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## **Towards a New LGBT Biopic:**

### **Politics and Reflexivity in Gus Van Sant's *Milk***

**By Julia Erhart**

“I am not a candidate, I am part of a movement. The movement is the candidate. There is a difference.” Spoken by Harvey Milk’s character in Gus Van Sant’s *Milk* (2008), these words emblemize a critical tension in a film that both is and is not a conventional biopic. Appearing to advance a key theme in the movie, these words downplay the significance of the individual in favour of a collective movement, and in so doing express an idea of group identity that runs counter to the conventional privileging of the individual in the generic biographical form. At the same time, the fact that they are spoken by a blockbuster Hollywood star chosen to play an “exceptional” individual within a movie bearing a one-man title makes it difficult *not* to view the film as a biopic (Custen *Bio/Pics*). The tension between the individual “Harvey Milk” and the gay political community disturbs – in interesting ways – the movie’s compliance with generic conventions. In what follows, I will explore how, because of its downplaying of the individual in favour of a focus on politics, the movie both is and is not a conventional biopic. Because it is not a mainstream film but a movie targeted at a presumably guaranteed, albeit niche, audience, *Milk* can elevate a different set of priorities than is normally seen. Yet, because of the film’s fortuitous resonance with topical issues and the foregrounding of

these issues by critics, *Milk* is able to exceed its non-mainstream boundaries and potentially reach a wider audience.

While there has been no shortage of critical scrutiny of single, isolated biographical films, there are surprisingly few long studies of the biopic as a media genre. George Custen's foundational *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (1992) remains the only single-authored, book-length resource on the biographical film of the studio-era.<sup>1</sup> Focussing on films created in the heyday of the studio system, Custen investigates how the practices of the studios (including the work of producers and directors-and the value of stars) circumscribed from the inside the versions of lives and histories that were able to be told. Hardly authentic versions of a person's life, the films Custen scrutinizes fashioned contents from refurbished and fictionalized plots, largely through the vehicle of studio stars. While Custen did publish a follow-up essay ("Mechanical") on more recent biopics (1961 – 1980), his claims are limited by his exclusion of made-for-tv movies and movies released after 1960.

The media landscape in which the current-day biopic is located has grown vastly more complex. Biographical work, as several scholars including Custen have noted, became staple TV fare during the eighties and nineties (Custen "Mechanical"; Anderson and Lupo "Hollywood"; Rosenstone). In cinemas, there is robust evidence that the biopic has survived the studio system's demise (Anderson and Lupo "Hollywood" and "Introduction"; Mann; Rosenstone; Welsh). And biographical and autobiographical material currently comprises an enormous amount of bandwidth on social-networking sites and on the reality-TV-oriented world of television. What is clear is that the number of smaller-budget, independently-funded films is on the rise (Anderson and Lupo "Introduction") and the conventional subject of the biopic as outlined by Custen has changed. The studio-era preference for heroic white men has

made way, in this post-civil-rights, post-feminist era of diversified marketing, for interest in a greater range of subjects. If, as Custen sensed, “we no longer [believe] in an old-fashioned idea of greatness” (“Mechanical”, 131), our fascination with celebrity culture has opened up new representational opportunities. Heidi Fleiss, Harvey Pekar, Eugène Terreblanche, Ed Wood, the non-famous and the infamous, the ordinary and the unpopular, are all suitable biopic subjects (Anderson and Lupo “Off-Hollywood”; Bingham).

Dennis Bingham’s *Whose Lives are They Anyway? The Biopic as Contemporary Film Genre* encompasses both recent auteurist works by directors such as Spike Lee, Oliver Stone, Tim Burton, and Jane Campion and outliers from the studio era like *Citizen Kane* and the British film *Rembrandt*. Taking up where Custen leaves off, Bingham positions Todd Haynes as emblematic of the twenty-first century biopic director, who, Bingham claims, is drawn to the genre in “postmodern times” (20). The book is organized into two major sections, “The Great (White) Man Biopic” and “Female Biopics,” both of which chart the positioning of various films within cycles in the genre. The cycles include the classical, celebratory biopic form, the “warts-and-all” biopic, parody, minority appropriation, and finally what Bingham terms the “neoclassical” biopic (17 – 18). In spite of both his self-declared interest in openly gay director Haynes and in biopics about queer historical figures, Bingham laments that a section on “queer appropriations” had to be omitted from *Whose Lives* due to time and space constraints (27).

