

The Strangers' Case: harnessing the power of screen entertainment to communicate between cultures.

You'll put down strangers,
Kill them, cut their throats, possess their houses,
And lead the majesty of law in line,
To slip him like a hound. Say now the king
(As he is clement, if th' offender mourn)
Should so much come too short of your great trespass
As but to banish you, whither would you go?
What country, by the nature of your error,
Should give you harbour?
..... This is the strangers' case;
And this your mountainish inhumanity.

(Sir Thomas More, Act 2, Sc. 4)

Sir Thomas More's speech, attributed to Shakespeare, and found in the little-known and multi-authored play *Sir Thomas More*, which deals with the responses to Huguenot immigrants to the UK in the 16th century, demonstrates that mistrust of other cultures, and the recognition of the need for cross-cultural communication are nothing new. In the 21st century we live in a world where globalisation and mass migration bring cultures together whilst the opposing forces of xenophobic nationalism from the populist right both sides of the Atlantic, as well as in other parts of the world, seek to drive them apart. That speech could be addressed today to Brexiteers in the UK, to those Europeans who would close their borders to Syrian migrants, to the current President of the United States or to the armed forces of Myanmar. Shakespeare made his plea through the medium of contemporary entertainment, and in the last hundred years many have used the medium of screen entertainment to make similar pleas.

In this paper I will look at some recent examples of this, and investigate the extent to which they achieved their intention. I will look at whether they reached the audiences they needed to, and suggest that sometimes they risked simply 'preaching to the converted', or, in an attempt to reach their intended audiences, offered an inauthentic picture of the culture they were depicting. Beginning with a film which challenged both racial and gay stereotyping, I will go on to look in particular at how LGBTQ emancipation has progressed in the cinema, how these pioneering films, whatever their shortcomings in terms of

authenticity, clearly did play their part in changing opinion, and paved the way for a refreshing new wave of films, now reaching mainstream audiences, which depict gay men, as well as other cultural minorities, in an accurate and uninhibited way.

The ground-breaking 1985 film, *My Beautiful Laundrette*, written by Hanif Kureishi, the South London son of a Pakistani immigrant father and an English mother, and directed by Stephen Frears is described by Sarfraz Manzoor as 'both a product of and a response to the social and political landscape of 1980s Britain' (Manzoor, 2015). It tells the slightly fanciful story of a British Pakistani, Omar, trying to make a business success of his uncle's rundown laundrette with the help of Johnny – a British punk, formerly with fascist leanings, who becomes his gay lover. In portraying both the relationship between the British and Pakistani communities, and an interracial gay relationship, the film sought to break down the social barriers with which Kureishi had grown up. But it did not go down well with the Asian community it represented as Manzoor reports:

“This depiction of Pakistani immigrants as Thatcher-loving capitalists was not universally welcomed. Mahmood Jamal, a member of the first British Asian film and video collective, set up in 1984, complained that the film expressed “all the prejudices that this society has felt about Asians and Jews—that they are money-grabbing, scheming, sex-crazed people,” and that Kureishi was someone who liked to “reinforce stereotypes of their own people for a few cheap laughs.”

(Manzoor, 2015)

Despite that, the film was hugely successful, with BAFTA and Academy nominations. But, as Manzoor suggests:

“In truth, most British Asians would not have seen the film—they were more likely to be watching the Bollywood movies that Channel 4 broadcast at weekends, movies that offered easy escapism, singing and dancing, and no interracial sex.”

(Manzoor, 2015)

And it seems equally unlikely that British audiences would have been watching those Bollywood movies. So there remains a question as to how successful the film was in terms of cross-cultural communication. Was it merely, as Jamal says, 're-inforcing stereotypes'? Was it, as he suggests, offering entertainment to a Western audience by making fun of the Pakistani community? The scene of Omar and Johnny making love behind the one-way

mirror, unseen by his Uncle Nasser as he visits the newly refurbished laundrette with his mistress would, without question, have caused offence to the Muslim Pakistani community, in terms both of the gay sex and of the mistress, so was Kureishi's intention to risk causing offence in the hope of breaking down barriers? Or simply to poke fun at what he perceived as the hypocrisy of his own community?

Whatever its own success in enlightening its target audience about a different culture, the film, as Manzoor suggests, paved the way for a number of other films, such as *East is East* (1998), and *Bend it like Beckham* (2002) and the TV series such as *Goodness Gracious Me* (1998-2015), all of which quite specifically sought to break down inter-cultural barriers between the Western and Pakistani and/or Muslim communities. So in that sense it was an important pioneer. In another sense, too, it was an inter-cultural pioneer in that it presented a gay relationship which was incidental to the plot, was not really a 'coming-out' story, such as most gay-themed films before it and since have tended to offer, and had a happy outcome.

