



Archived at the Flinders Academic Commons:

<http://dspace.flinders.edu.au/dspace/>

'This is the peer reviewed version of the following chapter:

Erhart, J.G. (2011). The Naked Community Organizer: Politics and Reflexivity in Gus Van Sant's Milk. *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, 26(1) pp. 1-15.

Which has been published in final form at

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08989575.2011.10846802>

Copyright (2011) Taylor & Francis

**Julia Erhart**  
**Department of Screen and Media**  
**Flinders University**  
**Adelaide, AUSTRALIA**

### **The Naked Community Organizer: Politics and Reflexivity in Gus Van Sant's *Milk***

“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 would appear to cancel out the movie’s very “biopicness.” 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 impedes the movie’s generic capacity *not* to be a biopic. 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 with a 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 is surprisingly little on the biopic as a media genre. The foundational text remains George Custen’s *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (1992) on the biographical film of the studio-era.<sup>1</sup> Although the book’s overall methodology, historical claims, and genre descriptions are well regarded, the book is not without limitations. For example, Custen’s study does not consider made-for-tv movies, movies made outside the US, or movies made outside of the studio system or following its demise.<sup>2</sup> Although these boundaries make some sense for the period Custen scrutinized, the media landscape in which the current-day biopic is located has grown vastly more complex. Biographical work, as several have noted, became staple TV fare during the eighties and nineties (Custen 2000; Anderson and Lupo 2002; Rosenstone). Biographical and autobiographical material currently comprises an enormous amount of bandwidth on the social-networking sites and on the reality-TV oriented world of television. And in cinemas, while Custen was uncertain of the biopic’s survival past the 1960s, there is evidence his

---

<sup>1</sup> Both *Biography* and *Journal of Popular Film and Television* have featured special issues on the biopic, and Dennis Bingham’s *Whose Lives are They Anyway? The Biopic as Contemporary Film Genre* (2010), released a month after this essay was submitted, is a more recent book-length study.

<sup>2</sup> Custen did publish a follow-up essay (2000) on more recent biopics (1961 – 1980).

pronouncements were premature (Anderson and Lupo 2002 and 2008; Mann; Rosenstone; Welsh). What is clear is that the number of smaller-budget, independently-funded films is on the rise (Anderson and Lupo 2008) 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 (131), our fascination with celebrity culture has opened up new representational opportunities. Heidi Fleiss, Harvey Pekar, Eugène Terreblanche, George Bush, the non-famous and the infamous, the ordinary and the unpopular, women and people of color, are all suitable biopic subjects.

### **Historical Fidelity and the Biopic: audience expectations**

Most theorists looking for serious history have been 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 claims “certain patterns of this genre dictate departure from historical accuracy” (vi). Putting the case more strongly, James Welsh cautions 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 are 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” (Custen 1992, quoted in Rosenstone 11).

In spite of critical agreement about the lack of guaranteed factuality in the biopic, audiences come to the movies with a different set of expectations. Regardless of what critics say, historically-themed movies, which of course include biopics, are often judged on factual grounds. As Custen puts it, the biopic provides “many viewers with the version of a life that they held to be the truth” (2); audiences want to know how much, and what, of a movie is indeed “accurate.” A good deal of 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) and events (such as the candlelight march) was well publicized.<sup>3</sup> 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 light of the 1984 documentary, 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 true-to-life-ness.

A good deal was written about the lengths the actors went to research their characters. Sean Penn’s “metamorphosis” into Milk attracted positive press (Ansen;

---

<sup>3</sup> For remarks about the camera store, see Marler; McCarthy; Lee; Maupin. For remarks about the March, see Cleve Jones.

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 it was helpful for actors to get an understanding of the subject, it also created demands in viewers and critics for the actor 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 very many) generally tracked the film's success in capturing and honouring Harvey Milk's life – and found it lacking. One writer took issue with the film's representation of the period in question, calling it politically naïve and ahistorical (Bronski 72). In his scathing review, Michael Bronski 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). The same reviewer 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.” 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, the riots that 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 the 1984 documentary by Robert Epstein, *The Times of Harvey Milk* (9). Als also noted the film's downplaying of Milk's “outsider” status, preferring the more honest, prefatory images of the men being rounded up at the film's beginning. 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>4</sup>

Given that *Milk* is a historical fiction, the fact that nearly all of its negative press was aimed at the film's representational accuracy, is no surprise. Like documentaries, historical fictions appear to have one foot in the real world and get judged according to how faithfully they appear to represent it. But while the reviews are not distinctive in that regard, two things still make them unique. First, nearly all of the negative reviews about the film 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*). Second, what is interesting is the propensity, particularly in gay-authored or –published reviews, to expound on the facts of Milk's real life. While some writers included a paragraph of details to expand on what the movie showed, other writers, like Hilton Als, wandered

---

<sup>4</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).

away from the subject of the film altogether, spending nearly one-third of the review amplifying on the events of Milk's life.

