

Decades of Denial:

Hollywood Portrayals of Lesbianism, 1930-1997

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Hollywood films have been an essential element of America culture throughout the twentieth century. The prevalence of the films produced by major studios makes them significant indicators of mainstream Americans' acceptance of various images on the screen as well as in the society; these films depict contemporary ideas and issues discussed in other areas of the mass media. The significant role Hollywood plays in reflecting the popular culture makes mainstream film's portrayal of lesbianism an indicator of the types of lesbian images mainstream Americans' are willing to accept. An analysis of the development of lesbian portrayals in Hollywood films reveals an increasing level of visibility, paralleling the increasing level of lesbian visibility found in other aspects of society as illustrated by mass media publications, including *Time* and *Newsweek*. Beginning with the depiction of lesbianism as an individual pathological disorder in the 1960s to the early 1990s' portrayals of lesbianism as an accepted lifestyle, Hollywood has remained in sync with prevailing media images, although mainstream film has failed to provide the validation that would come from depicting a successful lesbian relationship on screen.

American mass media first began to expose the country to the concept of "homosexuality" in the early 20th century with the dissemination of the work done by sexologists in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Sex researchers made new evaluations of behaviors that had rarely been discussed. Richard von Krafft-Ebbing determined that all non-procreative sexuality was perversion. Women with sexual feelings for other women were seen as men trapped in women's bodies and classified as "sexual inverts" whose behavior was considered abnormal and perverted. <1> By 1916, the influence of these early European sexologists could be seen in the United States' academic community. Although only one article concerning lesbian behavior appeared in *The Index Catalogue the Library Of the Surgeon General's Office* between 1740 and 1895, the same publication listed one hundred books and 566 articles about women's sexual perversions/inversions, including lesbian behavior, between 1896 and 1916. <2>

Academic discussions about lesbianism and homosexuality gradually filtered to the general population, altering views of female intimacy by providing terms like "sexual invert" to describe women who loved other women. By the end of World War I, Americans were aware of the work of the most famous of sexologist, Sigmund Freud. Freud's psychoanalytic approach to the study of sexuality was incorporated into popular culture and everyday life in America during the 1920s. Although Freud stated that exclusive homosexuality was a sign of arrest in psychosexual development, he also felt homosexuality did not necessarily need to be cured. Post-Freudian psychologists added their own interpretations of homosexuality as a pathological flight from normal heterosexual relations. <3> Freud's influence brought attention to the work of other sexologists who had studied lesbianism and classified it as a disorder. The new

classifications changed people's perceptions of female "romantic friendships" from harmless to unnatural.

The proliferation of ideas about homosexuality that occurred in America during the 1920s contributed to fears concerning lesbianism as the country entered the uncertain and turbulent 1930s. The economic crisis facing the United States limited women's opportunities for independence and brought hostility toward women who took jobs away from men. Lesbians seeking to live free and independent lives faced the hostility that confronted all women in the job market. <4> The difficult times of the Great Depression along with the new ideas concerning homosexuality made mainstream Americans suspicious of love between women and created a cultural climate that sought to eliminate any images that might be perceived as condoning such perverse behavior.

By the 1930s, any discussion of prevailing images in America had to include Hollywood movies. Americans were increasingly looking to Hollywood motion pictures as an escape from the problems the country faced; the movies emerged as a major form of entertainment and a mass medium that diffused images throughout society. Hollywood's importance as a provider of images to American society is illustrated in the industry's decision to regulate itself. The movie industry was pressured by the threat of external censorship to place restrictions on certain types of material which were considered morally unsuitable for American audiences. The industry established the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) in the late 1920s in an effort to provide positive public relations and avoid outside censorship. Under its first Administrator, Will Hays, the MPPDA formulated the Motion Picture Code in 1930. The Code was intended to make sure that Hollywood films did not contribute to lowering the moral standards of the public; therefore, the Code forbade the depiction of anything that violated divine, natural, or human law. <5> The Code was strengthened and more severely enforced after the Catholic Church's Legion of Decency began to criticize the industry. As a result of the Code, movies that depicted such immoral things as prostitution, adultery or sex perversion were denied the MPPDA seal of approval or were forced to eliminate scenes and references that fell outside of the established guidelines.

The implementation of the Production Code demonstrated that many people felt the movies had the power to influence behavior and attitudes. Although the actual influence that movies have on public opinion is difficult to measure, Hollywood's dependence on a paying audience has required that it reflect images acceptable to American audiences. In the 1930s, unacceptable images included those of homosexuality or "sex perversion." The Production Code reflected the strong influence of the more conservative elements of society and prevented mainstream American audiences from being exposed to lesbian images.

