Part Three - Reaching a Wider Audience

While coming out and detailed reportage of the queer experience certainly played their role in raising the profile of lesbians and gay men, it was the arts and media where queer visibility really took off. Film, television, literature and music saw a huge increase in the representation of, and participation by, queer people.

And what was particularly important about this was the global availability of these media. The film and television industries were already global enterprises; an increase in both terrestrial and cable television networks created new, overseas markets for the likes of Channel 4's *Out on Tuesday* and Showtime's *Brothers*. In literature, the growth of queer publishing houses and, in the UK, the resolution of importation restrictions following the Gay's the Word trial, also increased the profile and availability of queer materials.

Film

The Mainstream Studios

The 1980s kicked off with one of the largest protests ever seen against the representation of queer people in film. The protests were triggered by the filming and subsequent release of United Artists' movie *Cruising* and they were particularly significant because it was the first time a film had triggered protests by activists around the world. Cinemas in cities as diverse as London, Manchester, Sydney, Melbourne and San Francisco were picketed, while New York saw active disruption of filming as well as subsequent cinema protests.

In 1980, activists likened *Cruising* to *Birth of a Nation*, a film that demonised black people and lauded white supremacists such as the Ku Klux Klan. Leaflets produced by protestors declared that *"people will die because of this movie"* and that *"sexual violence does not come from gay people as the film suggests – but from heterosexual queer-bashers, fascists and police"*.

Protests had begun more or less from the moment shooting started because the book on which it was based already had a bad reputation. Written by former New York detective Gerald Walker about a real series of gay murders in the city, it had been condemned for stereotyping gay men as well as implying that the victims got what they

deserved. Even before filming had begun *Village Voice* columnist Arthur Bell claimed that the film would be *"the most oppressive, ugly, bigoted look at homosexuality ever presented on the screen"* and called for his readers to *"give Friedkin and his production a terrible time if you spot them in your neighbourhood"*[1].

And that's exactly what they did. Despite director William Friedkin's assurances that the movie would not be a replication of the book, activists did their best to disrupt the filming. Their tactics included renting apartments next to the shoot location then blasting loud music from the windows and using mirrors to deflect the sun's rays to disrupt lighting set-ups. These were so effective that the entire exterior soundtrack had to be re-recorded in post-production.

When the movie finally hit the screens it brought further criticism. Central to this was that it reinforced the notion of 'contamination'; that is, people who have regular contact with homosexuals will turn into homosexuals. This was an argument that homophobes such as Anita Bryant had used repeatedly throughout the 70s to justify discrimination against gays. Thus, the movie begins with a heterosexual cop (played by Al Pacino) going undercover in New York's gay S&M scene in order to track down a serial killer. In the course of the movie it appears that Pacino's character is starting to develop homosexual feelings himself: for example, on one occasion he is discovered naked and bound to a bed in a gay man's apartment – something that is definitely 'over and above the call of duty'.

The movie ends with very strong suggestions that Pacino's character might be responsible for some of the murders himself. Thus we have the additional inference that by associating with homosexual S&M practitioners, Pacino's character has not only become a homosexual, he has also turned into a psychopath.

But *Cruising* wasn't the only 'homo-psycho' movie released in 1980. *Windows* – also from United Artists – was essentially a lesbian version of *Cruising* in as much as it reinforced the 'all homosexuals are borderline psychopaths' line. In this case the focus is a lesbian whose increasing infatuation with her (heterosexual) neighbour ends up getting nasty. This one failed to attract the attention of activists beyond the USA – possibly because the movie itself didn't get that far either. There were no big names associated with the film and its nomination for five Golden Raspberry Awards – Worst Picture, Worst Screenplay, Worst Actress, Worst Supporting Actress and Worst Director

– can also be taken as a good indicator of its quality. Even the director – Gordon Willis – decided never to direct another movie again after his involvement with this one.

The question remains as to whether the protests around *Cruising* or *Windows* had any discernible impact on Hollywood's output. It would be a further 12 years before another film –*Basic Instinct* – triggered protests on a similar scale to those seen with *Cruising*. In the meantime the big studios produced a very mixed bag.

In 1982, Paramount released *Partners*. *The New York Times* called it:

"Hollywood's latest crime against humanity in general and homosexuals in particular ... stupid, tasteless and homophobic, this sleazy, superficial film implies that gay cops can't be trusted to work with straight cops because they might fall in love with them." (2)

In this case Ryan O'Neal and (surprisingly) John Hurt play a pair of mismatched cops; the mismatch being their sexual orientations, of course. O'Neal is the straight cop forced to go undercover with gay cop Hurt to investigate – again – a series of murders of gay men. Lest there be any confusion about the tone of this 'comedy' the promotional poster declares, *"Benson is a cop who wants to clean up the streets ... His partner just wants to redecorate."* While the movie certainly didn't promote the notion of the psychopathic homosexual, it did present Hurt's character as swooning and ineffectual, struggling to keep his eyes off his 'hunky heterosexual' partner.