Taken together, what can be said about both points is that they are evidence of ownership claims of various sorts, declarations of authority on the part of various writers, about the subject. What the attacks on the film'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, the film's links to current political movements and communities amplify the pressures on the film 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 the film might have left something out or misrepresented key historical aspects. Reviewers with links to the gay community obviously had high stakes in the film they wanted to see, 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)? Yes, and no. While gay critics especially responded to *Milk* as such, the film adheres closely to the conventions of the generic, studio-era biopic, whose parameters would seem closed to such a "specialized" film. Which of the studio-era conventions does *Milk* make use of?

### **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, where, in terms of the hero's personality construction, it promoted the idea of self-invention over the idea of the 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>5</sup> To show these aspects

---

<sup>5</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.

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, Milk’s 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 firefighter Dan White. As a historical event, Milk’s life has been heavily documented and many artworks have been inspired by it. For example, there is the aforementioned Oscar-winning documentary *The Times of Harvey Milk*; a popular biography by San Francisco journalist Randy Shilts; interviews, television footage, photographs, and other material held in the Harvey Milk archives; and even an opera (Holleran 18). The film makes liberal use of archival testimony with considerable dramatic effect. Scenes of drama and poignancy (for example, the candlelight vigil after the murders) make clever use of archival footage. Most notably, there exists a real tape-recording of Milk’s testimony, made by himself into a tape recorder, several months before his death; the reconstruction of Milk’s creation of this recording serves as a dramatic frame to structure 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 normalness may act as a foil to draw attention to the extraordinary qualities of the hero. The friendship is frequently non-symmetrical; 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 of Milk’s life story is further secured by the character’s attachment to the real-life person Cleve Jones, who acted as historical consultant for the film and has been visible after the film’s release (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; the studio-era biopic was no exception. Often supplemented or ameliorated where the factual partner was insufficient, the insertion of a 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 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* and *Ray*, 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*, 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 1987 biopic *Prick Up Your Ears*, about the UK playwright Joe Orton. Made at the height of the AIDS pandemic, *Prick* stresses the centrality of sex and desire to gay male culture, featuring scenes of sex in a public toilet, sex in an industrial estate, a threesome, and a sex tourism holiday in North Africa. Other biopics are not as explicit as *Prick*, but focus centrally on themes of male longing. *The Hours and The Times*, about Brian Epstein's relationship with John Lennon, and *Gods and Monsters*, 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 this mean that the film simply "domesticates" its lead, along the lines of what occurs in *Walk the Line* and *Ray*, 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 it 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 how the normally histrionic Jack responds, is 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 the event of 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 Prop 6 campaign.

### ***Milk* and Politics – towards a new biographical film**

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, as outlined above. Largely disinterested 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 occupied by romantic love in each case gives way to the *literal* hustle and bustle of the world of politics. This is narratively the case with Jack, as I have discussed, in that 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 time to the political goings-on of the time, which eclipse all other themes including any serious probing of Milk's life, psychology, and/or his sentiments about sex, romance, family, aging, etc.<sup>6</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 political difference 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, also 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

---

<sup>6</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 what Milk's stance on the current debate about gay marriage would be, is proof of how little is actually known about Milk's feelings in a range of areas (Martin 43-44).

*Prick Up Your Ears* (mentioned above), set in the nascent proto-gay communities of 1930s and 1950s UK, respectively. About the legendary gay personality Quentin Crisp, *The Naked Civil Servant* shows Crisp's coming of age at a time 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 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 per se. They are thus blueprints for a more contemporary film like *Before Night Falls* (2000), set in revolutionary Cuba about the author Reinaldo Arenas, which likewise features aspects of anti-gay violence and harassment. While each of these films focuses (as *Milk* does) on the life and achievements of a single individual, the protagonists are cut off from all but a tiny community of likeminded outcasts.

In contrast, *Milk* depicts the birth and formation of a well-structured political movement in its own right, picking up where earlier biopics leave off, and depicting the transformation of its gay characters into organized, successful, powerful political actors. In so doing, the film differs from the aforementioned films because of its representation of the complexity of political formation and prioritizing of that process over that of character development. A new kind of gay-targeted biopic that focuses on a process not previously seen, *Milk* marks a departure from both the generic studio-era biopic and the earlier gay biopics. Moreover, it does this 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>7</sup> One

---

<sup>7</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.

review went as far as to say that activists should “learn” from the film, whose activism was more successful than current-day activism (Holleran 20).

Throughout the gay-authored as well as the mainstream press reviews almost without exception, 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). 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 and make relevant the 1970s story for present-day audiences that 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 film, 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 especially 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, the critical link between the past of Harvey Milk’s time and the present day works to solidify an audience’s feeling of understanding toward past discontents, anxieties, and satisfactions and to overcome any potential uneasiness brought about by the film’s subject matter. Repeated references to material in the news – Prop 8, Obama’s election – add value to a film and open up an entrance point on to a possibly esoteric subject for mainstream as well as minority cultural audiences. Such commentary has

---

<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.”

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 fictions, including biographical fictions, strive for such reflexive qualities. *Malcolm X* 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*, 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 made *Milk* accessible for general audiences, in other words recognizing and domesticating the movie's non-mainstream themes and issues and perhaps helping it to reach a broader audience.

