodox community speak of damage, depression, low self-esteem and suicide among their population. Those who have chosen to come out tell stories of being outcast from their community after the loss of parents, children, and other immediate family members. And still, these men and women refuse to abandon their conviction that it is possible to integrate a life that is pleasing to God while living openly as homosexuals. The film offers no resolution to their dilemma; instead, it sends the powerful message that silence can equal death, and that creating an environment of openness and acceptance within the immediate family is the better alternative to rejection and ostracism. And while the Hasidic community consists of a very small minority, this thought-provoking and deeply revealing film may offer some food for thought to the millions of American evangelical Christians whose beliefs about homosexuality may very well rival their Orthodox Jewish counterparts.

Another kind of group, namely young urban professionals of no particular religious affiliation, is depicted in *Longtime Companion* (Lucas & René, 1990). Set in New York during the 1980s, this groundbreaking film provides a highly realistic account of the AIDS epidemic in its earliest years. The story begins during a sunny and carefree summer on Fire Island, where a group of long-time friends and lovers come together annually. Soon, however, talk of "gay cancer" begins to creep into the picture. One by one, these otherwise stable and well-connected men begin to experience symptoms for which there is no cure. Slowly, the extent and the enormity of the disease become revealed. The stark reality of seeing emaciated friends and lovers in hospital beds hooked up to machinery, stripped of their dignity and waiting helplessly to die, is shown in brutal verisimilitude. Paranoia grips those who are still healthy and many begin to panic. Meanwhile, those who are dying are further stigmatized and treated like untouchables, even by partners and friends. But the valiant struggle of the individual in the face of death transcends race, class and certainly sexual orientation; this is the modern plague – a Holocaust that consumes any victims in its way. Considering that the gay community chose to hide much of the physical deterioration of those afflicted from mainstream media and the general public, this film offers the audience an unparalleled view into the utter devastation that gripped the gay community during the early spread of the disease. It is in the themes of death, loss and grief that the film makes its strongest points. The traumas of seeing loved ones die without being able to offer any help, the feelings of being helpless and the rage over powerlessness – these are notions that aim to imbue the viewer with a sense of humility and the frailty inherent in the human condition, regardless of sexual orientation.

Against the mores and the morals of the 1950s, the romantic film *Desert Hearts* (Cooper & Deitch, 1985) tells the story of Vivian, a repressed college professor in her late thirties who comes to Reno to obtain a divorce. She is required to reside in Nevada for six weeks in order for the divorce to become final. Vivian takes a room in a boarding house run by a hardscrabble woman with a stepdaughter, Cay, a casino worker who is not only beautiful, but also openly lesbian. And while lesbianism was not against the law in the West during that time, the stamp of public opprobrium knew no bounds. Thus, lesbians were viewed as “deviant” and this becomes clear early on in the film. Meanwhile, the two women begin socializing and going for drives that soon evolve into trysts. Finally, Cay seduces Vivian, all of which is captured in remarkably erotic scenes that manage to remain sexual without turning gratuitous. Inherent in the drama is the eviction of Vivian from the boarding house, after her landlady vehemently registers her disapproval of the two women continuing their romantic relationship. The story ends with Vivian obtaining her divorce and leaving to return to New York – and Cay boarding the train right along with her. The strength and beauty of this film lie in the tenderness and naturalism with which the story is told. Vivian is slowly brought to the realization that she is in love with Cay; thus, it is the love relationship that becomes central, not the labeling or declaration that she suddenly has gone from one sexual orientation to another. Both Vivian and Cay are stunningly beautiful and very feminine, which is confirmed by the attention paid to them by several male characters in the film. But they have eyes for each other only, and this is where the audience may learn to appreciate that women can fall in love with each other as passionately and with the same ardor as people of opposite genders.

*Brokeback Mountain* (McMurtry & Lee, 2005) is the quintessentially tragic American saga, complete with a star-

crossed couple whose love is doomed from the start. Set in the breathtaking mountainous wilderness of Wyoming, the story revolves around two lonesome cowboys who live hard and love hard, except that the objects of their affection are one another. Their romance may well come as a shock to an unsuspecting audience; this is an unlikely pairing in conventional eyes, with two hypermasculine characters that otherwise show very little emotion. One may leap to the conclusion that these men turn to each other for physical comfort in the absence of available females – after all, they both declare to each other “I’m not queer.” As the story progresses, however, it becomes clear that their initial sexual attraction evolves into deep mutual love and caring. But the tragedy of hiding affects them in ways neither they nor the audience can predict. They marry into conventional lives with wives, children and regular jobs. Still, they manage to get away together for clandestine “fishing trips” a few times a year. Conscripted by the rules of a homophobic society, neither one is able to live an authentic life as a gay man and in the end one of them is brutally assassinated in a hate crime. This is a complex film that treats homosexual love as only one aspect of two individuals, not as a matter of simple sexual stereotype. For an audience that may expect a homosexual relationship to be depicted on the mere surface, this film offers incomparable depth and many life lessons in overcoming one’s own fears and prejudices in seeking a life of authenticity. Thus, the audience may find itself overwhelmed by compassion, empathy and increased understanding of those who remain closeted in fear and agony, conflicted and tormented for love that has been branded as “abnormal” by so many for so long.

Christine Milrod, 2008©

## Filmography

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Dubowski, S.S. (Writer & Director). (2001). *Trembling before g-d* [Documentary film]. Israel, France, USA: Simcha Leib Productions.

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McMurtry, L. (Writer) & Lee, A. (Director). (2005). *Brokeback mountain* [Motion picture]. United States: Focus Features.

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