1982 also saw the release of *Personal Best* (Geffen/Warner Brothers), ostensibly a film about the on- and off-field relationship between two female athletes. Ultimately it ended up reinforcing the notion that lesbianism is just a phase that young women go through until the right man comes along – in this case a water polo player.

Although the love-making scenes were considered to be realistic rather than sensationalist, and some athletics fans considered the shots of the athletes in competition to be particularly realistic, the film still came across predominantly as a soft porn movie for straight men. This wasn't helped by the use of wet T-shirts in the movie's poster nor the addition of the wording *"as featured in the April edition of Playboy"* to the marketing material.

When it came to men's sexuality, however, it was a completely different story. *Making Love* (20th Century Fox), made in the same year as *Personal Best*, is a

movie about two men – one of them married and closeted – falling in love and the consequences for the married man's marriage. The sex scenes are very tame – indeed there is nothing more explicit than the two men shirtless and kissing. Nonetheless, the producers felt it necessary to screen an advance warning to the audience lest they be shocked by the content:

"MAKING LOVE deals openly and candidly with a delicate issue. It is not sexually explicit. But it may be too strong for some people."

No such warning was posted for *Personal Best*, even though the sex scenes are far more explicit than those in *Making Love*. According to *Making Love's* screenplay writer, Barry Sandler, people were squirming in their seats and walking out in disgust at the movie's premiere [3]: yet there were no reports of people doing the same during *Personal Best*, suggesting that, for the men at least, that's exactly what they came to see in the first place.

But, studio warning notwithstanding, *Making Love* didn't treat queers as psychopaths, predators or victims. The gay men were just typical people who happened to be attracted to each other and were able to move on with their lives without killing themselves or each other. This was also the case with United Artists' *Lianna* (1983), where a bored housewife falls in love with one of her college lecturers – who is neither predatory nor unhinged. The film then follows the consequences of that relationship, including the outraged husband denying Lianna access to their two children and the college lecturer returning to her long-term lover. Some of the scenes do have the subtlety of a sledgehammer but, that notwithstanding, the issues raised are explored in a non-judgemental and non-stereotyping fashion without the lesbianism being portrayed as the central problem.

While *Lianna's* somewhat depressing storyline and absence of high profile cast members led to limited exposure, another movie from 1983 – *The Hunger* (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer) – had a star-studded cast that brought in the crowds. It also brought in significant criticism for its portrayal of queer people – in this case lesbians – as predatory. A film about female vampire Miriam (Catherine Deneuve) who needs to acquire 'new blood' in order to maintain eternal youth, it is most famous for its lesbian sex scene where Miriam seduces Sarah (Susan Sarandon). It's all soft-focus, billowing curtains and Delibe's *Flower Duet* as Miriam and Sarah unleash their passion. And it

was this portrayal of the sex scene – essentially, as a straight man's lesbian fantasy – that got lesbian viewers offside, along with the familiar 'homosexual as predator' notion.

Then, in 1985, Steven Spielberg got his hands on Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (Warner Brothers). Whereas earlier complaints about movie makers had centred on their portrayal of queer people, the problem with Spielberg was that he went out of his way to take the lesbians out of the storyline. More at home with mechanical sharks and little boys with alien chums, Spielberg couldn't bring himself to portray the lesbian relationship between two of the movie's principal characters. The physicality and eroticism of the relationship was filtered down to one passionate kiss. Spielberg has subsequently been quoted as admitting he was wrong to play down the lesbian relationship but also claiming he'd do the same again to ensure the movie's PG rating (and, no doubt, safeguard its $98m box office takings in the US alone). Alice Walker is known to have been disappointed by the exclusion of the lesbianism but has diplomatically said she likes the movie anyway – adding that it is very different from the book!

In fairness to Spielberg, however, it should be noted that not all of his films were completely devoid of homosexuals. 1981's *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark* includes an early lecture room scene where most of his (female) students are watching Dr Jones in doe-eyed adoration. When the recess bell rings they all file out dreamily – then one male student strides quickly and nervously past Dr Jones' desk, puts an apple on it then rushes, eyes downcast, from the room. It's a blink-and-you'll-miss-it moment; a plot device inserted solely to further underline Indy's irresistible charisma. And certainly nothing to threaten the movie's PG rating.

