Watching Men Kissing Men: The Australian Reception of the Gay Male Kiss On-Screen

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In the 1942 film *Casablanca*, piano-playing Sam famously sings that we "must remember this: a kiss is just a kiss."[1] Although now a classic cinematic moment, coming from a Hollywood film, this is arguably something of a hypocritical message; when placed on-screen, a kiss has often represented much more than *just* a kiss. The kiss has been required to carry multiple meanings in the history of cinematic sex, from innocent affection to sexual passion. From cinema's very beginnings until the mid-1960s, Linda Williams argues, "a kiss of variable length had to do the job of suggesting all the excitement and pleasure of intimate sexual contacts."[2] This was certainly true in Australia, where a limited local film industry and a dependence upon British and American studios was coupled with multiple layers of censorship, first in the place of production and then through local censorship regimes. Kisses were targets for the censors, who feared that audiences might be enticed toward inappropriate passions. But if the kiss could arrive at a range of moments in the narrative and could convey a range of possible meanings—from affection to desire and from illicit passion to marital bliss—there was at least one kind of kiss that remained entirely unacceptable to the censors. Until the 1970s the kisses filmed by British or Hollywood studios and ultimately screened to Australian audiences were always between a man and a woman. Although heterosexual sex enjoyed a slow cinematic reveal, starting with the kiss and leading up to the eventual display of sexual intercourse, gay men were first seen kissing on-screen in the same films in which they were first seen having sex. There was no slow reveal; a gay male kiss only ever appeared in films that also featured sexually explicit scenes. While heterosexual kisses were cinematic symbols for the whole range of heterosexual sexual acts, when two men kissed on-screen, it was always foreplay.

[1] *Casablanca*, directed by Michael Curtiz (1942, Burbank, CA, Warner Home Video, 2008), DVD.

[2] Linda Williams, *Screening Sex* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 34.

Journal of the History of Sexuality, Vol. 24, No. 2, May 2015

DOI: 10.7560/JHS24204

In her insightful and illuminating book, *Screening Sex*, Williams charts the history of sex on-screen in the context of her own (hetero)sexual awakening, depicting the progression in movie history from kisses to actual sex as a kind of growing up through which the movies, the American cinemagoing public, and Williams herself came of age. To Williams, the long era prior to the end of the industry-regulated Production Code censorship system in 1968 represented a "prolonged adolescence [during which] carnal facts of life were carefully—often absurdly—elided."[3] Williams does include gay male on-screen sex from the 1970s onward as a significant element of her analysis, but she does not contemplate the absence of same-sex kisses during that prolonged adolescence. For gay men on-screen, there was no gradual development of cinematic sexual knowledge. There was no gay Mickey and Judy or Frankie and Annette, innocently exploring their adolescent sexuality on-screen and containing their desire within (outwardly) chaste kisses. Nor were there any urgent film noir embraces in which the kiss represented illicit sex, or any final meetings of lips to resolve the sexual tension of a romantic comedy and to indicate future years of monogamous joy. When gay men finally kissed on-screen, they were decidedly grown up, and they only kissed because they were about to have on-screen sex.

I grew up in a slightly later era than Williams, with a different gender and sexuality and on the other side of the world. I was born in 1972 and grew up as a cinema-obsessed gay male in Sydney, Australia, and my childhood and adolescence were filled with movies, the vast majority of which contained at least one heterosexual kiss. But I was in my very late teens before I saw two men kiss on-screen. Films with gay men kissing were far rarer than those containing straight kisses and were, as a result of the sexually loaded position of the gay male kiss, only available to adult audiences. I am interested, then, in what the range of differences between cinemagoers like Williams and myself—sexual, historical and geographic—may mean for the experience and understanding of the cinematic kiss.

In this article I explore the historical reception of the gay male screen kiss, examining the possible meanings of that kiss for audiences in the city in which I grew up: Sydney, Australia. I look at films that were produced in Britain, the United States, and elsewhere but that were screened in Sydney either at the time of their production or, as a result of interventions by Australian censors, some years afterward. Although I look briefly at the censorships of films from the 1940s and 1950s and the coding of queer characters in some films from that era, my analysis begins more specifically with the arrival of the first openly gay characters screened in Sydney in British films of the 1960s.

Many of the films I will discuss have been examined and reexamined by film critics and historians interested in the representation of gay men

[3] Ibid., 2.

in the movies. Parker Tyler's *Screening the Sexes: Homosexuality in the Movies*, for example, appeared in 1972, the very year that Sydney cinema audiences would first see a gay male kiss in a mainstream film. Published in 1982, Vito Russo's *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies* would subsequently develop a broad readership and an influence that was extended when the book became a documentary film of the same title in 1995. Tyler, Russo, and others in the 1980s, notably Richard Dyer, Andy Medhurst, and Thomas Waugh, forged a place in film theory for gay men by challenging and critiquing their representation on-screen and thereby creating paths that have been fruitfully pursued and contested by later queer scholars.

In his investigation of the local reception of British film *Victim* in 1984, Andy Medhurst has demonstrated the importance of historical contexts in understanding how a film has been understood or responded to by audiences. Following his argument against film analysis that sees texts "wrenched out of history,"[4] I will make a case that geographic contexts are equally important. The combination of Australia's interconnection with English-speaking film culture and its relative geographic isolation suggests the important role of imported film in the emergence of Australian gay cultures.[5] The Australian case has much to teach us about the importance of time and place to both sexuality and cinema. I am particularly interested here in an historical turn in the discipline of film studies that encourages an interest in "the socio-cultural history of audiences."[6] Although a great deal of scholarly attention has been paid to gay characters on-screen, much less has been paid to the history of gay men in the audience and to the cinemagoing contexts that may have influenced their access and response to gay cinema. Drawing on media reporting, film reviews, and oral histories, I will examine how local factors determined the available meanings of the gay male kiss for gay and straight Sydney cinema audiences.

[4] Andy Medhurst, "'Victim': Text as Context," *Screen*, July–August 1984, 22.

[5] The connection between film and the emergence of Australian gay culture has not been adequately explored. We have some analysis of Australian queer film cultures, however. See, for example, Yorick Smaal, "'Dad and Dave Come to Town': Mr Enwhistle and Male Homosexuality," in *Making Film and Television Histories: Australia and New Zealand* ed. James E. Bennett and Rebecca Beirne (London: I. B. Taurus, 2012), 215–19; Deb Verhoeven, "The Sexual Terrain of the Australian Feature Film: Putting the Out:back into the Ocker," in *The Bent Lens: A World Guide to Gay and Lesbian Film*, ed. Claire Jackson and Peter Tapp (St. Kilda: Australian Catalogue Company, 1997), 25–32; and Scott McKinnon, "The Emerald City of Oz: The City of Sydney as a Gay Space in Australian Feature Films," *Studies in Australasian Cinema* 5, no. 3 (2012): 307–20.

[6] Richard Maltby and Melvyn Stokes, introduction to *Going to the Movies: Hollywood and the Social Experience of Cinema*, ed. Richard Maltby, Melvyn Stokes, and Robert C. Allen (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007), 2.

Kissing On-Screen, Kissing in Public

Writing about American television, Alan McKee has described the heterosexual kiss as "massively present," a description equally applicable to the history of cinema.[7] Whether narratively essential or ultimately inconsequential, sexually loaded or relatively chaste, the presence of the kiss is so predictable and so much an element of our cinemagoing lives that its absence is unthinkable. The omnipresence of heterosexual kisses in Western cinema history ensures that Australian children growing up with access to movies and television will have witnessed countless heterosexual kisses before they ever attempt a kiss themselves. Until at least the 1970s, however, it was possible for Australian audiences to reach adolescence and, in fact, adulthood having never witnessed two men kiss on-screen. Pointing this out—stating that heterosexuality has always been more visible in cinema than homosexuality—seems obvious to the point of absurdity. Yet emphasizing this fact remains necessary, because it reveals that heterosexuality is something that filmmakers *choose* to represent—and choose to represent in a range of different ways—rather than as something that just organically occurs. It is necessary to acknowledge that the affirmation or construction of heterosexuality as normative has been a critical element of film history and that, in the words of Wheeler Winston Dixon, "heterocentric mythos remains at the center of the cinema."[8] On-screen heterosexuality is so predominant that it can seem not like something that cinema shows but like something that cinema is and has always been. Its overwhelming visibility means that it has often gone unexamined.