Because of the recurrence of a number of themes – an ambivalence towards public recognition, that is, the state of being out; the link between visibility and social value (positive as well as negative); the relevance of sexuality and other intriguing “private” matters; a degree of exceptionalism (a lack of fit with the *status quo*) –

LGBT lives have made and continue to make apt biographical subjects whose figuration shifts depending on prevailing cultural expectations and available commercial forms. The dramatic changes in social and political capital that many (especially middle-class, developed-world) LGBT individuals have enjoyed since Stonewall and particularly into the twenty-first century, make possible a commercial interest in “other” historical LGBT lives, lived elsewhere and/or under more challenging circumstances than current-day audiences experience. While there is no single unified LGBT biopic, and films about LGBT lives conform to the newer biopic cycles identified by Bingham (mentioned above), their forms are also contoured by LGBT subject matter and targeted marketing campaigns. In so being, they share qualities that set them apart from non-LBGT biopics. What are these qualities and at what point – and in which ways – do the LGBT lives depicted in contemporary biopics become visible on-screen?

### **The LGBT Biopic**

The suitability of LGBT lives and gender non-conformity as themes for the commercial biopic became apparent as early as 1933, when *Queen Christina*, the historical costume drama about the eponymous seventeenth-century Swedish queen, opened at the box office. Subject of considerable interest to contemporary LGBT media scholars, the film has been touted as an early example of lesbian screen visibility because of the drag attire and manly swagger adopted by Greta Garbo (as the Queen) and the single mouth-on-mouth kiss between the Queen and her court favorite, Countess Ebba Sparre (Russo 63 – 66). While the film makes clear the protagonist’s historically documented gender non-conformity – her disdain for marriage, preference for male attire, and affectionate relation with her female friend –

subsequent biopics did not enjoy such openness. For example, although there is historical evidence of Cole Porter's many liaisons with men inside of his long marriage to Linda Lee Thomas, *Night and Day* (1946) presented a sanitized version of the composer's life from which all signs of same-sex relationships were absented (Purdum).

In the post-Stonewall period, and after the 1968 demise of the Motion Picture Production Code, biopics began to appear telling stories that more straightforwardly spoke to gay-liberation struggles. Set in the nascent proto-gay communities of 1930s and 1950s United Kingdom respectively, *The Naked Civil Servant* (1975) and *Prick Up Your Ears* (1987) each takes place in perilous times when gay sex was illegal. Dealing with issues of criminalization and homophobia and emphasizing the courage of their respective protagonists, these films set the stage for *Milk* and other contemporary biopics in ways which I will later discuss. In addition to *Milk*, the first decade of the twenty-first century has seen a burst in films about historical LGBT personalities. Focussing on significant characters in cultural and political histories as well as on victims of homophobic violence (*The Laramie Project* [2002]; *The Matthew Shepherd Story* [2002]; *Boys Don't Cry* [1999]), contemporary LGBT biopics are a corrective against both the industrially-sanctioned repression of images of "sex perversion" that was enforced by the Production Code and the spectrum of religious prohibitions that continue to make many forms of gay representation commercially unprofitable. Visionary in their depiction of LGBT pasts, such biopics supplement community historiographies, which recognize the significance of gay historical figures but have not always possessed resources to create visual depictions of them (Waugh 5).

Many contemporary LGBT biopics choose to show subjects that are not easily embraced as heroes within LGBT communities; in so doing, they qualify hegemonic conceptions of queer relations. As the biopic has seen a decline in celebratory storytelling and a move towards a “warts and all” approach (Bingham), the contemporary LGBT biopic is likewise witnessing more complex matters in both the stories that get produced and in the aspects of a person’s life which are revealed. Challenging themes are depicted in *J. Edgar* (2011), about the powerful, closeted, and sometimes capricious long-term Director of the FBI. Disclosing Hoover’s homoerotic relationship with colleague Clyde Tolson to audiences who previously may not have been aware of it, the film also asks gay audiences to accept people on the “wrong” side of history as part of the historical gay past. If Hoover is an ambiguous figure for contemporary LGBT communities to adopt, other films give shape to yet more controversial stories. Child killing, attempted murder, and serial killing are some of the events dealt with in *Swoon* (1992), *I Shot Andy Warhol* (1996), and more recently *Monster* (2003). Embodying links between criminality, sexuality, and violence, the subjects of such films present fundamental challenges to the conventional image of community worthiness. A manifestation of anger felt by lesbians and especially gay men towards an indifferent political climate during the heyday of the AIDS crisis, the experimental biopic *Swoon*, about convicted child killers Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb, demonstrates the power and potency of New Queer Cinema to feature images of provocation and overtly queer desire. With their depictions of homicidal women, *I Shot Andy Warhol*, about radical feminist writer Valerie Solanas, and *Monster*, about convicted serial murderer Aileen Wuornos, are likewise disturbing in their breaking of taboos on women and violence. Because the agents of the crimes are lesbians, the films recycle well-worn conventions associating female violence with sexual deviance

(Hart). In so doing, they may also serve to deconstruct such conventions, demonstrating violence to be a “last resort” for the protagonists living in repressive societies.