The Independent Studios

While Hollywood continued to send out mixed messages, there was hope on the horizon in the form of the independent studios, which produced a much wider variety of movies about queers. Most of these played largely on the arthouse circuit but occasionally some of the major cinema chains were adventurous enough to take them on.

In a number of cases, it was queer people at the helm; one of the most notable being Donna Deitch who, in 1984, directed *Desert Hearts*, regarded by many as the 'breakout' lesbian movie of the 80s. Perhaps one reason for this is that the two main characters manage to resolve the various issues around their increasingly strong lesbian

relationship without the intervention of a man! While their lesbianism is certainly relevant to the storyline it is society's reactions to that lesbianism that is seen as problematic (the film is set in 1959 America), not the relationship itself.

In terms of distribution, *Desert Hearts* was very much an arthouse, rather than cinema complex, kind of movie, but it still managed to gross $2 292 088 at the box office in the US, putting it ahead of *Windows* ($2 128 395) and *Lianna* ($1 530 839). A year later *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, a joint Brazil/US production grossed $17m in the US, making it one of the most successful (positive) queer-themed movies of that decade. The film is essentially about the relationship between two men who are complete opposites but find themselves sharing a prison cell in an unnamed military dictatorship. Sadly, in order to establish just how different the men are, one of them is portrayed as a shallow, effeminate homosexual while the other is a macho revolutionary. The film does redeem itself to some extent, however, by documenting the gay character's transformation into an insightful and ultimately heroic individual whose stand against the dictatorship ultimately costs him his life. The film was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Film and William Hurt, who played the gay character, for Best Actor.

In that same year, 1985, Channel 4 Films released *My Beautiful Laundrette*, the story of the relationship between two young men – one white working class, the other an Asian entrepreneur. Originally planned for television broadcast, the film was so well received at film festivals that it was decided to release it on the cinema circuit first. Like *Desert Hearts*, *Laundrette* was ground-breaking in that it documented the issues around a same sex relationship – men this time – without problematising the relationship itself. In this case the issues included the fact that it was both interracial and interclass thus introducing racism and class hostilities to the mix.

1985 also saw the first AIDS-themed movies, with Arthur J Bressan's *Buddies*, NBC's telemovie *An Early Frost* (discussed in the Television section of this chapter) and Rosa von Praunheim's lesser-known *A Virus Knows No Morals*.

Buddies was a very low-budget film that was, apparently, written in five days and shot in nine. Its director, Arthur J Bressan Jr was better known for gay porn movies until he worked on *Buddies*; the principal exception to this being *Gay USA*, a documentary about Gay Pride events around the USA in 1977. *Buddies* was the first movie to realistically explore the impact of AIDS on people – not just the people with

the disease but the other people in their lives as well. Focusing predominantly on the interactions of two men – one in the late stages of AIDS, the other a young man who had volunteered to befriend him and be his 'buddy' – it communicated very effectively the anger felt within queer communities at the lack of government action at that time.

A Virus Knows No Morals was von Praunheim's angry and cynical take on responses to AIDS – by everyone from people with the virus through liberals and political activists to the medical establishment. Its overall tone was satirical with little attempt to make its characters anything more than parodies. For example, the main character is the owner of a gay bathhouse who does everything he can to block safe sex material reaching his customers but then goes on to develop AIDS himself. In the course of his illness he meets a range of bizarre characters including a woman who wants to have a baby by a gay man *"before they die out"* and a research doctor who declares *"the best defence is shame"*. Unsurprisingly, the film did not do well in either mainstream or arthouse cinemas.

A year later the movie *Parting Glances* would use a more restrained approach – and a bigger budget – to explore the impact that AIDS has on relationships. Whereas *Buddies* has the person with AIDS restricted to a hospital bed, the character with HIV in *Parting Glances* is depicted within his social rather than medical context thus placing greater emphasis on the relationships while still acknowledging the illness. Sadly, both the director of *Buddies* and the director of *Parting Glances* (Bill Sherwood) would be dead from AIDS by the end of the decade.

While *Buddies, Parting Glances* and (especially) *A Virus Knows No Morals* were destined for limited distribution (*Parting Glances* only grossing around half a million dollars in the US, for example), *Longtime Companion*, released in 1989, managed to find its way into mainstream cinema networks. Taking its title from the term the *New York Times* used in its obituaries to avoid acknowledging same-sex partners, it is set over a period of seven years and portrays the impact AIDS has on a group of friends over that period. In so doing, it serves as an overview of the gay community's response to the disease: some are in denial from the outset; others paranoid and others more pragmatic. Unlike *Buddies* and *Parting Glances*, which focus on one individual, *Longtime Companion* sees a number of people diagnosed with and ultimately dying from AIDS, thus allowing a greater exploration of the impact.