That invisible visibility ultimately interacts with and (re)produces the presumptive heterosexuality of the space of the cinema in which a film is shown. The kiss is a form of physical interaction that dramatically reveals how heterosexuality and homosexuality occupy space differently. To Charles E. Morris and John M. Sloop, the public heterosexual kiss is a "gesture at once banal and iconic [that] represents metonymically the shared cultural embrace of heteronormative values and behaviours."[9] Michael Warner similarly argues that "same-sex people kissing, embracing, or holding hands in public view commonly excite disgust even to the point of violence, whereas mixed-sex persons doing the same things are invisibly ordinary, even applauded."[10] The prohibition of the public same-sex kiss is one element in a history of enforced exclusion from the public sphere. "The formal and informal prohibition of gay visibility in the spaces of the city," George Chauncey

[7] Alan McKee, "A Kiss Is Just," *Australian Journal of Communication* 23, no. 2 (1996): 52.

[8] Wheeler Winston Dixon, *Straight: Constructions of Heterosexuality in the Cinema* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 51.

[9] Charles E. Morris and John M. Sloop, "'What Lips These Lips Have Kissed': Refiguring the Politics of Queer Public Kissing," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 3, no. 1 (2006): 2.

[10] Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 24.

insists, "had a fundamental influence on the development of gay cultural practices."[11] It is thus critical to view the on-screen kiss as in fact occurring in public space (the cinema or other screening venue) rather than being contained within the text of a film; it has acted as either an element of or an incursion into the presumptive heterosexuality of that space, depending on who is doing the kissing. It is equally critical to understand the impact of on-screen representation beyond the space of the cinema, since cinematic depictions of compulsory heterosexuality potentially both respond to and form how sexuality has been understood more broadly.

I focus here on kisses between two men. There is no doubt that women kissing women in public may be read as a queering of space and as a risky performance of desire frequently policed through violence and abuse. However, due to what Morris and Sloop describe as "the sexism that underwrites appropriation of women kissing," a lesbian kiss on-screen can also be read as a form of sexualized entertainment for the heterosexual male viewer.[12] There is thus a significant distinction to be made between representations of same-sex kissing for women and for men. Morris and Sloop remind us of the performance by pop singer Madonna at the MTV Video Music Awards ceremony in 2003, in which she passionately kissed two other female (and heterosexually identifying) singers, Christina Aguilera and Britney Spears. Those kisses made headlines, certainly, and were successfully designed to shock, as well as to titillate and arouse. Yet a similar performance by three heterosexually identifying male performers (Justin Timberlake, say, with Justin Bieber and Robin Thicke) remains implausible. It would be impossible for all to leave with public acknowledgment of their heterosexual identities intact. That this argument requires little elaboration highlights my premise that the history of men kissing men on film requires specific exploration.

Film Reception in Context: Sydney, Australia

Although the sexualized positioning of the gay male kiss on-screen has similar resonance across the history of Western film, the Australian context is unique because of the specific place of homosexuality in Australian political, social, and cultural discourses and because of the role of Australian film censorship regimes. While a detailed history of post-1950 discourses around homosexuality in Australia is obviously impossible in the space of this article, a brief summary is in order. Particularly relevant is the fact that homosexuality in Australia in the 1950s was not widely discussed in the media. As Graham Willett has argued, although the 1950s saw increased policing and prosecution of homosexually attracted men, public discussion

[11] George Chauncey, "'Privacy Could Only Be Had in Public': Gay Uses of the Streets," in *Stud: Architectures of Masculinity*, ed. Joel Sanders (New York: Princeton Architectural Press), 224.

[12] Morris and Sloop, "What Lips," 9.

of the issue in Australia was minimal.[13] Willett notes that this relative lack of discussion differed sharply from the situation in Britain, where a string of high-profile arrests, followed by the release of the 1957 Wolfenden Report, which urged the decriminalization of male homosexual acts, ensured that the topic made it to the front pages of British newspapers. Decriminalization of homosexual sex for men over the age of twenty-one followed in England and Wales in 1967, while similar reforms were barely even a matter of political debate or media discussion in Australia. As Robert Reynolds points out, Australia also lacked the organized and vocal homosexual rights movement that helped drive reform in the United States and Britain.[14] The 1960s did see the emergence of a visible and active gay social scene in Sydney, along with some limited attempts at political organization in various parts of Australia.[15] Campaign Against Moral Persecution (CAMP), the first gay and lesbian rights organization to achieve a significant public profile and develop a broad membership, was not established until 1970.[16]

In both Australia and the United States, homosexual male sex was legislated at the state level, meaning that decriminalization occurred gradually, state by state, over a period of decades. In Australia, this process began with South Australia in 1975 and ended with Tasmania in 1997.[17] Sex between male adults remained illegal in Sydney, the capital of the state of New South Wales, until 1984.[18] Discrimination remained even after decriminalization, however, since until 2003 the age of consent for gay male sex was eighteen, compared to sixteen for heterosexual sex.[19] These points of context are important because they reveal that the circumstances in which, for example, British films about gay men were being created differed significantly from the Australian contexts in which they screened. If, as I argue here, the first gay male screen kisses were generally presented as foreplay, then English men on-screen were partaking in activities that were legal in the place of production from 1967 onward but were indicative of a prelude to what was still considered a criminal act in New South Wales until the mid-1980s.

At first, film censorship in Australia was somewhat haphazardly organized across a range of state and federal authorities. In 1956 responsibility for censorship was consolidated under the Commonwealth Film Censorship Board, a notoriously conservative institution run by a series of professional

[13] Graham Willett, *Living Out Loud: A History of Gay and Lesbian Activism in Australia* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2000), 19.

[14] Robert Reynolds, *From Camp to Queer: Remaking the Australian Homosexual* (Carlton South: Melbourne University Press, 2002), 30.

[15] Garry Wotherspoon, *City of the Plain: History of a Gay Sub-culture* (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1991), 155; Reynolds, *From Camp to Queer*, 30.

[16] Reynolds, *From Camp to Queer*, 30.

[17] Graham Carbery, *Toward Homosexual Equality in Australian Law: An Overview* (Melbourne: Australian Gay and Lesbian Archives, 2010), 8, 47.

[18] Willett, *Living Out Loud*, 164.

[19] Carbery, *Toward Homosexual Equality*, 36.

bureaucrats, most of whom had little experience (or, perhaps, even interest) in the world of cinema.[20] Although the censorship board often labeled films "adults only," no law existed requiring cinemas to enforce the label, and considerable concern existed that teenagers and children would see films thought unsuitable for them.[21] Chief Censor Colin Campbell complained in 1958, for example, that when British censors labeled a film "Adults Only" they were "secure in the knowledge that exhibitors are forbidden by law from admitting children. . . . No such law exists in any Australian state."[22] The censors seem to have been influenced by these perceptions to err on the side of caution when dealing with material considered "indecent." According to a report in the Australian news magazine the *Bulletin* in 1965, the board asked three main questions when reviewing a film: "Is it likely to impair moral standards of the viewers by extenuating vice or crime?"; "Is it likely to be offensive to a normal audience of reasonably-minded citizens?"; and "What will be the effect of the film on children?"[23]

Given the very limited nature of the Australian film industry at the time, Australian film censorship in the 1950s and 1960s was almost entirely concerned with censoring foreign films, predominantly (but not exclusively) from the United States and Great Britain. From the end of World War II until the late 1960s, very few locally funded Australian films were produced.[24] The history of film reception in Australia is thus largely a history of local audiences making meaning of films that had been produced elsewhere.

Calls for sweeping changes to Australian censorship laws became increasingly frequent in the 1960s. Local film festival organizers and sections of the media argued that censorship was limiting access to many quality international films and potentially leaving Australia looking insular and backward.[25] As various controversies arose over sexually explicit films applauded overseas but either cut or banned by Australian censors, the federal government minister for customs and excise, Don Chipp, recognized that Australian censors were making themselves look ridiculous.[26] In 1972 he thus introduced sweeping reforms to Australian censorship laws, including the introduction of a new rating system that featured an "R" for films

[20] Ina Bertrand, *Film Censorship in Australia* (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1978), 86.

