



Using Film Inclusively: Or, Queering Your Class

Dean Allbritton

Films are fun. Most of us, when presented with the option of doing what's generally considered "real work" and watching a film, will unilaterally choose to plant ourselves in front of the screen, munch on a bit of popcorn, and absorb all the images and sounds. As teaching assistants, why should we be reluctant to capitalize on that willingness? In particular, and for the purposes of this book, we're speaking about opening minds to the varied experiences of the LGBT community. Nonetheless, teaching inclusively has nothing to do with forcing these views or creating cookie-cutter liberal students; rather, it allows for those ideologies not normally expressed or even accessible to the general student population to be given space in the classroom forum.

So the proposal here is that inclusive, effective, and responsible teaching practices can encourage students to question their surroundings and, at the same time, offer exposure to viewpoints quite different (or not so different) from their own. Problematic, however, is the inclusion of what is considered, for the most part, a very personal

sphere—sexuality—into everyday classroom situations. This article doesn't propose a solution to that problem; the most that it can do is hold out three films that could be useful in launching these alternate ideas into the classroom and propelling rich discussions. Included are sample discussion questions that may serve as guidelines for beginning a dialogue within the classroom.

The three films discussed here are *Before Night Falls*, *Philadelphia*, and *Trembling Before G-d*. Out of the hundreds of informative and creative gay and lesbian-oriented films out there, these three were chosen for varied reasons: *Before Night Falls* is selected for its historical, political and literary emphases; *Philadelphia* is included for its focus on the legal politics of sexuality, as well as its emphasis on the AIDS epidemic; *Trembling before G-d* is included for its focus on religion, but also for its strong historical and political overtones, as it is a documentary of modern-day Israeli culture. These films are purposely diverse and contain topics and themes with multiple applications—greatly increasing the type of classrooms in which these films could be discussed.

For the arts and humanities class, the discussions that are suggested here may occur naturally, as open discussion is generally a built-in aspect of classroom practices. But for the math class, or geology class, where discussion isn't exactly on the list of things to do, the problem remains. Other articles within this book discuss aspects of incorporating awareness of sexual diversity and provide some suggestions for instructors in those disciplines. In addition, we all can take a lesson from these films that break from the familiar patterns of heteronormative thinking into more broadminded perspectives and ideas. Maybe the easiest and most effective way to introduce alternative ways of thinking and seeing—before showing the films or bending over backwards to incorporate unfamiliar and obtuse ideologies into your lesson plans—is to simply include the grain of these ideas into your presentation of the material.

For example, avoid homework assignments in which the student has to describe his girlfriend, or the female student needs to describe her boyfriend. What about the girl with a girlfriend, or the boy with a boyfriend? Does he change the pronouns? Why should she have to come out to her teacher? And is he self-defeating if he writes about some theoretical woman that could never exist for him? Thinking about how to consciously pay attention to these issues, even when they seem to have no real bearing on your life as a teaching assistant, is what I call “Teaching Inclusively 101.”

The idea is to make this comfortable and natural for all involved. The great thing about using these films (or any others) in class is that they can easily spark a discussion

that you may not feel comfortable enough trying to ignite on your own. And remember, the student that sees you struggle with being inclusive is going to be just as reluctant to think inclusively. Your job as a teaching assistant is to assist all students in the learning process, as diverse as they may be; opening up your mind and classroom to different streams of thought, regardless of your personal ideology, is one way to reach your students. Coating these ideas with an entertaining film is another way, softening the blow to more conservative ideologies and preparing students for the diversity of the world.

Before Night Falls

This film details the life of the late Reinaldo Arenas, an influential Cuban writer of various books and poems. Director Julian Schnabel retraces Arenas' origins in the rural Cuban countryside to his eventual development as a writer and self-exile in New York City. Arenas, played by Spanish actor Javier Bardem, suffers under the censorship and conservatism of the Castro regime and at the same time manages to smuggle some of his works out of the country for publication in France. Life in Castro's Cuba was difficult creatively as well as

>>>discussion questions>>>

Discuss the rise of the Castro regime. How does the movie treat these events?

In what ways is Reinaldo Arenas politically discriminated? Why?

Taking into account both the perspectives on the island as well as those exiled from the island, how is the United States portrayed in the film?

Read excerpts from Arenas' book *Before Night Falls*. In what ways does the text differ from the film version?

Read Arenas' suicide note. Why does he blame Castro for his death?

Arenas' work is noted for being somewhat autobiographical. Read some of Arenas' short stories and/or poems in conjunction with this film. How do we see autobiographical elements reflected in the story?

Does Arenas' position as a "storyteller" affect the veracity of his autobiography?

USING FILM INCLUSIVELY

socially for Arenas, who was jailed several times for alleged sex charges. Finally in 1980 Arenas was allowed to leave Cuba for the United States, where he lived a lonely exile, sick with AIDS. This film was released in 2000, winning Best Actor and Grand Special Jury prizes at the Venice Film Festival and eventually garnering Javier Bardem with a Best Actor nomination at the 2001 Academy Awards (Hastings, 2004).



What other notable Cuban literary figures appear in the movie?

How does Arenas' sickness affect his life? His work?

Arenas says that he would not have contracted HIV had he been in Cuba. What do you think about this statement?

Consider and discuss the ways that sexuality intersects with religion, gender, nationality, politics and (dis)ability as represented in this film.