With AIDS finally making it as a subject for mainstream movies, it seems ironic

that one of the other successful gay movies of that period – *Torch Song Trilogy* (1988) – didn't mention it at all. But this wasn't a deliberate avoidance of the issue: the play on which the movie was based was written pre-AIDS in the 1970s. Nonetheless, the issues explored – including bisexuality, hostile parents, gay parents and homophobic violence – were as relevant then as they are now.

With the exception of *Desert Hearts*, lesbians were poorly represented in mainstream or arthouse movies throughout the 80s. Both *Lianna* and *Personal Best* had reinforced the notion of the unhappy homosexual and Spielberg felt it necessary to cut the lesbianism from *The Color Purple*. Films by lesbian directors – such as Susan Lambert's *On Guard* (1983), Su Friedrich's *Damned If You Don't* (1987) and the works of Sheila McLaughlin (*Born in Flames* (1983) and *She Must Be Seeing Things* (1987) – all had significantly lower profiles. *November Moon* (1985), the story of two women in Nazi-occupied France, was a relatively popular arthouse movie but never broke into either mainstream cinemas or mainstream awareness. Another movie set around the time of the Second World War, this time in Berlin, was *The Berlin Affair* (1985), which featured a relationship between the wife of a Nazi bureaucrat and the daughter of a Japanese diplomat. Again, this one never got beyond the arthouses (although, given its unhappy ending, maybe this wasn't such a bad thing!).

While lesbian filmmakers struggled for wider recognition, a number of men from the fringe/underground school began to increase their profile. John Waters, for example, had been building a cult following since the 60s with 'bad taste' movies like *Hag in a Black Leather Jacket* and *Eat Your Make-up*. He began the 80s with *Polyester* which, despite being one of the world's first scratch-and-sniff movies, did little to raise his profile beyond existing fans. But in 1988 he and drag superstar Divine became known to mainstream audiences with *Hairspray*, in which Divine played Edna Turnblad, the mother of rebellious teenager Tracy Turnblad. Whether it was the absence of Waters trademark bad taste or the presence of famous names like Debbie Harry, Sonny Bono and Jerry Stiller, the film was a global success, pulling in $6.67m in the USA alone (although the later, straighter version with John Travolta in the Divine role pulled in $118m).

Pedro Almodovar made his first low-budget film, *Pepi, Luci, Bom*, in 1980, only a year after homosexuality was decriminalised in his home country of Spain. Just as John Waters' trademark was bad taste, Almodovar developed his as complex storylines;

in this case concerning the relationship between a lesbian punk singer, a masochistic housewife and a vengeful young woman. Like many of Almodovar's early 80s films, *Pepi, Luci, Bom* was not released outside of Spain until much later (1992 in this case). In the meantime he continued to produce films, most of which included lesbian, gay or transgender characters and often featured the as yet undiscovered Antonio Banderas. In 1982, for example, he directed *Labyrinth of Passions*, which includes Banderas as a gay Muslim terrorist who can track down his victims through his acute sense of smell. In 1983 *Dark Habits* featured a mother superior who was a lesbian drug addict. By 1984 his films – and the extraordinary array of queer characters therein – had begun to reach an international audience and his 1988 film *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* was nominated for a Best Foreign Language Film Academy Award.

At the same time Derek Jarman, an artist already renowned for his homoerotic works (for example, *Sebastiane* in 1976) continued to produce a range of short and full-length films. These included *The Angelic Conversation* (1985), in which two beautiful young men explore the landscape and each other to a soundtrack of Shakespeare's sonnets, and *Caravaggio* (1986), a contemplation of the raucous life of the bisexual artist.

Documentaries

The output of queer documentary makers that had begun in the 70s increased significantly during the 80s. One reason for this was the introduction of videotape, which dramatically reduced the costs of filming while also increasing flexibility. Another was the emergence and sponsorship of progressive television stations like the UK's Channel 4 (whose impact is considered in greater detail later in this chapter), Gay Cable Network in the USA and Australia's Special Broadcasting Service (SBS).

And as the numbers of documentaries increased, so too did the range of topics. For example, there were a number of documentaries that explored the experience of black or Asian lesbians and gay men. These included *If She Grows Up Gay* (1983), *Orientations* (1986), *Looking for Langston* (1988) and *Tongues Untied* (1989).

Before Stonewall (1984) and *Silent Pioneers* (1985) gave us a greater insight into pre-Stonewall queer American history, the Academy Award-winning *The Times of Harvey Milk* (1984) covered an important episode from our more recent history: the life and assassination of out-gay San Francisco politician Harvey Milk.