[21] Bertrand, *Film Censorship*, 189.

[22] Quoted in Robert Cettl, *Offensive to a Reasonable Adult: Film Censorship and Classification in Australia* (Robert Cettle Ebooks, 2014), 49.

[23] Harry Whitmore, "Wholesome or Prissy?," *Bulletin*, 8 May 1965, 24.

[24] Australian Film Commission, "The Australian Cinema: An Overview," in *Year Book Australia 1989*, ed. Australian Bureau of Statistics (Canberra: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1989).

[25] Bertrand, *Film Censorship*, 184.

[26] Ibid., 185.

restricted to viewers over the age of eighteen.[27] These legislative changes saw a rapid revolution in the kinds of films available in Australian cinemas. Although depictions of actual sex remained forbidden, it was now possible for censors to label certain films as being suitable for adult viewers only. Representations of heterosexual sex thus expanded well beyond the kiss in a category of films made inaccessible to children. The first two films released with a new R rating, for example, were Robert Altman's *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, an American western in which Julie Christie starred as a prostitute, and Ralph Thomas's *Percy*, a British comedy about the sexual adventures of a man who receives a penis transplant following an accident.[28] These two films ushered in an era in which heterosexual screen sex, while still monitored and contained, would no longer rely on the kiss to convey so many meanings.

The new ruling also brought cinematic male homosexuality abruptly into adulthood. The first gay kisses would arrive in R-rated films in the early 1970s. Having skipped the innocent, adolescent kiss altogether, these first kisses would be depicted as an element of going all the way. If the straight kiss could appear in everything from a Disney comedy to a newly R-rated sex farce, gay kisses were positioned as sexual and adult acts, appearing exclusively in films that were permitted on Australian screens with the proviso that children and teenagers would be forbidden from watching.

Enter, Not Kissing: The Arrival of the Chaste Gay Man

Between the 1940s and the 1970s, many of the films that historians now identify as groundbreaking in terms of their representation of homoerotic desire were entirely banned from Australian screens. Produced by avant-garde and alternative filmmakers, these films were important for both the eroticized images they contained and the opportunities they created to meet others at the cinema. As Janet Staiger has argued, access to underground cinemas in New York in the 1960s provided queer cinemagoers with the "potential of finding others like oneself, not only for identity but for community building."[29] Juan A. Suárez has argued that filmmakers such as Jack Smith, Andy Warhol, and Kenneth Anger deployed "aesthetic innovation and creative media uses to encode discourses and interests often excluded from the mainstream."[30] Censorship ensured that these films, which created

[27] Frank Bongiorno, *The Sex Lives of Australians: A History* (Collingwood: Black Inc., 2012), 253.

[28] *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, directed by Robert Altman (1971, United States, Warner Home Video, 2001), DVD; and *Percy*, directed by Ralph Thomas (1971, London, Cinema Club, 2005), DVD.

[29] Janet Staiger, *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 125.

[30] Juan A. Suárez, *Bike Boys, Drag Queens, and Superstars: Avant-Garde, Mass Culture and Gay Identities in the 1960s Underground Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 263.

opportunities for community building and for exploring nonmainstream forms of sexual representation in the United States, were entirely excluded from the Australian experience. For example, in 1967 police prevented the screening of Kenneth Anger's *Fireworks* (1947) as part of an exhibition at a Sydney art gallery, and they impounded the print.[31] Although illegal prints may have been available, Jean Genet's *Un chant d'amour* (1950) was absent from Australian cinemas until the 1980s, when it was screened in inner-city revival houses and at gay film festivals.[32] James Bidgood's *Pink Narcissus* (1970) similarly had to wait until 1982 before it could be legally shown on Sydney screens, while the 1968 Andy Warhol / Paul Morrisey feature *Flesh* was rejected outright by Australian censors in 1971.[33]

By the 1960s, however, Australian censors were permitting the importation of some films containing openly gay male characters. By making their desires clear, these characters were a significant departure from earlier on-screen queers who, in the words of Vito Russo, "were homosexual only if you chose to see them as homosexual."[34] From the "sissy" of 1930s comedies to the longing looks of Sal Mineo toward James Dean in Nicholas Ray's 1955 film *Rebel without a Cause*, Hollywood produced many coded queers who frequently found their way onto Sydney screens. In the 1960s, the habit of queer coding fell away, and homosexual characters openly declared their sexuality on-screen. As is clear in the British film *Victim*, however, those desires were not celebrated but meant to evoke pity, and any physical expression of gay male affection, romantic intimacy, or passionate longing continued to be hidden from view.[35]

Screened in Sydney in 1962, *Victim* received a limited release in only one inner-city cinema.[36] In the film, a married barrister (played by major British film star Dirk Bogarde) famously proclaimed his desire for a young male laborer: "I stopped seeing him because I wanted him. Do you understand? Because I wanted him!" There is no physical expression of that desire in the film, however, which instead depicts the agreement between the homosexual husband and the heterosexual wife to maintain a sexless marriage as a happy compromise. John Coldstream has described *Victim* as "a movie that truly mattered," arguing that it contributed positively to the British debate over decriminalization of male homosexuality in the 1960s.[37] Although positively received by some local critics, the film had none of the

[31] "Exhibition of Films Ban by Censor," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 July 1967, 27.

[32] Cinema listing, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 November 1983: 96; and "Celluloid Images of Ourselves," *Campaign*, February 1982, 20.

[33] Gavin Harris, "*Pink Narcissus* & *Desire*," *Gay Community News*, April 1982, 38; "Flesh," in *Refused-Classification.com*, accessed 15 July 2014, http://www.refused-classification.com/censorship/films/f.html#flesh.

[34] Russo, *The Celluloid Closet*, 32.

[35] *Victim*, directed by Basil Dearden (1961, London, Gold Cinema Collection, 2005), DVD.

[36] Griffen Foley, "Show-Going," *Daily Telegraph*, 7 June 1962, 46.

[37] John Coldstream, *Victim: BFI Film Classics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 108.

same political efficacy in Australia, nor was it considered newsworthy beyond the movie pages of the major newspapers.[38] *Victim*'s refusal to display same-sex desire reveals the producer's intent to argue that while these desires should not be criminalized, they should also not be acted upon. A range of other British films in the 1960s, including Bryan Forbes's *The L-Shaped Room* (1962), Tony Richardson's *A Taste of Honey* (1961), and Sidney J. Furies's *The Leather Boys* (1964), were similarly seen as radical for their inclusion of openly gay characters, but it remained taboo to depict any act of physical affection between these characters. Even for these progressive directors, gay kissing still seemed beyond the realm of the possible.

Concerned as they were about the impact on children and teenagers, Australia's prereform censorship laws had carefully contrived to limit expressions of affectionate, romantic, or sexual intimacy on-screen to the male-female kiss. In the interests of preventing "vice or crime" and in order to avoid "offending a normal audience," the laws prevented Australians from seeing any acts of physical intimacy between men. Through its complete exclusion from screens, the most chaste of kisses between gay men was positioned as a form of physical interaction that was just as shocking, intimate, and deserving of prohibition as any representation of intercourse between a man and a woman. Gay men now had access to representation on-screen, but that access was, for now, granted only if they did not touch.

From Nothing to Everything: The Gay Kiss as Foreplay

When gay men were at last seen kissing on the cinema screens of Sydney in the 1970s, they did so in the context of a sexual revolution, and their actions were framed as an element of a newly public imagining of sex. A revolution in Australian sex lives would run through the sixties and into the seventies, ultimately providing, in the words of Frank Bongiorno, "the opportunity for an unprecedented sexual and social freedom."[39] In 1970s Sydney, a significant element of this new freedom could be seen in an increasingly out gay social scene and the emergence of vocal and political gay rights and liberation movements. At the very beginning of the decade, the founding of the activist group CAMP gave Australian gays and lesbians a political voice. Reynolds argues that "CAMP created a new homosexuality by challenging ideas and beliefs which prevailed in the 'outside' world."[40] That included challenging ideas and beliefs depicted in the movies in the pages of CAMP's magazine, *CAMP Ink*, and in a range of other gay media publications that emerged in Sydney in the 1970s. Film reviews in these publications provided an entirely new forum for openly gay Australian

[38] For an example of a positive review, see Eva Sommer, "New Films," *Sun*, 11 June 1962, 19.