## Works Cited

- Als, Hilton. "Revolutionary Road," review of *Milk*. *The New York Review of Books* 56, no. 4 (March 12, 2009): 8-10.
- Anderson, Carolyn and John Lupo. "Hollywood Lives: The State of the Biopic at the Turn of the Century." In *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood*, edited by Steve Neale, 91-104. London: BFI, 2002.
- Anderson, Carolyn and Jonathan Lupo. "Introduction to the Special Issue." *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 36, no. 2 (Summer, 2008): 50-51.
- Ansen, David. "*Milk*." *Newsweek* (December 8, 2008): 69.
- Barnes, Henry. "Could Gus Van Sant's Harvey Milk movie have killed off Proposition 8?" Film Blog guardian.co.uk, comment posted 9 January, 2009, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/filmblog/2009/jan/09/gus-van-sant-harvey-milk-proposition-8> (accessed November 20, 2009).
- Black, Dustin Lance. *Milk: The Shooting Script*. New York: Newmarket Press, 2008.
- Bronski, Michael. "*Milk*." *Cineaste* 34, no. 2 (Spring, 2009): 71-73.
- Corliss, Richard. "Holiday Movie Preview," review of *Milk*. *Time Magazine* (December 8, 2008): 63.
- Custen, George F. *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992.
- Custen, George F. "The Mechanical Life in the Age of Human Reproduction: American Biopics, 1961-1980." *Biography* 23, no. 1 (Winter, 2000): 127-59.
- Edelstein, David. "The Gospel of Harvey Milk," review of *Milk*. *New York* 41, no. 43 (December 1, 2008): 72-3.
- Gilbey, Ryan. "Dawn in Hollywood," review of *Milk*. *New Statesman* (January 26, 2009): 44-5.
- Harvey Milk archives/Scott Smith Collection. Housed at the James C. Hormel Gay and Lesbian Center, San Francisco Public Library.
- Holleran, Andrew. "If they know us...," review of *Milk*. *The Gay and Lesbian Review Worldwide* 16, no. 2 (March – April, 2009): 18-20.
- Jones, Chris. "The Death of an Important Man," review of *Milk*. *Esquire* 150, no. 6 (December, 2008): 42-3.
- Jones, Cleve. "Me, Myself, and I: Cleve Jones Interviews Emile Hirsch about the Making of *Milk*." *The Advocate*, November 18, 2008: 36-7.

- Klawans, Stuart. "Epic Moments," review of *Milk*. *The Nation* 287, no. 21 (December 22, 2008): 43-44.
- Lee, Nathan. "Fatalistic Tendency," review of *Milk*. *Film Comment* 44, iss. 6 (November-December, 2008): 20-23.
- Lupo, Jonathan and Carolyn Anderson. "Off-Hollywood Lives: Irony and its Discontents in the Contemporary Biopic." *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 36, no. 2 (Summer, 2008): 102-11.
- Mann, Glenn. "Editor's Introduction." *Biography* 23, no. 1 (Winter, 2000): v.-x.
- Martin, Micheal. "The Resurrection of Harvey Milk." *The Advocate*, November 18, 2008, 32-44.
- Maupin, Armistead. "Gus Van Sant." *Interview Magazine*, December, 2008, <http://www.interviewmagazine.com/film/gus-van-sant-milk/> (accessed November 20, 2009).
- McCarthy, Todd. "Penn pours on the charm as landmark gay politico," review of *Milk*. *Variety*, November 10-16, 2008, 39 (2 pages).
- Rosenblum, Emma. "Emile Hirsch, Man of 'Milk.'" *New York* 41, no. 43 (December 1, 2008): 73.
- Rosenstone, Robert. "In Praise of the Biopic." In *Lights, Camera, History: Portraying the Past in Film*, edited by Richard Francaviglia and Jerry Rodnitzky, 11-29. Arlington: University of Texas at Arlington, 2007.
- Shilts, Randy. *The Mayor of Castro Street: The Life and Times of Harvey Milk*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982.
- Simpson, Mark. "There's just one problem with Milk: it castrates its hero." Film Blog [guardian.co.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk), comment posted 28 January, 2009, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/filmblog/2009/jan/28/milk-gus-van-sant-sean-penn> (accessed November 20, 2009).
- Smith, Glenn D. "Love as Redemption: The American Dream Myth and the Celebrity Biopic." *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 33, no. 3 (July 2009): 222-38.
- Sturken, Marita. "Reenactment, Fantasy, and the Paranoia of History: Oliver Stone's Docudramas." *History and Theory* 36, iss. 4 (December, 1997): 64-79.
- Travers, Peter. "An American Classic," review of *Milk*. *Rolling Stone* iss. 1066 (November 27, 2008): 131-132.
- Tueth, Michael. "San Francisco Giant: Gus Van Sant's 'Milk.'" *America* 200, no. 6 (February 23, 2009): 31-33.

Welsh, James M. "Hollywood 'Faction' and the New Biofantasy." *Studies in Popular Culture* 15, no. 2 (1993): 57-66.