



PROJECT MUSE®

Screenwriting Representation: Teaching Approaches to Writing Queer Characters

Michael Green

Journal of Film and Video, Volume 65, Nos. 1-2, Spring/Summer 2013,
pp. 30-42 (Article)

Published by University of Illinois Press
DOI: 10.1353/jfv.2013.0014



➔ For additional information about this article
<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/jfv/summary/v065/65.1-2.green.html>

Screenwriting Representation:

Teaching Approaches to Writing Queer Characters

MICHAEL GREEN

RECENTLY A STUDENT IN MY screenwriting adaptation workshop came to me with the issue of how she should handle the sexuality of her main character. The heroine of the novel she was adapting is a lesbian, but my student was worried that writing a lesbian protagonist might reduce her chances of selling the screenplay. She was struggling over whether she should subtly infer the lesbianism, rather than show it outright, or maybe not represent it at all. Changing the character's sexuality—or not representing it—would alter the conflict and theme as it was presented in the novel, but the screen story as a whole would more or less work either way, and so my student was torn.

In this case, I said, she had better first query the novel's author, with whom she had already been in contact regarding rights issues. Even though I teach my students that they owe nothing to the source material they are adapting (because movies and books are different animals), this was a special case because the author might not be willing to grant the rights to the book if such a change was made. I also mentioned that an adaptation of a small literary novel (which this was) was more likely to find independent production than Hollywood production and that independent cinema depicts more queer characters and themes and more frequently courts queer audiences. While working out this issue, the student also struggled over how much physical affection, if any, to rep-

resent and how she could avoid stereotypes—she was worried that the protagonist, a high school athlete, might be too “butch.” We also talked about the underrepresentation of queer characters in movies and whether a desire to be progressive or socially ‘just’ should inform her choices. The fact that a novelist had already created the character did not make the struggle over representing the character's lesbianism any less challenging. However, working through all these issues with me made my student feel more comfortable and confident as she wrote. Ultimately, she decided to represent the character's lesbianism overtly and even included a physical coming-out scene.

This is one of many occasions in my screenwriting courses in which the representation of sexuality, race, ethnicity, gender, or class has been an issue in a student script. Often the specific concern is that a student is perpetuating a harmful stereotype—gangsters in these scripts are invariably still Italian, for example. Fortunately, I also teach a critical studies course called *Race and Gender in American Film* and have taught a great deal of cultural studies courses generally, so I have the background and the training to help my students navigate the treacherous terrain of representation. Obviously, I do not have all the answers, and I am struggling myself to avoid the minefield of interracial buddy movie clichés, as well as what Shohat and Stam have defined as the “Imperial Imaginary” (100–36), in a script I am currently writing that is set in Africa. But I have found that educating screenwriting students in the history and cultural/political implications

MICHAEL GREEN is a lecturer in the Film and Media Studies program at Arizona State University, where he teaches screenwriting and film studies.

of representation—and critiquing their scripts with this in mind—leads to more thoughtful characterization and less rote stereotyping, as well as more originality.

Unfortunately, screenwriting curricula typically do not mandate that cultural studies and representation be taught within them. Granted, these crucial topics are often a part of a film student's larger film studies or liberal arts program, but because they are taught as "theory," film students and professors alike often see the topics as unrelated to practice, not to mention dry and boring. Regarding critical film studies, I frequently hear from students some variation of "Why do I need this stuff? I don't want to be a film critic. I want to be a filmmaker." This is the failing of screenwriting courses and curricula, which—apart from story construction—tend to focus on the minutia of formatting, the arcana of craft, and industry buying and selling trends, while neglecting how cultural theory can be made into creative practice. Formatting and industry trends are unquestionably important topics for the apprentice screenwriter, but they give students little idea of cinematic history, social context, or the politics and ideologies behind representing diversity and difference. This is as important as ever, given the stereotyping, marginalization, silencing, and vilification of difference that continues unabated in cinema. Student writers need to understand how to recognize and potentially avoid the harmful representation continually on display in contemporary movies. Recent examples that have offended some audiences include the gay stereotypes in *Stardust* (2007), the portrayal of gold tooth-wearing African Americanized-robots who cannot read in *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* (2009), and the validation of patriarchy and abject sexual objectification of women in *Crazy, Stupid, Love* (2011).

Part of the reason Hollywood movies—as well as some independent films—seem to take place in a vacuum where social issues and representations of difference are absent is that young screenwriters are basically encouraged to copy other successful movies. Screenwriting books

and courses may preach originality and finding one's singular voice, but that message is lost when these same books and courses uncritically model successful films and when the student is continually bombarded by powerful and ubiquitous media that discourage critical thinking. This leads to new generations of screenwriters churning out work that is uninspired at best and that perpetuates harmful hegemonic ideals at worst. As a result, stereotypes and traditional conservative principles—such as the normalizing of heterosexuality and the demonizing of queer sexuality—persist in American movies even as they are being questioned and dismantled throughout our larger culture.

