Abstract This article examines independent cinema’s depictions of homosexuality from 1990 to 2000. Using mainstream Hollywood films of the 1990s as the context for their development, I show significant differences in how homosexuality is represented outside mainstream films. Specifically, I divide independent films into two types: gay and lesbian standpoint films, and queer cinema. Gay standpoint films are distinguished by their narrative focus on a gay and lesbian subculture, whereas queer cinema generally depicts representations of a character’s sexuality as decentered. I suggest that if we understand gay and lesbian standpoint films as a response to mainstream Hollywood ones that exclude subcultural depictions, then queer cinema can be seen as a challenge to both gay and lesbian standpoint films, and mainstream Hollywood films that center and normalize homosexual identity.

Keywords  decentered, gay and lesbian standpoint films, mainstream Hollywood films, normalization, queer cinema

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Gays and Queers: From the Centering to the Decentering of Homosexuality in American Films

From star-studded films such as Brokeback Mountain (2005) to biographical films like Capote (2005) and Kinsey (2004), recent Hollywood films never seem to tire of depicting homosexuality. Even the most cursory examination of popular culture and film cannot help noticing the increasing visibility of gay and lesbian representations on celluloid over the last decade. Think, for example, of Philadelphia (1993), As Good As It Gets (1997), My Best Friend’s Wedding (1997), The Object of My Affection (1998), or Alexander (2004).

However, gay narratives have not always been such prominent fixtures of American films. As Vito Russo’s classic The Celluloid Closet (1987) documents, the history of gay and lesbian characters in movies was a story...
of invisibility, virulent stereotype, or innuendo, from the time of the silent pictures and talkies in the early 1900s (and especially under the censorious Production Code of 1934), to the late 1960s. Even after the disbanding of the Production Code in 1966, and up to the end of the 1980s, film scholarship shows that when homosexual characters were featured in films, they were typically presented as deviant and pathological human types, from murderers and sociopaths, to victims of psychological sickness (Tyler, 1972; Dyer, 1984; Russo, 1987; Gross, 1991; Holmlund, 1991; Weiss, 1992; Fejes and Petrich, 1993; Gross, 2001; Seidman, 2002). However, beginning in the 1980s, but more significantly in the 1990s, film and media scholars noted a salient increase in the number of gay and lesbian images, as well as changes from the dominant stereotypes of the past (Gross, 2001; Walters, 2001; Gamson, 2002; Seidman, 2002). Thus, recent gay and lesbian media scholarship has been engaged in a debate about the meanings of this new gay and lesbian visibility.

For example, media scholars, such as Larry Gross, maintain that, although there has been an increase in gay images, these images continue to reinforce, to a large extent, stereotypical representations of gays and lesbians as inferior or hyper-visible tokens who are reduced to their heterosexuality. For instance, Gross writes, ‘The rules of the mass media game have had a double impact on gay people: not only have they mostly shown them as weak and silly, or evil and corrupt, but they continue for the most part to exclude and deny the existence of normal, unexceptional as well as exceptional lesbians and gay men’ (2001: 16). Similarly, Suzanna Walters contends that there were two dominant patterns of gay visibility in the 1990s. She argues that either gays are assimilated into the filmic narrative and viewed as being just like straights, or they are just commodified ciphers without depth, who are ‘inserted into the film in order to exhibit a certain hipness but who are insignificant as anything other than signs of hipness, and, further, signs of hipness of the lead character’ (2001: 154, her italics).

Steven Seidman also argues that the recent gay and lesbian visibility can be seen as creating new boundaries of gay representation. He states that gay images in today’s Hollywood films evidence a shift from the ‘polluted’ to the ‘normal’ gay. ‘The “normal” gay is presented as being fully human; as the psychological and moral equal of the heterosexual’. However, he observes that ‘the normal gay is expected to be gender conventional, link sex to love and a marriage-like relationship, defend family values, personify economic individualism, and display national pride’ (2002: 133).

While Gross, Walters, Seidman and other scholars (e.g. Dyer, 1984; Weiss, 1992; Fejes and Petrich, 1993) have well documented the shifts in mainstream images of gay and lesbians, they have not examined the patterns of representation of homosexuality in independent cinema that emerged in the 1990s. In this article, I focus on independent cinema’s
depictions of homosexuality from 1990 to 2000, using mainstream Hollywood films of the 1990s as the context for their development, to show significant differences in how homosexuality is represented outside mainstream films.

I divide independent films into two types: gay and lesbian standpoint films, and queer cinema. Gay standpoint films are distinguished by their narrative focus on a gay and lesbian subculture, whereas queer cinema generally depicts representations of a character’s sexuality as decentered. Specifically, I argue that the development of gay and lesbian standpoint films in the late 1980s and 1990s, and queer cinema in the mid to later 1990s, are responses to the shift towards normalizing images of homosexuality in mainstream Hollywood films of the 1980s and 1990s. Moreover, I suggest that if we understand gay and lesbian standpoint films as a response to mainstream Hollywood films that exclude subcultural depictions, and which historically stigmatized homosexuality but recently have begun to normalize it, then queer cinema can be seen as a challenge to both gay and lesbian standpoint films and normalizing mainstream films. That is, both gay standpoint and Hollywood films center and normalize homosexual identity and thus maintain the dominant heterosexual/homosexual minority logic of normative heterosexuality.

For methodological clarity this study focuses on US films that feature explicit gay and lesbian characters. Keeping with the focus of this study, which is to provide an analysis of homosexuality and normative heterosexuality’s key features in gay standpoint and queer cinema, I do not engage in queer cultural analyses of coded and implied homosexuality, although I have been inspired and benefited immensely from the incisive queer analyzes of the heterosexual/homosexual binary (e.g. Farwell, 1990; Miller, 1990; Fuss, 1991; Doty, 1993, 2000; Straayer, 1996; Corber, 1997). Further, while audience reception studies are valuable ways to assess viewing practices, they are outside the scope of this paper. Rather, I provide an ideal typical analysis that is conceptually driven and spans two decades of gay, lesbian and queer cinema.