Happy outcomes to gay stories were rare at this time, when AIDS was wreaking havoc in the gay community. Paradoxically, however, at the same time the epidemic was making that community more visible. Stage plays such as Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart* (1985), and William M. Hoffman's *As Is* (1985) were tackling the subject, as did the 1985 TV film *An Early Frost*. Hollywood finally addressed the issue with *Philadelphia* (1993), "widely regarded" according to Kylo-Patrick Hart (2000, p.54) "as Hollywood's first all-star movie about AIDS". It starred Tom Hanks, who was already established, as a successful lawyer forced by his illness to come out, and the up-and-coming Antonio Banderas as his partner. But, as Hart points out, and as with *An Early Frost*, "little within the movie's content reveals that these men are sexually involved lovers rather than very close room-mates or best friends" (2000, p. 54-5) which is remarkable given that the story is about a man dying of a disease acquired through gay sex. It could be argued that the film was neutered in order to make it acceptable to a mainstream Hollywood audience, and that at the time any depiction of gay sex would have alienated that audience, which it needed to attract if it was to avoid simply 'preaching to the converted'. It certainly represented a gay relationship as directly parallel to a straight one in all respects other than the gender of its participants, which, as subsequent portrayals have made clear, is not authentic. But in that the film presented its

gay characters and their relationship with respect, sympathy and dignity it was ground-breaking.

Still more ground-breaking was *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) which followed twelve years later – the story of two rootless farmhands who find love whilst taking care of sheep on a remote and unforgiving mountainside. Ralph Roughton, in an article for the *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Mental Health*, credits this film with being at least partially instrumental in ushering in civil partnerships and gay marriage only a few years later. He makes a fundamental point about how prejudice of any kind is broken down:

“The most important factor in changing attitudes ... is getting to know someone who is gay in a way that allows for real understanding and empathy rather than dismissive stereotyping. This transformative knowing can be with a real person or it can be with a believable fictional character. That is the basis for the extraordinary significance of *Brokeback Mountain*.”

(2013, p. 85)

Again, although this film does actually depict the men having sex, it is so discreetly done as to be almost coy, and it feels less than authentic. As the openly gay British actor Simon Callow points out in his preface to the book *Out at the Movies*: “not a single gay person had anything to do with *Brokeback Mountain*, from the author of the original novella, to the director, to the actors” (Callow, 2016, p.10). Like *Philadelphia* before it, it ends unhappily with one of the men dying because of his homosexuality – Andrew from a disease caught through having gay sex in the former, and Jack murdered because he is gay in the latter. In this way both films, whilst unquestionably sympathetic to their gay stories, could be said surreptitiously to be re-enforcing a homophobic message.

Gary Needham, in his 2010 in-depth study of the film and its social significance, suggests that *Brokeback Mountain* queered the Western genre, thus subverting an American icon of masculinity and in that lies its power. Roughton suggests:

“*Brokeback Mountain* was much more than an artistic success. Most importantly, it evoked a national discussion about gender and sexuality, about love and homophobia. Cowboys are icons of masculinity, and here we have two cowboys in love, challenging the assumption that being attracted to another man unmans you—that you cannot both want a man and be a man.”

(2013, p.92)

Arguably this was the breakthrough the film represents. It had been preceded nine years previously by a very different gay story – *The Birdcage* (1996), Mike Nichols' American remake of the 1978 French classic comedy *La Cage Aux Folles*, which had been readily accepted at the box office, as Richard Corliss makes clear in his 1996 Time article *The Final Frontier*:

“This gently supportive comedy about gays, a sweet parable of family values, has Robin Williams and Gene Hackman for star quality, writer Elaine May and director Mike Nichols for comedy know-how, and a famous property for box-office insurance - the hit French play and film *La Cage aux Folles*. In short, this new version is no more threatening to mainstream American sensibilities than the pro-Indian *Pocahontas*.”

(Corliss, 1996)

Perhaps this film's ready acceptance was because, as outrageously camp and comic, the characters Armand and Georges, as portrayed by Nathan Lane and Robin Williams, are sufficiently 'other' not to be threatening. As Needham says of *Brokeback Mountain*: “That Jack and Ennis are “regular guys” is for many an anxiety inducing wake-up call that homosexuality is frequently non-indexical and non-stereotypical.” (2010, p.43).