Being able to recognize what makes a screen story moving and effective and being able to emulate successful story craft is, of course, a necessary precursor to writing a solid, saleable script. But this should be only one step in a comprehensive screenwriting education that provides students with the ability to form critical ideas grounded in the liberal arts that can be applied to creative expression.

Every screenwriting curriculum should feature at least one course that marries the critical and the creative, one course that makes clear to students that in expressing their ideas, they are contributing to history and culture. Telling stories through media is a position of responsibility and power, especially given the "digital divide," the gap that separates those with access to technology and those without, and the privilege that favors those in dominant economic and cultural positions. Students also need to be persuaded that such knowledge will help them creatively as well—that it will open up their minds to more possibilities of storytelling and characterization, helping them to avoid the kinds of stereotypes and clichés that offend and bore audiences. A student may understand act structure, plotting, and the basics of conflict and dialogue, but meaningful, responsible writing extends beyond mechanics to include a lucid perception of the social, cultural, historical, and political implications of the material. Therefore, every screenwriting curriculum should have at least one course that

combines cultural studies and creative writing. Call it “Screenwriting Representation.”

This article examines several issues fundamental to such a course. It identifies various challenges of writing queer characters for the screen; asserts some history that all screenwriting students should know; and proposes ideas for how the screenwriting instructor could approach the pedagogy of screenwriting representation. Although the representation of race and ethnicity, gender, and class are equally important, this article is limited to the issues of sexuality and screenwriting, with many of the points herein applicable to other areas of representation.

Although the article is written from a straight point of view (mine), we are all subjected to the same texts from the same system, and most thoughtful, critical viewers, regardless of sexuality, recognize that there is much room for improvement in queer representation. Obviously, queer viewers often “read” film texts differently than straight viewers; however, it is always important not to essentialize and not to assume that queer students “know” how to write queer characters and straight students do not (and vice versa). Engaging these issues in the screenwriting workshop brings them out in the open, leads to important dialogue and collaboration between students of all sexualities, and is an important step in improving queer representation in the cinema.

Queer Representation in Cinema

First, this article is about cinema—Hollywood and independent—not television, where queer representation has had something of a different history. Also, I use the term “queer” in this article as Benshoff and Griffin define it in their book *Queer Images: A History of Gay and Lesbian Film in America*. They write,

Human sexuality is multiple, varying and diverse and in recent years, the term *queer* has been brought into the academic lexicon to acknowledge and describe this multiplicity of sexualities—sexualities that encompass both

straight and gay but also the vast gray areas between them as well as the sexualities that lie beyond them. (2)

Although by this definition queer sexuality is seen as fluid and existing on a continuum, Hollywood’s portrayal of queers—when they have appeared onscreen at all—has been mostly limited to depictions of gays and lesbians, who can easily be positioned as binary oppositions to heterosexuals (Benshoff and Griffin 7). Historically, this opposition has been set up to normalize heterosexuals and villainize homosexuals or render them as “other.” Examples are too numerous to list here—*From Russia with Love* (1963), *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1999), and *Monster* (2003) are several among many—but teachers should encourage students to seek out superbly researched books on the subject, such as Vito Russo’s *The Celluloid Closet*, Richard Dyer’s *Now You See It: Studies in Lesbian and Gay Film*, and Raymond Murray’s *Images in the Dark*.¹ Bisexuals have been represented more rarely in cinema, and they often appear in mainstream films as female characters designed to titillate male audiences; moreover, this female bisexuality is often equated with manipulation and deceit, such as in *Basic Instinct* (1991), *Wild Things* (1998), and *Femme Fatale* (2002). Transsexual or transgendered persons, rarely seen onscreen, are typically represented as monsters or perverts, such as the murderer in *Dressed to Kill* (1980) or serial killer Buffalo Bill in *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991). Especially when they are looked at as part of a larger pattern, a study of these films helps illuminate for screenwriting students what Keller refers to as “the absurd and intolerable conditions to which gays and lesbians are subjected within American culture” (x).

Even despite the recent popular success of such queer-themed films as *Milk* (2008), *A Single Man* (2009), and *The Kids Are All Right* (2010), Hollywood mostly persists in its traditional representation of queers, who are vilified, stereotyped, marginalized, or absent altogether. Mainstream queer representation has progressed to the point where queers can

be prominently featured in sympathetic queer-themed films such as the aforementioned, but as in those movies, few queer-themed films are made where queer sexuality is not the subject of the movie. As I detail later in this article, queer-themed mainstream movies of today are much like the “social problem” movies of the 1940s in which African Americans or Jews—in movies such as *Pinky* (1949) or *Gentlemen’s Agreement* (1947)—are treated sympathetically but nevertheless seen as social problems, as “thorns in America’s heel” (Diawara 3).