While the above-named biopics trouble somewhat the convention of the “acceptable” biopic subject, the majority of LGBT biographical movies depict well-known individuals associated with more or less positive contributions to society and culture. In the twenty-first century, biopics and biographically-oriented screen works have shown the lives of literary legends Reinaldo Arenas (*Before Night Falls* [2000]), Truman Capote (in both *Capote* [2005] and *Infamous* [2006]), Allen Ginsberg (*Howl* [2010]), Virginia Woolf (*The Hours* [2002]), Hart Crane (*The Broken Tower* [2011]), and Christopher Isherwood (*Christopher and His Kind* [2011]); artist Frida Kahlo (*Frida* [2002]); composer Cole Porter (*De-Lovely* [2004]); entertainer Liberace (*Liberace: Behind the Candelabra* [2013]); film critic Vito Russo (*Vito* [2011]); and actor Sal Mineo (*Sal* [2011]).<sup>2</sup> Common to most of these films is the idea that same-sex attraction and/or unconventional gender attributes are central to the biopic subject’s identity, significantly impacting his or her life and work. For example, in *Infamous*, Capote’s research into the events of the Clutter family murder develops alongside his feelings for one of the convicted murderers, Perry Smith. These feelings both impede Capote’s distance from the story he is researching and enable, it is suggested, the development of a new literary style, in what ultimately became the blockbuster novel *In Cold Blood*. While the 1930s Woolf is not shown herself with a lesbian lover in *The Hours*, the lesbian attraction felt by one of Woolf’s characters (the moment when Mrs. Brown shares a kiss with her buxom neighbor) is the precipitant for a chain of important movie events, namely the abandonment of the child who grows up to be the protagonist Richard in the contemporary story.



Concerning an obscenity trial, on the one hand, and state-sanctioned anti-gay persecution, on the other, the story-lines of both *Howl* and *Before Night Falls* are given shape in both cases by their respective protagonists' sexuality. Sidestepping conventional "coming out" story formats, such films track lives lived within and against historical practices of intolerance.

In telling these histories, many post-2000 LGBT biopics re-fashion the celebratory biopic, espousing postmodern, revisionist storytelling styles. Generically, many are marketed as high-brow, award-attracting films in the "arthouse" genre. Crosscutting between live action and animation; interweaving scenes of the literary personality with scenes about characters from the writer's work; incorporating cutaways to mock interview subjects; inserting obviously anachronistic material in the form of contemporary songs, are a few of the tropes that animate *Howl*, *The Hours*, *Infamous*, and *De-Lovely*, respectively. The anachronistic framing device in *De-Lovely*, where an older Cole Porter looks back and comments on his life as a younger man, typifies how the past may be framed in these biopics – as something worth knowing yet also worth maintaining distance from. At the same time, audiences (especially LGBT audiences) are not slow to condemn films that they perceive to have manipulated the facts, especially if the story is well-known. Indeed, audience expectations of historical fiction films, and biopics in particular, are my next topic.

### **Historical Fidelity and the Biopic**

Most scholars looking for serious history have ended up being disappointed by what the biopic has to offer. Reminding us that the biopic is first and foremost a "fictionalized or interpretative treatment" (v), Glenn Mann, for example, has claimed that "certain patterns of this genre dictate departure from historical accuracy" (vi).

Putting the case more strongly, James Welsh has cautioned us that in the medium of film “even more than on the printed page, history and biography are likely to become imaginative exercises, perhaps not intentionally designed to confuse the viewer, but resulting in mass confusion none the less” (59). Custen’s comments on the subject have been the most unequivocal. Comparing Hollywood biography’s relation to history with Caesar’s Palace’s relation to architectural history, the biopic, he writes, “is an enormous, engaging distortion, which after a time convinces us of its own kind of authenticity” (*Bio/Pics*, 7). In spite of critical agreement about the lack of conventional factuality in the biopic, audiences have come to the movies with a different set of expectations. Regardless of what Custen et al acknowledge to be the case, historically-themed movies, which, of course, include biopics, have often been judged on factual grounds. As Custen puts it, the biopic has provided “many viewers with the version of a life that they held to be the truth” (Custen “Mechanical”, 2); audiences have wanted to know which movie elements are “accurate” and which ones are not.

A good deal of the paratextual materials that emerged over the course of the making of *Milk* and around the time of its release seemed to cater to audience demands for factuality. For example, that the makers took pains to recreate original locations (such as Harvey’s and Scott’s shopfront, recreated on the site of the original camera store [Marler; McCarthy; Lee; Maupin]) and events (such as the candlelight march [Cleve Jones]) was well publicized. Pre-production consultations with historical advisors like Cleve Jones and Jim Rivaldo (Black 107) added to the sense of historical fidelity. Post-production praise from well-known gay people who lived in San Francisco in the seventies testified to the historical faithfulness of the project (Maupin). The film was judged in the light of Robert Epstein's 1984 documentary,

*The Times of Harvey Milk*, with one critic claiming that the similarity between the two films lent credibility to Van Sant's project (Tueth 31). Lance Black's "enormously researched script" received praise (McCarthy 39; Holleran 19), while cameos by historical personalities from the period like Tom Ammiano, Allan Baird, and Frank Robinson suggested approval of the project from those in-the-know and promised a film which would be true-to-life.