If cultures are to communicate successfully with, and learn from each other then what will enable that is a recognition of their common ground. What both *Philadelphia* and *Brokeback Mountain* did was to suggest that two men can love each just as a man and a woman can, even if they did not explore the differences between gay and straight relationships. Gay men and Lesbians have long learned to extrapolate from observing heterosexual love stories, as gay playwright and actor Harvey Fierstein put it in the film *The Celluloid Closet*: “All the reading I was given to do in school was always heterosexual, every movie I saw was heterosexual. And I had to do this translation – I had to translate it to my life rather than seeing my life.” (1995). On a similar note Corliss suggests: “The movies, as commentators of every political stripe have noted, are a glamorous mirror of society. Growing up, we all find ourselves, in part, by finding aspects of ourselves onscreen. Gays didn't.” (1996). Fierstein went on to say how gay emancipation has now liberated his writing: “you can take it and translate it for your own life. It's very nice. But at last I don't have to do the translating, you do.” (1995).

Once the homosexual nature of a relationship is not the story, but simply one aspect of it, or, in other words, if the story is not about people being homosexual but about people who happen to be homosexual, then a whole range of new storylines can open up which can be of interest to everyone simply because they are good stories. The 2010 film *The Kids are Alright* tells of a family dealing with issues resulting from children seeking to track down their father who gave his sperm to both their Lesbian mothers. It is a story about parenting which could resonate with any family where a child is brought up by parents who are not their biological progenitor. That it centres on a Lesbian relationship is incidental – this fact merely gives rise to the story. When one of the mothers begins an affair with the newly-found sperm donor we have a love triangle such as has been seen in so many heterosexual stories, but with the added dimension of suggesting flexibility in sexual attraction which opens up interesting new possibilities. As I suggested in my PhD thesis, *Emancipating 'Madame Butterfly': Intention and Process in Adapting and Queering a Text* (2016), breaking the heteronormative mould can liberate stories in so many more ways than simply changing the gender and sexual preference of the protagonists. By offering a family story, and a love story to which anyone can relate, *The Kids are Alright* offers a genuinely cross-cultural experience which is both refreshing and enlightening, with the title itself suggesting a challenge to those who would challenge the idea of gay parenting.

Of course, offering entertainment which breaks down cultural barriers can only work if audiences can be persuaded to come and see it. Corliss notes the 'glamorous mirror' (1996), and indeed Manzoor (2015) also suggests that audiences need to be persuaded to look away from the mirror and out of the window if they are to be enlightened about other cultures. Star names like Tom Hanks, Jake Gyllenhall, Heath Ledger and Julianne Moore – the star names in the movies to which I have referred - can do this, though not always. Alisters Michael Douglas and Matt Damon could not prevent *Behind the Candelabra*, Soderbergh's 2013 biopic of Liberace, from being perceived as 'too gay' (Jagernauth, 2013) to attract funding in the US.

There are other methods now being tried. Faced with the challenge of finding a market for the 2015 gay-themed film *Holding the Man* Australian producer Kylie du Fresne (2016) opted for the log-line 'a love story for everyone' on the poster and reported finding as good

an audience for this as for any other of her independent movies, mainly amongst older women, in addition to the gay men who would inevitably seek out such a film.

Odeon cinemas have launched a new scheme entitled 'Screen Unseen' where audiences will come in for a reduced ticket price without knowing what film they are going to see. They advertise the scheme thus:

"They're all guaranteed to be advance previews - so you'll be one of the very first to see the releases.

They're all guaranteed to be films we believe are 5 Star future classics.

And they're all guaranteed to inspire conversation."

(Odeon Cinemas)

What this scheme can do is to encourage audiences out of their comfort zone – to persuade them to take a chance on seeing a film that they might not otherwise have chosen. One film which featured in this scheme was *Moonlight* (2016) – Barry Jenkins story of a young man growing up gay in a rough neighbourhood of Miami. Just a few years ago it would have been hard to imagine this utterly niche, 'art-house' film with its unknown, entirely black cast speaking with thick and not always intelligible accents, and its gay storyline, even being made, much less seen by mainstream audiences in multiplex cinemas. Its exposure via Screen Unseen might have helped, but clearly its exposure was largely the result of its two 2017 Oscars for Best Film - the first gay-themed film to win this award - and Best Supporting Actor. It could be suggested that there was at least an element of politics in these awards, coming as they did in the wake of the election of a US president leading an administration perceived as racist and homophobic, but few have suggested that this powerful and affecting film and performance did not deserve them. And if the forces, such as the Academy, behind the cinema industry can support its efforts to combat the xenophobic nationalism to which I referred at the start of this paper, and to encourage cross-cultural communication, again I imagine there would be few, at least in the entertainment industry, who would disparage that.