Following a Weberian tradition that analyzes social phenomenon through ideal types, I examine each of the three filmic types – normalizing Hollywood films, gay and lesbian standpoint films and queer cinema – as an ideal type that follows particular patterns in its narrative representation of (homo)sexual identity and normative heterosexuality (see Weber, 1978 [1925]). I use the following five concepts to analyze sexual identity and normative heterosexuality:

1. the presentation of sexual identities as centered or decentered;
2. the depiction of gay or lesbian subcultures;
3. how the norm of heterosexuality operates within the narrative;
4. the presentation of gender identities; and
5. critique, if any, of normative heterosexuality and normative gender conventions.

Recent scholarship has noted a visible shift occurring in mainstream Hollywood depictions of gay and lesbian characters in the 1980s and 1990s. A shift away from stigmatized representations of homosexuality is evidenced in recent mainstream Hollywood films since the 1990s, where a preponderance of normal and good portrayals of homosexual characters has appeared (Gross, 2001; Walters, 2001; Gamson, 2002; Seidman, 2002). This shift in depiction, although uneven and still evidencing stigmatizing depictions at times, follows the dominant logic of normative heterosexuality that makes homosexuality into a minority identity while maintaining heterosexuality as the normative identity of the majority. However, this normalizing trend argues for a new found respect and view of the homosexual as a normal individual, deserving of recognition and tolerance, if not equality.³

Mainstream Hollywood films which normalize gay identity, however, almost always isolate the gay or lesbian character from a larger gay/lesbian subculture. And it is exactly this feature – a gay/lesbian subculture – that gay and lesbian standpoint films of the 1980s and 1990s make integral to their depictions of gay and lesbian life. Subcultural settings challenge the norm of heterosexuality, undermining it as the right and only way in which to be sexual. Furthermore, if mainstream films were to portray gay and lesbian subcultures as legitimate forms of social life, they would be arguing not only for tolerance for gays and lesbians, but also for equality and social recognition of their relationships and lives as well. Subcultural depictions question and challenge cultural norms that privilege heterosexual families (e.g. norms of monogamy and marriage) and their sexual and gender conventions (e.g. masculine men and feminine women and the norm of compulsory heterosexuality). This notwithstanding, gay and lesbian standpoint films present their own limitations in their depiction of homosexual identity. Chiefly, these films make gay and lesbian identity into a uniform and essentialist identity, where the main characters’ lives revolve around their homosexuality.

The representational limit of gay and lesbian standpoint films is their inability to examine the fluid and complicated portrayals of a queer or decentered sexual identity. As a result, I analyze films designated under the rubric of queer cinema, which make this theme integral to their characters and narratives. In these films, I examine characters whose homosexuality is decentered or not depicted as uniform. Films in the queer cinema category replace unitary and flat images of homosexual identity with more fluid and dynamic ones.
This essay consists of three parts. The first section analyzes *Philadelphia* (1993), a film I take to be paradigmatic of normalization. *Philadelphia* is one of the first mainstream Hollywood films that presented a normalizing and positive depiction of homosexuality and a gay man living with HIV/AIDS. While normalizing films are overwhelmingly positive in their portrayal of homosexuality, I show how *Philadelphia* and, by extension, normalizing Hollywood films still operate within normative heterosexuality’s majority/minority logic that reinforces homosexual subordination and maintains a residual element of homosexual stigmatization as well. After setting up *Philadelphia* as the contextual backdrop, I then explore the rise of lesbian and gay standpoint films, highlighting the differences between Hollywood normalizing films and standpoint ones. Finally, I show how queer cinema can be seen as a response to the Centering or unifying depictions of both normalizing mainstream films and gay and lesbian standpoint ones. I argue that only queer cinema offers images of a decentered homosexuality, although it often does this by situating decentered depictions alongside centered ones.

**Mainstream Hollywood films: the ‘normalizing’ context**

The mainstream Hollywood film *Philadelphia* is paradigmatic of normalizing representations of homosexuality and presenting a sympathetic portrayal of a gay man with HIV/AIDS. The film, starring Tom Hanks (who is arguably Hollywood’s embodiment of the ‘normal’, even ordinary, American male) portrays Andy, a lawyer who was made a senior partner of his law firm but was recently fired for his supposed incompetence in his last important case. Andy claims that he was fired after his law firm’s senior partners discovered his status as a HIV positive gay man.

Following the ideal typical logic of a normalizing film, Andy has already accepted his homosexuality as a gay man. For example, he lives with his long-term partner Miguel, played by Antonio Banderas, and is open with his family about being gay and HIV positive. Although Andy was closeted at work, it was only because of his fear of being fired by his fellow law partners, having overheard their homophobic banter on past occasions.

Normalizing films, like *Philadelphia*, reinforce specific characterological prescriptions for their gay characters. First, in order to make a gay character’s homosexuality acceptable and normal, a character overcompensates for the stigma of homosexuality (and, in Andy’s case, his HIV status as well), by being hyper-idealized in every other characterological aspect. For instance, Andy is a model citizen. He is hardworking and, until recently, a successful lawyer. Further, he is in a quasi-marital relationship
that is accepted by his large extended family. Andy is also gender conventional, and besides having had unsafe sex and contracting HIV, he leads a conventional sexual life that excludes stigmatized sexual practices, such as commercial sex, group sex or sadomasochism. Paradoxically, a residual stigmatizing element remains a key part of normalizing representations. That is, if homosexuality was not assumed to be an already stigmatized sexual identity, then normalizing films would not continue to hyper-idealize homosexual characters in every other aspect but their sexual identity.

Since the beginning of the 1990s, gay and lesbian characters in mainstream Hollywood films have been presented as normal within rigid ideal prescriptions that reinforce the heterosexual majority/homosexual minority logic that confines homosexual desire to a mutually exclusive and putatively uniform group of individuals. In the case of Philadelphia, Andy is portrayed as having an essentialist or centered homosexual identity.