Independent cinema largely remains the realm of queer-themed movies, and there has been an explosion in queer independent cinema over the last few decades, including the films that emerged from the early 1990s that are now thought of as belonging to the New Queer Cinema movement (Dyer 267). Some of the most important and successful queer films, such as *Swoon* (1992), *The Living End* (1992), *The Crying Game* (1992), *The Wedding Banquet* (1993), *The Incredibly True Adventures of Two Girls in Love* (1995), and *Boys Don’t Cry* (1999), have been indies, many associated with the 1990s independent cinema movement. Like Hollywood films, independent films have depicted mostly gays and lesbians, but they have more often represented balanced depictions of other queer characters, such as bisexual and trans characters. Examples of indies featuring bisexual characters include *My Own Private Idaho* (1991), *Chasing Amy* (1997), *Velvet Goldmine* (1998), and *Short Bus* (2006); trans characters appear in *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994), *The Adventures of Sebastian Cole* (1998), *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2001), and *Transamerica* (2005), among others.

More and more queer-themed films are being distributed and exhibited outside of gay and lesbian film festivals, and there are many more festivals as well. Beyond that, queer-themed films have become more mainstream. Setting aside for a moment the question of essentialism, the fact that Amazon streaming service has a “Gay and Lesbian” category—featuring more than 500 films—alongside conventional genres

such as “Sci-fi and Fantasy” and “Comedy” illuminates both the escalation in production and the further mainstreaming and normalizing of queer-themed films and films aimed at queer audiences. Unfortunately, such a grouping also ghettoizes queer films and perpetuates the idea of them as culturally “different.” Why should the films in this category be thought of as “gay and lesbian” and not of the specific genres that they otherwise belong to, especially since there are no “straight” cinematic categories?

The issue of genre highlights yet another problematic issue surrounding queer cinema, which is that even indie queer films tend to focus on sexuality as a subject, and like the “women’s pictures” of Hollywood’s past, they tend to be confined to a few genres, such as melodrama and romantic comedy. This association “feminizes” queer films, which marginalizes both queers and women. It also continues, at the expense of other groups, to hold up heterosexual men as paragons of strength, power, and virtue, since queers, like women, have historically been excluded from leading roles in genres that almost exclusively feature heterosexual men: crime, sci-fi, action/adventure, spy, Western, and so on. In the last few decades, cinema has begun to portray—and society has begun to accept—women in traditional male genre roles. Jodie Foster, Angelina Jolie, Sigourney Weaver, and Zoe Saldana, among others, have become associated with action and thriller leading roles in recent decades. Student screenwriters should be aware that a next step for queer diversity and equality onscreen is for queer characters to begin to fill these roles as well and not just be confined to melodramas, erotica, romantic comedies, or social problem films—though of course there is nothing inherently wrong with any of these genres.

As an alternative model for genre representation, I sometimes show my students *Raising Heroes* (1996), a low-budget independent film directed by Doug Langway that markets itself as “the first gay action film.” The film, about a gay couple who have to resort to violence to keep

their family together, positions its gay protagonists in many of the same narrative situations as straight protagonists in similar films; further the movie visually subverts queer stereotypes by having the heroes involved in fighting and shoot-outs.

Being grounded in genre history is important for the student screenwriter, who can make informed choices between writing in a traditional genre for queer characters or branching out into riskier territory—writing a Western with a queer hero, for example, even though it will have a far slimmer chance of being made than a Western with a heterosexual protagonist.

Despite persistent inequality and marginalization, queer cinema over the last few decades represents quite a dramatic shift from Hollywood before the 1960s, “which rarely acknowledge[d] the existence of queer people” (Benshoff and Griffin 9), and certainly since the conservative mid-1980s, when Russo wrote, “As expressed on screen, America was a dream that had no room for the existence of homosexuals. Laws were made against depicting such things on screen. And when the fact of our existence became unavoidable, we were reflected, onscreen and off, as dirty secrets” (xxi). Contemporary films, like their forerunners, still rarely feature queer protagonists. But at the same time, the overt demonizing of queers, the “dirty secret” approach articulated by Russo, is far less frequent now than in, say, the 1970s, when Hollywood avoided “complex queer characters and styles” in favor of “simplistic queer stereotypes” such as “swishy gay men,” “vicious queers,” and “lesbian vampires” (Benshoff and Griffin 145). For example, a movie such as William Friedkin’s *Cruising* (1980)—which depicts a homogenous gay underworld comprised of furtive, deviant, and villainous gays and “trades on ignorance about homosexuality and refuses to treat in any but the most shallow way the links among violence, desire, and authority”—would likely not be made in 2012 (Wilson 100).

