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# Queer History Through a Hollywood Lens

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## Abstract

Film festivals have been important platforms for promoting independent films that bring to the forefront issues of marginalized communities, especially the struggle for queer justice and visibility. This paper pursues a hypothetical opportunity for programming a film festival screening centered on queer stories. The direction of this paper will take the form of a film festival curator's statement that links three films with common themes and issues. The overarching, common thread holding the proposed films together is the mainstream Hollywood influence behind the exhibition and consumption of the films—The Academy Awards (otherwise known as The Oscars). Three major Academy Award-winning and nominated feature films will be used to exemplify the type of films that film festivals ought to program, thus, making more of an impact for queer representation in both the public discourse and mass media. The three films proposed for this hypothetical film festival program are, in order of appearance in this paper: Tom Hooper's *The Danish Girl* (2015), Morten Tyldum's *The Imitation Game* (2014), and Gus Van Sant's *Milk* (2008). Programming three films that utilize

queer history to positively represent queer individuals and experiences will catalyze more queer opportunities in Hollywood, politics, and society at large. Moreover, this paper will combine scholarly research, press articles, and a variety of media, to create a discourse regarding the importance of screening the aforementioned films. Although these films were, by and large, produced and distributed by independent production companies, they garnered success in Hollywood via nominations and wins at the Academy Awards.

*Keywords:* Academy Awards, Oscars, queer, film festival

## Motion Picture Production Code

The emergence of scientific research on homosexuality surfaced around the same time early motion picture production began to make advances in technology towards the end of the nineteenth century (Benshoff & Griffin, 2004, p. 6). Due to the concurrent nature of early cinema and homosexuality research, films act as a medium documenting how sexuality has been perceived through the decades (Benshoff & Griffin, 2004, p. 6). Potential queer representation could be traced back to an early short film by Dickson (1895) of two men dancing together. Although the film did not feature an

overtly “gay” interaction, it leaves room for interpretation as there is a “queer” aspect to the performance that does not align completely with what is expected of a heterosexual couple (Benshoff & Griffin, 2004, p. 6). Despite the fact that the construction of “queer characters often reflected the early-twentieth-century model of homosexuality as gender inversion,” films made during the Silent Era, pre-Code, allowed for the inclusion of queer characters that defied traditional gender norms (Benshoff & Griffin, 2004, p. 6). However, this all ended in 1934 with the implementation of the Motion Picture Production Code, which was an attempt to correct what was deemed “immoral” representations existing on-screen, thus, creating the constraint of how “classical Hollywood films used connotation rather than denotation when dealing with on-screen homosexuality, and thus created moments and characters that were more queer than specifically homosexual” (Benshoff & Griffin, 2004, p. 7). Against the backdrop of celebrity scandals and crimes, with the added pressures of how “state and local censorship laws forbade depicting homosexuality in a forthright manner,” it became fitting at a time with McCarthyism that the Code was adopted to improve the moral standard of society (Benshoff & Griffin, 2004, p. 7).

The Code was a strictly enforced set of guidelines, ensuring that the “explicit representation (or even the mention) of ‘sex perversion’ was banned from Hollywood movie screens for almost three decades” (Benshoff & Griffin, 2004, p. 7). Homosexuality or any non-heterosexual content was prohibited from production and

exhibition. According to the Motion Picture Production Code, the only acceptable romantic representations to be depicted on-screen is that of “*Pure love*, the love of a man for a woman permitted by the law of God and man” (Doherty, 1999, p. 354). Only heterosexual relationships were deemed acceptable as anything else was labeled inappropriate and the “other.” Evidently, during the era of the Code, values were more conservative, signaling the importance of upholding religious standards of morality. Any representation that steered away from a heterosexual relationship within the institution of marriage was deemed impure (Doherty, 1999, p. 355). Beyond Hollywood feature films, the educational propaganda film, *Boys Beware* (1961), dramatizes scenarios that depict gay men as pedophiles and homosexuality itself as a mental illness, a disease. Thus, depictions of queer individuals were never flattering or accurate up until the weakening of the Motion Picture Production Code in the 1950s, and its replacement with the Motion Picture Association of America film rating system in 1968 (Benshoff & Griffin, 2004, p. 9).