As a result of the Production Code, homosexuality in Hollywood films of the 1930s, 40s and 50s was virtually nonexistent. Although some films such as *Morocco* (1930) and *Queen Christina* (1933) have been cited as having lesbian images through the cross-dressing stars of Marlene Dietrich and Greta Garbo, these films had no clear lesbian relationships. The sexuality of the characters may be questionable to some viewers who

consider Garbo's tuxedo and Dietrich's male attire as an outward indicator of "sexual inversion;" however, the possible lesbian tendencies of these characters is not definitively evident in either film to cite as an example of lesbianism. The absence of clear lesbian characters and relationships on the screen in the 1930s coincided with the prevailing cultural view that such behavior was immoral, perverse and unacceptable. Any film attempting to depict lesbian images was in violation of the established Production Code.

One of the first films affected by the Production Code's restrictions was the German film *Mädchen in Uniform* (1931). The lesbian feelings a young girl has for her teacher in the film were apparently too clear for the Hays Office which condemned *Mädchen in Uniform* until revisions to the film made the lesbianism less obvious and more of a matter of interpretation. Changes in the approved version of the film included the deletion of glances between the young girl and her teacher and the elimination of the girl's proclamation of love for her teacher. Although *Mädchen in Uniform* has been cited as one of the most famous lesbian films and the first seen publicly in America, the film's American distributor, John Krimsky, insisted that the movie was not about lesbianism. Even without the lesbian content, the independent distribution of this film limited its viewing audience.

The Production Code served its purpose and throughout the 1940s and 50s: no clear lesbian images made their way to the big screen American audiences were spared the exposure of immoral behaviors through the diligent work of the Hays Office. Although Americans had little choice in what types of material were being censored or eliminated, Americans did not appear discontented with the absence of lesbian images in Hollywood movies. During the 40s and 50s, mainstream Americans did not want lesbians visible in society much less depicted in movies.

Many Americans became suspicious of women's relationships with one another as events such as World War II brought women together in the war effort through military and civil service. By the beginning of World War II, the American public had been exposed to the sexologists' terms and had read about these female inverters in Radclyffe Hall's famous depiction of a woman's desire for other women in her novel, *The Well of Loneliness*, which was widely read when it was published in the United States in 1928. <6> In the decade following the war, America entered a period of conservatism that encouraged women to return to their homes. Women who chose to be with each other rather than to be wives of men were not praised for their independence in the 1950s.

Lesbianism also received more attention after studies revealed homosexual behavior to be more prevalent than previously thought. The results of Alfred Kinsey's work for the Institute for Sex Research were published in 1948 and 1953. Kinsey's studies indicated that 10 percent of American males were more or less exclusively homosexual and 28 percent of American females had homoerotic interests in the same sex at some point in their adult lives. Americans were shocked to read that "thirty-seven per cent of the total male population has at least some overt homosexual experience to the point of orgasm between adolescence and old age." <7> The statistics for homosexual experience between males were much higher than females; however, these figures frightened Americans and

contributed to the persecution of all homosexuals. Although Kinsey's findings may have been over-estimated, these figures were widely discussed in the mass media in publications such as *Newsweek* and *Time*. <8>

Conservative leaders used Kinsey's assertions of widespread homosexuality to authorize an investigation into the employment of homosexuals in the government. Senator Joseph McCarthy led the crusade to remove homosexuals from positions in the federal government. He claimed that homosexuals were a threat to the nation as a security risk because of their alleged lack of emotional stability and their high risk for being blackmailed. <9> Investigators also explored the possible connections between homosexuals and leftist groups.

The intolerance of homosexuality that characterized the 1950s did not prevent the first lesbian organization from being formed. The Daughters of Bilitis (DOB) emerged from the subculture that developed after many women came together in larger cities during World War II. Although DOB was only a small group of women dedicated to publishing a magazine, *The Ladder*, and advancing the acceptance of lesbians in society, the women were investigated by government informants who infiltrated the organization and gave the Federal Bureau of Investigation the names of the membership. The intolerance of the 1950s is further illustrated by the nearly 5,000 men and women who were dismissed from civilian organizations and the armed forces for being homosexual. <10>

America's increased awareness of homosexuals that resulted from the Kinsey studies and the increased attempts by the government to expel homosexuals from government agencies resulted in the increased discussion of homosexuality within the popular culture. Although Hollywood attempted to do its part to enforce the conservative agenda dominating America in the 1950s, Americans were beginning to show signs that they were willing to pay to view films containing content that the MPPDA found inappropriate, and the Production Code's authority began to weaken by the mid-fifties. *The Moon Is Blue* (1953) and *The Man With The Golden Arm* (1953), which violated the Code by depicting adultery and drug use respectively, were successfully released despite the denial of official approval. Rather than allowing future films to defy the authority of the Association, the Code was revised in 1956 to eliminate restrictions on the use of narcotics, prostitution and miscegenation in film. By the 1960s, the only specific restriction on subject matter mentioned in the Production Code was against sex perversion. <11>

The final restriction of the Production Code was removed as studios wanting to produce films with forbidden content increased pressure on the MPPDA. On October 3, 1961, the Motion Picture Association of America approved a change in the Production Code to allow the depiction of homosexuality and other sexual aberrations when "treated with care, discretion and restraint." <12> Major studios were considering releasing films that dealt with these subjects; therefore, the Code was modified in order to keep an appearance of control. <13> Changes in the acceptable images of Hollywood films reflected mainstream Americans' limited willingness to view homosexuality in the mass media. Homosexuality could be portrayed and discussed as long as the images and

discussions were "safe" and "discrete," which usually meant revealing the social condemnation of homosexuals.