Given both historic and contemporary cinema then, the industry is likely to come between

screenwriters and their vision, forcing them to consider the balance between the “purity” of personal expression, their desire to be socially progressive, and the kinds of queer representation that studios, producers, and exhibitors are willing to put onscreen. As we have seen, Hollywood films with queer themes and characters are still few and far between. Despite the financial and critical success of *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), for example, it took three years for *Milk* to appear on screens—and then only after gestating in the development pipeline for twenty years (Goldstein). Likewise, despite the success of *Milk*—profitable box office and Academy Awards, including a rare screenwriting Oscar for an openly gay screenwriter (Dustin Lance Black)—the last few years have seen few major queer-themed pictures. Meanwhile, the non-queer-themed films that populate the multiplex are as conservative as ever. For example, the recent update *X-Men: First Class* (2011) all but purged the gay subtext for which fans praised earlier *X-Men* films, focusing instead on heterosexual relationships among the mutants. A survey of the landscape clearly shows that Hollywood hegemony remains set on producing and distributing films and images that are resoundingly straight. Meanwhile, as mentioned previously, queer-themed independent films, though more numerous and certainly more progressive, tend to be limited to certain genres. The independent films *A Single Man* and *The Kids Are All Right*, among the most notable queer-themed films of the last few years, are no exception, being dramas about gay and lesbian relationships, respectively.²

So although they do not necessarily need to be experts, student screenwriters should have a solid foundation in the history of representation, the patterns of genre, the kinds and prevalence of queer (and other) stereotypes, and the hegemony of Hollywood and dominant culture. To create strong, original, diverse, and progressive scripts, students need to be versed in this material as thoroughly as they are in script elements such as act structure, dialogue subtext, and character arc.

Case Studies and Approaches for Students

The student screenwriter should at least be aware of industry trends concerning representation; be able to recognize the kinds and prevalence of stereotypes; have a map to the minefields of essentializing; consider what social responsibility she or he might have; and have some idea of how different audiences might react. In helping to create that awareness, screenwriting instructors should analyze case studies with their students. Another effective method is to give students exercises that allow them to practice different approaches to representation. In this section I outline some examples that I use in my screenwriting classes and workshops.

One of the issues we discuss in my class is how comedies are held to a different standard than dramas when it comes to stereotypes. Though it is rare for queer characters to be depicted with extreme stereotypes in recent dramas—except, of course, in *300* (2006)—queer characters continue to be fair game for gross stereotyping in comedies. Examples, among many, include the airport control-room geek from *Airplane* (1980); Martin Short's wedding planner in *The Father of the Bride* (1991) and its sequel (1993); Bruno in *Bruno* (2009); and the leads in *I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry* (2007), which perpetuates the worst queer stereotypes under the pretext of liberal tolerance while ultimately affirming heterosexuality as the norm.

Two recent comedies I examine with my students are *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006) and *The Hangover* (2009). In the much-acclaimed indie *Little Miss Sunshine*, Steve Carell plays Frank, an openly gay professor. He is depicted as a good man, mostly accepted by his family, who has had success in his chosen career. But gay stereotypes define him as well: Frank suffers from depression and is recovering from a suicide attempt that resulted from his being spurned by a lover. Both character traits cast him in traditional homosexual terms—as weak-

willed, as obsessed with sex or love, and as a social outcast. His all-white dress, his manner, and even his life's work—he is one of the world's top Proust scholars—suggest that he is “sensitive” and dandified. Finally, another character in the movie, the crotchety old family grandpa played by Alan Arkin, makes a number of jokes about Frank's homosexuality. Though the Arkin character is depicted as wrongheaded in his attitudes, the movie nonetheless provides him with a number of funny remarks at Frank's expense. Here the viewer can laugh in good conscience at the insults since he or she understands that the Arkin character is a (lovable) bigot.³

But despite the movie's “acceptance” of homosexuality and its rendering of Frank as a complex and sympathetic man, the gay epithets and stereotypes nevertheless make it onto the screen, taking their place in a cinematic history rich with them. One could also argue that the fact that Arkin won an Oscar for his portrayal of this lovable bigot further legitimizes within our culture his casual use of those nasty epithets.

The Hangover, even more widely seen, resorts thoughtlessly to crude stereotypes and epithets, and though it keeps the sexuality of the Asian gang lord played by Ken Jeong nominally ambiguous, the movie nevertheless supplies him with a number of outrageous and flamboyant tics and behaviors that exhibit the most offensive gay stereotypes. This stereotypically feminized Asian man—a character portrayal going back in cinema to at least D. W. Griffith's *Broken Blossoms* (1919)—and a number of stereotypical black and Latino characters are set up as thugs/foils in contrast to the middle-class heterosexual white heroes. Though there was some criticism of this—from, among others, GLAAD and *Time* magazine—the movie nonetheless escaped a significant public backlash on the way to becoming one of the highest-grossing comedies of all time (Corliss; Rosales).

The Hangover is one of the more offensive movies of recent years in terms of its representation of race, gender, and sexuality; *Little Miss*



Photo 1: Ken Jeong as Mr. Chow
in Todd Phillips's *The Hangover* (2009).

Sunshine, though more thoughtful and progressive, is problematic. Screenwriters should take note of these recent films' approach to representing queer characters because both were huge hits, with *Little Miss Sunshine* earning an Oscar nomination for best picture. I encourage students to analyze why these movies are so popular and then have them do exercises in which they identify the stereotypes, rethink the characters, and rewrite scenes and character biographies to avoid the stereotypes and offensive material. How can the gangster in *The Hangover* be made funny without reliance on queer bashing and racism? How can Frank in *Little Miss Sunshine* be portrayed as an outcast with emotional issues without the screenwriter dandifying him or making him dependent on a romantic relationship? Once they have completed the exercises, my students discuss whether they think the movies can still be as funny with the stereotypes eliminated or diminished. Usually they realize that the screenwriters of the films lazily relied on harmful stereotypes when they did not have to.

