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# The City of Brotherly Love: Sex, Race, and AIDS in *Philadelphia*

The film *Philadelphia* (Jonathan Demme, 1994) can seem unfamiliar to the very audience it pretends to include and therefore to address (namely, a gay audience, an HIV-infected audience). While the cast includes characters that some gay and marginal audiences might be expected to recognise (Michael Callen, the singing group the Flirtations, Quentin Crisp, the off-Broadway performers Ron Vawter, Anna Deavere Smith, David Drake, and Karen Finley), as well as some of the real symptoms and medications, the film's viewpoints, *mises-en-scène*, and themes suggest that the fundamental audience identification will be with those characters who are ambivalent or intolerant of AIDS and homosexuality, not those who are gay, infected, and ill. We in the audience identify with the sympathisers, with the tolerant; if we are mean and closed-minded, or even just ambivalent about homosexuality, we identify with Joe Miller (Denzel Washington), who is homophobic and taught over the film's narrative to be a little less so; if we are magnanimous and goodhearted we might identify with Andy's mother (which is to say, with

embarrassed at Joe's innuendoes. Finally, earnestly, Joe says, "look, these people make me sick, but a law has been broken. You remember the law, don't you?" And so the film returns to its theme of justice, always balancing and justifying homosexuality with civil liberties. But not before the bartender can have his say: "At least we agree on one thing, Joe." "What's that?" Joe

about AIDS—Walter (Robert Ridgely), one of the law partners, mutters at the trial, for example, "he asked for it"—without contradicting them. This same law partner exonerates a presumably more "innocent" victim of AIDS by expressing sympathy for a former colleague with HIV "who contracted the disease through no fault of her own." Near the end of the film Joe is allowed an extended homophobic tirade in the guise of "informing" Andy about "what the general thinking [is] out there" about homosexuality. After a party that Andy and Miguel have thrown (in lieu of, but in anticipation of, Andy's memorial service), Joe and Andy are going over Andy's testimony for the trial the next day, when Andy is going to take the witness stand. Andy congratulates Joe, as they sit across a table late in the night, for attending what Andy presumes to be his first "gay party." In response Joe laughs and reiterates the "truth" of what America thinks about homosexuality:

> Let me tell you something, Andrew. When you're brought up the way I am, the way most people are in this country, there's not a hell of a lot of discussion about "homosexuality," of, uh – what do you call it? – alternate lifestyles. As a kid you're taught that queers are funny, queers are weird, queers dress up like their mother, that they're afraid to fight, that they're a danger to little kids, and that all they want to do is get into your pants.

To this Andy replies, "thank you for sharing that with me." This conversation is followed by Andy's melodramatic moment, his aria of life and death and hope and struggle, which is itself then followed by Joe's far more normative (and, to a mainstream cinema-going audience, far more recognisable) family setting. The crazed life and dying of Andy (bathed in red light, clutching his IV drip, and channelling Maria Callas) is juxtaposed with the ordinary heterosexual life of Joe. Joe holds his baby. He clutches his wife. The strategy to put all perspectives on screen emphasizes a liberal acceptance of

all points of view without attempting to resolve the contradictions between prejudice and compassion, between queer and common.

While the recognition between Andy and Joe revolves around the word "innocuous," Joe is at the same time visibly anxious and upset as soon as he learns that Andy has AIDS, and focuses, as the camera directs us, on Andy's head, his baseball cap, his hand, as though each thing he touches is now going to be infected. That same afternoon Joe sees his medical doctor to reassure himself about his own immunity to AIDS and cinematically creates in the doctor an educator for the audience who reassures Joe that AIDS is not casually transmitted. Joe's doctor, as the teacher for the audience, explains, "the HIV virus can only be transmitted through the exchange of bodily fluids, namely, blood, semen, and vaginal secretions." But, Joe insists, what if they find out later that it is casually transmitted? Joe then flees the office, both insulted and warily amused when his doctor wants to give him a blood test. If he is worried that AIDS can be spread casually, then why is he so alarmed at the prospect of a blood test? Joe embodies the contradiction common to anxiety about AIDS: that it can be spread casually (which means a blood test

Sitting in front of this sign Joe refers to Andy's "dreaded deadly infectious disease." This is a long way from "innocuous," and much nearer to the general fear of deliberate and stigmatised infection.

**AIDS and the American Dream**

The film *Philadelphia* very strongly places its setting in the city of Philadelphia, the land of American freedom, of equal opportunity, and of liberty. Julius Erving, the former basketball player for the Philadelphia 76ers (known familiarly as "Dr. J") and Edward Rendell, the mayor of Philadelphia, each make an appearance. During the trial Joe extemporises to a television reporter, "We're standing here in the city of Brotherly Love, the birthplace of freedom, where the founding fathers authored the Declaration of Independence." Indeed, Andy in his work and lifestyle is the image of the American dream, which, the film's didactic narrative and *mise-en-scène* stress, can include being gay and can include AIDS. The film opens with a survey of the people of Philadelphia—black, white, walking, bicycling, at work, down and out. "You want this one?" the fish sellers ask, holding their wares up to the camera, implying choice and freedom. The world is mixed but open, black and white, full of possibilities, and even beautiful. AIDS is placed against a backdrop of life going on, life as we know it, life that anyone can relate to. This montage of ordinariness makes the everyday simultaneously consequential and insignificant. It also suggests that AIDS is an American problem. At the end of the opening credits the camera settles on the liberty bell and its visitors, a group of children of all races holding hands as they circle the bell. The bell is, famously, cracked. This will be a film, the opening

credit sequence announces with this last image, about justice and injustice in America.