One film that facilitated changes in the Production Code by threatening to proceed even without approval from the Hays Office was *The Children's Hour* an adaptation of Lillian Hellman's 1934 play. Pressure from the film's distributors, United Artists and the Mirisch Company, influenced the removal of the restrictions against homosexuality in film. An earlier adaptation of the play had to be stripped of its lesbian content to meet the Hays Office's approval in 1936. This early film version, titled *These Three*, replaced lesbian content with adultery and the producers denied any connection to Hellman's play which was known to contain lesbian themes.

By 1963, Hellman's play was allowed to come to the screen with its lesbian content intact as an example of a "tasteful" treatment of homosexuality. *The Children's Hour* represents the first major film released in the United States to deal clearly with lesbianism. The nature of the depiction of the lesbianism in this film reflects the type of images that were considered tasteful to American audiences in the early 1960s. Hollywood was ready to release a film with lesbian content as long as lesbianism was treated as an unhealthy condition with no opportunity for happiness. In *The Children's Hour*, Shirley MacLaine and Audrey Hepburn co-star as headmistresses of a boarding school for young girls from wealthy families. After a little girl whispers to her grandmother a lie about a sexual relationship between the two women, the accusation spreads and the school is destroyed as parents remove their children.

The film is meant to illustrate how lies have the power to destroy the lives of innocent people; however, the movie takes an interesting turn as MacLaine's character, Martha Dobie, realizes there may be some basis for the child's lie. Martha is forced to confront her own feelings for her friend Karen (Hepburn) and in an emotional scene, she reveals her true feelings to Karen. In a speech filled with torment and self-hatred, Martha cries, "I'm guilty! I've ruined your life and I've ruined my own. I feel so damn sick and dirty, I just can't stand it anymore." The words "lesbian" and "homosexuality" are never used in the film; however, the implications are clear. Martha explains to Karen, "There's something in you, and you don't know anything about it because you don't know it's there. I couldn't call it by name before, but I know now. It's there. It's always been there ever since I first knew you."

Martha's self-realization leads to her suicide. The little girl's lie revealed a truth that was unacceptable to Martha whose death ends her struggles with her lesbian feelings. Martha's failure to accept herself eliminates all possibilities of a lesbian relationship in the film. The reaction of the parents resulting in the downfall of the school is an example of the power that even a lie about lesbianism has to destroy. The lesbianism in *The Children's Hour* is limited by Martha's internal conflicts with self-acceptance; Martha cannot be accepted by another woman if she is not able to accept herself. The reaction of the parents who abhor the idea of Martha's lesbianism contributes to her self-hatred causing her to blame herself for destroying their lives.

The resolution of *The Children's Hour* is characteristic of the fate of homosexual characters in the movies of the 1960s. Although the issue of invisibility was remedied, the increasing visibility of lesbians was accompanied by portrayals of violent, predatory, overt or lonely homosexuals. *The Children's Hour* represents a typical characterization in which a repressed, tortured homosexual commits suicide because it appears to be the only viable option to dealing with such unacceptable sexual desires. The existence of lesbians in society in the early 1960s could be recognized through Hollywood only if the depiction properly identified lesbian feelings as hopelessly life destroying.

Reactions to the depiction of lesbianism in *The Children's Hour* were mixed. A review in *Time* magazine criticized the "implied happy ending" stating that despite the "it's- really all -right" music, it is really not "all right.", Others attacked *The Children's Hour* for condoning lesbianism. This criticism stemmed from a scene that implied the possibility that lesbianism did not necessarily lead to destruction. Karen states "This is not a new sin they say we've done. Other people haven't been destroyed by it." Martha replies, "They're the people who want it. Who believe in it. Who have chosen it for themselves. That must be very different."

A reviewer in *The Commonwealth* expressed a longing "for the relatively tame good old days when . . . items about wayward spouses were shocking patrons of the flickers." The reviewer's greatest problem with the film's treatment of lesbianism is that it is unrealistic:

Would two supposedly intelligent school teachers, who probably had Psych I and II and several education courses in college, be so naïve about their situation and so thrown by adversity? Would the doctor-fiancée of one of the women believe the lie and walk out on her? Would the other teacher, suddenly realizing her love for this woman, believe that this is the end of the world for her?