Each of the preceding examples analyzes a supporting character, and indeed, most queer characters in Hollywood films show up in minor or supporting roles, frequently as the "gay best friend"—examples include *Clueless* (1996), *My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997), and *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* (2010) (Gilbey). Very few queer protagonists make it to the Hollywood screen. It is more common to see queer protagonists in independent films, but even in the independent queer-themed films that get wide distribution and become hits, the primary conflict in

the movie almost always turns on the social problem of the characters' homosexuality—how straight society handles it and how the queer characters get along and manage to fit into a world in which they are not tolerated. As Keller argues, "While . . . portraits [of socially responsible queers] are certainly advantageous to a much maligned minority, they are also capitulationist, stipulating conditions under which gays and lesbians should be allowed to co-exist safely within heterosexual society—only through the emulation of the bourgeois couple" (200). Finally, the queerness of main characters in mainstream movies is rarely, if ever, incidental to some other goal or conflict, such as saving the world from the threat of marauding dinosaurs or errant asteroids or winning a big jury trial.

A sampling of prominent gay-themed films—major studio productions and prominent independent hits—over the last twenty-five years confirms all of the preceding points. *Longtime Companion* (1988), *Philadelphia* (1992), *The Birdcage* (1996), *In and Out* (1997), *As Good As It Gets* (1997), *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), *Gods and Monsters* (2000), *Brokeback Mountain*, and *Milk*, among others, all represent homosexuality as a social issue, dramatizing the conflict between straight and gay characters over the subject of their sexuality and conveying the difficulty of being queer in an intolerant society.⁴

This approach allows filmmakers to advocate progressivism and tolerance, usually by humanizing the queer character and illustrating the damage done as a result of bigotry. In

this approach, sexuality, rather than simply being one of many attributes of a character that may or may not figure somehow in the film's story, is instead represented as the defining aspect of a queer character's life, one that brings him or her into continual conflict. This approach is certainly an improvement over the way in which queers have historically been represented, but it is still problematic because it tends to rob queer characters of multidimensionality, reinforcing them for some viewers as different or abnormal.

In *Boys Don't Cry*, for example, Brandon Teena, played by Hilary Swank, tries to pass as a man and enters into an affair with a young woman who runs with a crowd of losers so bigoted and dangerous that almost every scene in the movie turns on whether Brandon is going to make it out of the situation alive. Brandon does not survive, and the movie is so suffused with dread leading up to the scenes of the character's brutal rape and murder that the film is almost too painful to watch. Though the writer and director, Kimberly Peirce, certainly humanizes and evokes empathy for Brandon, the story is so relentlessly effective that a viewer might associate what Brandon calls "a sexual identity crisis" with violence and terror. And yet Brandon's story is true—he was killed in real life—and Peirce can hardly be criticized for effective filmmaking that conveys the reality of the situation.

Another case that I discuss with my students to illustrate some of the challenges inherent in queer representation is that of *Brokeback Mountain*, screenplay by Diana Ossana and Larry McMurtry, from an original story by Annie

Proulx. Proulx has written that her story is about "destructive rural homophobia" (Proulx, McMurtry, and Ossana 130). It resulted from her desire to write about "both long-lasting love and its possible steep price tag, both homophobic antipathy and denial" (131). But finding the right tone and approach was complicated for her. "I was an aging female writer, married too many times, and though I have a few gay friends, there were things I was not sure about," she writes (134). Ultimately, she pressed ahead despite her reservations because she believed so passionately in the story she wanted to tell. Her instincts were validated by the scores of letters she received from gay men thanking her for her sensitive and emotionally realistic treatment of her gay characters and the social and cultural obstacles that kept them apart (129–38).

This story in hand, it was easier for McMurtry and Ossana to expand the plot and add characters to the adapted screenplay. They wrote with the conviction that they could profoundly affect the world for the better with their movie, though they did discuss what it might mean for McMurtry and the legions of *Lonesome Dove* fans that might "turn against him" (Proulx, McMurtry, and Ossana 145). Proulx feared that her story would not be made into a film because of its explicit sexuality and its general topic of homophobia, and indeed, it took their script seven years to be made because of producers' fears about finding an audience for what came to be derisively known in industry circles as the "gay cowboy" movie (143–51). But *Brokeback Mountain* resonated with both straight and queer audiences, who applauded its bravery



Photo 2: Hilary Swank as Brandon Teena in Kimberly Peirce's *Boys Don't Cry* (1999).

and authenticity, not to mention the inspired filmmaking. The movie problematized homosexuality within the narrative but nevertheless had a positive social impact by widening the public discourse about the obstacles that gay men face in pursuing same-sex relationships. It helped expand tolerance (or perhaps revealed the increased tolerance that now existed) to the point that the film was the early favorite for the Academy Award for Best Picture—it lost to *Crash* (2005)—and was a sensation with audiences around the world.⁵

In presenting these issues to my students, I make the case that this movie's success with diverse audiences can make writing a screenplay that deals with queer themes and characters less daunting. Also, it can be seen as a validation of the approach of problematizing sexual difference onscreen. Despite the problematizing of homosexuality in these films, queer individuals obviously face intolerance, violence, and marginalization in the world, and the challenges they face are often simplified or ignored—or worse—in the media. In the interest of advocating tolerance, working toward equality, and fostering empathy, these kinds of stories are necessary and important.

