



## Van Sant, Gus (b. 1952)

by David Ehrenstein

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.  
Entry Copyright © 2002, glbtq, Inc.  
Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

One of the most idiosyncratic talents to have emerged from the independent cinema over the past decade and a half, Gus Van Sant is matter-of-fact about his sexual orientation. More significantly, in his work he represents homosexuality matter-of-factly.

Back when Hollywood was still tip-toeing around the subject of homosexuality, Van Sant's low-budget feature *Mala Noche* (1985) burst onto the emerging gay and lesbian film festival scene with disarming frankness.

Based on the then unpublished writings of Portland, Oregon poet Walt Curtis, the film told of the unrequited love of a skid row liquor store clerk (Tim Streeter) for a Mexican street hustler (Doug Coyote) and his more sexually available hustler pal (Ray Monge). Shot in 16mm black and white, it evidenced a talent of remarkable assurance, as well as bravery.

Van Sant's confidence and courage have stood him in good stead in a career that has encompassed everything from films with high-profile superstars such as Sean Connery to music videos for groups such as the Red Hot Chili Peppers and Hanson, to a thoroughly bizarre shot-for-shot remake of Alfred Hitchcock's 1960 classic film *Psycho* (1998), to such intensely personal short works as the ineffable *Five Naked Boys with a Gun* (1992).

Born in Louisville, Kentucky on July 24, 1952, into a decidedly "mainstream," business-oriented family (his father is responsible for the classic "Mac" raincoat), Van Sant is the perfect example of the American upper-middle-class "black sheep." As a child he evinced interest in artistic pursuits of all kinds and made a number of autobiographical super-8 films.

At the Rhode Island School of Design, which he entered in 1970, Van Sant first fell in love with painting. But then he loved poetry and literature too, particularly the works of the blackest of all "black sheep," William Burroughs, who later became a friend and collaborator. There he was also introduced to the work of such avant-garde filmmakers as Andy Warhol and Jonas Mekas.

Making Portland his home, Van Sant became part of its art and music scene, performing with a band called "Destroy All Blondes." Then he worked for some time in television. His adventures in television--particularly as they relate to the disadvantages of sleeping with your boss--are covered in his wry, self-starred short *Five Ways to Kill Yourself* (1987).

Van Sant's penchant for making experimental shorts--*My New Friend* (1988) and *Ken Death Gets Out of Jail* (1987) being the most remarkable of them--even after his career entered the "mainstream" speaks volumes about his maverick nature.

Van Sant refuses to be pinned down. Instead of making a gay follow-up to *Mala Noche*, he turned to *Drugstore Cowboy* (1989), his extraordinary drama of the life of a "functioning" drug addict (also based on



Gus Van Sant at a screening of *Paranoid Park* in December, 2007. Photograph by Mai Li. Image appears under the Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 License.

then-unpublished material, a novel by James Fogle). The gritty but tender film revitalized the careers of Matt Dillon and Kelly Lynch, while also introducing Heather Graham and James Le Gros.

But following that success, instead of continuing in a more heterosexual direction, he went on to make his gayest film to date, *My Own Private Idaho* (1991). Casting Keanu Reeves and River Phoenix as Portland street hustlers, it mixed Pasolini-style neo-realism with a bizarre restaging of Shakespeare's *Henry IV*.

*Idaho* climaxes with one of the most memorable scenes in modern gay cinema, a campside confession of love by one of the hustler heroes for the other. Interestingly, this scene was conceived not by Van Sant, but by his star, River Phoenix. It is a hallmark of Van Sant's directorial style that he creates an atmosphere that encourages such collaboration.

Still, there is such a thing as being too loose, as Van Sant learned the hard way with his adaptation of Tom Robbins' *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* (1994). Lacking the dramatic coherence of *Drugstore Cowboy* or the playful spontaneity of *My Own Private Idaho*, *Cowgirls* simply never comes alive on the screen.