The reviewer goes on to state that the moving scene in which MacLaine reveals the truth to Hepburn makes "one want to pack her off at once to a good psychiatrist." <14>

An essay in *Time* magazine published in 1966 attempted to address the subject of homosexuality becoming a "freely discussed and widely analyzed" issue. The essay cites examples of the increasing evidence of homosexuality in the United States including Kinsey's research. Possible causes and cures are also evaluated. The author asserts "the consensus is that it [homosexuality] is caused psychically, through a disabling fear of the opposite sex." <15> The essay concludes:

It is a pathetic little second-rate substitute for reality, a pitiable flight from [it]. As such it deserves fairness, fairness understanding and when possible treatment. But it deserves no encouragement, no glamorization, no rationalization, no fake status as minority martyrdom, no sophistry about simple differences in taste and above all, no pretense that it is anything but a pernicious sickness.

Attitudes about the status of homosexuality in America in the early 1960s as expressed by the *Time* essay make it clear why Martha is not allowed self-acceptance in *The Children's Hour*. Her feelings of self-hatred are the correct response to her homosexual inclinations. If Martha were allowed to accept her own feelings and have those feelings returned by Karen, Hollywood would be "glamorizing," "rationalizing," or "encouraging" something that was no more than "a pernicious sickness." In conjunction with the prevailing opinions about the nature of homosexuality as expressed in the mass media, film images represented lesbian feelings as undesirable and illegitimate.

A significant shift in attitudes about homosexuality in the media began to occur at the end of the 1960s. By 1969, the media was forced to acknowledge the existence of a gay community and the issues it faced. The first gay riots erupted at Greenwich Village's Stonewall Inn during a customary police raid targeted at homosexuals. Although the events in Greenwich Village received little coverage initially, it served as a rallying force for the gay community. Soon after the riots, many major newsmagazines featured in-depth stories concerning the new emergence of homosexual visibility. A *Newsweek* article said of the Stonewall riots, "In summers past, such an incident would have stirred little more than resigned shrugs from the Village's homophile population - but in 1969 the militant mood touches every minority." <16>

A detailed article, "The Homosexual: Newly Visible, Newly Understood," appeared in *Time* at the end of October 1969. The authors noted the connection between the mood of the times and the increased visibility of homosexuals in America: "Encouraged by a national climate of openness about sex of all kinds, and the spirit of protest, male and female inverts have been organizing to claim civil rights for themselves as an aggrieved minority." The article further stated, "Though they still seem fairly bizarre to most Americans, homosexuals have never been so visible, vocal, or closely scrutinized by research." <17> Indeed, research was being conducted in the 1960s which contributed to the increased debate surrounding issues related to homosexuals. In October of 1969, a report issued by the government's National Institute of Mental Health urged states to abolish laws against private homosexual intercourse between consenting adults. <18> This report was interpreted by the author of the October *Time* article as a sign that some tolerance and even support for the gay activists was emerging in the "straight" community. The release of Mart Crowley's film *The Boys in the Band* in 1970 coincided with the activist gay movement and provided Americans with personalized examples of male homosexuals and their struggles.

After Stonewall, membership in existing homophile organizations increased dramatically and many new organizations emerged. The organizations incorporated strategies of the African American civil rights movement as well as militant tactics used by radical groups. The movement fought for a variety of issues, including its focus on changing the official position of the American Psychiatric Association (APA) which had already begun to reevaluate its position on homosexuality. Members of the gay rights movement attended the APA's annual conference in 1970, and continued to apply pressure to the organization until the diagnosis of homosexuality as an illness lost its support from the APA. Homosexuality was removed from its list of psychiatric disorders in 1973. Since

the APA nomenclature is seen as the official definition of mental disorders, its decision marked a significant change in opinion about the nature of homosexuality. The removal from the list of disorders resulted when the board concluded that homosexuality did not necessarily create emotional problems or a psychiatric disorder. <19>

Changes in mainstream America's attitudes toward homosexuality went beyond the psychiatric panels, and by the 1980s, homosexuality was visible in many mainstream films. In 1982, lesbian characters were visible in a Hollywood film that did not end with self-hatred and suicide. *Personal Best* has been praised and criticized for its depiction of a lesbian relationship between two athletes who meet at the Olympic trials. In a review in *MacLean's* magazine, *Personal Best* is described as "a stride forward in the portrayal of gay relationships on screen." <20> The movie did go beyond any previous Hollywood films with its depiction of the sexual and emotional aspects of a lesbian relationship; however, the legitimacy of the relationship is reduced when one of the women falls in love with a man.

Although the relationship does not last, the main characters in *Personal Best*, Tory and Chris, are not depicted as sick or deviant. They are young and attractive women involved in a lesbian relationship that lasts over three years. Their relationship is not condemned by the other characters in the film. The two women do not seem ashamed of or embarrassed by their relationship, and sex scenes develop without either character breaking down in tears or feeling "sick" about themselves. Tory and Chris move in together and train together under Tory's coach.