Furthermore, his character’s normalized homosexuality portrays a narrow and thin representation of gay men and gay life. His homosexual difference, for instance, is signalled symbolically through him listening to opera or having a party where other subculturally marked gay men are present. Normalizing representations, however, avoid depicting a gay subcultural community as the film’s narrative context, because this would situate the targeted viewer as more likely subculturally gay themselves, not as a general audience (read: sympathetic heterosexual and homosexual viewers), which Hollywood films, by the very nature of their big budgets and stars aim, to attract to the theater. By making gay and lesbian subcultural life invisible at worst or rendering it as symbolic and tangential at best, normalizing films are able to avoid images that challenge social norms that privilege heterosexuality (e.g. marriage and monogamy) or contest sexual and gender conventions (e.g. the norm of compulsory heterosexuality and males as masculine men and females as feminine women).

In Philadelphia, and normalizing films in general, the norm of heterosexuality is not viewed as wrongly dominant. Rather, heterosexuality is viewed as the desire or identity of the majority of individuals, while homosexuality is the desire or identity of a mutually exclusive minority population. This conception allows mainstream films to confine homosexuality to isolated characters, while establishing heterosexuality as the identity of the majority and of the narrative context. For example, Andy and Miguel are the only main gay characters. From Andy’s lawyer, Joe, to his parents, siblings and law colleagues, every other character is portrayed as married, or assumed by their gender and social conventions, to be heterosexual. Heterosexuality is shown to be the status of the majority.

In particular, this film presents an idealized construction of the heterosexual family with Andy’s parents. His parents are shown celebrating their fiftieth wedding anniversary. They live an almost 1950’s ideal of family
values. For instance, they reside in a white picket fenced colonial home in a small town, and are surrounded by their children and grandchildren. Again, this hyper-idealization reinforces the normality of Andy’s character except for his homosexuality and HIV status. And while Andy’s parents openly accept him and Miguel as part of their family, Andy still reproduces his family’s normative heterosexual and gender conventions. That is, Andy reproduces the norm of heterosexuality through his quasi-marital relationship with Miguel, as well as a binary gender order through his clear depiction as a masculine man.

While films such as Philadelphia criticize unjust homophobic practices against wronged homosexual individuals, such as Andy who was fired for being an HIV positive gay man, they still reinforce the cultural and institutional status of normative heterosexuality. In other words, normalizing films offer a narrow critique of normative heterosexuality. They do not contest its majority/minority logic that naturalizes and privileges heterosexuality as ideal and normal, nor do they problematize its depiction of normative gender and sexual conventions. Although Philadelphia, like all normalizing films, depicts homosexuals as self-accepting and good, and homophobic actions as unjust and bad, it still reproduces essentialist gay and straight identities, and maintains the dominance of a normative heterosexual majority over a homosexual minority.

In short, Philadelphia is a paradigmatic example of mainstream Hollywood films that normalize homosexual characters by portraying them in narrow, essentialist ways. By isolating gay and lesbian characters from a larger gay community, these films either avoid depicting gay and lesbian subcultural life altogether, or render it as an inconsequential backdrop. In the next section on gay and lesbian standpoint films, I show how they make a gay and lesbian subculture central to their characters’ narratives. Turning to standpoint films, I sketch out the ideal typical analytical features of normative heterosexuality through two films, Bar Girls (1994) and Jeffrey (1995), showing that the depiction of a gay and lesbian subculture is central to these films. Although standpoint films offer a critique of normalizing Hollywood films’ exclusion of gay and lesbian subcultures, these films still maintain normative heterosexuality’s conception of homosexuality as a minority and essentialist identity. It is not until the development of queer cinema that the minoritizing logic of normative heterosexuality is challenged.

Gay and lesbian standpoint films (1980s–1990s)

By the 1980s, a change in the social status of homosexuals in the US had occurred. After the 1969 Stonewall Riots, the 1970s and 1980s witnessed an efflorescence of gay and lesbian organizing. For example, prior to
Stonewall, there were about fifty lesbian and gay groups in the US (D’Emilio, 1983; Adam, 1995; Epstein, 1999). Within five years after the riots, over a thousand different groups had formed, ranging from political and legal organizations to social clubs and newspapers. The 1970s and 1980s represented the rise of lesbian and gay liberation movements as well as political and legal organizations, such as the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, the Human Rights Campaign and Lambda Legal Defence. Legal changes ranged from the development of domestic partner benefits to the passage of gay adoption laws and the spread of anti-discrimination ordinances across the country. In other words, it was during this time that gays and lesbians emerged as a distinct and ethnic-like interest group.

Not surprisingly, it was also during this time that gay and lesbian standpoint films started to emerge. Gay standpoint films represent the development and entrenchment of gay and lesbian life as an affirmative basis of identity, community and politics. Beginning in the 1970s, and well entrenched by the 1980s, gay enclaves became a hallmark of urban centers across the US, often marking out their territorial space with rainbow flags. A gay and, to a lesser extent, lesbian subculture established itself around this network of businesses, restaurants, churches and bars (Levine, 1979; Castells, 1983; Davis, 1995; Epstein, 1999). Like gay and lesbian literature, gay and lesbian standpoint films indicate the development and influence of a gay and lesbian perspective and voice in the cultural realm. I will illustrate the logic of gay and lesbian standpoint films by discussing two films that are unambiguous in their standpoint logic, *Bar Girls* and *Jeffrey*.

Even though mainstream films like *Philadelphia* present normalizing images of homosexuality, they still reinforce the dominant logic of normative heterosexuality that makes homosexuality the desire/identity of a minority population, while heterosexuality goes unmarked as the majority desire/identity. Similarly, gay and lesbian standpoint films reproduce the majority/minority binary as well. The key departure of gay standpoint films from mainstream films is in their representation of a gay or lesbian subculture. By subculture, I mean that gay and lesbian communities contest normative heterosexual styles, norms and values to various extents (Foucault, 1978; Hebdige, 1979). This subcultural contestation ranges from challenging rigid gender norms and styles, to the norm of heterosexuality, to heterosexual privilege and homophobia.

Standpoint films tell a narrative that is both by and about gays and lesbians. This means that the film’s narrative is no longer aimed at a straight audience, but is instead directed at a gay and lesbian one. The problems that these characters face and overcome are ones specific to the lives of gays and lesbians.