In a November 2017 Entertainment Weekly article, Tim Stack reports on 'A New Wave of Gay Coming-of-Age' stories' following the success of *Moonlight*, with particular reference to Luca Guadagnino's *Call Me by Your Name* (2017). And he does not even mention Francis

Lee's *God's Own Country* which, like *Moonlight*, was on general release in the UK in 2017 despite a gay storyline and a largely unknown cast. Both films have now been nominated in 'Best Film' categories at the 2018 BAFTAs. This latter tale of two men finding love in the wild and inhospitable farmland of North Yorkshire echoes its forerunner *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) in so many ways, except that the portrayal of the lovers, Johnny and Alec's sex is uninhibited and utterly truthful. And they are afforded a happy ending. If *Brokeback Mountain* is a plea by heterosexuals for understanding of the plight of gay men in a homophobic world, *God's Own Country* is an authentic and insightful story of a gay love affair which recognises how such relationships differ from their straight counterparts. Johnny has already learned how to gratify himself sexually with another man – what he learns in the course of the film is how to love one. And in this regard the film offers a story of cross-cultural communication on more than one level. As Johnny comes to terms with combining his own sexual and emotional needs, at the same time he has to overcome his prejudices against Eastern European immigrants – when he first meets Alec he greets him with very disparaging remarks about his Romanian gipsy ancestry.

The landscape of the Yorkshire moors is an important character in the film, just as *Brokeback Mountain* itself was in the earlier one. Both are cold, harsh, lonely environments which draw the men together physically in the first place. But they are also sanctuaries where they can freely enjoy their love away from the opprobrium of society. In this latter regard they echo the greenwood to which the lovers escape in Forster's *Maurice*, written in 1913 and filmed in 1987. In a postscript to the novel, which he would not allow to be published until after his death, Forster freely admitted that the resolution of his story is an unrealistic fantasy – a romantic idyll to offer something which, in 1913, would have been inconceivable in real life:

“A happy ending was imperative. I shouldn't have bothered to write otherwise. I was determined that in fiction anyway two men should fall in love and remain in it for the ever and ever that fiction allows, and in this sense Maurice and Alec still roam the greenwood.”

(1972: p.218)

The progression of the landscape image through these three filmed stories in a way parallels the LGBTQ emancipation to which they have all contributed, from Forster's romantic fantasy

through the harsh, forbidding sanctuary of *Brokeback Mountain* - the only place where Jack and Ennis can feel safe in their love - to the almost equally harsh Yorkshire moors which becomes Johnny and Alec's comfortable home as they move together into the farmhouse, accepted and understood by Johnny's grandmother and his ailing father. That this last appealed to mainstream audiences demonstrates real progress in terms of liberalised audience tastes, for which both the earlier films can take considerable credit. But it is also because this is a powerful love story – 'for everyone' as Kylie du Fresne (2016) might have argued – and, as Fierstein (1996) would say, "you can take it and translate it for your own life."

The same is absolutely true of Guadagnino's *Call Me by Your Name* (2017), the story of a love affair between a 17-year-old boy, Elio and his father's 24-year-old assistant, Oliver. Like *Brokeback Mountain*, this film is set in a period some decades prior to the film's release, but this time the setting is a warm and sensuous Mediterranean summer, conducive to the romantic affair which ends as winter sets in. But, as Kate Taylor reports in her Toronto Globe and Mail article:

"Guadagnino has swatted away any attempt to turn the film into a political statement.

"I think the intimacy that these two boys develop ... has nothing to do with the history of the LGBTQ liberation politics and civil rights," he said. "It has to do with the capacity of exploration of your intimate self, it has to do with id." His tendency, then, has been to side with those who celebrate the universality of the story: "I think it is specific because it is Elio and Oliver, but it is universal because they have to speak the truth of what they feel to one and other, [and] that can be said to any kind of couple."

(Taylor, 2017)

But Taylor also reports how attempts were made to 'straight-wash the movie', using an image of the heterosexual affair that Elio also has in the film, to promote it, thus demonstrating that even in 2017 publicists were apprehensive about audience responses to a gay story. And she goes on to discuss how:

"The larger controversy that continues to threaten *Call Me by Your Name* and its inevitable Oscar campaign is the age gap between the two characters....."