Van Sant lined up a more focused project for his next venture, *To Die For* (1995). This black comedy about a would-be news journalist (Nicole Kidman) who will not let a loving husband (Matt Dillon) stand in the way of her career was scripted by veteran writer/actor Buck Henry. It also gave Joaquin Phoenix (the former child actor Leaf Phoenix) his first important adult role.

*Good Will Hunting* (1997), Van Sant's most acclaimed mainstream effort, featured veteran comedian Robin Williams as the anticipated draw. But the stars of this tale of a blue-collar math genius proved to be its writer/performer *Wunderkinder*, Matt Damon and Ben Affleck.

Instead of basking in this success or repeating himself, Van Sant followed *Good Will Hunting* with his *Psycho* remake, possibly the most ambitious piece of conceptual art since Warhol.

And then came *Finding Forrester* (2000), another "budding genius" tale starring Sean Connery as mentor to a teen-age underdog. This commercial project is, however, filled with all sorts of personal touches, such as the lavishly orchestrated version of "Deep Night," the Rudy Vallee number used so hauntingly in *My Own Private Idaho*.

Van Sant followed *Finding Forrester* with a two-character film starring Matt Damon and Casey Affleck (who also share writing credit with Van Sant), *Gerry* (2002), and a film of teenage angst set in a Portland high school, *Elephant* (2003).

Given the wide thematic range of his work, it is telling that Van Sant's visual style is equally broad. It encompasses both the swoonily romantic lighting style of cinematographer Jean-Yves Escoffier in *Good Will Hunting* and the edgy, color-saturated style of cinematographer Chris Doyle in *Psycho*.

Van Sant's breadth of style and range of interest are complemented by his quasi-surrealist penchant for making up his next move (be it "highbrow" or "low") as he goes along. There is no way of knowing where Van Sant will find himself next. For this gay "wild card" in the Hollywood pack, being gay is simply one of many stories to be told.

[In 2005, Van Sant released *Last Days*, a film that he characterized as the third part of his "Death Trilogy," seeing it as completing a cycle exploring death that also includes *Gerry* and *Elephant*. It is a fictionalized account of the days leading up to the death of Kurt Cobain.

In the fall of 2008, Van Sant completed the feature film *Milk*, a biography of gay martyr Harvey Milk, based on an original screenplay by Dustin Lance Black and starring Sean Penn.

The film, which was nominated for a Best Picture Academy Award and earned Van Sant an Academy Award nomination as Best Director, has been acclaimed for its dazzling performances (especially by Penn, who won the Academy Award as Best Actor in the title role, and by Josh Brolin, who won an Academy Award nomination for Best Supporting Actor as Dan White, Milk's assassin) and for its success in capturing the tumultuous years of the early gay rights movement in San Francisco.

The film also succeeds in humanizing its hero. Without denying the messiness of Milk's personal life, the film presents him as an ordinary man who achieved genuine heroism through his dedication to the cause of equal rights. A courageous man in the right place at the right time, Van Sant's Milk grew to fill a role that the times demanded.

Perhaps the most controversial aspect of *Milk* is its implicit suggestion that Dan White may have been a deeply closeted homosexual.]

### **Bibliography**

Ehrenstein, David. *Open Secret: Gay Hollywood, 1928-2000*. New York: HarperCollins, 2000.

Maupin, Armistead. "Gus Van Sant." *Interview Magazine* (November 29, 2008): <http://www.interviewmagazine.com/milk/gus-van-sant-milk-1/>

Van Sant, Gus, "The Hollywood Way." *Projections* 3. John Boorman and Walter Donohue, eds. London: Faber & Faber, 1994.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Pink*. New York: Doubleday, 1997.

### **About the Author**

**David Ehrenstein** is author of *The Scorsese Picture: The Art and Life of Martin Scorsese* and *Open Secret: Gay Hollywood 1928-1998* and has contributed to numerous journals, newspapers, magazines, and television shows.