## Screening Order

With the cultural backdrop of negative queer representation in Hollywood, I propose, for your consideration, a special presentation of Academy Award-nominated feature films that chronicle the lived experiences of openly queer historical figures in a positive manner. The three notable films chosen include 1. *The Danish Girl* (events take place in the 1920s), 2. *The Imitation Game*



(events take place during World War II in the 1940s), and 3. *Milk* (events take place in the 1970s). Since this proposal includes the three aforementioned films together, feature films adapted from true historical events—organizing the films in chronological order based on their historical time periods is the most logical course of action, based on the years of the diegesis of each film. The importance of this screening is the inclusion of mainstream Hollywood films that cover issues of prominent queer historical figures. The goal of this film festival screening is to grant visibility to the queer experience of individuals who respectively lived through gender dysphoria, war, or homophobia. The intent of this proposal is to catalyze the positive representation of queer characters “in motion,” instead of dehumanized, “othered” bodies, despite the tragedy involved with the queer historical figures in the proposed films, by using queer historical context to tie in the relevance of these narratives to current events.

### The Danish Girl

Tom Hooper’s *The Danish Girl* (2015) is a coming-of-age historical drama that chronicles the journey of Einar Wegener (Eddie Redmayne) receiving one of the first sex reassignment surgeries to transition from being biologically male to identifying as a transgender female in the late 1920s. Throughout the majority of the film, she identifies with a name of her own choosing: Lili Elbe. Elbe shall be referred to using feminine pronouns for the rest of this paper. Elbe was formerly a Danish painter living with her spouse, Gerda Wegener (Alicia Vikander), who

was also a painter. Wegener would often have Elbe dress up as a woman to be her painting subject, invoking Elbe’s lifelong identification as a woman, hidden through her heterosexual relationship with Wegener. In the film, there are scenes where Wegener copulates with Elbe, who wears women’s clothing in secret, which brings to fore the discussion of gender and gender identity, as well as sexuality. The essence of *The Danish Girl* is romance, but the coming-of-age theme takes prominence as this film dramatizes an early historical instance of a transitioning individual. Commencing with a love story humanizes these characters because love is arguably a “universal language.” The fact that these characters are loosely based on historical figures will make the characters feel more tangible and significant since Elbe was a real queer figure whose legacy headlines a major Hollywood film that has reached a global audience and received many accolades, including several Academy Award nominations, most notably, Vikander’s Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress for her portrayal of Wegener and Redmayne’s Academy Award for Best Actor nomination for his portrayal of Elbe.

Prefacing this special presentation with a transgender narrative is best demonstrated by the emblematic scene of Elbe looking in a mirror, stripping, taking her penis out, and tucking it behind her thighs to appear more “womanly” hence visually erasing her masculinity. This scene is strikingly similar to a scene in Jonathan Demme’s *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) where Jame Gumb (Ted Levine), also known as Buffalo Bill,

puts on makeup and tucks her penis away as she dances to music. However, Gumb is portrayed as a serial killer who kills women and skins them to produce a suit made of skin. Thus, a disturbing representation of a cross-dressing individual has existed through this film in a very prominent manner. *The Silence of the Lambs* won five out of seven Academy Award nominations. Juxtaposing these two scenes is significant as Elbe shows us a more positive, contemporary representation of a transgender individual that may be more accurate and flattering, whereas, with *The Silence of the Lambs*, Gumb is framed as an unstable serial killer. Including *The Danish Girl* and excluding *The Silence of the Lambs* points to the importance of positive representation of queer individuals, whether they be historical or fictional. All the films included should help promote positive visibility, rather than perpetuate misrepresentative archetypes that have detrimental implications on how people view transgender individuals in society. Let us not forget that negative stereotypes of transgender individuals have permeated through other prominent films like Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) with the inclusion of the murderous cross-dresser, Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins) (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006, p. 93). Although *The Silence of the Lambs* and *Psycho* are critically acclaimed films that appear on the American Film Institute (n.d.) Top 100 list, these films should be excluded from queer-positive screenings, and instead, leave room for more accurate portrayals of transgender individuals and history, best demonstrated by *The Danish Girl*.