But as Russo writes, “[a] good story is universal and sexuality doesn’t matter if one creates real people instead of stereotypes” (270). In other words, to balance out the association between queer lives and social problems, we need more scripts that represent queer characters as cops, lawyers, dog-catchers, ninjas, and so on. In these scripts, which rarely are made, and never in Hollywood, sexual difference is theoretically normalized against the backdrop of a complex and multifaceted story world in which themes and issues other than sexual identity are privileged in the narrative.

To this end, I often ask my students to imagine a role-reversed Hollywood blockbuster—*The Incredibles* (2004), for example—with the same basic script but with queer instead of straight superheroes. Instead of Mr. Incredible (Craig T. Nelson) as white patriarch to a nuclear family, Mrs. Incredible (Holly Hunter) as a strong but ultimately supporting wife and homemaker, and

Lucious (Samuel L. Jackson) as the desexualized “black buddy,” a role-reversed script might feature Mr. Incredible and Lucious as a gay married couple and Holly Hunter’s character as the lesbian buddy. For students who have not thought much about cinematic representation of sexuality, or who think it is more or less equal to heterosexual representation, such an example gives them pause and helps them recognize that in Hollywood certain taboos are rarely transgressed. It is important that student screenwriters recognize the social and cultural implications of this, as well as the chances for getting such a script produced. This does not mean students should be discouraged from writing such a screenplay strictly because of its commercial liabilities. In fact, writing such a script should be presented as a worthwhile challenge.

The challenge for writers is to make such characters recognizably queer, without centralizing queerness as a problem or resorting to stereotypes, the pitfall of most movies. Should queer characters manifest certain attributes that differ from straight characters so that their sexuality is recognizable? If so, what are those attributes? Are a few touches enough? Perhaps the writer merely depicts a warm smile over breakfast, a touching of hands, or a couple getting into bed together and turning out the light—the same images that have depicted many heterosexual relationships. Of course even these small touches in a superhero blockbuster aimed at kids would be culturally earth-shattering—queers in mainstream film are so rare that they immediately call attention to themselves. But that would not be because of the way the writer depicted the relationships. That would be about reception—and reception is one thing the writer can never control.

The question of *how* to represent queer sexuality has been much discussed. In *Images in the Dark*, for example, Murray summarizes the queer debate over the gay friend in *Reality Bites* (1994), on the one hand praising the movie for including a gay character (Sammy, played by Steve Zahn), but on the other saying that the character does not “seem gay at all” and criticizing his representation as a “sexless,

semi-nerd hanger-on” (512). Of Greg Kinnear’s portrayal of a gay artist in *As Good As It Gets*, Bruce Vilanch expresses similar sentiments:

I wonder what about his performance makes him gay. Other than the script’s telling us, repeatedly, that he’s gay, when does he have a moment of overt homosexuality? Is there intimacy with a man? Is there physicality? Is there even anything stereotypical, other than a cuddly dog and an even more ambiguous manager, played with strategic jewelry by Cuba Gooding Jr.? Do shy smiles and a certain softness make a nonentity gay? In the absence of a fully realized character—and for all the big scenes they’ve given him, I don’t think he has one here—Kinnear shows admirable restraint in not falling into a stereotype to make his point. (5)

At the crux of Vilanch’s discussion is the question of where to draw the line between exhibiting sexual identity and falling into stereotypes. Vilanch argues that Kinnear shows “admirable restraint” in avoiding the latter. But since Kinnear’s character is later beaten up in the movie in what can be read as a hate crime, despite the details of the plot, and he remains a problem for the movie’s bigoted straight lead, *As Good As It Gets* falls into old conventions of representations anyway, including its climactic affirmation of the heterosexual relationship at the center of its narrative.

Vilanch criticizes the notion that a gay character should represent so few outwardly gay characteristics that we are aware of his sexuality only because it is vocalized. In calling a press conference to out Professor Dumbledore,

master wizard and mentor in the *Harry Potter* novels, but only indirectly referencing his gayness late in the series, J. K. Rowling achieved the apotheosis of this approach. *New York Times* critic Edward Rothstein writes, “Of course it would not be inconsistent for Dumbledore to be gay, but the books’ accounts certainly don’t make it *necessary*. The question is distracting, which is why it never really emerges in the books themselves. Ms. Rowling may think of Dumbledore as gay, but there is no reason why anyone else should” (Rothstein).