[39] Bongiorno, *The Sex Lives of Australians*, 258.

[40] Reynolds, *From Camp to Queer*, 46.

writers to dissect and discuss queer representation in the movies from a queer perspective. The 1972 reforms to Australian censorship laws thus enabled a new visibility for queer sexuality on-screen at almost the exact moment that queer sexuality was becoming politically visible in the city of Sydney.

The British film *Sunday, Bloody Sunday*, directed by John Schlesinger and released in Sydney in 1972, was another of the first films given the new R rating, and it contained what was, perhaps, the first gay male kiss seen in mainstream film in Australia.[41] In that film, Murray Hood plays a bisexual artist simultaneously conducting affairs with a gay man (played by Peter Finch) and a straight woman (played by Glenda Jackson). When Hood's and Finch's characters first greet each other, they do so with a hug, a frequently used ploy that allowed gay men to show on-screen affection without the need for a kiss. But Hood and Finch continue to hold each other in a longer embrace and, after talking for a few moments, they kiss passionately. As the first such kiss seen (either on-screen or off-) by many Australian cinemagoers, the revolutionary impact of this moment paradoxically lies in its simplicity. There is no orchestral flourish suggesting drama or impending doom; no darkened room or discreet silhouetting of the two men; no suggestion that this is a moment of sadness or a fall into depravity. Like many public gay kisses before and since, it was both a simple expression of desire between two lovers and a radical queering of the space in which it occurred.

It was also foreplay. Although the two men continue to chat after their kiss, we shortly thereafter see a scene of them in bed, with a close-up on Finch's hands moving across and clutching Hood's naked back. The kiss preceded sex and was contained in a film celebrated for its brave exploration of changing sexual mores. Indeed, in Australia, critics greeted the film with high praise and feelings of celebration, because this was something entirely new on Australian screens. It was symbolic of a new era in which paternalistic censorship laws had been successfully reformed and sex on-screen had become a possibility. In the *Sydney Morning Herald*, for example, commentator Lillian Roxon greeted the film with joy, declaring, "At last, an adult movie—a truly adult movie."[42] But the understanding of the film as an exploration of profound changes in sexual values—the common realization that the kiss was new, radical, and profoundly sexual—also produced negative reactions. According to a report in *CAMP Ink*, the kiss in *Sunday, Bloody Sunday* provoked gasps of disgust from some local cinemagoers.[43] Defying the images on-screen, such outcries represent a policing of homosexual affection and a reassertion of compulsory heterosexuality within the

[41] *Sunday, Bloody Sunday*, directed by John Schlesinger (1971, London, Shock Entertainment Group, 2008), DVD.

[42] Lillian Roxon, "An Adult Movie on Love," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 October 1971, 16.

[43] Gary Dennison, "R Certificate and Camp Themes," *CAMP Ink*, May 1972, 4.

space of the cinema. While some gay cinemagoers may have experienced pleasure in finally viewing a gay kiss on-screen, these reactions from fellow cinemagoers may also have reminded gay men of the dangers of attempting such a public kiss themselves.

In the 1970s a number of independent art-house films, including *A Very Natural Thing* and *Sebastiane*, released in Sydney in 1976 and 1977, respectively, ensured that kisses between men were most frequently accompanied by nudity and explicit sex scenes.[44] These films were screened only in inner-city art-house cinemas and were discussed as something radical and new amid acknowledgment that they would more than likely have been banned from Australian screens just a few years before. Indeed, the Australian state of Queensland, which continued instituting its own censorship policies in conjunction with the Commonwealth Film Censorship Board, banned *A Very Natural Thing* on the basis that it was "objectionable," that it "could have an immoral or mischievous tendency," and that it contained "some 'soft core' pornography."[45] *A Very Natural Thing* shows a young seminarian who leaves church life for the burgeoning world of gay sex, community, and liberation in 1970s New York. It ends with him and his lover running completely naked along a beach, rapturously happy at having cast off the restrictions of the heteronormative world. In *Sebastiane*, the camera focuses boldly on the tanned, exposed skin of beautiful Roman soldiers, exploring new possibilities for the candidly and consciously sexual cinematic depiction of homoerotic desire. Gay male kisses and gay male sex were no longer invisible; they were now on-screen, most frequently appearing as part of a unified act.

Unlike the first openly gay men on Sydney screens in the 1960s, therefore, these R-rated queers were seen to express their desires. There was pleasure and liberation to be found in that. But gay male kisses appeared only in films in which the kiss led to on-screen sex. In an Australia exploring new possibilities for the public discussion, representation, and acceptance of adult sexual desire, gay men were experiencing a new kind of visibility. But they were only visible as adult and as sexual, represented in ways that continued to leave the affectionate, romantic, or adolescent gay kiss hidden from view.

Porn Both Soft and Hard: Gay Kisses and Pornography in the 1970s

Alongside these art-house releases, gay men on-screen were also integrated into the world of sexually explicit adult cinema through hard-core pornography

[44] *A Very Natural Thing*, directed by Christopher Larkin (1973, United States, Water Bearer Films, 1999), DVD; and *Sebastiane*, directed by Paul Humphress and Derek Jarman (1975, UK, Siren Visual Entertainment), DVD.

[45] "Banned film 'Immoral,'" *Courier Mail*, 21 August 1976, 4.

and the somewhat surprising appearance of gay sex in the new, soft-core subgenre of the "nudie" films. Playing in less reputable inner-city cinemas or at drive-ins, these soft-core films featured frequent—mainly female—nudity and comedy plots stringing together frequent—mainly heterosexual—sex scenes.[46] They were marketed as "naughty fun" by promoters and loudly decried by socially conservative politicians and commentators. Right-wing Christian activist Fred Nile, for example, expressed his disdain by calling for a new "P" (for Perverted) censorship rating to categorize these films.[47] Film reviewers of the mainstream media largely ignored such material, but the new Australian gay and lesbian media showed no qualms about discussing these films on those rare occasions when they depicted sex between men.

One such film was the 1974 American film *Flesh Gordon*, which enjoyed a surprisingly long life on the cinema screens of Sydney from its first screenings in 1975 through frequent revivals that ran well into the 1980s.[48] *Flesh Gordon* is a parody of the comic strip *Flash Gordon* and tells the story of a threat to Earth in the form of the evil Emperor Wang of the planet Porno. There are frequent scenes of heterosexual sex throughout the film, but there is also a scene involving the handsome Prince Precious, a gay Robin Hood–styled character, and our hero, Flesh Gordon. When the prince saves Flesh's life, Flesh happily expresses his gratitude by agreeing to have sex with him, leading to a brief scene in which we see a naked Prince Precious in bed, going down on a naked Flesh Gordon. Before returning to Earth at the end of the film, Flesh tells the prince he will return one day, next time for a "friendly visit."

Flesh Gordon gave no hints to its gay content in its marketing, and the straight men attracted to the film by advertised images of Flesh's voluptuous girlfriend, Dale Ardor, may have been surprised to find themselves watching, perhaps for the first time, two naked men in bed together. Homosexuality is presented matter-of-factly in the film as just one of the many and varied sexual experiences that make up a free and liberated attitude to sex. In fact, a reviewer in the Australian gay press described the film as "probably the most positive film statement yet as propaganda for peaceful sexual co-existence."[49] Significantly, however, the homosexual sex scene in *Flesh Gordon* had no kissing, suggesting that it was more acceptable for the otherwise heterosexual Gordon to allow a man to fellate him than it would have been for the two to kiss. The absence of kissing thus suggests a view within the film that

[46] For discussion of Australian drive-ins as sexualized spaces, see Ben Goldsmith, "'The Comfort Lies in All the Things You Can Do': The Australian Drive-in—Cinema of Distraction," *Journal of Popular Culture* 33 (1999): 160.

[47] "P-Perverted Film Rating Urged," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 August 1978, 2.