The two women may not seem ashamed or feel sick; however, they also do not appear to be seriously in love. Chris behaves like an adolescent child throughout their relationship. She is dependent on others to help her push herself and perform at her best. She whines and cries throughout the film as if she were thirteen. As one reviewer phrased it, "Chris is an amorphous simp." <21> When the two women are together, they seem more like childhood friends than lovers. During a parlor with other athletes, Chris spends the evening flirting with a man while Tory broods in the corner and eventually leaves; this scene is typical of the imbalance of their relationship. Tory seems to consider the relationship as valid and serious while Chris seems to take the relationship lightly, as evident in her flirtation with the man at the party.

The relationship is further strained when the coach starts to favor Chris and moves her to the pentathlon event where she will be competing against Tory. The coach lies and tells Chris that Tory is jealous and will do anything to make sure that Chris does not take her spot on the team. Chris is easily convinced and begins questioning Tory's motives for helping her to train. The coach gives them different practice schedules and warns Chris that she should not listen to Tory. The tension caused by the coach and competition results in a conversation in which Chris defines their relationship by stating that they are friends. Tory responds that yes, they are friends, but their relationship also has a sexual element. After a severe knee injury which appears to be caused by Tory intentionally misplacing Chris' high jump mark, Chris leaves Tory and stays with the coach for the night. If Chris had been truly in love and taken her three-year relationship with Tory

seriously, she would not have been so quick to make an assumption that Tory was trying to injure her. Chris has no problem making that assumption and refuses to speak to Tory. The relationship is over and Chris moves out. The validity of their relationship is undermined by the lack of any issue of real seriousness precipitating their separation.

The end of the relationship seems to correspond with the beginning of Chris' maturity. She moves into her own apartment and soon meets a nice guy, Denny the polo player. During one of their dates they see Tory; Chris is slightly uncomfortable and refers to Tory as her former "roommate." Chris' new boyfriend has no problem with her previous lesbian relationship and informs her that she doesn't have to lie about Tory's identity because everyone in town knew about the nature of the relationship between the two prettiest girls in town.

Chris finally manages to pull herself together and performs at her best with encouragement from her new boyfriend. The relationship with Tory appears to have been another step toward realizing her full potential and maturity. In a review for *Time*, Richard Corliss explains the growth of Chris' character as "development as a woman from unformed adolescence to self-aware maturity." <22> Michael Sragow's *Rolling Stone* review praises the film for depicting "an American woman's rite of passage." <23>

Although *Personal Best* marks a significant change in the depiction of lesbians in film by actually portraying them in a relationship, in the end, the girl loses the girl to a boy. The relationship is presented without criticizing or stigmatizing the women involved; however, the light-heartedness of the relationship makes this depiction possible. Neither of the women are seen as having an illness; however, Chris is depicted as an immature child whose relationship with Tory is simply another part of her development into a complete woman. *Personal Best* depicts lesbianism in a manner that reflects mainstream society's increased level of acceptance. American audiences in the early 80s seem able to accept portrayals of women whose lesbian experiences could be seen as merely a passing phase of sexual development that would inevitably lead to a more legitimate heterosexual relationship.

Another movie in the early 1980s went beyond *Personal Best* to depict lesbianism as more than an adolescent phase. In *Silkwood*, Cher plays Dolly, Karen Silkwood's lesbian roommate and best friend. Although the lesbianism is not the central theme of the film, Dolly's character is highly visible and her relationships are given enough attention to be considered a significant element of the film. Dolly shows clear signs of being in love with Karen throughout the film; however, for a brief time Dolly has a girlfriend who moves into the house. The relationship does not last and the focus returns to Dolly's unrequited love for Karen.

The first implication of Dolly's feelings for Karen occurs after an argument between the two-women. Dolly is so upset that she sits awake all night. Karen wakes up and finds Dolly sitting where she had left her the night before. The two women hug and Dolly mutters, "I love you, Karen." Karen responds by saying that she loves her too, but Dolly explains, "I don't mean I love you too." Karen clarifies her feelings, "I know that's not

what you mean, but its what I mean." Karen remains Dolly's roommate and friend and does not treat Dolly as an ill individual.

Dolly's sexuality is accepted in the film by both Karen and her live-in boyfriend, Drew. In the first scene that makes Dolly's lesbianism obvious, Dolly's lover emerges from the bedroom one morning. Drew and Karen seem slightly surprised, but then Drew says, "Well, personally, I really don't see anything wrong with it." Karen agrees and replies, "Nope, neither do I." Dolly's girlfriend moves into the house; however, the relationship ends when she returns to her husband. No clear reasons are given for the break-up other than the girlfriend's desire to return to her husband.

