



Bisexuality in Film

by Carla Williams

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The history of gays and lesbians in film is well documented, but bisexuality, in both characters and performers, has been less examined. While some historians and filmmakers take the approach that bisexuality is a mediated and therefore acceptable representation of homosexuality, others vilify the bisexual as either a traitor to the gay world or a maniacally homicidal or suicidal deviant torn between two worlds.

The first documented appearances of bisexual characters in motion pictures are *A Florida Enchantment* (1914), an American film by Sidney Drew, and *Zapatas Bande*, a German film from the same year. These early silent films were not burdened by overt censorship, and filmmakers were free to represent sexuality in their characters' lives within the constraints of the mores of the period.

Still, characters' sexuality was more often implied rather than definitively stated. Depictions of homosexuality and bisexuality were often cloaked in religious themes in order to evade local censors, who frequently edited films before they were screened.

The Hays Code

Around 1915 Hollywood invented itself as the film capital of the world and along with this new industry came widespread notoriety for rampant debauchery--especially drug use and promiscuous sex--among its employees, especially performers.

Eventually deciding it needed to regulate itself before external censors did, a group of filmmakers and producers hired Will H. Hays, former Postmaster General, to draft a series of guidelines that by 1934 had become the Motion Picture Production Code, or Hays Code, which banned any explicit representation of homosexuality or bisexuality in American films.

The words "gay," "homosexual," and "bisexual" could not even be uttered, and virtually no bisexual characters appeared in American films during the 1930s and 1940s. The lack of representation of bisexuals in film may have been abetted by the popular belief that bisexuality did not actually exist. Eventually, however, bold filmmakers began to release their films without adhering to the Code, which led to its complete abandonment in the 1960s.

Formulaic Scenarios

The demise of the Hays Code did not immediately translate into positive representations of homosexuals and bisexuals. Instead, what emerged were a few formulaic scenarios in which bisexual characters in film were presented.

In one scenario, a married bisexual's past is revealed or he or she strays with a same-sex partner. Adhering to this formula, *Making Love* (1982) was the first mainstream Hollywood film to address openly and directly



Will Hayes (above) drafted the Hays Code which banned explicit representations of bisexuals and homosexuals in American films. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

the bisexual male character without vilification. Husband Michael Ontkean leaves wife Kate Jackson--the former *Charlie's Angel* Sabrina (and lesbian icon)--for another man, played by Harry Hamlin. While the film was not a commercial success, it was a watershed event in Hollywood's depiction of the bisexual as a normal, complex human being.

In another film formula, a gay man or lesbian is left by a bisexual lover who pursues a heterosexual relationship. In 1968's box-office success *The Fox*, the bisexual female character Ellen ultimately chooses a man over her female lover, who, in turn, is killed by the male, Paul.

In *Personal Best* (1982), the Mariel Hemingway character is awakened to her sexuality by Patrice Donnelly, but eventually settles with her coach, Scott Glenn.

A twist on this theme is Kevin Smith's *Chasing Amy* (1994). The character Alyssa is an avowed lesbian until she falls in love with a man; she has a relationship with him, but eventually returns to lesbianism.

In the third and most frightening scenario, the bisexual character is a deviant who kills or is killed for his or her sexuality. In the aforementioned *The Fox*, the lesbian's death is rife with symbolism: she is killed by a tree falling between her legs.

In *Basic Instinct* (1982), a film boycotted by gay, lesbian and bisexual groups for its perpetuation of the criminal homosexual, Sharon Stone portrays the murderous bisexual seductress Catherine Tramell. Her former bisexual lover is at one point assumed to be the murderer but ends up murdered by a man, Michael Douglas, with whom they have both been involved .

The Bisexual as Betrayer

The bisexual character in film is frequently represented as lacking commitment, someone who ultimately betrays his or her gay or straight partners or even his or her community.

Hollywood heartthrob Robert Redford played the bisexual husband Wade in 1966's *Inside Daisy Clover*; at the star's request, Wade was changed from homosexual to bisexual so that Redford could "play him as a guy who bats ten ways--men, women, children, dogs, cats, anything--anything that salves his ego." Although his bisexuality is barely alluded to in the film, the actor's intent was to represent bisexuality as a selfish, amoral endeavor.

In John Schlesinger's 1971 film *Sunday, Bloody Sunday*, a gay man and heterosexual woman share a bisexual partner who is regarded as freewheeling because he does not "choose" either homo- or heterosexuality.

Cabaret (1972), based on the John Kander-Fred Ebb musical and inspired by Christopher Isherwood's *Berlin Stories*, features a relationship between the bisexual character Baron Max and the more clearly homosexual Brian Roberts. Roberts eventually ends up alone.

The 1994 independent film *Go Fish*, arguably the most successful and mainstream lesbian film, includes an openly bisexual character, Daria, who sleeps with a man and then undergoes an imaginary inquisition from her lesbian friends who disapprove and want to vote her out of the sisterhood.

Sidney Lumet's *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975) is a notable exception to these themes. Based on real events, the film presents Al Pacino as Sonny, who is married with children, but who is in love with Leon, his pre-op transsexual lover played by Chris Sarandon. Sonny robs a bank in order to pay for Leon's operation. It is an extraordinary circumstance presented without hysterics or pretense.

That same year, however, hysterics and pretense were celebrated in the campy cult classic *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. Dr. Frank-N-Furter, portrayed by Tim Curry in transvestite drag, satisfies both Brad

and Janet, the newlyweds played by Barry Bostwick and Susan Sarandon (former wife of Chris).

Recent Depictions

Despite some advances, Hollywood still regards depictions of bisexuality as taboo. *Henry and June* (1990), which includes a relationship between bisexual women, was the first film to earn the NC-17 rating from the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA).

On the other hand, *Wild Things* (1998), which also presents an explicit sexual relationship between the two female lead characters, as well as an implied one between the two male lead characters, did not receive such a rating; the film, however, merely exploits a heterosexual fantasy lesbianism that has little or nothing to do with an actual lesbian relationship.

A more serious recent depiction is in the Wachowski brothers' *Bound* (1996), in which Jennifer Tilly's mob-moll femme leaves her gangster man for a slightly butch Gina Gershon and never looks back.

Bisexual Performers

Rumors of bisexuality have persisted about many performers, from James Dean to Cary Grant to Tom Cruise, but only a few actors, such as Madonna, Joey Lauren Adams, Anne Heche, and Sandra Bernhard, have openly revealed their bisexual identities. It is no coincidence that the majority of these actors are women, for female bisexuality is still much more acceptable than male bisexuality, since it plays into a particular male heterosexual fantasy.

An especially interesting instance of bisexual infiltration is the Julia Roberts film *My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997), which opens with bisexual singer Ani DiFranco's tongue-in-cheek cover of Dusty Springfield's "Wishin' and Hopin'" played over the credits. The film also starred bisexual actor Rupert Everett, who stole the show as the predictably loveable, laughable gay sidekick to Roberts' lead.

Bisexuality in film, as separate from gay and lesbian representation, has emerged as a significant genre in its own right, even spawning a separate bisexual film festival in San Francisco.

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About the Author

Carla Williams is a writer and photographer from Los Angeles, who lives and works in Santa Fe. Her writings and images can be found on her website at www.carlagirl.net.