## Queer Theory

It is important to discuss the significance of cross-dressing to produce the feminine gender identity that Elbe seeks to create. By way of transformation through material means, the coming-of-age aspect of this film points to the site of how “a closet references the familiar coming-out trope of LGB narratively, a closet is also gendered—representing the snare of assigned sex and its required public performances through clothing” (Keegan, 2018, p. 4). The “coming-out trope” simply represents the coming-of-age genre of Hollywood narratives for queer individuals, and oftentimes, it involves exploration with clothing. Clothing often contains a gendered denotative appearance, which is essential to representing gender on-screen. In the case of *The Danish Girl*, prior to undergoing surgery, to transition to womanhood, Elbe experimented with trying on women's clothing, wearing a wig, and putting on makeup. To perhaps get a better understanding of the importance of clothing to transgender individuals, let's define a few things like gender expression, which are “external manifestations of gender, expressed through a person's name, pronouns, clothing, haircut, behavior, voice, and/or body characteristics” (GLAAD, n.d.). Transgender individuals struggle with their gender identity, which often does not align with the sex they were assigned at birth. Thus, transgender individuals may feel compelled to transition through surgical or other methods. Clothing is seemingly the most accessible and immediate method of transforming one's self to the preferred gender expression that aligns with one's



gender identity.

However, why open the screening with this particular film beyond the diegetic date? Historically, queer studies emerged as a more recent research area in the 1990s following the emergence of gay and lesbian studies in the 1970s. The very term queer, once a slur, was reclaimed and utilized as an academic word to encapsulate the diverse spectrum of genders and sexualities after feminist scholars prompted queer theory as an area of study (Benshoff & Griffin, 2004, p. 1). Queer theory is centered around the fluidity of gender and sexuality, and the exploration of the various forms of these identities. The transgender experience is a more recent topic of discussion, especially for non-binary individuals who continue to be misgendered and invalidated on a daily basis. The relevance of this screening points to how politically, transgender rights are being infringed upon. According to Green, Benner, and Pear (2018), approximately 1.4 million transgender Americans are at risk of losing protection against gender discrimination due to President Donald Trump's intentions of legally framing sex as a biological binary of male or female under the Title IX Law. In short, these individuals who wish to freely express their preferred gender identity are soon at risk of being rendered invisible. Presenting *The Danish Girl* as the opening film is an approach to provide visibility to marginalized transgender individuals around the world. However, the coupling of *The Danish Girl* with the next film gestures to a more sinister truth.

## The Imitation Game

Morten Tyldum's *The Imitation Game* (2014) dramatizes the career of Alan Turing (Benedict Cumberbatch), a cryptanalyst who broke Nazi codes for Britain during World War II, which in turn saved an estimated 14 million lives. However, throughout the film, his personal life was investigated, with the government finding out he was homosexual, which was illegal in Britain at the time. As punishment, he was subjected to chemical castration via an experimental estrogen treatment meant to "cure" him of his homosexuality. In the denouement, the visible results of the hormonal therapy are depicted. Turing is shown as mentally unstable and physically sickly. We are presented with a hero who is punished because of his queerness, which instantly frames him as a sympathetic gay character. Similarly, in *The Danish Girl*, there is one instance of Wegener bringing Elbe to get medical help to "fix" her condition through therapy and radiation treatment on her genitals. Pairing this film with *The Danish Girl* is important because both offer examples of real instances of queer individuals being punished for "abnormal" sexualities and gender identities. Yet, it is imperative that we portray these uncomfortable realities to audiences, as these are not made up stories. They may be romanticized for the mainstream market, but the significance is still valid as the queer community will be able to hail these individuals as martyrs and pioneers who have paved the path for the newer generations. With nine Academy Award nominations and the Academy Award for Best Adapted Screenplay for writer,

Graham Moore, it is unequivocal that Turing's life has been immortalized in a significant way.