[48] *Flesh Gordon*, directed by Michael Benvenistes and Howard Ziehm (1974, Los Angeles, Gryphon Entertainment, 2003), DVD. *Flesh Gordon* was screened, for example, as part of a triple bill with *Night Games* and *Virgins on the Run* at the Skyline Drive-In in Sydney in 1982. See the advertisement "Sexual Sensations," *Daily Mirror*, 21 October 1982, 33.

[49] "Film Reviews: *Flesh Gordon*," *Campaign*, 1 September 1975, 11.

kissing is more tied to sexual identity than oral sex (at least for the receptive partner). Thus, Flesh could retain a predominantly straight identity by receiving a blow job from the openly gay prince, an identity that may have been troubled by a kiss. *Flesh Gordon* also placed the audience's first experiences of visible homosexuality within the contexts of a movie almost wholly about sex. Although making gay sexual desire visible, the film contained representations of gay life within an entirely sexualized space.

This survey of films screened in Sydney in the first two years after the relaxation of censorship demonstrates that filmic representations of physical intimacy between men were possible only in the sexualized spaces of the city and appeared within contexts similar to only the most explicitly represented heterosexual sex scenes. Heterosexual sex on-screen had, however, experienced a more gradual revealing, and it continued to include a more diverse range of representations, from the kiss (which was not always the prelude to on-screen sex) through to penetration. It was therefore visible in a broader range of spaces, from the suburban family cinema to the inner-city porn-house. Gay representation on-screen, on the other hand, was confined to sexualized spaces; it was framed as more overtly and explicitly sexual and was therefore only considered appropriate in venues that strictly limited public access.

Throughout the 1970s, this cultural framing was made most apparent by the fact that the most likely or available place to see gay men kissing on-screen in Sydney was in a hard-core pornographic film. Although the production, importation, or screening of pornographic material in Australia remained illegal in that decade, certain venues in inner-city Sydney neighborhoods such as Kings Cross nonetheless possessed and screened pornographic films, often interspersed with live performances from strippers.[50] These illegally screened films included both heterosexual and homosexual pornography, and while local police were aware of the existence of and activities at these venues, prosecutions were rare.[51] However, the fact that representations of gay life were so rare in mainstream cinema arguably legitimized pornography within 1970s gay culture in ways that were not analogous to its role in the straight world. Inner-city theaters that screened porn were prominent advertisers in local gay media publications, including *Campaign* and *Stallion* from the 1970s onward, as were mail-order services that sold pornographic movies—first on 8mm film and then on video cassette—for home viewing. Through the 1970s and into the 1980s and 1990s, porn films were frequently reviewed in magazines like *Campaign* and *Gay*, whose primary goal was to report on gay rights issues and the local queer social scene. In other words, some of the writers fighting for the

[50] Jill Matthews, "The History of the Exhibition of Pornographic Film in Australia," in *Acts of Love and Lust: Sexuality in Australia from 1945–2010*, ed. Lisa Featherstone, Rebecca Jennings and Robert Reynolds (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2014), 15.

[51] Ibid., 16.

acceptance of homosexuals in Sydney or exploring issues of interest to the gay community felt that pornography was doing a better job of exploring gay life than mainstream cinema.

John R. Burger has argued that "the appropriation by gay men of pornographic media was a big step toward legitimacy and making visible their sexual practices."[52] Watching on-screen depictions of acts that remained illegal in New South Wales can be interpreted as a form of resistance to the criminalization and pathologization of gay male sexual practices. Some of these films, such as the 1974 *Boys in the Sand*, not only acted as a celebration of sex between men but also contained, Linda Williams argues, "clearly stated . . . advocacy of coming out as proud, happy, and sexually satisfied gay men."[53] *Boys in the Sand* starred Casey Donovan, whose first pornographic feature, the 1971 *Casey*, was reviewed in Sydney newspaper *Gay* in 1974 as "an interesting document of an age of innocence that slipped away from the gay community in the late sixties with the advent of liberation and counter cultures."[54] This review largely ignored the sexual aspects of the film and instead examined *Casey*'s social and cultural relevance to a newly out and politicized community. A film that would have been dismissed as pornographic by the mainstream media was thus treated seriously as a mechanism for exploring and legitimizing 1970s gay male life.

The importance of pornography to 1970s film representations of gay relationships and identity provides further evidence that the gay male kiss was contained within heavily sexualized contexts. Unlike depictions of heterosexual relationships, the first on-screen kiss and the first on-screen penetration were not decades apart for many gay male viewers but minutes. Indeed, it is possible that some saw on-screen penetration *before* they saw an on-screen kiss. In the context of 1970s gay liberation politics, filmic representations of sex between men operated as an immediate, pleasurable, and defiant casting-off of oppression, censorship, and criminalization. They are also evidence for the speed of change with which a newly politicized community demanded new forms of representation and cinematic pleasures. However, the absence of any lag between chaste portrayals of same-sex love and on-screen sex likely also contributed to social presumptions that this newly visible community was wholly concerned with sex.

Pornographic film is, of course, a form of screen entertainment that creates a set of pleasures and a form of social interaction different from narrative, mainstream features. For all its power to legitimize gay male sexual desire, pornographic film also contained that desire within specific

[52] John R. Burger, *One-Handed Histories: The Eroto-politics of Gay Male Video Pornography* (Birmingham, NY: Haworth Press, 1995), 3.

[53] *Boys in the Sand*, directed by Wakefield Poole (1971, New York, TLA Entertainment Group, 2002), DVD; Williams, *Screening Sex*, 151.

[54] *Casey*, directed by Donald Crane (1971, United States, Hand in Hand Films); "We Love You Casey," *Gay* 9 (1974): 6.

cultural and geographic spaces. Gay male identity could certainly be explored on-screen through pornography, but it could only appear in specific, quasi-legal, or illicit spaces devoted to sex and, significantly, in which sex was often actually taking place. Sim Lee, for example, writes that when he took his first trip to a gay porn theater in Sydney in the late 1970s, he incorrectly assumed that viewers would watch the film and then go home to masturbate.[55] Lee was disappointed to find the space "grotty" and the picture quality terrible, both of which left him wondering why anyone would pay for such an experience. He was then approached by a man who initiated sex, thereby revealing that the sex on-screen was not the only sex that took place in these public venues.

Such experiences no doubt had their pleasures, and they certainly enabled both the performance of sexual desire and the creation of connections to a gay community in an era of criminalization and significant oppression. The lingering consequences of representations that partitioned gay desire into specific spaces, however, would continue long after the growing complexity, diversification, and cultural visibility of gay male life proved that pornography was inadequate as a means to comprehensively reflect gay social, sexual, and cultural desires.

The desire that many gay men felt to see their lives reflected in something other than movies wholly concerned with sex is reflected in the advertising tagline for *A Very Natural Thing*, which was marketed as "The First Accurate, Non-Pornographic Presentation of Contemporary Gay Life!"[56] The producers were clearly assuming that the first "accurate" presentations of contemporary gay life that most gay men had seen had been pornographic and that these films had nonetheless provided gay viewers with a sense of realism and legitimacy. The tagline simultaneously implies that all previous gay films had been exclusively concerned with sex—that they never or rarely provided broader narratives of gay life. As an R-rated film, *A Very Natural Thing* certainly contained explicitly sexual scenes, but it was sold as a nonpornographic film that would appeal to both straight and gay viewers interested in exploring gay life in ways that were not exclusively focused on sex.

A Kiss and Nothing More: The Problematic Beginnings of Gay Cinematic Adolescence

With rare exceptions, movies that featured gay male characters through the 1970s and 1980s either contained no kisses between men (*Cabaret*, *Partners*, *Fame*, *A Chorus Line*, *Streamers*, *Victor/Victoria*), or the kisses were followed by on-screen sex (*Fox and His Friends*, *A Very Natural Thing*, *Sebastiane*, *My Beautiful Laundrette*, *Prick Up Your Ears*, *Making*

[55] Sim Lee, "A Journey with Support," in *Being Different*, ed. Garry Wotherspoon (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1986), 210.

[56] "A Very Natural Thing" (advertisement), *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 June 1976, 39.

Typesetter: Transpose period and superscript note 57 on first line.