A considerable amount was written about the lengths the actors went to research their characters. Sean Penn's "metamorphosis" into Milk attracted positive press (Ansen; McCarthy; Travers), while Emile Hirsch spoke on several occasions about his research for his role as Cleve Jones (Rosenblum; Cleve Jones). Actors discussed the advantages and challenges of making a film on a subject about which there existed a great deal of archival imagery. The presence of such imagery was deemed a mixed blessing: though if it helped actors to get an understanding of the subject, it also created demands in viewers and critics for the actors to get things right (Tueth 32; Cleve Jones, 36). As Armistead Maupin, speaking to Van Sant, put it: "you had such a responsibility to a number of living people who remember the characters and the events that are shown in the film."

Although much of the affirmative commentary circled around the issue of historical fidelity, not all of the commentary was positive. What few negative reviews the film received (and there weren't many) generally tracked the film's success in capturing and honouring Harvey Milk's life – and found it lacking. In a scathing review, Michael Bronski took issue with the film's politically naïve and ahistorical representation of the period in question, criticized the film for depicting Milk's radicalism as *sui generis*, and lamented that Milk was portrayed as a "singular hero who triumphs almost entirely as a result of his own will" (72). Bronski then went on

to bemoan the film's failure to show that "San Francisco in the mid-Seventies was a hot bed of grass-roots organizing that had existed for over a decade" (72). While the target of Bronski's attack was the film's portrait of historical San Francisco politics, other critics found fault with the events and characters that the film left out. Nathan Lee queried the film's decision not to show the White Night Riots, which occurred after Dan White's sentence was announced, suggesting that to leave that event out told "only half the story" (20). Hilton Als criticized the paucity of female voices in the film, noting it was out of step with the facts of Milk's life and, indeed, with Epstein's 1984 documentary (9). Preferring the more honest, prefatory images of the men being rounded up at the film's beginning, Als also noted the film's downplaying of Milk's "outsider" status. And, as I will go on to discuss in greater detail, numerous writers took issue with what they saw as a desexualizing of the San Francisco gay community and Harvey Milk's life in particular (Simpson; Holleran; Klawans; Bronski).<sup>3</sup>

Apart from their adjudication of the film's factuality, there is one further thing to note about negative reviews of Milk: nearly all of them appeared in the gay press and/or in articles by self-identified gay writers. Of the relatively few negative reviews I unearthed, one appeared in the gay press (in *The Gay and Lesbian Review Worldwide*) and five were by self-identified gay writers (Hilton Als, Nathan Lee, Andrew Holleran, Michael Bronski, and Mark Simpson); only one appeared in the non-gay press by an apparently straight-identified writer (Stuart Klawans, writing in *The Nation*). Within these reviews, there was a propensity to expound on the facts of Milk's real life. While some writers included a paragraph of details expanding on what the movie showed, other writers, like Hilton Als, wandered away from the subject of the film altogether, spending nearly one-third of the review amplifying the

events of Milk's life. Taken together, these points are evidence of ownership claims, declarations of authority on the part of various writers about the subject. What the attacks on *Milk*'s faithfulness to history evidence are the high stakes in the story of Harvey Milk's life and in the film's representation of it. Clearly, *Milk*'s links to current political movements and communities amplify the pressures on the movie to be accurate beyond what would ordinarily be required for a biopic. Likewise, the critical attempts to augment the facts of Milk's life evidence an anxiety that *Milk* might have left something out or misrepresented key historical aspects. Reviewers with links to the gay community obviously had high stakes in the movie; and when it failed to live up to their expectations, they were not slow in pointing this out. Does this make *Milk* a "specialized audience film," as Todd McCarthy has called it (39)? In a short while I will consider how the film managed to transcend this category and achieve cross-over appeal for non-gay-community audiences. But first I want to show that, ironically, while a number of gay community critics approached *Milk* as a "specialized" product, the movie itself makes use of many rhetorical tropes from the generic, studio-era biopic.