The opening credits also remind us that there is something very emotional about everyday life, especially as a prelude to a film about dying. With Bruce Springstein's lyrics intoning suffering and inviting sympathy, the long introduction tries to establish a false equality, a false sense that this could happen to anyone. Death is not tragic here because Andy is a hero, the opening sequence suggests, but because he is the image of the American dream—something that even the poor and disenfranchised can apprehend—and he is dying of injustice. Not the injustice of the courtroom but the injustice of a system that is not equipped to respond to AIDS because it keenly discriminates against gays. The system also (and equally, the opening suggests) discriminates against black people, Latinos, drug users; however, the film does not bring these elements in. In this film not everyone is equal: everyone *else*, perhaps, but not "homosexuals." Unusually, though, in this film being African-American is what is normal.

Soon after the opening credits, as Andy and Joe are leaving the judge's chambers in which they argue over the word "innocuous," the camera lingers on the elevator doors as they close in front of them. Scratched on the elevator door is a piece of graffiti that announces, "No Justice, No Peace." This was the slogan taken up in response to the Rodney King verdict in 1992 in which an all white jury in California acquitted two white policemen of vigorouslh,ao b3(l)15.7(a m(r)6.39.1(o)(ator-0.3(i)i)5tso -0.R(i)i)od.7T(dneyh)-0 K5.5(,a)9.7Tts-

videotape and broadcast repeatedly on television. The whole nation witnessed the beating and then was collectively apprised of the acquittal. "No justice, no peace" is a warning. If there is no justice for black people, the slogan threatens, there will be no peace. *Philadelphia* is a film about justice, about the pursuit of justice. Peace can refer to public civility but also to peace of mind, to tranquillity of spirit, to dying peacefully. Andy cannot die peacefully unless he gets justice. In the film he says, "I'm ready" (to die) just within hours

discrimination, each reading a part, like a love scene, as the music swells. The camera, in a style mimicking a shot-reverse-shot, conventionally associated with cinematic romance, by filming each of their faces in close up as they read, moves back and forth between them, and the scene ends with Joe incanting that the essence of discrimination is in "formulating opinions about others not based on their individual merits but rather on their membership in a group with assumed characteristics."

When the film aligns the two discriminations, homophobia, or AIDSphobia (which the film merges) and racism, it does it in a way that assumes the absence of racism but never assumes the terribleness of homophobia. The film's iconography invites the audience to make small steps, as Joe makes in the film, in battling their hatred of gays, but in the film there is no interrogation of racism; the assumption is that it should not—and does no longer—exist. The assumption is that the viewer should have no trouble, whoever the viewer is, identifying with a middle-class professional black man. This is revolutionary indeed, but not in the cause the film's story is mired in apparently revolutionising.

**Masculinity, Male Sexual Identity, and AIDS**

The film focuses on the ways men relate to each other around issues of sexuality and identity, and exposes a cinematic ambivalence regarding representations of men and of male sexuality, particularly in the context of AIDS. There are no women in the film who think the disease is disgusting or harmful, no women, that is, who harbour misconceptions about AIDS. Even the defence attorney (Mary Steenburgen), defending the firm that fired Andy,

mutters under her breath toward the end of the trial, "I hate doing this case." The film can have it both ways here: it shows equal opportunity in who is bad—and who are the topflight lawyers—but still women are sympathetic and veritably, underneath it all, good. Only men end up being homophobes or villains in this movie.

Indeed, Joe's homophobia is a sign of his masculinity. In Joe's kitchen rant against homosexuality, the audience is expected to relate to his confusion and alienation and unexamined contempt. Hilton Als writes of this sequence, "one of the more unintentionally painful scenes in the film is when Denzel Washington, as Hanks's reluctant lawyer, explains why he's a flaming homophobe. His wife—regardless of her well-intentioned speech about how aunt so-and-so and cousin doodah are gay—embraces him nonetheless for his valor."[8] In defending his hatred of gays Joe says, to his wife, in the privacy of their kitchen, while wielding a turkey leg, enacting the role of primal man, while knocking the fowl's appendage against the baby bottle he is holding in his other hand, bashing, in effect, what is feminine and domestic, "You can call me old-fashioned, you can call me conservative, just call me a man," implying that to be a man is naturally conjunctive with disgust for homosexuality. "Besides," he adds, "I think you have to be a man to understand how really disgusting that whole idea is anyway."