Love, *Cruising*)[57]. A kiss between men was still framed as wholly about sex in a way that a kiss between a man and a woman was not. In other words, films with gay male characters could retain the image of not being about sex only if these men were not seen kissing each other on-screen, while heterosexual kisses had no effect on the overall evaluation of a film as sexual.

By the 1990s, however, a greater range of films featuring gay characters had been produced, and there were signs that some form of gay cinematic adolescence had finally begun. In Hollywood films like *In and Out* and *The Object of My Affection*, as well as in Australia's first romantic comedy about a gay male relationship, *The Sum of Us*, kisses were as far as sex went on-screen between gay men.[58] *In and Out*, a broad, multiplex-friendly comedy, tells the story of a male schoolteacher who is about to marry his longtime girlfriend but is outed as gay by a former student on national television. Still attempting to assert his heterosexuality, the teacher is convinced it is time to admit otherwise—to himself, his friends, and his family—only as a consequence of an extended kiss with another man. The kiss leads to the beginnings of a romance between the two men but not to sex on-screen. As with the heterosexual kisses of Production Code Hollywood, some gay kisses were now, very occasionally, left "on the brink of carnal knowledge."[59]

The arrival of such films played into concerns within the gay community of the 1990s that "authentic" gay culture had been mainstreamed, co-opted, and commoditized by commercial filmmakers who were then selling it back to the community in a sanitized, middle-class, and neutered form. For example, while acknowledging positive aspects of *In and Out*, James Keller and William Glass wrote in 1998 that the film lacked evidence of desire or eroticism and that "the solution of Hollywood to the controversy of same-sex relations is to define it as an absence of normative heterosexual

[57] *Cabaret*, directed by Bob Fosse (1972, United States, Warner Home Video, 2003), DVD; *Partners*, directed by James Burrows (1982, San Diego, CA, Legend Films, 2008), DVD; *Fame*, directed by Alan Parker (1980, New York, Warner Home Video, 2003), DVD; *A Chorus Line*, directed by Richard Attenborough (1985, New York, MGM Home Entertainment, 2003), DVD; *Streamers*, directed by Robert Altman (1983, Irving, TX, Shout Factory, 2010), DVD; *Victor/Victoria*, directed by Blake Edwards (1982, London, Umbrella Entertainment, 2009), DVD; *Fox and His Friends*, directed by Rainer Werner Fassbinder (1975, Munich, Madman Films, 2003), DVD; *My Beautiful Laundrette*, directed by Stephen Frears (1985, London, MGM Home Entertainment, 2003), DVD; *Prick Up Your Ears*, directed by Stephen Frears (1987, London, Umbrella Entertainment, 2002), DVD; *Making Love*, directed by Arthur Hiller (1982, Los Angeles, Twentieth Century Fox, 2007), DVD; *Cruising*, directed by William Friedkin (1980, New York, Warner Home Video, 2007), DVD.

[58] *In and Out*, directed by Frank Oz (1997, United States, Warner Home Video, 2001), DVD; and *The Object of My Affection*, directed by Nicholas Hytner (1997, New York, Twentieth Century Fox, 2004), DVD; *The Sum of Us*, directed by Kevin Dowling and Geoff Burton (1994, Sydney, Southern Star Entertainment, 2008), DVD.

[59] Williams, *Screening Sex*, 26.

desires rather than a presence of alternative sexual longings."[60] Similarly, Chris Berry argued in a 1995 issue of *Metro Magazine*, a publication aimed at teachers of media, that *The Sum of Us* relied upon the "excessively blokey and ocker" masculinity of the film's lead character and that this was not designed for the pleasure of gay audiences but was rather a product of the filmmakers' presumption that "that's the only kind of queer in a regular suburban setting straight audiences could accept."[61] This was the height of the AIDS crisis, and the predominance of homophobic discourses that tied gay male sex to death and disease gave these critiques a particularly urgent edge. The perceived desexualization of gay men in these movies was read either as a refusal to acknowledge the reality of AIDS or as a sign of the co-optation of gay culture for commercial purposes—a process that encouraged filmmakers to avoid allusions to sexual activities that mainstream culture found distasteful.

The fact that there was some validity to these concerns was demonstrated by the absence of a kiss between the central gay lovers in Hollywood's first attempt at a major film about the AIDS epidemic—Jonathan Demme's 1993 drama *Philadelphia*.[62] A gay lawyer, Andrew Beckett (Tom Hanks), is dying of AIDS and hires a straight lawyer, Joe Miller (Denzel Washington), to help him sue his employers for unfair dismissal. Although we see Miller sharing a bed with and kissing his wife, such scenes are denied Beckett and his partner, leading one Australian critic to describe the relationship as containing "all the warmth and intimacy of a semi-frequent squash partnership."[63] In response to such criticism from reviewers and gay activists, director Jonathan Demme defended the absence of a kiss, arguing: "When we see two men kissing, we're the products of our brainwashing—it knocks us back twenty feet. And with *Philadelphia* . . . I didn't want to risk knocking our audience back twenty feet with images they're not prepared to see. It's just shocking imagery, and I didn't want to shoehorn it in."[64] This speaks volumes about the absence of the gay male kiss in film to this date. Demme assumes, perhaps correctly, that even cinemagoers who had knowingly purchasing a ticket to a film about a gay man would not be "prepared to see" that man kissing his lover. In a telling testimony to widespread discomfort with gay physicality, the director believed that viewers would be more shocked by a kiss than by scenes of a man slowly dying of a debilitating and disfiguring

[60] James Keller and William Glass, "In & Out: Self-Referentiality and Hollywood's 'Queer' Politics," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 26, no. 3 (1998): 140.

[61] Chris Berry, "Not Necessarily the Sum of Us: Australia's Not-So-Queer Cinema," *Metro Magazine*, no. 101 (1995): 15. "Blokey" and "ocker" are slang terms relating to stereotypical, uncouth, or uncultured versions of Australian masculinity.

[62] *Philadelphia*, directed by Jonathan Demme (1993, New York, Tristar Home Video, 1998), DVD.

[63] Ruth Ritchie, "Squirming with Hanks and Hanky," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 January 1995, 41.

[64] Quoted in William Leslie Hewitt, "It's My Job," *Film & History* 39, no. 2 (2009): 86–87.

illness. That he described the possibility of adding a scene with two men kissing as something that he would have had to "shoehorn in" makes it clear that he was unable to see such a kiss as an organic part of a narrative that was in large part about a gay male couple. Displaying the kisses between a heterosexual couple in the same film, on the other hand, seemed to be an easy, natural fit. Given the account of the filmic significance of the gay male kiss that I have provided here, it is also possible that the lack of a sex scene between the two men explains the absence of a kiss. Perhaps Demme was yet one more filmmaker who viewed gay kisses as always a symbol of foreplay; adding a kiss can only really be seen as "shoehorning" if one understands that kiss as a prelude to the two men having sex on-screen.

According to Demme, a scene in which Beckett and his partner dance together resulted in a complaint from a straight audience member who had been made to feel physically ill by the sight. Defending the film, Australian historian Paul Sendziuk has argued that this dancing scene "of exquisite tenderness was more honest and, because of its poignancy, more confrontational for heterosexual audiences than any number of bouncing bare asses that featured in earlier and later films about gays."[65] I have some sympathy for Sendziuk's argument, in that this was a poignant scene that was rare, and therefore potentially confrontational, in its tender depiction of gay male romantic intimacy. Sendziuk's defense of the film implies, however, that the absence of the gay male kiss is understandable because the sensibilities of straight viewers must be accounted for when depicting such intimacy. This allows for heteronormative supremacy in policing cinematic displays of gay affection and places the gay male kiss as an act that should be more contained and monitored than a heterosexual kiss. The physical intimacy of a close dance, he insists, is poignant yet radical because images like these were still unusual in mainstream film. The fact that gay cinema had not yet gone through its adolescence ensured that scenes of acceptably adolescent affection—a kiss, a dance—were read as being more shocking to mainstream audience than adult scenes of simulated sex containing "bouncing bare asses."