*Bar Girls* and *Jeffrey* both feature protagonists who have already established an affirmative gay identity. A coming out story is absent from
these films. The audience is also assumed to have normalized gay identity and to be able to empathize with the conflicts the main characters face. While showing a diversity of gender styles among the characters, both films still essentialize or center homosexual identity. That is, gay and lesbian standpoint characters view the world through a gay prism that organizes their lives.

In *Bar Girls*, the main character, Loretta (Nancy Allison Wolfe), is an animated TV cartoonist. Her cartoon character is named Rhonda. And Rhonda is a counsellor who solves relationship problems and is basically Loretta’s alter ego. Consequently, as Loretta becomes involved in a relationship with a woman, Rachel (Liza D’Agnostino), she also has Rhonda become involved with a woman as well. In other words, Loretta’s life as a lesbian is mirrored in her professional life as an animated cartoonist.

In *Jeffrey*, the title character, Jeffrey (Steven Weber), does not incorporate his personal life into his career, but he is still a waiter and an aspiring actor, which are industries that the film presents, and our culture stereotypically codes, as having high concentrations of gay men. These industries are service occupations that emphasize presentation and aestheticization. Both industries are coded as feminine and, by extension, marked as stereotypical homosexual occupations. Both Loretta and Jeffrey, then, have occupations in which their homosexuality is either a topic of focus or an industry stereotyped as having a large concentration of gays. Their jobs reinforce the centrality of homosexuality in their lives.

Moreover, *Bar Girls* and *Jeffrey* situate their protagonists as part of a larger gay and lesbian subculture in Los Angeles and New York City, respectively. While a subcultural context reinforces the centrality of the main characters’ homosexuality, it also signals a shift in narrative focus from past negative filmic images. These characters do not focus on coming out (like the early Hollywood films of the 1980s and before) or the problems heterosexuals in their lives have with homosexuality, but rather the focus is on their daily lives as gay and lesbian individuals within the context of a gay and lesbian subculture. This is an important and central move for gay and lesbian standpoint films, indicating that the targeted audience and narrative focus of the film is intended for gay and lesbian audiences. *Bar Girls*, for instance, focuses on Loretta’s relationship problems, such as the threat of ‘predatory’ lesbians, while Jeffrey deals with the quandary of dating a HIV positive man. Both narratives focus on problems situated from the standpoint of gay subcultural life.

Although gay and lesbian subcultural life is the narrative context of these films, their representation of normative heterosexuality remains similar to mainstream Hollywood films. By maintaining essentialized gay and lesbian identities, and thus reinforcing the majority/minority logic
of normative heterosexuality, gay and lesbian standpoint films do not challenge the dominant logic of heteronormativity. For example, while random acts of homophobic violence against gays and lesbians are portrayed, these films fail to show a larger society structurally organized around the norm of heterosexuality. Jeffrey himself, for instance, is a victim of gay bashing, but this is the only scene that shows the oppression of gays. And while the film focuses on Jeffrey’s fears of dating a HIV positive man, the AIDS epidemic is not portrayed as a form of inequality.

Similarly, when films like Jeffrey and Bar Girls offer a critique of normative heterosexuality, it is weak and diluted. In Bar Girls, Loretta is told her animated character Rhonda cannot have a lesbian relationship as it will lose ratings and advertising sponsors. Loretta says that this fear of bad ratings is the ‘patriarchy’ at work, not compulsory heterosexuality or homophobia. Her character uses ‘patriarchy’ as a coded and indirect way to criticize normative heterosexuality. As a result, gay and lesbian standpoint films often elide, or completely omit, depicting the coercive institutional and cultural power of normative heterosexuality. These films miss the chance to provide a critique of its hegemonic status. Consequently, the status of heterosexuality is privileged through this elision and of course by the depiction of essentialist gay characters. In sum, the explicit presentation of homophobia is often a good measuring stick for whether an accompanying critique will be levelled against it. Often, if homophobia is absent, then a critique is as well.

Further, lesbian and gay standpoint films unwittingly reinforce heteronormativity through reproducing a clear gender binary. As scholars have shown, heterosexuality’s dominance is reinforced through the establishment of rigid binary gender roles and identities (Butler, 1990, 1992; Sedgwick, 1990, 1992; Fuss, 1991; Warner, 1993; Seidman, 1996). Rigid constructions of gender as male/female and masculine/feminine set up a logic of oppositional binaries and hierarchies that privilege and reinforce the norm of heterosexuality and male dominance over homosexuality and femininity. For example, in Jeffrey, two of the other supporting gay characters, Sterling (Patrick Stewart) and Darias (Michael Weiss), are clearly marked as stereotypical gays, which entails a feminizing of their talk, dress, style and comportment, as well as their characters’ emphasis on pleasure, elegance, surfaces and consumerism in general. The lead character, Jeffrey, however, presents a more complicated coding. While Jeffrey is conventionally masculine (e.g., in talk, dress, style and comportment), he is still coded as feminine in subtle ways. For example, he is afraid to have sex because of HIV/AIDS and this fear creates a character who is indecisive, passive and weak-willed. His psyche and personality are subtly coded as ‘feminine’. As a result, one can see that the gender binary
and its accompanying hierarchy of heterosexual privilege subtly and not so subtly still mark the homosexual male as feminine, leaving the absent, unmarked heterosexual male as masculine. In short, the gender binary of masculine/feminine is reproduced in the maintenance of the heterosexual/homosexual binary, thereby privileging heterosexuality and masculinity once again.