Dolly does not have a lasting romantic relationship with either of the women she desires in *Silkwood*. Karen, who is Dolly's main love interest, never returns the feelings. Although Karen does not consider being with Dolly as an option, she does not consider Dolly's feelings to be deviant or unacceptable. Karen is simply heterosexual and has no feelings for Dolly other than friendship. Dolly is a healthy, social, funny woman who is also gay. Despite these positive characteristics, Cher's character is denied a lasting lesbian relationship. Dolly is the lonely friend to the heterosexual couple that accepts her. Representations of lesbians in *Personal Best* and *Silkwood* seem to indicate at least some level of tolerance for sexual behavior that was once censored for its perceived deviant nature. These films were viewed by a large audience (*Silkwood* grossed over \$35 million in the United States) and reviewed in major publications. <24> Awareness and visibility for homosexual issues is also evident in the 1980 Democratic party's national platform which included a gay rights plank. <25> Despite these gains, the 1980s were characterized by the political conservatism of the Republican Reagan administration and a backlash against homosexuals resulting from the AIDS epidemic. The United States Supreme Court's conservatism was illustrated in its 1986 decision to uphold the constitutionality of laws against sodomy in *Bowers v. Hardwick*. <26>

The conservatism that characterized the 1980s and the backlash against homosexuals resulting from the outbreak of the AIDS virus helped to revitalize the gay rights movement. During the mid 1980s, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) was established to monitor the increased media coverage of lesbians and gays. The need for such a group was a significant indicator of the increased level of gay issues in mass publications, films, and television. By the 1990s, more confrontational groups such as ACT-UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) have become increasingly visible in their attempts to bring attention to the cause for increased AIDS research and gay rights. Despite the increased conservatism of the 1980s, visibility of gays in America increased. An article in *Newsweek* in the early 1990s argued, "Public attitudes toward the estimated 2.5 million gays and lesbians are more tolerant than at any time since the AIDS epidemic triggered a negative backlash in the early 1980s." <27>

In the 1990s, discussions of gay issues in the mass media are no longer limited to psychology and AIDS. Gay parenting, domestic violence, and employment discrimination have moved into the public view as they are increasingly discussed in the mass media. On June 21, 1993, *Newsweek* magazine's cover story dealt with lesbians and

came complete with a picture of a happy lesbian couple embracing on the cover. Gay visibility has increased in areas of mass entertainment as well. As of February 1997, there were twenty-two recurring gay and lesbian characters on network and cable television shows. Gay and lesbian characters are represented in sitcoms, dramas, and daytime soap operas. In 1995, the top rated sitcom *Friends* aired an episode in which a main character's ex-wife marries her lesbian lover. <28> In 1997, the cover of the April 14th issue of *Time* featured a picture of television star Ellen DeGeneres next to bold red letters that read, "Yep, I'm Gay." Ellen Morgan, the lead character DeGeneres plays on her sitcom *Ellen*, came out as television's first homosexual main character in late April of 1997. <29>

Lesbian characters have also been visible in a variety of major motion pictures during the 1990s. Despite the increased discussion of gay and lesbian issues and the positive treatment of gay and lesbian characters in television, the most visible lesbian images appear in films like *Basic Instinct* which features pathological lesbian killers and grossed over \$117 million domestically. <30> *Basic Instinct's* depiction of lesbianism is used to further complicate the plot of this erotic suspense thriller. The lesbian relationships add to the eroticism of the movie without providing the lesbian characters with any legitimizing relationships. Sharon Stone's lesbian lover is killed off by the middle of the film, leaving Stone's bisexual character in the bed of the investigating officer played by Michael Douglas.

Other films have been less extreme in their representations. *Fried Green Tomatoes* (1991), based on Fannie Flagg's novel *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café*, received praise from gay and lesbian groups for its positive depiction of lesbians in film; however, it has also been criticized for blurring the romantic nature of the friendship between the lead characters which was more significant in the novel. In fact, the film's depiction of the relationship seems absent of a romantic element.

Although a variety of major films in the 1990s had visible lesbian characters, *Boys on the Side* (1995) features a lesbian main character whose love for her friend is a major theme of the film. The movie was reviewed by publications ranging from *Newsweek* to *Vogue*. Although Jane (Whoopie Goldberg) is a lesbian, she is not a pathological killer or a mental case. She is secure in her sexuality and openly discusses it with the other characters in the film. Jane does, however, face the typical fate of lesbian characters in Hollywood films; she must be alone and in love with someone who is unattainable.

Jane answers Robin's newspaper ad looking for someone to share a ride to California. The two pick up Jane's friend Holly (Drew Barrymore) along the way and the road trip begins. Robin (Mary-Louise Parker) and Jane seem like complete opposites at first; however, they soon become close friends. When Holly informs Robin of Jane's lesbianism, Robin is slightly surprised, but does not seem too concerned. The conversation highlights some of society stereotypes of lesbians: Holly comments that her friend Jane is the "only one [lesbian] I've ever seen except girls in the porno tapes Nick used to rent." She also humorously warns Robin that lesbians are very emotional and love to wear uniforms.