Through the 1990s, therefore, many Hollywood films continued to position the gay male kiss as an act that was far more sexual than a kiss between a heterosexual couple. However, films such as *In and Out* did indicate a moment of gradual change—a change that was less a reflection of the desexualization of gay movies than of their diversification. Cinemagoers of the 1990s were also treated to such films as *Poison*, *The Living End*, *Head On*, *Velvet Goldmine*, and *Happy Together*, all of which featured explicit (simulated) sex and/or male nudity and that explored alternative forms of queer desire between men.[66]

[65] Paul Sendziuk, "Philadelphia or Death," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 16, no. 3 (2010): 444.

[66] *Poison*, directed by Todd Haynes (1991, United States, Accent, 2008), DVD; *The Living End*, directed by Gregg Araki (1992, Los Angeles, Hopscotch Entertainment, 2002), DVD; *Head On*, directed by Ana Kokkinos (1998, Melbourne, Umbrella Entertainment,

Gay audiences were at last able to explore a range of cinematic experiences, from sexual arousal to Hollywood versions of romance.

Three films in the 1990s and into the 2000s directly commented upon the politics of the gay male kiss by explicitly drawing the viewer's attention to the fact that while the cinematic gay kiss had become possible, it remained problematic as a public act. In *Jeffrey*, a romantic comedy about love in the time of AIDS, the film's central lovers, having just met at a gym and experiencing immediate attraction, share a passionate kiss.[67] The scene then cuts to a cinema where two young straight couples are watching *Jeffrey* and have just witnessed that kiss. While the women react positively, their boyfriends are disgusted and appalled. The scene then shifts back to the gym. Similarly, in *The Opposite of Sex*, following a scene of two men kissing, the film's sardonic female narrator speaks directly to the audience: "Can I just say to all the girls out there, if you're with a guy who groaned or made some crack during that little kiss, you're with what we call a closet case. That's the number one tip-off."[68] In the 2005 comedy *Adam and Steve*, the lead character finds himself pelted with food or otherwise abused whenever kissing another man in public, scenes that are played for black humor but that nonetheless draw our attention to the policing of such a kiss.[69]

Each of these films underlines how absent the gay male kiss had been in Western cinematic history to this point, and each also emphasized that this kiss remained subject to the enforcement of uniform heterosexuality in public. While *The Opposite of Sex* pushed back against that enforcement by playfully questioning the sexuality of those who objected, it nonetheless acknowledged the possibility (or likelihood) that some viewers would react with disgust. There is a self-consciousness to these kisses that, even in the process of their performance, draws a form of metacommentary that reflects on the difficulties of the public gay male kiss. The same-sex male kiss remained so unusual and so much a breach of heteronormative cinematic convention that it enabled or required extracinematic comment.

Gay Adolescent Cinemagoers and the Gay Cinema Adolescence

The arrival of the gay kiss in mainstream cinema would ultimately provide accessible images of gay life to a new viewer: the gay teenager. Without a cinematic adolescence, gay movies had essentially excluded gay adolescent cinemagoers. As Jeffery P. Dennis has argued in the context of 1990s

2014), DVD; *Velvet Goldmine*, directed by Todd Haynes (1998, London, Buena Vista Home Entertainment, 2000), DVD; *Happy Together*, directed by Kar Wai Wong (1997, Buenos Aries, Madman Entertainment, 2000), DVD.

[67] *Jeffrey*, directed by Christopher Ashley (1995, New York, Love Films, 2010), DVD.

[68] *The Opposite of Sex*, directed by Don Roos (1998, Los Angeles, Sony Home Pictures Entertainment, 1998), DVD.

[69] *Adam and Steve*, directed by Craig Chester (2005, New York, TLA Releasing, 2006), DVD.

America, "Real teenagers, unless they had very, very permissive parents or could sneak out to the Castro Theatre, continued to subsist on a diet of media images virtually unchanged since the days of Frankie and Annette."[70] In Sydney, this audience was barred from access to images of gay life either by the R rating for cinemagoers under the age of eighteen or because gay films more often than not screened in art-house venues, spaces that were less attractive or welcoming to adolescent viewers than the teen-friendly multiplexes. Sexually explicit material had been crucial in disrupting the cultural invisibility of gay male sexuality while also legitimizing and stimulating those desires for gay male viewers, but such material may have been less desirable or accessible to younger viewers who sought less adult forms of representation.

In oral history interviews conducted for my larger project on the history of gay male cinema audiences in Sydney, both of my youngest interviewees—men in their very early twenties—expressed disappointment that so many films aimed at gay audiences during their recently passed teen years had been explicitly sexual. Both specifically mentioned the American television soap *Queer as Folk*, which had played on Australian television in their teen years and was known for its explicit sex scenes. Referring to the *Queer as Folk* episodes he had watched, Stefan stated: "I actually really dislike the fact that they're so sexualized."[71] Discussing the program, David complained that "the straighties" had a far greater range of "age-appropriate" entertainment, while films directed at a gay audience tended to "shove fisting in [your] face, for example."[72] This desire for gay entertainment that was not sexually explicit suggests a desire for a gay cinematic adolescence. Asked if he had a favorite gay movie, Stefan listed the American films *Connie and Carla* and *The Family Stone*, neither of which contains any sex at all.[73] David chose *Shelter*, a romantic drama in which sex is suggested mainly through the kiss.[74] In that film, a closeted young man finds true love with his first male sexual partner. The end of the film sees them establishing a home together that even includes a child (the young man's nephew, abandoned by the child's mother). In many ways, it is an old-fashioned Hollywood romance in which the kiss leads to off-screen sex and an on-screen relationship that extends beyond the film's closing moments. For David, *Shelter* was a film that "doesn't say, 'You're going to get a second-rate outcome,'" and that did not "have a focus on, like, hot heavy sex scenes." While the sex in this

[70] Jeffery P. Dennis, *Queering Teen Culture: All-American Boys and Same-Sex Desire in Film and Television* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 2006), 172.

[71] Interview with Stefan, 28 October 2009. All interviews conducted by the author. Recordings held by the author.

[72] Interview with David, 21 October 2009.

[73] *Connie and Carla*, directed by Michael Lembeck (2004, Los Angeles, Universal Pictures, 2005), DVD; and *The Family Stone*, directed by Thomas Bezucha (2005, Los Angeles, Twentieth Century Fox, 2006), DVD.

[74] Shelter, directed by Jonah Markowitz (2007, Los Angeles, Here! Films, 2007), DVD.

film is not delayed until the wedding night, it is nonetheless representative of a new form of cinematic adolescence in which the gay kiss eventually leads to wedded bliss and the formation of a family.

David came out as gay while still in high school, and his sexuality was broadly accepted by his family, friends, and schoolmates. His memories offer a valuable moment of inclusion for teenage experiences in the history of gay men as cinema audiences. David described cinema and cinemagoing as significant life experiences through which an openly gay teenager could both communicate and explore his adolescent sexuality in the late 1990s and early 2000s. He had, for example, come out to a group of school friends by taking them to see the British film *Get Real*, which tells the story of a teen romance between two schoolboys.[75] For David, the arrival of a gay male adolescence on-screen enabled the process of performing his own identity in the company of his peers. The appearance of teen adolescence on-screen was not, however, without its continued inequities. David complained that "there are token gay characters in every teen movie now. But everyone hooks up and he gets kind of . . . the fag hag. And they're 'happy' because of that and you're like, 'No, he wants to fuck someone. This is a teen movie, everyone else wants to fuck someone. . . .' It's kind of like, the narrative just gets fucked at the end every time." What was missing, in other words, was the adolescent kiss. In expressing a desire to see films that avoided explicit sexuality but in which gay male characters could nonetheless indicate their desire "to fuck someone," David indicates a desire for films in which sexual desire is primarily signaled by the kiss. He bemoans the continued rarity of such a kiss on cinema screens. In David's adolescence, there was still no homosexual equivalent to the heterosexual kiss, which implied the desire to fuck while still encompassing many nonsexual meanings and thus remained appropriate in films aimed at younger audiences. The exclusively adult and heavily sexualized framing of the gay male kiss continued to make it inappropriate in films aimed at teens throughout the early 2000s, and film plots that sealed a relationship with a kiss continued to center around a male-female couple.

Kissing in a New Century: The Continued Monitoring of the Gay Male Kiss

Into the first decade of the twenty-first century, the monitoring of on-screen representations of gay male intimacy led to some critics insisting that an explicit depiction of sex was necessary in order to signify true gay cinema. Any mainstream film that featured gay male characters who did not engage in explicit on-screen sex was criticized by some critics for having mediated queer representation to protect the sensibilities of heterosexual audiences.