Similarly, *Bar Girls* constructs Loretta, her girlfriend Rachel, and her questioning friend Veronica (Justine Slater), who is pursuing a butch lesbian, as the feminine lesbians (e.g. all of them have long hair, wear conventionally feminine clothes, and could arguably pass as straight), while marking JD (Camila Griggs), the ‘predatory’ lesbian, and Tracey (Paula Sorge), the butch southern lesbian, as the more masculine lesbians. For example, JD is deemed as quasi-pathological for pursuing other women’s girlfriends and being overly masculine. Similarly, Loretta warns Veronica against pursuing Tracey, stating, ‘Tracey is not a femme. She drives a Harley. She’s learned in the ways of dykeness’. The film thus reinforces JD, Tracey and butch lesbians as being more dangerous and even stigmatized by other lesbians, although the statement about Tracey as ‘learned in the ways of dykeness’ is meant to be humorous. *Bar Girls*, while showing a diversity of gender styles among its lesbian characters, does reinforce a gender binary that privileges feminine gender norms for its lesbian characters.

While gay and lesbian standpoint films offer narratives and characters that are affirmative and inclusive of a subcultural depiction, they still have the unintended effect of reinforcing the subordinate status of homosexuals, through presenting an essentialist homosexual identity. Although films about and for gays and lesbians are an important development, queer cinema’s images are a critical response to these images and mainstream Hollywood ones. While standpoint films aim at making gay subcultural life a narrative focus, or Hollywood films portray gay characters as ‘normal’, queer cinema aims to contest a uniform image of the homosexual and gay and lesbian subcultural life.

Queer cinema: decentering identity

Of course, the new queer films don’t share a single aesthetic vocabulary or strategy or concern. Yet they are nonetheless united by a common style. Call it ‘Homo Pomo’: there are traces in all of them of appropriation and pastiche, irony, as well as a reworking of history with social constructionism very much in mind. Definitively breaking with older humanist approaches and the films and tapes that accompanied identity politics, these works are irreverent, energetic, alternately minimalist and excessive. Above all, they’re full of pleasure’. (B. Ruby Rich, writing in 1991 on the rise of the new queer cinema)
The above quote by film critic and scholar B. Ruby Rich could have easily been a description of the politics of Queer Nation, or the rhetorical strategies of queer theory that came into vibrant existence in the 1990s. And in many ways, films in the queer cinema camp are just that: the elaboration of a critical sensibility towards identity politics and what counts as normal within a heteronormative society (De Lauretis, 1991a, 1991b; Gever et al. 1993; Hanson, 1999; Aaron, 2004). While Queer Nation chapters sprang up across the United States in the early 1990s, emerging out of ACT UP, and only lasting for two years, they made gay bashing and all normative sexual practices and identities touchstones for rebellion and critique, for example (Chee, 1991). As the reclamation of the pejorative term ‘queer’ demonstrates, Queer Nation activists wore their queerness as a badge of in-your-face anger over sexual injustice and domination, and at the same time tried to use it to bridge differences between gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender persons as well.

Similarly, queer theorists like Butler (1990, 1992, 2004), Sedgwick (1990, 1992), Fuss (1991), Warner (1993, 2000) and Seidman (1996, 2002) provided important queer cultural analyses that highlighted the subversive quality of lesbian, gay, drag queen and queer activists’ performative identities in undoing normative heterosexuality’s codes of normality. I argue that queer cinema can be seen as appropriating Queer Nation’s and queer theory’s critical decentering response to essentialist sexual identities that reinforce the normative heterosexuality’s majority/minority social order, which demands sexual identification, as gay, straight or bisexual, for instance. Further, queer cinema contests the distinction between good and bad homosexuals who practise or do not practise norms of monogamy, quasi-marriage like relationships or vanilla sex, as well as gender conventions of masculine men and feminine women. A queer critique problematizes what and who should count as normal/abnormal and acceptable/unacceptable in society.

In the 1990s, we witnessed the development of gay and lesbian standpoint films and the rise of queer cinema. Gay and lesbian standpoint films, carve out, on one hand, filmic space for narratives for and about gay individuals and their subcultural worlds. However, these films depict essentialist images of homosexuals and homosexuality. Queer cinema, on the other hand, can be seen as a response to the essentialized images of homosexuals depicted in standpoint and mainstream Hollywood films. I argue that queer cinema’s major departure, from gay standpoint films and mainstream Hollywood films is its decentering of sexual identity. By ‘decentering’ I mean the effort to dislodge the image of a unified homosexual identity. These films problematize unitary and flat images of ‘the homosexual’, replacing them with complicated, fluid, and dynamic ones.
While these films do not unilaterally portray sexuality as decentered and fluid for every character, their narratives generally contest a minoritizing gay logic that reinscribes an ostensibly distinct gay self. As a result, these films subvert normative heterosexuality’s logic that makes homosexuality into a minority status in order to maintain heterosexuality’s majority and normative status.

I examine various strategies of decentering that range from showing both essentialist and queer depictions of individual characters alongside one another, to ones that critique normative heterosexuality’s norms, practices and institutions, such as monogamy and marriage, to strategies that extend beyond sexuality and include boundaries of what constitutes the normal/abnormal in general.

A queer perspective is a clear part of the film *High Art* (1998) and one of its main character’s development. This film tells the story of two women – Syd (Rydha Mitchell), a young, ambitious assistant editor at an art magazine, and Lucy (Ally Sheedy), a once critically successful photographer – who become sexually involved through their mutual interest in art.

Consider the character of Syd. Syd presents a decentered sexual identity by going from living with her boyfriend to becoming sexually and professionally involved with Lucy. She does this without going through a coming out process and without justifying her romantic interest through an identity category. First, she develops a budding friendship with Lucy that turns sexual while she is still living with her boyfriend. During this transition, Syd is not concerned with what it means to have sex with a woman, but is rather caught between her new found love for Lucy, which is connected to her professional ambitions to be recognized for commissioning Lucy’s cover for her art magazine. Syd does not essentialize her identity through coming out as a lesbian or a bisexual; however, it is clear through several scenes that Syd is in love, and wants to have a relationship, with Lucy. In short, Syd’s character occupies a queer position.