Rowling has said that the screenwriters working on the later movies in the series had no inkling of Dumbledore’s gayness. Warner Bros., which aimed these films at teenagers and families, chose to handle the revelation by ignoring it. And indeed there is not even an indirect inkling of Dumbledore’s sexuality in the movies. Given that the burgeoning romantic and sexual desires of the main characters—Harry and his friends—are a main component of the series, it would not have been out of place for the writers to depict Dumbledore’s desires as well. Instead, the final movies maintain Dumbledore’s unambiguous status as white patriarch to the forces of good. And in the coda of the final movie, the centrality of heterosexuality is underscored with a scene in which the main players are seen twenty years later, all in heterosexual relationships that have yielded children. As has been true since the classical era, Hollywood films “depict married, procreative heterosexuality as the only proper sexuality” (Benshoff and Griffin 9).

If Dumbledore is supposed to be gay, and not only is his gayness not overtly represented,



Photo 3: Michael Gambon as Albus Dumbledore from the *Harry Potter* series.

but he also overwhelmingly embodies traditional tropes of straight masculinity and patriarchy, then his character's sexuality is just a political gimmick, one that the conservative powers-that-be behind the *Harry Potter* movies (2001–11) never let affect the films' bottom line. One can credit Rowling for using her power to advocate some degree of tolerance and social progress but, at the same time, it seemed a bit late in the day for such a timid gesture. The time to reveal Dumbledore's homosexuality was early in the series, so that readers and viewers could think of Dumbledore as his "true" self as the series evolved. Of course, it is possible that the *Harry Potter* books never would have taken off in America in such a scenario because "family" groups would have certainly worked to censor or ban the books.

Of course the fact that it is Dumbledore under discussion and not Harry underscores other issues that screenwriters have to deal with in creating gay characters. We are very far from living in a world in which Harry Potter himself could be accepted as anything other than straight—or for that matter, anything other than white, male, and middle-class. Choose any random *Harry Potter* movie (though I would say that *The Order of the Phoenix* (2007) is a

particularly good—or bad—example) to see traditional values of whiteness, heterosexuality, patriarchy, and Eurocentric colonialism perpetuated. Moreover, any recent popular transmedia fantasy series will affirm these values as well—*Star Wars*, *Batman*, *Spiderman*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, or *Star Trek*, among others. It is important for students to recognize the values on display in these movies that they viewed uncritically as children, as well as how consistent these series' traditional representation is with cinema history.

Star Trek is a particularly interesting case to discuss with student writers because the franchise has a long history of fans clamoring for queer representation. For decades both queer and straight fans have openly questioned *Star Trek's* supposed commitment to multiculturalism and tolerance of diversity, wondering when a queer character would be introduced. In the absence of such representation, fans began a rich tradition of *Star Trek* slash fiction, depicting queer relationships between characters such as Kirk and Spock (Jenkins 185–222). Though the supposedly gay character of Hawk was finally introduced to *Star Trek* in the mid-1990s, scenes depicting his overt homosexuality never made it into the final version of *Star*



Photo 4: Zachary Quinto as Spock in J. J. Abrams's *Star Trek* (2009).

Trek: First Contact (1996), the movie that introduced Hawk. Disappointed fans had to look to the *Star Trek* novels to see Hawk's homosexuality overtly represented.⁶

Star Trek is at an interesting crossroads as far as queer representation is concerned because the franchise has been "rebooted" to enormous profitability at the same time that two prominent *Star Trek* actors—George Takei, Sulu of *The Original Series* (1966–69), and Zachary Quinto, Spock of the rebooted *Star Trek* (2009)—have publically disclosed their homosexuality. Moreover, both actors have fan bases apart from the series. Takei has a popular following online on Facebook and Twitter; and Quinto has fans from his cult television series *Heroes* (2006–10). Because each actor has a significant cultural presence apart from *Star Trek*, *Trek* will not be able to easily "contain" the actors' queerness simply by having them play straight heroes. Going forward, *Trek* now has a more distinct queer subtext. How *Trek* writers and producers will—or should—handle these new queer associations at a time of renewed popularity and profitability for the franchise is a topic that can lead to instructive exercises and discussion in a Screenwriting Representation course.

Conclusion

Despite the limitations put on queer characters throughout cinema history, students need to understand that there are many possibilities for representation. Whether studios, producers, distributors, and exhibitors make room for diversity is largely out of the hands of the student, the teacher, and the writer. Ultimately, however, the more good scripts featuring a multiplicity of representations that make it into the world, the more that are likely to be produced, and more produced will mean more diversity of queer characters on movie screens. Historically, more representation and more diversity lead to increased acceptance and normalization of marginalized groups.