### **Harvey Milk as Biopic Subject**

In many ways Harvey Milk's life is an ideal subject for a biopic. A naturally colourful, theatrical personality with celebrity credentials, Harvey Milk found his calling as a gay activist when he migrated to San Francisco in 1972. The film tracks Milk's move from his repressed New York City life to the more liberated San Francisco on the eve of that city's transformation into a gay mecca. The film opens on the night of Milk's fortieth birthday, when Milk meets and picks up his future lover and eventual fellow activist Scott Smith and takes him back to his apartment. In

spite of the somewhat risqué subject matter, the film enlists a number of stereotypes from the studio-era biopic. The movie presents an individual who is charismatic and stands out from the crowd but who is humanized and whose uniqueness is contained. Visually, for example, Milk is frequently shown standing apart at the front of a crowd (typically with a bullhorn), but over and over the narrative positions him as another regular gay guy from the Castro. As a two-hour-long movie, the film condenses and abbreviates Milk's life, presents his personality as a seamless package, and makes his motivations and personal goals clear and comprehensible. For example, where the real-life Milk had been in the Navy and had spent many years working in the insurance industry and on Wall Street, the film focuses on the symbolically straightforward and politically more consistent aspects of Milk's life after his move to San Francisco. The film simplifies the story of the development of Milk's political consciousness by beginning not just in the middle of Milk's life but literally *in medias res*, inside a subway station as Milk is making his way home from work.

According to Custen, the trope of *in medias res* was a staple of the studio era, through which the hero's personality could appear as an effect of self-invention rather than family (149). In *Milk*, such a trope allows the film to gloss over all-at-once Milk's Jewish heritage, the politically awkward facts of his corporate life in NYC, and the more messy and ambivalent aspects of Milk's attitude to sexuality that existed prior to his "out" San Francisco life.<sup>4</sup> To show these aspects would confuse viewers and would be, in narrative terms, uneconomical. Instead, the film promotes a fairly one-dimensional understanding of character motivation, a reading of the political landscape in terms of "good guys" and "bad guys," and a vision of "coming out" as the single practical political answer (evidenced in interactions with minor characters like the gay publisher and the young staff-member to whom Milk hands the phone).

In narrative terms, a number of aspects make the real-life Milk's life biopic-worthy. Although Milk spent only ten months in elected political office, his career in San Francisco contained a number of highly dramatic points, including not one but four runs for political office, a high profile Referendum fight (touching on the hot-button issues of sexuality in schools), numerous TV appearances, and finally his death by assassination at the hands of conservative one-time fire fighter and fellow supervisor Dan White. As a historically real individual, Harvey Milk and the events of his life have been heavily documented and many artworks have been inspired by them. For example, there are the aforementioned Oscar-winning documentary *The Times of Harvey Milk*, a popular biography by San Francisco journalist Randy Shilts, interviews, television footage, photographs, other materials held in the Harvey Milk archives, and even an opera (Holleran 18). The film makes liberal, dramatic, and poignant use of archival materials: for example, the candlelight vigil after the murders, and, most notably, a tape-recording of Milk's personal testimony, which he made several months before his death, and the reconstruction of which serves as a dramatic frame structuring the movie.

As in the studio-era biopic, characters in *Milk* are introduced and positioned to showcase personality traits of the movie's main subject. According to Custen, the "friend" in the biopic may chronicle and showcase key qualities of the famous person; his or (less frequently) her normality may act as a foil to draw attention to the extraordinary qualities of the hero. The friendship is frequently asymmetrical; in most cases, the friends are the "helpers" (164). In *Milk*, Cleve Jones functions as precisely such a friend to Milk, managing his campaign, providing unequivocal support, and facilitating his manipulation of crowds. Jones acts as a stand-in for audience members who would like to be close to the main charismatic character. The

significance of the Jones character as chronicler/witness/enabler of Milk's life story is further secured by the character's attachment to the real-life person Cleve Jones, who acted as an historical consultant for the film (Cleve Jones; Black).

### **Sex and Romance in *Milk***

If *Milk* conforms to the studio-era biopic in how it introduces and constructs its main and supporting characters, where the film breaks ranks is in its positioning of a life partner for Milk. In studio-era films generally, a romance line was nearly ubiquitous, and the biopic was no exception. Often supplemented or ameliorated where the factual partner was insufficient, the heterosexual romantic partner had the effect of lightening the otherwise serious stuff of the biopic. In some cases where a romantic figure was altogether lacking, one was added – sometimes against the will of the subject in question (Custen “Mechanical” 160). The overall effect of the heterosexual partner on the subject of the biopic, according to Custen, was a stabilizing or “humanizing” one. Writing more recently about the function of the romantic partner in two contemporary celebrity biopics, *Walk the Line* (2005) and *Ray* (2004), Glenn Smith argues that in each film romantic love helps repair psychological traumas stemming from deprivation and disadvantage. In so doing, Smith claims, romantic love displaces more controversial issues of classism and racism and works to distract viewers from the more challenging issues in the story (236). Romantic love, it would seem, both domesticates the male lead and contains the more controversial issues introduced elsewhere in the films.