By positioning Syd’s character as having a decentered sexuality, the film contests essentialist understandings of sexual identity and normative heterosexuality’s hetero/homo logic. At first Syd occupies a heterosexual position; she’s living with her boyfriend and assumed to be heterosexual or bisexual. However, by becoming involved with Lucy and eschewing the heteronormative logic that demands dichotomous heterosexual/homosexual identities, her character disturbs the normalizing power of heterosexuality. In other words, the queer positioning of Syd’s character implants the notion of homosexual desire as always already a possibility within heterosexuality. Further, if her representation of sexuality can be seen as spreading a general narrative of homosexual suspicion or sexual
fluidity, then it entails the possibility of decentering any desire, identity or relationship. *High Art*, then, critiques both the minoritizing logic of gay identity and the binary logic of normative heterosexuality.

Further, the issue of the gender binary and its relation to homosexuality is problematized as well. While there is a coding of lesbians as not hyper-feminine – for example, Lucy’s hair is short, and she generally wears trousers, not short skirts, and goes without makeup – the film does, nonetheless, show a diversity of gender styles for its lesbian characters, ranging from Lucy to her hyperfeminine girlfriend Greta (Patricia Clarkson). Thus, if the gender binary is not dispensed with, it is, at the very least, contested.

Like gay and lesbian standpoint films, queer cinema often presents a subculture or a group of lesbians or gays who belong to a larger subculture. For instance, *High Art*, while not presenting a lesbian subculture, links Lucy to a group of other artsy, hipster lesbians, thereby gesturing to a larger lesbian subculture. While some scholars have argued that women’s sexuality is presented as more fluid than men’s, films such as *Totally Fucked Up*, *Chasing Amy*, *Velvet Goldmine*, *My Own Private Idaho* and *Star Maps* depict images of gay and bisexual men, or at least not exclusively heterosexual men, with fluid sexual desires and identities.

Nonetheless, I think critics make an important point. Take, for example, the film *Chasing Amy* (1997). While this film queers the sexuality of its two male heterosexual protagonists, Holden and Banky (Ben Affleck and Jason Lee, respectively) towards the end of the film, the narrative focus is on the ostensibly lesbian character of Alyssa (Joey Lauren Adams), who goes from protesting Holden’s profession of love for her and its implications on her ‘gay’ life to passionately kissing him a few seconds later. However, even though a film like *Chasing Amy* makes the transition from lesbianism to heterosexuality perhaps seem unbelievable, to the point of seeming like a heterosexual male’s sexual fantasy of lesbians, it still does problematize heterosexuality’s phallocentric logic around heterosexual sex as the ‘standard’ or the only ‘real’ type of sex.

On the other hand, a film like *The Incredibly True Adventure of 2 Girls in Love* (1995) also avoids making desire into an identity category. While Evie (Nicole Parker), the black middle class female protagonist, goes from having a boyfriend to holding hands and falling in love with Randy (Laurel Holloman), the white working class lesbian, she does this without coming out as a lesbian. The film seems to be arguing for both a queer understanding of desire as too complicated to be captured by an identity, to championing a humanist ethic that wants to move beyond differences of gay/straight, black/white and poor/rich. The film implies that love is able to transcend boundaries of sexuality, race and class; it wants to shore up the humanity of every human being. Evie, in other words, can simply love.
Randy as a fellow human being. Whether this film is read as highlighting a queer or a humanist critique of desire and identity, both interpretations eschew an essentialist understanding of sexual identity, pointing to its limits in understanding sexuality.

Moving from the queer sexuality of Syd, Alyssa, and Evie, to the David Bowie inspired glam rock star character of Brian Slade (Rhys Meyers) in *Velvet Goldmine* (1998), we turn from a strategy of decentering a single character to one that depicts an era of sexual and gender decentering. In *Velvet Goldmine*, viewers are taken into the 1970s glam rock era of London. Popular cultural references run rampant in this film. The protagonist, Brian Slade, is a deliberate simulacrum of David Bowie. The film has a general decentering logic which eschews a linear narrative. The glam rock era was a time of gender inversion and sexual subversion; a time when issues of gender, sexuality, and fashion became rallying points for rebellious British youth. Instead of highlighting the trenchant class differences of a stratified British society, the glam rock era illustrated the proliferating cultural differences of gender and sexual identities. For example, the era made popular a politics of gender-fuck, from drag and androgynous clothing styles to men wearing make up and having sex with other men. The film illustrates the era’s subversive tendencies through the rise of Brian Slade as a celebrity.

Brian, for instance, appropriates the culturally devalued practices of femininity and homosexuality and throws them in the face of mainstream culture. By dressing in a kind of high drag and publicly admitting to having sex with men while being married, and with his wife’s consent, Brian flaunts femininity in men, homosexual desire, and breaking of the norm of monogamy in marital relations.

Further, the decentering logic of sexuality is best seen through Brian’s shifting sexual identifications. Although Brian claims to be bisexual, his sexuality escapes any strict identification. Before his rise to fame, Brian was wearing dresses and flaunting a feminine, queer persona. With a gay manager, he seemed to be part of a British gay enclave. But Brian’s involvement and later marriage to Mandy (Toni Collette), an Angela Bowie copy, is presented as a way to steal a magical pendant from a very flaming Oscar Wilde avatar, who is credited with originating the glam rock era.

An important scene in the film highlights his brazen queer sexuality as well as his decentering of the normative rules of heterosexual marriage. In this scene, Brian is at a press conference:

Announcer: [A] very special show today dedicated to one of pop’s blazing new talents. [He has] reign[ed] over the British charts for the last 18 months. The incomparable Brian Slade . . .
Reporter: Brian, why the make-up?
Brian: Why? Because rock ‘n roll is a prostitute. It should be tarted up, performed. The music is the mask while I am my chiffon and taft. Well, part of the message . . . [He is wearing a black and lime green outfit with a scarf tied around his neck and has make up and lipstick on. He looks flamboyantly gay.]
Reporter: What about your fans? Aren’t they likely to get the wrong impression?
Brian: Which wrong impression is that?
Reporter: Well, you’re a freakin’ fruit.
Brian: Well, thank you, sir. No, it doesn’t concern me in the least. I should think if people were to get the wrong impression of me, the one to which you so elegantly referred, it wouldn’t be the wrong impression in the slightest. I mean, everybody knows that most people are bisexual.
Reporter: I was under the impression that you were married and living in North London.
Brian: I am married, quite happily in fact. I just happen to like boys as much as I like girls, and seeing that my wife feels pretty much the same about such things, I should think we’ve been able to make a fairly decent go of it so far. [Mandy is in the audience, smiling and sticking her tongue out at Brian, as he shocks the reporters, who start to walk out.]