[75] *Get Real*, directed by Simon Shore (1998, London, Madman Entertainment, 2004), DVD.

Cerise Howard, for example, described *Brokeback Mountain* and *Capote* as "gay films for straight audiences" and argued that these films were far too timid in their depictions of gay male intimacy. "While it is abundantly clear what Jack and Ennis get up to on their irregular fishing trips," Howard complains, "there is no chance we're going to be shown anything beyond but a suggestion of it. Truman Capote and Jack Dunphy's relationship is even more chaste in its presentation."[76] The relatively discreet sex scenes of *Brokeback Mountain* and the absence of sex in *Capote* are here seen as almost equivalent failures in the representation of gay life. Howard's critique implies that an explicit representation of sex between gay men is a prerequisite for more authentically queer films about and for gay men. Anything less is avoiding what truly makes these men gay in deference to heterosexual audiences who may not want to see it.

I would argue that we need to find a balance between a critique of the continued monitoring of gay male sexuality in mainstream films and understandable pleasures to be found in explicitly sexual films; we have to get beyond the insistence that any film about gay men must include explicit sex. Focusing on the diverse desires and pleasures of gay audiences rather than on our presumptions about the intentions of filmmakers reveals Howard's argument as limiting. In acknowledging the diversity of the gay audiences and the broad range of cinema that these audiences seek, we should acknowledge that not all gay viewers want every movie they see to be sexually explicit, and they will not necessarily only ever feel themselves addressed by sexually explicit films.

This desire to feel addressed by nonsexualized filmic imagery is not limited to the young. Charlie, another of my interviewees and a man in his seventies, explained that he had never enjoyed pornography but that *Brokeback Mountain* was the kind of movie that provided a "sexual interest" for him.[77] As he put it, the film had a "real story," was not "overly explicit," and featured, as he noted with some laughter, "handsome, attractive men." He did not view the sex of *Brokeback Mountain* as a modified representation of gay male sex for the sake of heterosexual audiences but rather as an important part of a movie that gave him a great deal of pleasure, including sexual pleasure.

While an on-screen kiss that indicates a desire to fuck or the relatively discreet sex of a film like *Brokeback Mountain* can be enough on-screen sex for some gay male audiences, the fact remains that the sight of two men kissing continues to trouble majority definitions of appropriate public

[76] Cerise Howard, "Queer and Queerer, or Fucking Different," *Senses of Cinema,* 5 May 2006, accessed 12 October 2013, http://www.sensesofcinema.com/2006/festival-reports/mqff2006/. She is referring to *Brokeback Mountain*, directed by Ang Lee (2005, Alberta, Canada, Universal Studios Home Entertainment, 2006), DVD; and *Capote*, directed by Bennett Miller (2005, United States and Canada, Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2009), DVD.

[77] Interview with Charlie, 14 October 2009.

behavior. The initial exclusion of the gay male kiss from cinema screens, and its subsequent sexualized positioning, continues to influence the reception of films in which such a kiss is included. Through significant extratextual discussion, a potential kiss between gay male characters is a matter that has become a far more marked cinematic moment than that between a man and a woman. Even before each film was released, the kisses of *Brokeback Mountain*, *Milk*, and *Behind the Candelabra*, for example, were the subject of widespread media discussion in which the heterosexual lead actors were asked repeatedly what it had been like to kiss another man.[78]

In early 2014 Australian newspaper reports further indicated the ways in which the historical exclusion or positioning of the gay male kiss continued to impact its current monitoring and censorship. A poster developed to advertise the 2014 Queer Film Festival in Brisbane, capital of the Australian state of Queensland, featured an almost exact reenactment of a kiss featured in the 1953 film *From Here to Eternity*.[79] In that iconic film moment, Deborah Kerr and Burt Lancaster lie on a beach, kissing passionately, with the surf that swirls around them acting as a none-too-subtle metaphor for their peaking desire. The film festival poster drew from this Hollywood imagery but depicted two men. Festival organizers had planned to use the image as one of a series of advertisements at bus stops and on public transport, but the Brisbane City Council banned its use, and local councilor Krista Adams described it as "too confronting."[80] The director of the Brisbane Powerhouse, where the film festival takes place, defended the council decision, stating: "They approved six other images, so they are not saying, 'We don't want images of gay culture,' they are saying, 'We don't want overly sexualized images in public spaces.'" It is nonetheless significant that the banned poster was the only proposed advertisement that featured men kissing. It is difficult to imagine a similar decision being made to ban the original movie poster

[78] *Milk*, directed by Gus Van Sant (2008, San Francisco, Focus Features, 2009), DVD; *Behind the Candelabra*, directed by Steven Soderbergh (2013, Los Angeles, Home Box Office Video, 2013), DVD. On *Brokeback Mountain,* see Alexa Moses, "It's Kissing Another Human Being. So What?," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 January 2006, accessed 15 August 2008, http://www.smh.com.au/news/film/its-kissing-another-human-being-so-what/2006/01/13/1137118969951.html. On *Milk*, see "Sean Penn Demands More Gay Sex," *Ninemsn*, 12 February 2008, accessed 15 August 2009, http://channelnine.msn.com.au/blog.aspx?blogentryid=259980&showcomments=true; and on *Behind the Candelabra*, see "Matt Damon and Michael Douglas to Be On Screen Lovers," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 March 2011, accessed 20 April 2011, http://www.smh.com.au/matt-damon-and-michael-douglas-to-be-onscreen-lovers-20110330-1cfab.html.

[79] *From Here to Eternity*, directed by Fred Zinneman (1953, Los Angeles, Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2005), DVD.

[80] Chad St James, "What's Wrong with Two Men Kissing?," *Same Same*, 22 February 2014, accessed 20 April 2011, http://www.samesame.com.au/news/10613/Whats-wrong-with-two-men-kissing.

featuring Kerr and Lancaster. It seems clear that what made this poster appear "overly sexualized" was a reading of the gay male kiss as more sexually explicit than an opposite sex kiss. It continues to be the case, therefore, that the gay male kiss will often been read as a sexual act.

In a critique of the banning of the film festival poster, Brisbane sexual health worker Michael James underlined just how significant this ongoing sexualization of the gay male kiss could be for gay men in their everyday lives: "This decision makes me feel if I were walking down the street and gave my husband a kiss, that would be too confronting." James instructively underlines the connection between the ways in which a kiss is represented as a cinematic image displayed in public and the ways in which it is performed by individuals in public spaces. Censoring of representations limits public performance and enforces spatialized heteronormativity. The gay male kiss continues, therefore, to be an act that is less frequently seen and yet more visible and more heavily sexualized than a kiss between a man and a woman. Although increasing cinematic inclusion of gay male characters indicates a growing place for gay male culture in mainstream discourses, the continued cultural impact of the sexualization of the gay kiss suggests the continued troubling of heteronormative sexual and gender performance by gay men. The movies have played a significant role in ensuring this cultural positioning. By containing the gay male kiss to sexual contexts, the movies have paradoxically placed that kiss as more explicitly sexual than the countless Hollywood heterosexual kisses that preceded it. As my account of Sydney cinema has demonstrated, the movies have certainly played a valuable role in making gay male desire visible both in terms of offering legitimacy and in terms of providing voyeuristic pleasures to gay male viewers. However, the fact that gay life on-screen was, from the 1970s onward, so persistently sexual has also excluded some viewers, primarily but not only gay teenagers, from these processes of identification. Although the delayed adolescence of gay life on-screen and the heavily sexualized imagining of the cinematic gay male has brought with it specific pleasures for gay male cinemagoers, it has also contributed to the exclusively sexualized framing of gay lives well beyond the cinema.

About the Author

Scott McKinnon is a postdoctoral research fellow at the University of Western Sydney's Urban Research Centre and an honorary associate at the University of Sydney. He has a particular interest in interdisciplinary approaches to studying histories and geographies of sexuality, and he has published research in a diverse range of fields, including film studies, memory studies, cultural geography, disasters research, and gay history. His PhD research investigated the role of cinema in the emergence of gay

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