



Cholodenko, Lisa (b. 1964)

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Lisa Cholodenko
(YouTube video still).

Acclaimed lesbian filmmaker Lisa Cholodenko has so far written and directed three feature films, whose "narrative motor," as Dennis Lim noted in the *New York Times*, is "sexual attraction."

As Lim observed, "[Cholodenko's] sex scenes can be steamy, but they are far from gratuitous, since in her movies nothing jolts characters and plots into action quite like an erotic spark."

For example, in *High Art* (1998), Cholodenko's first feature-length film, an ambitious associate editor of a photography magazine leaves her boyfriend and becomes involved with a drug-addicted, older lesbian photographer whom she coaxes out of retirement. In *Laurel Canyon* (2002), an uptight research scientist suddenly finds herself in the middle of a potential threesome involving her fiancé's record-producer mother and the mother's much younger rock musician boyfriend. And in Cholodenko's most recent film, *The Kids Are All Right* (2010), one of the women in a long-term lesbian relationship is drawn into an affair with the previously anonymous sperm donor who fathered the couple's two children.

As Cholodenko herself explained in an interview, "With sex it's really a line crossing. It's a very clear demarcation of passing a barrier." She went on to add, "When people make that choice to cross boundaries outside of relationships, which I guess is what I've done for a lot of these characters, it's about a yearning for something to change. I think it's an expression of 'Let me push this into crisis.'"

Lisa Cholodenko was born on June 5, 1964 in Los Angeles, California, into a "very talkative and inquisitive and pretty liberal Jewish family."

In an interview for National Public Radio, Cholodenko explained that she was "kind of outed" by her mother when she was 17 years old. As Cholodenko reflected, "I was in high school, and there weren't other people who were gay that I knew, and so I felt different and confused about that. But I had a great love affair in high school, and let myself have that love affair and tried to keep it to myself. But . . . I was eventually kind of outed by my mother, who took me aside one day and said, 'Well, it's obvious to me that you're in love with this person, and you're struggling to kind of sort it out. So why don't you go get some therapy and feel better about it because I don't want you to feel bad.'"

After graduating from high school, Cholodenko enrolled at San Francisco State University, where she had an integrated major that included ethnic studies, women's studies, and anthropology.

While still a student, Cholodenko became a teaching assistant to the political activist and academic Angela Davis who was then a Professor of Ethnic Studies at San Francisco State University. Davis had been associated with both the Communist and the Black Panthers political parties and was famously tried and acquitted for her suspected involvement with the 1970 abduction and murder of Judge Harold Haley in Marin County, California.

Cholodenko travelled to Nepal and India after graduating from college, before finally settling down in

Jerusalem with her then girlfriend who was studying to become a rabbi. Cholodenko stayed abroad for a year and a half and then returned to Los Angeles.

By then, Cholodenko had determined that she wanted a career in film. Her introduction to the film industry was as an apprentice editor on John Singleton's *Boyz n the Hood* (1991). She has since called this a "seminal experience," given that Singleton was only 24 years old at the time, fresh out of film school, and directing his first studio-financed feature film that he had also written, according to Cholodenko, from a "heartfelt and . . . singular perspective."

Cholodenko went on to become an assistant editor on Brett Leonard's science fiction horror film *The Lawnmower Man* (1992) and Beeban Kidron's romantic comedy *Used People* (1992).

Colleagues encouraged her to apply to film school. She enrolled in the graduate Film Program at Columbia University School of the Arts in New York City, where she earned a Master of Fine Arts (MFA) degree in screenwriting and directing. While in film school she was mentored by Milos Forman, the award-winning director of such films as *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975) and *Amadeus* (1984).

Cholodenko's early efforts include the short films *Souvenir* (1994) and *Dinner Party* (1997), which won the Audience Award in the Best Girl's Short category at the 1997 Seattle Lesbian & Gay Film Festival.

Cholodenko made her feature-length film debut in 1998 with the well-received and attention-getting *High Art*.

The film stars Ally Sheedy, in a career-reviving role, as a once-celebrated photographer named Lucy Berliner who has retreated from the art world to live a louche and insulated life with her German, heroin-addicted, former film actress girlfriend, Greta (Patricia Clarkson). Lucy is befriended by her ostensibly heterosexual downstairs neighbor, Syd (Radha Mitchell), an associate editor at a fashionable photography magazine, who hopes to lure Lucy out of retirement. The two women's working relationship, however, soon turns sexual.

As Janet Maslin observed in her review of the film for the *New York Times*, "Syd's professional seduction of Lucy is complicated by Lucy's sexual gamesmanship with Syd."

The film had its premiere at the 1998 Sundance Film Festival in Park City, Utah, where Cholodenko won the Waldo Salt Screenwriting Award, which recognizes outstanding screenwriting. *High Art* also won the Jury Special Prize at the 1998 Deauville, France Film Festival and was named Outstanding Film at the 1999 GLAAD Media Awards.

For her work on the film, Ally Sheedy was named Best Actress at the 1998 Los Angeles Film Critics Association Awards and the 1999 National Society of Film Critics Awards, as well as Best Female Lead at the 1999 Independent Spirit Awards.