In the press conference, Brian announces that he is bisexual, showing that he is unafraid to admit to his sexual desire for men and stating that his bisexuality is amenable to his wife. He makes his homosexual desire public, while at the same time subverting cultural conventions around marriage, which assume both monogamy and a pure heterosexual desire. Brian then decents heterosexual marriage and places homosexual desire as legitimate within any consensual adult relationship. Their open marriage and his fluid sexual identity consequently contest normative heterosexuality’s Centering logic. Brian’s character rejects the norms of marital monogamy and a uniform sexual desire and identity.

Brian’s sexuality is queer. At the beginning of the film, we view him as probably exclusively ‘gay’, but later he becomes sexually involved and married to Mandy, and while married pursues a torrid love affair with Curt Wild (Ewan McGregor), a reference to Iggy Pop and David Bowie’s supposed affair with him. In short, Brian’s sexuality escapes rigid identity categories. In one scene, he states that he is bisexual, but his sexual practices and relationships escape any identity category. His sexuality changes; it’s fluid or queer.
Unlike *High Art*, *Velvet Goldmine* not only decenters its main character’s sexuality but also offers the representation of an era where sexual and gender identities and relations were contested. Homosexuality, bisexuality and a queer sensibility became the hallmark of the glam rock era. High feminine drag and gender bending styles were touchstones for rebellion against a hegemonic straight and gender conformist culture. Rock stars like Brian Slade caught hold of this cultural moment, capturing its transgressive acts of gender nonconformity and sexual fluidity.

Like *Velvet Goldmine*, other films such as *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), *My Own Private Idaho* (1991) and *Star Maps* (1997) present male characters with fluid sexual practices. While the protagonists of these films, such as Joe (Jon Voight) in *Midnight Cowboy*, Scott (Keanu Reeves) and Mike (River Phoenix) in *My Own Private Idaho*, and Carlos (Douglas Spain) in *Star Maps*, have sex with men and women for money, their characters represent the subcultural norms of male hustling, where fluid sexuality is considered part of the typical sexual practices of both heterosexual and homosexual men.⁵ Although these decentering depictions of normative heterosexuality are underpinned by a normative culture that marks hustlers as deviant individuals who belong to a pathological subculture. And by associating homosexuality and decentered forms of sexuality with hustling, these films then reinforce homosexuality as being a practice of deviants, not as one of ‘normal’, ‘good’ individuals deserving of respect and recognition.

However, a mainstream Hollywood film like *Threesome* (1994) did decenter sexual desire for its heterosexual protagonist Stuart (played by Baldwin brother Stephen). In a sex scene towards the end of the film, Stuart puts Eddy’s (Josh Charles) hand on his butt while he kisses Alex (Lara Flynn Boyle). While the film does not make queer sexuality its narrative focus, and ends up reinforcing normative heterosexual norms through showing Stuart married at the end, it still does, for a brief scene, queer its heterosexual male character’s desires.

While all of the previous films that I have discussed decenter sexuality for a main character, films like *Poison* (1991) decenter and contest normative heterosexuality and boundaries of normal/abnormal, inside/outside and sameness/difference in general. In *Poison*, we view three inter-cut stories of three types of outsiders or queers who have violated norms of what counts as normal. *Poison*’s queer decentering critique extends beyond sexuality and includes norms of gender, science and normative boundaries in general.

For example, in ‘Homo’, the most sexually and erotically charged of the three stories, we observe the obsessive sexual love relationship between two prisoners, John and Jack. Set in a prison during the early part of the 20th century, we learn that the principle of social organization in this
institutional arena is based on the role that a male prisoner takes in sexual acts with the other male prisoners. The prison’s organization is split between men who penetrate other men and are not marked as homosexual, and men who are penetrated and marked as homosexual. The group of men who are penetrated are marked as subordinate in the prison hierarchy.

John, who is a ‘homosexual’ but unmarked as one within the prison’s codes of homosexuality, desires and loves Jack. They have a clandestine sexual relationship. However, after Jack is taken as the homosexual partner of another prisoner, who is at the top of the prison hierarchy, John turns jealous and vengeful. In a rage, he waits for and sexually assaults Jack, forcing him to be penetrated. This scene, and the entire story, illustrates how boundaries of homosexual/heterosexual, subordination/domination and love/hate are decentered and reorganized in the context of prison. That is, although John is a homosexual, it is Jack who is marked as a homosexual in prison, and who John rapes and dominates into sex out of anger. Boundaries of homosexual and heterosexual desire and identity are, then, decentered and reorganized in this story of prison love.

Similarly, the story ‘Horror’, which is set in the 1950s, focuses on a scientist, Dr Graves, whose life work has been to make a contribution to the field of sexology. However, after presenting his discovery of the human sex drive, he is derided as a charlatan by his colleagues who refuse to believe his discovery. This leads him to work harder to provide evidence of his discovery. After isolating the human sex drive in liquid form to rebut his colleagues, he ends up accidentally drinking the liquid and becoming facially deformed. He also becomes a pariah of society who is blamed for spreading a new sexual contagion. Although Dr Graves is wrongly accused of having spread this sexual contagion, he is still pursued by the authorities and despised by the public for it. In the end, he commits suicide to escape society’s persecution.

This story, like ‘Homo’, shows how a normal scientist becomes an abnormal monster or outsider of a sexual epidemic which incites hysteria and hatred. The story suggest that societies reject the abnormal or the outsider and label him or her only to denigrate and expel the individual from their midst. ‘Horror’ documents how everyday society treats the abnormal and the different, while ‘Homo’ shows how those in prison, or outside everyday society, recreate boundaries of inside/outside and normal/abnormal within their own social world.