After Jane realizes that Robin is aware of her sexuality, she assures her, "Don't worry I'm not after you." Robin replies that she is worried about that then asks, "Why aren't you after me?" The two then joke about Robin not being Jane's type.

The friendship between the three women is strengthened when Jane and Holly discover that Robin has AIDS. They stop their road trip in Arizona when Robin becomes ill. The three women live together in a house and become friends with the owner, bartender, and patrons of a local bar which seems to have a diverse crowd including lesbians. Holly meets the man she wants to marry, Robin has a brief affair with Alex the bartender, and Jane remains alone.

Jane moves out of the house after a fight with Robin who is getting sicker. Robin's mom comes to visit and is stunned to learn that Jane was living in the house: "She's a black lesbian? And she was living here?" When Jane comes over she introduces herself to the startled mother, "I'm the lesbo." Robin's mom comments, "They call themselves that. They make it sound like a compliment." Despite her apparent conservatism and homophobia, Robin's mother is soon brought closer to Jane as they both care for Robin whose condition has become serious.

The movie takes a strange turn as Jane and Robin must testify in court for Holly who accidentally killed her abusive ex-boyfriend in the beginning of the film. During the trial, the prosecutor attempts to discredit Jane's testimony by questioning her about her sexuality. The trial seems to be an attempt to highlight the ignorance behind the negative attitudes about lesbianism that exist in society; however, the courtroom scene goes overboard with Robin's emotional appeal to the court about the love between women friends.

Jane's love for Robin grows throughout the film. Holly warns Jane about falling in love with straight women and being self-destructive. Despite Holly's warnings, Jane is in love with Robin who is not only straight, but also dying. Robin loves Jane as a dear friend, and their friendship seems to be one of the closest bonds of all; however, Jane still ends up alone. In a decade where lesbian characters on television sitcoms can get married and raise a child, mainstream Hollywood has yet to produce a film where the girl gets the girl. Nonetheless, *Boys on the Side* illustrates changing attitudes about lesbians by depicting intimate friendships between the women in the film. Karen and Dolly's friendship in *Silkwood* is secondary to Karen's relationship with her boyfriend. Dolly is left as a sort of third wheel. Jane is allowed to have a more intimate relationship with Robin whose love focuses on Jane even though it is absent of a romantic element. *Boys on the Side* represents the incorporation of lesbians into society by depicting a lesbian character who can have an intimate relationship with a straight woman without her sexuality or anything else coming between them.

By 1995, the print media's awareness of gay and lesbian issues has expanded to include criticisms of Hollywood's failure to keep up with the changing times. In the mid 1990s, Vito Russo's book *The Celluloid Closet* was made into a documentary. Although Russo had great difficulty finding a publisher for his book in the early 1980s, the documentary's

release in the 1990s motivated the media to discuss the ideas the documentary presented by bringing attention to the depiction of gay and lesbian characters in film. <31> A *Time* article commenting on the documentary and extending its analysis to other Hollywood films concluded, "Hollywood sees little need to show that the vast majority of gays are ordinary, reasonably complicated people." <32>

Hollywood's portrayal of gay and lesbian characters was also criticized by a *Newsweek* article written with references to Russo's documentary. The article commented on the possibility of improvements in the depiction of homosexuals in film: "While Hollywood makes the occasional honorable movie about homosexuality, the independents make movies—good, bad and indifferent about people who happen to be gay. It's taken almost a hundred years of cinema to reach this sane matter-of-factness." <33>

Indeed, independent films have been depicting lesbian characters since the 1970s when lesbian filmmakers like Barbara Hammer produced films for lesbian audiences. In the 1980s, the distinctions between independent films and Hollywood productions became unclear as independent productions started featuring narratives which addressed gay and mainstream audiences. *Desert Hearts*, an independent film produced by Donna Dietch and released in 1986 is considered a benchmark in lesbian film making. *Claire of the Moon* (1993) also received attention with its cult appeal. Despite the minor cross over successes of these films, their releases were limited and they received little attention from the mainstream media. <34> The lesbian content of these films makes them notable for their contributions toward increased lesbian visibility in films aimed at specific audiences; however, their limited mass exposure reduces their ability to reflect a general social climate.

The most recent independent film featuring lesbians has received widespread attention from the mass media. *Bound* (1996) features two lesbian lovers who decide to steal money from the mob. The movie stars Gina Gershon as the ex-convict Corky and Jennifer Tilly as Violet, the sexy girlfriend of a mobster. *Bound* opened on 261 screens across the country and grossed \$900,902 on opening weekend. The movie received positive reviews in mainstream publications including *Entertainment Weekly* and *Time*. Famed movie reviewers Roger Ebert and Gene Siskel gave the film their seal of approval: "two thumbs up." The *Time* reviewer called the lesbian relationship "a sweetly loyal, ultimately all-conquering romance." <35>

The labeling of the lesbian relationship in *Bound* as a romance implies that the lesbians in the film are not longing for the unattainable. Rather than having one lesbian character hopelessly in love with a straight friend, *Bound* presents two women whose attraction for each other is immediate. Not only are the two women allowed to have a lesbian relationship, the relationship lasts. The girl gets the girl.