In a film that disallows any evidence of gay sexuality, Andy's interaction with the film's myriad metonymically phallic cigars is telling. He fondles his cigar when the law partners smoke theirs. He finally gets to light his cigar only when he is alone and after he has finished writing up an important complaint for the firm and leaving it late at night on the desk in his office. He cannot light

melodramatically. The film also makes Andy's role feminine because "cinematically, disease has usually been a female complaint.... A different scenario attends the male body, which is more likely to be wounded than it is diseased."[10] And in the scene that most closely suggests a sexual encounter between Andy and his lover Miguel (Antonio Banderas), Andy gets penetrated by Miguel. The only sexual intimacy between Andy and Miguel can be read symbolically in the "penetration" scene: Miguel pushes a needle into a catheter in Andy's arm. When he pushes the needle through, Miguel lets out a sigh, a groan, "ahh..." But the needle is blocked, it needs to be flushed out; there can be no consummation. Miguel scalds his hand on something burning on the stove in a symbolic gesture of frustrated desire.

Finally, after Charles Wheeler and his partners in law are served with a summons the camera watches their backsides: they are made into vulnerable (homo)sexual prey after being slapped with a discrimination suit that will require them to prove their manliness. By looking at the men as sexual objects, this scene betrays an anxiety, particularly aroused by an AIDS narrative, that all men can be (made) gay. Charles refers to the "pathetic gay bars" that Andy might have frequented and knows that they are on Chestnut Street, while Bob Seidman (Ron Vawter), one of the partners, ever so discreetly cruises a man who is passing by "into" the camera, thereby "cruising" the viewer, making the viewer a (homo)sexual object for a moment as well. The focus on their backsides as they walk through a nether canal of the stadium is a reminder of "what we're talking about here," as Joe eloquently manages to remind us in the court scene (everyone "is thinking

about sexual orientation, who does what to whom and how they do it") lest we forget that AIDS is everywhere and always about homosexuality.

**Immediate Families**

*Philadelphia* is a film of wedding rings and babies, as though the weight of homosexuality is so strong that it needs dramatic overcompensation to give the film a sense of balance. The film loses no opportunity to include a

seems to fluctuate according to how threatening his sexuality might be to the viewing audience.

The film also employs all of its women of childbearing years to either bear children, to be pregnant, or to hold their newborns. Even the woman with

As the first (and arguably the only) mainstream film about AIDS, *Philadelphia* does little to change public misconceptions and prejudices about AIDS and about gay men. However, I would like to close by suggesting that even a movie at its most convincing would not effectively change the sentiments of its viewing audience.

The movies, even polemical movies, do not change people's minds, at least not in the way their creators might intend them to and not in the way we expect or hope them to. Rather, films reflect change as it has already transpired in the public imagination. Films give us what we are ready for. Films reflect the changes in thought and opinion already in progress in society and further reinscribe the thoughts and feelings—the sentiments—of a society. In fact, they do more, by so inscribing, to create stasis, for things to stay the same, than to change things. Gabriele Griffin comments that *Philadelphia* achieved mainstream status "in part by articulating a moral economy which is fundamentally conservative and, indeed, homophobic."[12] Films resolve the dilemmas created by their narratives, but hardly the perplexities of life that are recapitulated in the films. The peripatetic ghost gets into heaven, the lonely man gets married, the killer gets caught, the mystery solved, but we—the viewers—are still left with our mortal anxiety, our gender confusion, our terror of disease, our sexual identity crisis.

When a pervasive public trauma upsets our fastidiously achieved (and delicately illusory) equilibrium about sex and death, pleasure and mortality, we must construct cultural paradigms of reassurance. *Philadelphia* is such a film, in which AIDS is featured but made palatable; Sarah Schulman is scathing in

"[v]iewers are protected from seeing people who are really sick, really angry, and really abandoned by the general public—the same public that the distributors feel dependent on for the film to make a profit."[13] Motion pictures—for their pure intentions to entertain and occasionally (and safely) to challenge less than tenaciously held conceptions within the public psyche, and because of their mass consumption (consumed not only through actual ticket sales and personal viewing, but also through widespread advertisements, trailers, and universal reviews)—are one of the primary vehicles for expressions and representations of societal, that is, collective, if personal, anxiety and for the formulaic and steady flow of reassurances. Mainstream movies are expressions of and passing antidotes to cultural and sociological trauma. Hollywood offers us an unfailing prescription of palliatives: love conquers evil (or quells it) or we learn that there are far worse problems and they have to do with other people, people who are in no way like us.

Pity can be a great antidote to cultural anxiety. Feeling sorry for someone else (which often translates as feeling relieved for yourself) is antithetical to feeling sorry for or afraid for yourself. However didactic a film may be—and however successfully the music swells to evoke sympathy and pity—no long-lasting shifts in political or cultural beliefs are wrought as long as the viewer continues to believe the trauma is happening—and can only happen—to someone else. Nothing in film will actually relieve anxiety. Melodrama is only ever entertainment; it does not function as motivation toward greater civil consciousness much less revolutionary fervour, and it is working most effectively as entertainment, and least as political provocation, when you cannot stop crying.

[1] Gabriele Griffin, *Representations of HIV and AIDS: Visibility Blue/s* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2000), 189.
[2] Amy Taubin, "The Odd Couple" (*Sight and Sound* 4.3, 1994), 24.
[3]