From a brief look at movies like *Boys Don't Cry*, *Swoon*, and *Monster*, mentioned near the start of this essay, it is clear that conventions of romantic love indeed do animate some gay or queer biopics, albeit in non-heterosexual forms. Yet,



unlike the lives depicted within those stories, the historical facts of Milk's life pose a challenge not just to the heterosexual component of the framework outlined by Custen and Smith, but to the convention that the partnering be life-long and more or less monogamous. Because of its subject's well-documented commitment to non-monogamy (Shilts), *Milk* cannot help but put pressure on the generic conventions outlined by Smith and Custen. How does the film deal with the subjects of sex, love, desire, and coupling?

Although publicity around *Milk* made much of the fact that the movie would open with a "really big sex scene" and be faithful to Milk's life (Maupin), the movie garnered criticism from some quarters for its tepid and inaccurate representation of 1970s gay sex and Harvey Milk's sex life in particular. The film devotes precious little screen time to gay sex or gay sex cultures, containing but one explicit sex scene (between Milk and Scott Smith) and virtually no anonymous, casual sex scenes of any sort. And while Milk waxes positive about the beauty of having "many lovers" to Cleve, he is shown coupled sequentially with only two – Scott and Jack Lira. The misrepresentation of Milk's life and gay sexuality more generally was not lost on critics. Writing for the *Guardian*, Mark Simpson blasted the film for its domestication of gay sexuality and, in his words, "castration" of its hero. Simpson writes: "far from 'destroying every closet door,' it instead builds a brand new bullet proof one around its subject's sex life. Van Sant's film is, in fact, living a lie." Indeed, considered in generic terms, the film contains considerably fewer sex scenes, for example, than the aforementioned *Prick Up Your Ears*, about the United Kingdom playwright Joe Orton. Made at the height of the AIDS pandemic, *Prick up Your Ears* stresses the centrality of sex and desire to gay male culture, featuring scenes of sex in a public toilet and an industrial estate, a threesome, and a sex-tourism holiday in

North Africa. Other gay-oriented biopics from this period and after are not as explicit as *Prick up Your Ears*, but focus centrally on themes of male longing. *The Hours and The Times* (1991), about Brian Epstein's relationship with John Lennon, and *Gods and Monsters* (1998), about Hollywood director James Whale, are organized wholly around the themes of desire (albeit frustrated desire).

Appearing in a post-AIDS-activism climate, *Milk*, it would seem, is a different film altogether. Does the film "domesticate" its lead, along the lines of how the lead males in *Walk the Line* and *Ray* are contained, as discussed above? I think not. In simple terms, the representation of each of Milk's two partners is not sufficiently fleshed-out to permit a domestication of Milk. Neither of Milk's boyfriends is developed with any real depth; several scenes of emotional intensity with each are resolved inconclusively. For example, the aftermath of the scene where Jack locks himself in a closet is not shown; audiences are given no indication of how the closet episode wraps up. While this scene succeeds in conveying Jack's instability, it conveys precious little about the overall relationship between the two men or about Harvey's feelings for Jack. Moreover, Scott's "return" to Harvey and the normally histrionic Jack's response, are likewise not fleshed out, again leaving viewers uncertain about the significance of either man to Milk (and about the significance of romance to Milk in general). Finally, there is no fallout shown from the aftermath of what ought to be a major narrative event, that is, Jack's suicide. While we might expect a few scenes showing Milk coping with finding Jack's body, we hear simply Milk's voice-over telling us he "had to keep on," as the image switches abruptly to scenes of the Proposition 6 campaign.

### ***Milk* and Politics: Towards a New LGBT Biopic**

Although it is possible to dismiss the above examples as poor character plotting, I believe they are an indication of the film's ambivalence about the convention of monogamous romance. Largely uninterested in casual sex, profoundly ambivalent about romantic love, the film is driven overwhelmingly by an interest in the mechanisms of gay politics. In *Milk*, the space (usually) occupied by romantic love gives way to the hustle and bustle of the world of politics. This is narratively the case with Jack: the film barely takes a breath after Harvey discovers Jack's body before launching into the next political event. And this is no less true of Milk's relationship with Scott, whom the film depicts as moving out on the occasion of Milk's renewal of his political ambitions. In narrative terms, Scott's departure from the center of the story makes way for the campaign to resume. In the cases of both Scott and Jack, politics *literally* displaces romance. So what is the status of politics in the movie?

The film draws strong parallels between Milk's self-fashioning as a political entity and the growth and maturation of the gay community as a political force in its own right. *Milk* devotes nearly all of its story arc to the political goings-on of the time, which eclipse all other plotlines, including any serious probing of Milk's psychology and/or his sentiments about sex, romance, family, aging, and the like.<sup>5</sup> In spite of the one-person title and Oscar-ready performance, *Milk* throws its investigative energy into the story of the 1970s San Francisco gay-rights movement, which is conveyed far more compellingly than are the conventional biographical issues of psychology formation and emotional development. Even Milk's recurrent exhortation – for individuals to “come out” – yields little in terms of character exposure, in Milk or other major characters (who are essentially already “out”). Instead, “coming out” is a rallying cry, a symbol of the political aims of the period, and a fully depersonalized theme with consequences for only minor characters.