The other story ‘Hero’ presents the tale of a seven year old boy, Richy, who kills his father when he finds him beating his mother, and then flies away. This story has the most absurd ending but follows the same theme of examining how outsiders are treated by society. Richy is a gender nonconformist. For example, he likes to be spanked by another boy at his school and is unmercifully picked on by his peers for his nonconformity.
Unlike the other two stories, this narrative is told in reverse chronological order and it explores the kind of boy Richy was. In a docu-drama style, it interviews Richy’s teachers, neighbors, school nurse, doctor and mother, who describe Richy as a prototypical gay child. For example, he was caught trying on girls’ clothes, harassed by his peers, played sexual games with another boy, and was generally viewed as odd and lonely.

All of the narratives in Poison focus on isolated, lonely males: a homosexual prisoner; a reviled scientist; and a young, nonconformist boy. The film suggests that society depends on the outsider, the abnormal and the different, in order to constitute its boundaries of the inside, the normal and the same. Poison shows, then, how normative boundaries create pain, humiliation and alienation for those excluded from them. And while the film critiques normalizing boundaries and aims to decenter them in part, it shows that more often than not, boundaries of the normal persist and continue, unabated to dominate others.

Conclusion

Writing in the afterward to the revised edition of the Celluloid Closet in 1987, Vito Russo stated that, ‘Gay visibility has never really been an issue in the movies. Gays have always been visible. It’s how they have been visible that has remained offensive for almost a century’ (p. 325, emphasis in original). That this statement no longer seems to resonate is illustrative of the significant changes in how gays and lesbians are represented in film today (Weiss, 1992; Fejes and Petrich, 1993; Gross, 2001; Walters, 2001; Gamson, 2002; Seidman, 2002).

Although scholars like Suzanna Walters (2001) underscore the reduction of gay characters in Hollywood films to being portrayed as just like straights, or as commodified ciphers of a film’s hipness factor, others, like Steven Seidman (2002), view the emphasis on ‘normal’ images of gays and lesbians as creating new boundaries that legitimate only gay representations that portray conventional gender norms and sexual practices, such as monogamy or a committed relationship. Even though Hollywood films now often represent gays and lesbians as ‘normal’ and ordinary individuals, limitations still exist.

Consequently, the importance of gay standpoint films is the centrality of a gay or lesbian subculture to their narrative depictions, which are not included in mainstream Hollywood films since they are told from the standpoint of a heterosexual viewer, not a gay one. And as Larry Gross (2001) rightly argues, the value of gay standpoint images is that they provide representations that feature ordinary and extraordinary gays and lesbians and are aimed at gay and lesbian audiences. Gay standpoint films, therefore, provide a vital critique of normative heterosexual culture and
norms, ranging from the norm of monogamy and the nuclear family, to
gender conventions and compulsory heterosexuality. However, the limit
of gay standpoint films is their reinforcement of essentialist images of gays
and lesbians, and the logic of normative heterosexuality that makes itself
the legitimate and majority sexuality through confining homosexuality to
a minority group population.

In contrast, queer cinema challenges both the normalizing aspects of
heteronormativity in Hollywood films, as well as the Centering of homo-
sexual identity in gay and lesbian standpoint films. Queer cinema’s narra-
tives, by depicting decentered sexual identities, create new ways for
envisaging sexualities and for troubling normative heterosexuality.6
Moreover, these three filmic types – mainstream Hollywood, gay stand-
point and queer cinema – are arguably emblematic of the larger political
landscape in which we find ourselves today. Whether it is the queer sensi-
bility of Shortbus (2006) or the normalizing Hollywood hit Brokeback
Mountain, film and popular cultural representations remain central forces
in shaping who we are and how we think about ourselves as individuals
and a movement.

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course my own.

Notes
1. The Production Code, promulgated in 1934 and started by Will H. Hays, set
strict guidelines on film content, censoring explicit depictions of sexuality and
violence. It was only completely abolished in 1966, and was replaced by the
Motion Picture Code and Rating Program used by films today, which
provide guidelines ostensibly for parents, not filmmakers.
2. To research these themes I analyzed 58 films appearing between 1960 and
2000. For example, of the 22 films viewed that appeared between 1970–89,
17 adopted the standpoint of a heteronormative order organized around
homosexual stigmatization. In the 1990s, only four films exhibit a
stigmatizing narrative, while the remaining fall into the three types of
affirming images of homosexuality that I discuss. Of the 31 films I viewed in
the 1990s, 12 represent mainstream Hollywood film and nine films fall
into the gay and lesbian standpoint category, and another nine represent
queer cinema.
3. Following Foucault, I take normalization to mean the centrality of sexual
desire as constitutive of the self, thus making heterosexual and homosexual
selves master categories of sexual identity. The hierarchizing of
heterosexuality as the normative standard of socio-sexual arrangements in
personal and social life makes homosexuality its abnormal, subordinate
counterpart. Paradoxically, normalization also provides the identity framework for both resisting homosexual pathologization and enabling it. See Foucault (1978) and Meeks (2001) on normalization.

4. Following the work of Michel Foucault (1978) and Dick Hebidge (1979), I view subcultures as creating styles or practices of both accommodation and resistance to the dominant culture they oppose and contest. As a result, no subculture can be just oppositional. However, subcultures provide real space for the fashioning of alternative selves, identities and communities, and are integral to the development of critical voices and visions.

5. While queer cinema is a cultural and historical representational development, and this paper develops queer cinema as such, I also argue that the main thrust of queer cinema’s analytical value is in highlighting decentered sexualities, whether in films from the 1990s, such as High Art and Velvet Goldmine, or a film such as Midnight Cowboy, which was released in 1969. Consequently, I do not limit my analytical distinctions to a linear historical narrative.

6. Queer cinema can be seen as a subcultural force that contests the dominant logic of normative heterosexuality in Hollywood films, as well as the heterosexual majority/homosexual minority binary of gay and lesbian standpoint films that center gay and lesbian identity. Nonetheless, each of these filmic types provides a critical outlook on homosexual identities, and signals the development of a complicated visual culture of homosexuality. I consequently view each filmic type as not only an important indicator of a vibrant visual culture, but also as a democratizing of how homosexuality is understood and represented.

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**Filmography**


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