Philadelphia

When it premiered in 1993, *Philadelphia*, directed by Jonathan Demme, was the first big-budget Hollywood film to tackle the medical, political and social issues of AIDS. Playing lawyer and gay man Andrew Becket, Tom Hanks shines in his first Academy Award-winning performance. Andrew has recently contracted AIDS and fears the repercussions of disclosing his sickness. He is assigned a case involving the firm's most important client, but as AIDS-related lesions begin showing on his face, he is abruptly removed from the case and fired from the firm. Believing he has been discriminated against—fired due to his



Since the film's release a decade ago, what, if any, legal advancements have been made against AIDS discrimination in the workplace?

Do you feel that the mainstream voicing of AIDS, evident through this film and through Bruce Springsteen's accompanying song "Streets of Philadelphia," affects public awareness? In what ways is this positive? In what ways is this negative?

>>>discussion questions>>>

Many of the participants in the film are from large, urban areas. How would these perspectives be different in a more rural or an isolated community?

Pick someone from the documentary and trace his or her personal history. How is his or her perspective different from that of others in the film? Why do you think this is?

What are some of the basic tenets of Hasidic and Orthodox Judaism, according to the film? How is this different from the more liberal forms of Judaism?

What is the response of other forms of Judaism to the issue of homosexuality?

In general, what is the relationship between sexuality and other religions that you know?

Considering the history of social discrimination of the Jewish, how different do you think the experiences of a gay or lesbian Jewish person would be? How might their sexual identity complicate their religious oppression?

Does the film attempt to tackle historical issues of Judaism? In what ways?

Why is the film titled *Trembling before G-d*? Do some of the participants in the film have different views of who, or what, God is? Where do these differences come from?

film documents the lives of several people attempting to come to grips with the disparities between their faith and their sexuality. The audience meets pianist David, Los Angeles resident and Orthodox gay man, who has lived through over ten years of sexual therapy to “cure” him of his homosexuality. Michelle, a Hasidic lesbian in Brooklyn, has been shunned by her community since her divorce and coming out. Israel, also living in Brooklyn, is a gay man who has turned his back on his Hasidic life, distancing himself equally from his family for over 20 years. Some of the participants, however, prefer their anonymity due to their continued close involvement with the Hasidic and Orthodox community. Also included in this film is footage of various doctors and religious leaders discussing for and against the fusion of religion and sexual differences (LeVasseur, 2004).



Some of the participants of the film prefer to remain anonymous, while others freely show their faces, names and locations. Considering the possible repercussions within your community as well as issues of your own pride and self-worth, what would you have done? Why?

Film Suggestions¹

After Stonewall (1999), historical documentary

All about my mother (Todo sobre mi madre) (1999), transgender identities, Spanish language

All Over the Guy (2001), gay identities, romantic comedy

And the Band played On (1993), dramatization of the Emerging AIDS epidemic, AIDS studies, American history, American politics

Before Night Falls (Antes que anochezca) (2001), Cuban politics, Cuban literature, Spanish language

Before Stonewall (1984), historical documentary

Bent (1997), German history, Global politics, Holocaust

Better Than Chocolate (1999), romantic comedy, lesbians

Big Eden (2000), gay-related romantic comedy

The Birdcage (1996), comedy, gay parenting, non-traditional families

The Birdcage (La Cage Aux Folles) (1979), male sexual identity, French language, gay parenting

Bound (1996), lesbian identity, thriller

Boys' Life (3 parts) (1995), gay identity, college, coming out

Boys Don't Cry (1999), Transgender identity and experiences, hate crimes, based on a true story

Brandon Teena Story (1998), transgender identity and experiences, hate crimes, documentary

But I'm a Cheerleader (1999), Lesbian identity, comedy

The Celluloid Closet (1996), documentary on the history of LGBT identities in Hollywood films

CONTINUED>>

USING FILM INCLUSIVELY

Chutney Popcorn (2000), lesbian identity, cultural differences
Come Undone (Presque Rien) (2000), gay identity, coming out, French language
Defying Gravity (1997), college campus, fraternities, coming out
Desert Hearts (1985), coming out, lesbian identity
Eight Women (8 Femmes) (2002), lesbian identity, camp, French language
Fire (1996), lesbian identity, marriage issues in India
Frida (2002), bisexual themes
Gia (1998), lesbian identity
Go Fish (1994), lesbian communities
Hedwig and the Angry Inch (2001), Transgender studies
The Hours (2003), lesbian identity, English Literature, AIDS
If These Walls Could Talk 2 (2000), lesbian couples, three dramatic short films
Incredibly True Story of Two Girls in Love (1995), lesbian romantic comedy
It's Elementary (1996), gay issues and schooling, documentary
Kissing Jessica Stein (2001), Queer studies, lesbian identities, romantic comedy
The Laramie Project (2002), Matthew Shepard hate crime, documentary style
Ma Vie en Rose (1997), transgender/male sexual identity, French language
My Beautiful Launderette (1986), English history, hate crimes, discrimination, interracial issues
The Next Best Thing (2000), non-traditional families, comedy
Nico and Dani (Krámpack) (2000), coming of age, gay identity, Spanish language
Normal (2003), Transgender studies, families
Out of the Past: the struggle for gay and lesbian rights in America (1998), American history, sexual identity
Paragraph 175 (2000), German history, Global politics, Holocaust
Paris is Burning (1990), documentary on drag shows by men of color in Harlem, voguing
Parting Glances (1986), AIDS studies, American history
Philadelphia (1993), AIDS studies, American history, Law
Southern Comfort (2001), transgender love story, documentary
Stonewall (1996), American history, sexual identity
The Times of Harvey Milk (1984), gay politics, American history, hate crimes, documentary
Tongues Untied (1990), African-American studies, gay identity, masculinity
Trembling before G-d (2001), Jewish history, Global politics, religion, sexuality