Generally speaking, there is virtually no dialogue or scene in the movie which is not about politics to some extent. Commentators made note of this fact, including the film's director, who acknowledged both the novelty and indeed risk of such an approach (Black 118). As Van Sant says, "one of the weird things about Lance's [Black's] script was that it seemed to be entirely political. . . . I kept asking Lance to put in some more ancillary dialogue that just wasn't at all about the political side of the story. . . . and it was something that Lance COMPLETELY avoided" (Black 118). Other commentators expressed anxiety that the film would come across as "agenda-driven agitprop," though, like Van Sant, they came to the conclusion that their fears were unfounded (McCarthy 39).

Arguably, the film is less a biopic *per se* than a film about a gripping, dramatic political era which happened to have a charismatic leader at its center. In so being, *Milk* breaks rank with earlier gay biopics such as *The Naked Civil Servant* (1975) and *Prick Up Your Ears* (1987). About the legendary gay personality Quentin Crisp, *The Naked Civil Servant* shows Crisp's coming of age at a time (the 1930s in Britain) when effeminacy was the target of near-universal hostility, a jail sentence was an ever-present threat, and violence at the hands of street thugs was routine. The most open depiction of homosexuality that had yet been seen, *The Naked Civil Servant* emphasized the singularity and courage of its fiercely and flamboyantly "out" protagonist at a time when most men gathered surreptitiously in coffee shops or danced fearfully with one another in private. Set primarily in Britain about twenty years after *The Naked Civil Servant*, *Prick Up Your Ears* depicts a world less obviously perilous than Crisp's but dangerous and discriminatory nonetheless. Successful evasion of the police is a strong theme in the film, which highlights both the pleasures and risks of gay life in a world where homosexuality was still illegal.

Because of their settings in emergent gay communities, *The Naked Civil Servant* and *Prick Up Your Ears* emphasize subjects of anti-gay discrimination and heterosexual panic rather than the formation of an organized political movement. They are thus blueprints for a more contemporary film like *Before Night Falls* (mentioned at the beginning of this essay), set in revolutionary Cuba, which likewise features aspects of anti-gay violence and harassment. While each of these films focuses on the life and achievements of a single individual, as does *Milk*, the protagonists are cut off from all but a tiny community of like-minded outcasts.

In contrast, *Milk* depicts the birth and formation of a well-structured political movement in its own right, and picks up where earlier biopics leave off by depicting the transformation of its gay characters into organized, successful, powerful political actors. In so doing, the film differs from the aforementioned films because it represents the complexity of political formation and prioritizes that process rather than character development. A new kind of gay-targeted biopic that focuses on a process not previously seen, *Milk* thus marks a departure from both the generic studio-era biopic and the earlier gay biopics. Moreover, it does so while succeeding both critically and at the box office. How an essentially non-mainstream, gay-targeted film was able to achieve this is a matter to which I will now turn.

### ***Milk* and Current Events: Topicality, Reflexivity, and the Box Office**

Rarely does a film come along that resonates so strongly with current events. The film's release, it must be recalled, came a mere three weeks after the 2008 U.S. federal election, an election which provided liberal voters with both extraordinary pleasure (on account of the election of Barack Obama) and unanticipated pain (because of the passage in California of Proposition 8, which defined marriage as a

union between a man and a woman). Apparently at the forefront of many writers' minds, these two events rated a mention in most critical reviews of *Milk*. The topic of California's Prop 8 generated the greatest amount of commentary. Many writers remarked on the ironic timing of the events, lamenting that debates and discussions that appear in *Milk* to be over and done with are still largely unresolved.

Overwhelmingly, most critics saw the film as amplifying the cause for gay rights, crediting it for raising awareness and inspiring a new generation of activists. Even writers who otherwise criticized the film, generally praised it on this account.<sup>6</sup> One review went as far as to say that activists should "learn" from the film, the activism of which was more successful than current-day political strategies (Holleran 20).

Almost without exception, throughout the gay-authored as well as the mainstream press reviews, writers remarked on the similarities between Harvey Milk and the newly-elected U.S. president. Ryan Gilbey, for example, said that the film would "epitomize" Barack Obama's presidency (44). Frequently, reviewers cited Milk's and Obama's shared identities as "community-organizers" and "outsiders." "The election of Barack Obama proved what a band of outsiders could achieve in support of an unlikely, charismatic candidate," wrote Richard Corliss (63). Writers repeatedly cross-referenced the significance of the trope of "hope" in the respective campaigns. Stuart Klawans's reference is perhaps the most intricate, in metaphorically mapping Harvey Milk's words on to the persona of Barack Obama. Klawans concludes: "here is the story of a successful community organizer – the first member of his social group to rise to a certain office – who continually tells his supporters that they are the true source of change, and whose final words of the film are, 'You gotta give 'em hope. You gotta give 'em hope. You gotta give 'em hope.' Think of the audacity" (44).<sup>7</sup> In another mash-up of current politics and popular

culture, Peter Travers blends the identities of the two men. Elevating Harvey Milk to the status of the 2008 Democratic candidate, Travers concludes his article with the words “John McCain, meet a real maverick” (132).