As such, representation should be more broadly taught across the curriculum and should suffuse every area of not only film stud-

ies but also film production, especially screenwriting, where screen stories take their initial shape. If dominant representational strategies are going to change, then change needs to begin in the pipeline of students who are going to become the next wave of screenwriters and filmmakers, as well as teachers, scholars, and journalists. Any screenwriting curriculum should include at least a basic history of the representation of sexuality. Already preoccupied with the demanding tasks of crafting a good story, the young screenwriter must also navigate the minefields of Hollywood history, industry, genre convention, cultural dynamics, social responsibility, and audience when writing queer characters. Despite twenty-first-century cinema's amazing new methods and technologies—faster equipment, digital tools, IMAX, improved 3-D, and new democratizing platforms for production, distribution, and exhibition—representation of sexuality (as well as race, class, and gender) remains squarely twentieth-century, at least in the mainstream. This needs to change, especially given American cinema's continued hegemony over the global box office. Encouraging students to carefully consider the kinds of values that we want to represent us is at least as important as teaching them the nuts and bolts of story structure.

Recently a student e-mailed me a link to his completed short film along with this message: "After taking your class, I found newfound pride in this film after becoming aware of the idea of [representation] and the expectations that follow. It could be argued that my film subverts these expectations, but there's always room for discussion." And it is precisely awareness and discussion that is the goal of a course such as Screenwriting Representation.

NOTES

1. Murray's book even includes a useful index that organizes films under such categories as "Gay Killers," "Lesbian Predators," and "Homophobia."

2. It should be noted that some viewers took issue with *The Kids Are All Right*. The movie features a lesbian couple—Jules and Nic (played by Julianne Moore and Annette Bening)—raising children together. When Paul (Mark Ruffalo), the father of Jules's kids, shows

up after a long absence, Jules begins an affair with him. This turn to conventional heterosexual coupling upset a number of viewers who otherwise might have been fans of the film.

3. One might argue that all the characters in *Little Miss Sunshine* are represented to some degree as stereotypes—the foul-mouthed grandpa; the new age mother; the withdrawn teen, and so on—and that the screenwriters have created them in this way to give them room to “break out” of their stereotypes as the movie progresses.

4. I argue that the success of these movies with crossover audiences is partially tied to the fact that the pictures star straight actors. Supporting this argument is the fact that virtually all actors Oscar-nominated for playing queer characters are straight, including, in the last twenty years or so, Bruce Davison, Tom Hanks, Greg Kinnear, Sean Penn, Philip Seymour Hoffman, Javier Bardem, Heath Ledger, Hilary Swank, Jake Gyllenhaal, Chris Cooper, Charlize Theron, and Annette Bening, among others.

5. *Brokeback Mountain* made \$83,043,761 domestically and \$95,018,998 abroad.

6. Andy Mangels and Michael A. Martin established Lieutenant Hawk as gay in the *Star Trek* novel *Section 31: Rouge*.

REFERENCES

Benshoff, Harry M., and Sean Griffin. *Queer Images: A History of Gay and Lesbian Film in America*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006. Print.

“Brokeback Mountain.” Chart. Box Office Mojo, n.d. Web. 8 Nov. 2011.

Corliss, Richard. “The Hangover: A Bro-Magnon Bro-mance.” *Time*. Time, 5 June 2009. Web. 10 Nov. 2011.

Diawara, Manthia. *Black American Cinema*. New York: Routledge, 1993. Print.

Dyer, Richard. *Now You See It: Studies on Lesbian and Gay Film*. London: Routledge, 1990. Print.

Gilbey, Ryan. “The Role of the Gay Best Friend.” *NewStatesman.com*. New Statesman, 17 Aug. 2010. Web. 9 Nov. 2011.

Goldstein, Gregg. “Van Sant Closes In on Milk Tale.” *Variety.com*. Variety, 10 Sept. 2007. Web. 1 Nov. 2011.

Jenkins, Henry. *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1992. Print.

Keller, James R. *Queer (Un)Friendly Film and Television*. Jefferson: McFarland, 2002. Print.

Mangels, Andy, and Michael A. Martin. *Section 31: Rogue*. New York: Pocket Books, 2001. Print.

Murray, Raymond. *Images in the Dark: An Encyclopedia of Gay and Lesbian Film and Video*. Philadelphia: TLA, 1994. Print.

Proulx, Annie, Larry McMurtry, and Diana Ossana. *Brokeback Mountain: Story to Screenplay*. New York: Scribner, 2005. Print.

Rosales, Jonathan. “The Hangover Resorts to Unfunny and Offensive Gay Slurs.” *Glaad.org*. GLAAD, 10 June 2009. Web. 15 Oct. 2011.

Rothstein, Edward. “Is Dumbledore Gay? Depends on Definitions of ‘Is’ and ‘Gay.’” *New York Times*. New York Times, 29 Oct. 2007. Web. 15 June 2011.

Russo, Vito. *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies*. New York: Harper and Row, 1987. Print.

Shohat, Ella, and Robert Stam. *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*. London: Routledge, 1994. Print.

Vilanch, Bruce. “As Gay As It Gets.” *The Advocate* 17 Mar. 1998: 51. Print.

Wilson, Alexander. “Friedkin’s *Cruising*, Ghetto Politics, and Gay Sexuality.” *Social Text* 4 (Autumn 1981): 98–109. Print.