The film, however, is not a heart-warming love story. Corky and Violet's relationship develops through a plan to steal \$2 million from Violet's mobster boyfriend. Although the lesbians in this film are not pathological, self-hating or helplessly lonely, they do end up murdering Violet's boyfriend and getting away with a crime. Despite these criminal

tendencies, the women must trust each other to pull off their plan and by the end of the film, they are more than just partners in crime. The feminine Violet and the masculine Corky discover they are more alike than they had previously thought.

Rather than being swept away by a man like Mariel Hemingway's character in *Personal Best*, Violet leaves her boyfriend for a lesbian. Violet's boyfriend never expected to be left for a woman. When he discovers that Corky is Violet's lover and partner in stealing his money, he laughs. He asks Violet, "What did she do to you?" To which Violet replies, "Everything you couldn't."

The conquest of lesbian love in this film represents a drastic change from Hollywood's depictions of lesbians. The increased distribution of independent films through video release has allowed *Bound* to receive more exposure; however, it is still an independent film with a limited release in the theaters. Independent films are increasingly finding larger audiences and receiving mainstream recognition. In 1996, the year *Bound* was released, four out of five Academy Award nominees for Best Picture were independent films. Hollywood has recognized the popularity of independent films and has contributed to their production by buying out many of the independent studios. Although *Bound* is classified as an "independent" film released by Gramercy Pictures, that studio is actually owned by Polygram, an entertainment giant. <36> The success of a film like *Bound* may influence Hollywood to release a major film that depicts a successful lesbian relationship; however, the major studios may use their "independent" subsidiaries to address less traditional issues.

Although Hollywood has failed to release a major film that portrays a successful lesbian relationship, the gradual changes in the depictions of lesbians in Hollywood films continue to evolve. Hollywood's role in lesbian visibility in American society has largely been to reflect only those images that audiences were comfortable with viewing. In the early years of film, no images of lesbianism were considered appropriate for audiences who considered such behavior immoral and perverse. Even the Production Code that prohibited lesbian images avoided using terms like "homosexuality" and "lesbianism." The prohibition against images of "sex perversion" was removed only to allow films that depicted lesbianism as a "perversion." Lesbian images that emerged as acceptable were those that illustrated lesbians as pathologically ill with no hope of accepting their own feelings or having them returned. *The Children's Hour* treated lesbianism "tastefully" by having Shirley MacLaine's character kill herself rather than accept her lesbianism. The film itself does not accept her lesbianism; the language in the film avoids any use of any terms that clearly define her sexuality as lesbian.

By the 1980s, lesbians were being portrayed in roles where their lesbianism was accepted by themselves as well as others; however, these accepted by themselves portrayals stopped short of legitimizing lesbian behavior by allowing these women the satisfaction of finding a lasting relationship. Neither *Personal Best* nor *Silkwood* discuss the lesbian characters using definitive terms; however, both clearly illustrate the sexuality of the women by showing them with their female lovers. The films and publications of the 1980s also moved away from the psychological emphasis that characterized the mass

media's discussions of lesbianism in the 1960s as seen in *The Children's Hour* and the *Time* essay which both illustrated the pathology of lesbianism. The mass media representations of lesbianism in the 1980s were influenced by the gay rights movement of the 1970s which increased the visibility of homosexuals and contributed to discussions about homosexual issues that went beyond psychology.

In the 1990s, American mass media broadened the scope of homosexual discussions even further. Mainstream films not only depict lesbian characters, but also finally use terms like "lesbian" to clearly acknowledge the sexuality of these characters. Although American audiences in the 1990s can see healthy lesbian characters, and hear them defined as "lesbians," only an independent film has managed to completely validate lesbianism by portraying a successful relationship between two women. Although lesbian issues as varied as parenting and same-sex have been discussed in major publications, mainstream films have avoided portraying lesbians in lasting relationships. Perhaps Hollywood is not willing to validate lesbian relationships as other elements of the mass media because of its dependency on audience approval of content. Readers can skip over the article in *Time* on Ellen DeGeneres; however, moviegoers can not avoid seeing Gina Gershon and Jennifer Tilly kiss in *Bound*. Hollywood's dependency on paid admissions forces it to limit its lesbian images to those that mass audiences will accept. American society has evolved to a level where discussions of lesbianism can fill magazines, and lesbian characters can be married on national television. Hollywood has proven its ability to show healthy lesbians function in society; however, it has yet to offer lesbians the validation that would be created by portraying a lasting lesbian relationship.

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