Cholodenko's second feature film, *Laurel Canyon* (2002), revolves around Jane Bentley (Frances McDormand), a freewheeling and world-renowned record producer, her angry and defensive grown son Sam (Christian Bale), and his fiancée, Alex (Kate Beckinsale), a research scientist.

Sam, a recently graduated psychiatrist, is about to begin his residency at a Los Angeles hospital, and the couple plans to stay in Jane's vacant house in the bohemian L.A. enclave known as Laurel Canyon, which was also famous in the 1960s and 1970s as the home of many rock musicians, while Alex completes her dissertation on the mating habits of the fruit fly. However, at the last minute, Jane decides to stay in her Laurel Canyon home instead of moving to her beach house as originally planned.

Jane is completing an album in her home studio with a British rock band, and has become sexually involved with the band's lusty lead singer Ian (Alessandro Nivola), who is roughly the same age as her son. While Sam is at work in the hospital (and increasingly forming an intense bond with a second-year resident played by Natascha McElhone), Alex is at first annoyed by, but nevertheless inexorably drawn to, the hedonistic world swirling around her, which includes an impromptu naked late-night swim with Jane and Ian, and culminates in exchanged kisses with her future mother-in-law.

Cholodenko won the Dorothy Arzner Prize, which rewards outstanding direction of a film, at the 2003 Director's View Film Festival in Stamford, Connecticut, for *Laurel Canyon*, and both McDormand and Nivola were nominated for 2004 Independent Spirit Awards for their roles in the film.

While working on *Laurel Canyon*, Cholodenko met her current partner, Wendy Melvoin, a musician who is perhaps best known for her work with Prince in the 1980s and as one-half of the duo Wendy & Lisa with her former girlfriend, Lisa Coleman.

In an interview with *The Observer*, Cholodenko explained that Melvoin contacted her because she and Coleman wanted to work on the score for *Laurel Canyon*. "They kept calling me," Cholodenko remembered. "They were relentless. I was like, leave me alone! I had no recollection of them, except as these girls . . . dancing behind Prince."

But eventually Cholodenko met with the two women, and although nothing came of the meeting professionally, she found herself attracted to Melvoin. The two women traded telephone numbers, but Cholodenko did not follow up, believing that Melvoin was still in a relationship with Coleman.

Several years later, when Cholodenko moved from New York back to Los Angeles, she found Melvoin's phone number and thought, "I should call those nice lesbians. That might make me feel better."

"So I called," Cholodenko continued, "and [Melvoin] came alone to pick me up for dinner and that was kind of it. We got together pretty quickly."

In 2005, Cholodenko and Melvoin decided to have a child. As Cholodenko explained, "We were unsure if we were going to do it with a friend or with an anonymous person, and what did that mean for us and for the kid. . . . There was a certain amount of hand wringing over it."

This process led to the idea behind her most successful film to-date, both critically and commercially, *The Kids Are All Right*, released in 2010.

Writing in *The New York Times*, Dennis Lim notes that the film "is a thought experiment of sorts, a film that wonders what might happen when sperm-donor children ask questions—and get answers—about their paternity."

At the center of *The Kids Are All Right* are a lesbian couple, Nic (Annette Bening) and Jules (Julianne Moore), and their two children—Joni, an 18-year-old about to embark on college and her 15-year-old brother, Laser (played, respectively, by Mia Wasikowska and Josh Hutcherson).

Driven by Laser's desire to learn where he came from, and his growing need to make a strong connection with an adult male, Joni contacts their biological father. He turns out to be an easygoing and slightly rakish restaurateur named Paul (Mark Ruffalo).

When the two women learn of their children's secret meetings with their until-then anonymous sperm

donor, they are wary at first but eventually attempt to build a friendly relationship with Paul. However, one of the women has an affair with him, the affair is soon discovered, and the family is very nearly destroyed by this act of betrayal.

Lim again notes, "It is a mark of [Cholodenko's] generosity that her characters don't always act as one might expect, let alone as identity politics dictate. She's aware that it is 'politically incorrect,' as she put it, to show a lesbian character caught up in a torrid heterosexual affair."

Cholodenko worked on the script with a co-writer, Stuart Blumberg, who had been a sperm donor while in college. Both Cholodenko and Blumberg were awarded Best Screenplay at the 2011 Independent Spirit Awards, and were nominated for Best Writing, Original Screenplay at the 2011 Academy Awards.

The Kids Are All Right was voted Movie of the Year at the 2010 AFI Awards and Outstanding Film at the 2011 GLAAD Media Awards. The film was also nominated for Best Picture of the Year at the 2011 Academy Awards.

Annette Bening and Mark Ruffalo also received Academy Award nominations for their work on the film.

Cholodenko also directed the made-for-television film *Cavedweller* (2004), with a script by Anne Meredith and based on the novel by the lesbian author Dorothy Allison, which starred Kyra Sedgwick and Aidan Quinn.

In addition, she has also directed episodes for television series, including *Homicide: Life on the Street* (1999); *Six Feet Under* (2001); *Push, Nevada* (2002), *The L Word* (2005); and *Hung* (2010).

Cholodenko and Melvoin and their son Calder currently reside in Los Angeles.

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About the Author

Craig Kaczorowski writes extensively on media, culture, and the arts. He holds an M.A. in English Language and Literature, with a focus on contemporary critical theory, from the University of Chicago. He comments on national media trends for two newspaper industry magazines.