Although Turing's gay subplot takes prominence toward the end of the third act, the fact that his own country betrays him, despite being revered as a hero before he was outed for his homosexuality, points to how "oppression positions homosexual masculinity at the bottom of a gender hierarchy among men" (Connell, 2005, p. 10). Fundamentally, Turing's accomplishments and service to his country were immediately disregarded due to the fact that he possessed a "deviant" sexual preference, which made the British government perceive him as less of a human being. Thus, he is seen as the "other." He is dehumanized and subjected to castration. Turing's disconformity with heterosexuality is seen as unacceptable in the view of the British government, which perceives Turing's sexual orientation as what Connell (1992) articulates as one of the "contradictions to hegemonic masculinity posed by male homosexuality" (as cited in Bird, 1996, p. 14). Oftentimes, an idealized masculinity is constructed by avoiding traditionally homosexual or feminine traits and performances. Being homosexual in Turing's time was seen as taboo, an immoral act that countered the church and society at large. The same could be said for today; however, one could argue we live in a more tolerant time. Still, there is always room for improvement.

## Milk

Gus Van Sant's *Milk* (2008) focuses

on Harvey Milk (Sean Penn), the first openly gay politician to be elected from California in 1978. He served as a Member of the Board of Supervisors in San Francisco, California as a pro-gay rights advocate after several failed election attempts. *Milk* opens with a voice recording of Milk reciting his will in anticipation of an assassination attempt, as he is a prominent activist for gay rights during a time where anti-gay sentiment pervaded the public consciousness of the United States. He was, in fact, assassinated on November 27, 1978, at age 48. The film opens on the eve of his assassination, which would lead us to ask: Why would a film open with the death of its protagonist? Perhaps the intention was to prioritize the rise of Milk's career in politics and gay activism. The filmmakers seem to focus more on the life of Milk and frame the diegesis to make audiences forget about his untimely death, in essence stating that what he did when he was alive was more important than the fact that he was assassinated. The film was rewarded with eight Academy Award nominations, with two wins including the Academy Award for Best Actor in a Leading Role for Penn for his performance as Milk, and the Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay for writer, Dustin Lance Black. To top it off, Black and director, Gus Van Sant, who was also nominated for the Academy Award for Best Director, are both openly gay men in Hollywood who produced a film about a prominent gay politician.

*Milk* begins in medias res, leading to the denouement of Milk's death. This serves as the introduction to the first act of the film and explicitly frames the story of a gay man front



and center—tragically. Although *Milk* starts with the aftermath of the assassination of the protagonist, I argue that showing his death first allows the film to play out as celebrating Milk's life instead of focusing on the tragedy. Milk is represented as a queer icon, a fully realized human being instead of a stagnant, "othered" dead body. In other words, his death will not define him; his career in politics and gay activism will. Including Milk's story is imperative to promoting positive visibility of queer narratives. A significant string of events that took place in the diegesis in *Milk* is how the Proposition 6 law banned gays and lesbians from seeking public school employment in the state of California. Proposition 6 was one of the many obstacles Milk faced in his struggle for gay rights. Through his activism and politics, the referendum failed, which was a significant victory for the gay community at the time. Today, we have marriage equality under the law for all Americans. We must reflect on the individuals who pioneered and championed these unprecedented changes to get us to the present day.

### Gay Rights Today

Although same-sex marriage is legal in the United States, the Supreme Court recently ruled in favor of the baker that refused a gay couple service for a wedding cake, utilizing the protection of the First Amendment for free speech and religious expression (ABC News, 2018). With the progress that has been made for LGBTQIA+ rights and visibility, especially with Jared Polis becoming the first openly gay governor elected in the United States after the recent midterm

election on November 6, 2018, those in the community seem to continue to be treated as second-class citizens in the United States, being subjected to violence (CNN, 2018). It was not too long ago that Pulse, a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida, was subject to one of the deadliest mass shootings in the United States. Gay and lesbian deaths are all too common in our films and reality. We need films like *Milk* to reaffirm the progress for equal rights under the law for gay and lesbian individuals is headed in the right direction. However, how do we justify the inclusion of *Milk*, which depicts a dead gay man in the very first minutes of the film? If we are suggesting that we program these films together to advocate for a more positive and accurate representation of queer characters, perhaps we should avoid romanticizing the lived experiences of queer historical figures. History is ugly. Too many queer individuals die too young.