What is the function of these relentless and recurring references to current events in reviews of a historical biographical film set in the 1970s? I believe these rhetorical ploys work to update the 1970s story and make it relevant for present-day audiences who ordinarily would have little interest in history. While it is not possible to definitively prove the box-office relevance of such references, we know that liberal media tend to do well in conservative times (as voters would have felt with the passage of Prop 8); from this we can at least *hypothesize* a box-office effect. Two writers remarked as such, noting the film’s opportunism (unwitting or not) in relation to current events (Klawans; Holleran).<sup>8</sup> Andrew Holleran, for example, directly attributed Milk’s critical and box office popularity to the dislike for Prop 8. “It’s Harvey Milk, but also the gay rights movement itself, that reviewers are responding to, I suspect” (19).

In an article about historical-fiction films, Marita Sturken explains that our relationship to images of the past goes beyond questions of “accuracy.” For Sturken, that relationship is complex and paradoxical. On the one hand, we view historical images (such as those we see in *Milk*) as evidence of what actually took place and endow them with empirical truth. As I have tried to show, these are the terms by which many gay writers engaged with and evaluated the film. On the other hand, continues Sturken, we may be engaged by the fantasy of popular films “to feel as though we have acquired an ‘experience’ of a particular historical event” (66). By referring over and over to contemporary topical circumstances, critics link the past of Harvey Milk’s time with events of the present day and in so doing solidify an

audience's feeling of understanding toward past discontents, anxieties, and satisfactions. Repeated references to material in the news – Prop 8, Obama's election – add value to the film, assist audiences to overcome any potential uneasiness brought about by the film's subject matter, and open up, for mainstream as well as minority cultural audiences, a possibly esoteric subject. Such commentary has the effect of projecting on to the film a reflexive quality, which, had it been released two years later, it perhaps would not have had.

A number of contemporary historical films, including biographical films, strive for such reflexive qualities. *Malcolm X* (1992) is often cited in this regard, for the way it switches back and forth between the past of *Malcolm X*'s time and contemporary images, which include the videotape beating of Rodney King and Nelson Mandela speaking to a classroom. *Flags of Our Fathers* (2006), which problematizes what happened at the flag raising on Iwo Jima, likewise offers a reflexive take on its subject. In that film, audiences are asked to reflect on what occurred in the past and what the legacy of the past is now in the present. The film cautions us against too much certainty about historical events, suggesting that it is always possible to make mistakes. While *Milk* does not self-consciously set out to be a reflexive film in the ways that *Malcolm X* and *Flags of Our Fathers* do, it nonetheless functions to draw attention to commonalities between and among past and present eras, politics, and political figures. Because of how critics responded to the historical confluence of events surrounding the film's release, resonance is added to the film that was not otherwise there. And in so doing, critics both secured their own in-road to the non-mainstream movie and also made *Milk* accessible for general audiences.



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<sup>1</sup> *A/B Studies, Biography, and Journal of Popular Film and Television* have featured special issues on the biopic.

<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, films about Freddie Mercury and James Dean are reputedly in production.

<sup>3</sup> And there were general criticisms that the film was “conventional” (McCarthy), the framing device “regressive” (Lee), and that the film’s generic requirements as a biopic resulted in a lack of emotional complexity (McCarthy; Als).

<sup>4</sup> Prior to his move to San Francisco, Milk worked for the financial securities firm Bache and was a one-time supporter of conservative politician Barry Goldwater. See Shilts.

<sup>5</sup> Proof of how little is known about the historical figure in such areas is evidenced in an article in *The Advocate*, where friends and observers speculate about what Harvey would be doing now had he not been killed. To take just one example, the discrepancy of opinions about Milk’s stance on the current debate about gay marriage is indicative of how little is actually known about Milk’s feelings in a range of areas (Martin, 43-44).

<sup>6</sup> The exception to the praise was Mark Simpson, who used the film as a platform to criticize the gay marriage campaign as tame and apology-ridden.

<sup>7</sup> The phrase ‘audacity of hope’ emerges in Barack Obama’s keynote address to the 2004 Democratic Convention and is the title of his second book.

<sup>8</sup> Only one writer viewed the question of the film’s release date with scorn. Criticizing Van Sant’s decision not to release the film prior to the U.S. election, Henry Barnes suggested that an earlier release date could have “tipped the vote in the anti-prop-8 camp’s favour had it arrived before 4 November.”

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