And that:

“Perhaps predictably, given the deep political divide in the United States, the complexities of the relationship in the film have been rapidly drawn into a simplistic debate about adult exploitation of teens”

(Taylor, 2017)

In this respect the film risked becoming a victim of the furore, which happened to co-incide with its release, about inappropriate sexual behaviour by notable figures in the entertainment industry, such as Harvey Weinstein, Kevin Spacey and others. Taylor reports how:

“The film’s Canadian distributor, Mongrel Media, dismissed questions about how it might be seen in the current social context, in which the dark side of a youth-worshipping culture have been so horribly exposed. "Criminal and predatory behaviour have nothing to do with a movie about two consenting and of-age adults," the company said in an e-mail.”

(Taylor, 2017)

Here is an example of a pitfall which can catch out any attempt to enlighten across a cultural divide – the moving of the cultural goalposts. Manzoor reports how, just three years after the release of *My Beautiful Laundrette*, the publication of Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* changed utterly the way the community that the film had presented perceived itself:

“The protests sparked by the novel marked the emergence of an identity based on religion, and this hardened following the terror attacks of 9/11 in New York and Washington and 7/7 in London. Today, young men and women whose ancestors are from Pakistan are more likely to refer to themselves as Muslims than British Pakistanis.”

(Manzoor, 2015)

The subsequent behaviour of ISIS and other Islamist organisations have, of course, exacerbated that still further and threatened to rebuild cultural barriers higher than they were before. This portends different, arguably greater challenges than existed thirty years ago to contemporary storytellers in all media interested in breaking down those barriers.

When adapting the story immortalised by Puccini in his opera *Madama Butterfly* (1904) and relocating it in 21st century Bangkok I faced an interesting example of the same issue. While

making the affair homosexual was not, in the light of the responses to the films I have discussed here, likely to present problems for contemporary audiences, and would certainly not be an issue in Bangkok, where the film is set, in today's social climate the age gap between the lovers could well be. And mine, at 16 and 40, are much further apart than Elio and Oliver. When the story was first written, at the turn of the 19th century, presenting a homosexual story of any kind would have been unthinkable, but little is made of Cio Cio San being just 15 years old, whilst Pinkerton, although his age is not made clear, is evidently considerably older. This is rarely brought out in production, perhaps not least because it takes a mature voice to sing the very demanding role and so it is usually taken by a soprano old enough to be the mother of a 15-year-old, so that aspect is de-emphasized to the audience. But in the light of these new contemporary sensibilities, particularly with Bangkok often being perceived as a paedophile destination, and to avoid the perception of my story as one about paedophilia, I was careful to make the boy above the age of consent, and very clearly the one who instigates the sexual contact, just as Elio does in *Call Me by Your Name*.

Brokeback Mountain could be said to have paved the way for enlightening films like *Moonlight*, *God's Own Country* and *Call Me by Your Name*. But, in that all these are about characters recognising and coming to terms with their homosexuality, they could still all be described as 'coming-out' stories. However, it is to be hoped they, in their turn, might make a mainstream audience accessible for films, like my *Bangkok Butterfly* (2016), that move the LGBTQ agenda on again because, like *The Kids are Alright*, they need not be about people being gay, but rather about people who happen to be gay. The simple fact of the characters' sexuality is not the story, even if it defines the world they inhabit which is culturally different, and can therefore generate different stories.

To conclude, it is evident that cinema entertainment can help, and has helped to break down cultural divides, albeit a slow process which has sometimes required a degree of inauthenticity to draw in an audience whose attitude might be changed by it. But the important element to attract that audience must be the story – a story to which they can relate because it is a human story. As Guadagnino says of his lovers' story: "it is universal because they have to speak the truth of what they feel to one and other, [and] that can be said to any kind of couple". (Taylor, 2017). And as Manzoor says:

“what *My Beautiful Laundrette* proved so decisively and thrillingly to the generation of South Asian writers and performers who saw the film was that, if they believed in their stories and told them with wit and humanity, those stories would find an audience, and they would find a voice.”

(Manzoor, 2015)

And if the voices telling those stories are actually from the different cultures they depict, such as the openly gay Guadagnino and Lee, rather than sympathetic members of other cultures, such as those who made *Philadelphia* and *Brokeback Mountain*, then greater authenticity, and consequent further enlightenment, are likely to follow.

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