### Queer Tragedy

The unfortunate fact of the matter is that we include films that show queer pain and death, which has been a recurring trope in Hollywood. Hollywood has often killed off queer characters throughout history as "films punish their queer characters by killing them in quite brutal ways," portraying the unfortunate fact that queer characters seem to be disposable, or "sideline" characters in Hollywood films, or serve as supporting characters, such as the "gay best friend" character (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006, p. 90). Queer characters often function to support the lead characters that, by and large, tend

to be heterosexual and cisgender. The unfortunate fact of all these three films is their depictions of queer tragedy. In *The Danish Girl*, Elbe dies after her surgery. The film shows a biologically male individual transitioning to identifying as a woman. Many audience members may be exposed to this kind of story for the first time and be touched by Elbe's gender identity struggle. In *The Imitation Game*, Turing meets a terrible fate with his chemical castration, which leads to his eventual suicide from one year of treatment. At first glance, this story seems tragic, however, the reality is that Turing will be hailed as not only a war hero but a queer hero. In *Milk*, although the story of Milk meets a tragic ending, the film will compel audiences to identify parallels of the gay and lesbian struggle for civil rights to the transgender struggle happening today. I argue that the aforementioned films depict the greatness of these real historical figures. Their deaths and pain take a back seat to the actual lives they lived as shown in each of the films. This screening will not only have a large impact in inspiring change beyond the movie theater, but also in catalyzing discussion into the public sphere to influence policy, tolerance, and acceptance regarding non-heteronormative identities and non-heterosexual sexualities.

## Conclusion

The inclusion of these three films create visibility for queer historical figures, thus, queer representation at large. As Academy Award-nominated films, these depictions have reached a stage where the national dialogue on

queer representation has the potential of being catalyzed on a grand scale. The significance of this screening is that these mainstream Hollywood films signify the importance of queer stories and voices. They matter because Hollywood has the potential to influence global culture and economy as in "no other cultural area is America's export prowess so strong. Movies are very expensive to make" (Cowen, 2015, p. 405). If Hollywood is paying attention to these underrepresented stories and voices, there is a higher chance that a mainstream audience will too. It is important to reflect on the success of the films in regards to accolades and box office. However, programming these films together gestures to the importance of bringing to the forefront the history of those that have come before. It is imperative that we promote the significance of the adaptations of true queer powerhouses to the screen as these are real role models to draw inspiration from. If we want real change, I believe we have to start from working within the Hollywood system to really make a global impact. Not to put doubt on more underground, independent queer film, but I believe accolades matter because they lead to the visibility of a film. 26.5 million viewers tuned in for the 90th Academy Awards last year. This is a huge platform for any feature film, especially queer-centric narratives. I strongly believe screening these three films together for a single night will be an excellent catalyst for discussion regarding the global queer experience.

We are presented with three different queer individuals who lived very different lives in different time



periods. History is an incredibly important tool to reach marginalized individuals that did not know their own history. Queer youth and adults will be able to use this screening as inspiration towards more advocacy work and potentially producing queer-centric films that can take more of an intersectional lens. This screening seeks to subvert the male gaze, the heterosexual, heteronormative lens we are often forced to view films through. Film festivals are a place to learn and discover. These films provide the perfect educational entertainment. What better way to teach history than with fiction, at 24 frames per second, in a dark movie theater, with characters you fall in love with that have gone through similar experiences as you? Perhaps you are gay and you really found Milk and Turing to be highly inspirational. Perhaps you are a transgender woman that never really saw herself on-screen until seeing *The Danish Girl*. Ultimately, that is who I

want to cater to through this screening, the queer individuals that feel invisible and marginalized. Hopefully, seeing characters similar to themselves will inspire queer individuals to empower themselves through coming out and making their voices heard. Ultimately, this screening gives a voice to the queer community using cinema as the mode of disseminating queer history. Queer experiences are human experiences. Queer individuals are more than bodies, they are characters that live on despite the tragedy and politics involved with being queer in a heterosexual, heteronormative world. This screening would immortalize these queer historical figures further for future generations to preserve queer history, and mobilize more queer individuals to go out and make queer history. I thank you for your consideration of the “Queer History Through a Hollywood Lens” screening block for the hypothetical queer film festival.

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