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Focus Features: A New Safe Haven for Queer & Gay Cinema

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It is not uncommon for the general moviegoer to have no frame of reference of the production companies responsible for some of their favorite films. Focus Features, (formerly known as USA Films, Universal Focus, and Good Machine) moved to the arthouse films division in 2002 and since then has produced a plethora of Academy-Award Winning films on lower-end to minimal budgets. While soon to celebrate its ten-year anniversary the company now has a variety of well-received films under their belt including titles such as *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), *Milk* (2008), *The Kids Are Alright* (2010), and most recently *Beginners* (June 2011). These films share a common link with leading homosexual or “gay” protagonists. Each film uniquely promotes a “positive image” for the gay character, each film contrastingly differently, starting a trend of second-wave queer cinema. Focus Features is one of the most successful arthouse film companies promoting social acceptance of gay and queer cinema.

The film is an often-overlooked platform for social commentary in an age saturated with various modes of entertainment. David Pendleton writes that there are three main strains of queer cinema: the “arthouse” distributor, the mainstream film, and the stylistic experimentation (Pendleton 48). Writers define arthouse in different means, but for the sake of this paper, the “arthouse” film has two distinctive qualities. The first quality comes in the form of fiscal budget each film utilizes. Focus Features, as a company, works on a low-budget range for its films, averaging less than thirty-five million dollars per picture: *Brokeback Mountain*, fourteen million; *Milk*, twenty million; *The Kids Are Alright*, four million; and *Beginners* with three-point-two million dollars (boxofficemojo.com). The second element to the arthouse film is the distribution of the film; Focus Features often oscillates between the limited-release dates or wide-release dates. All four of the films
listed began as limited-release films, meaning that specific theaters were hand-selected and chosen to showcase the film and based on fiscal success, grew outward and higher in theaters and screenings (boxofficemojo.com). These two elements of arthouse cinema require the spectator to actively pursue a film that often has limited publicity and advertising. These arthouse elements often connect to the genre of gay and queer cinema but are actually mutually exclusive.

Queer cinema and gay cinema are distinctively different genres of filmmaking, separated by how the homosexual character is incorporated into the motion picture. Before going into the specific standards of each type of cinema, one must contextualize the history surrounding the film movement. The New Queer Emergence spanned between 1987 and 1992, part of a “new queer mode of subjectivity...a shared “attitude” of “defiance”...a “defiance directed” against “mainstream” heterosexist and homophobic (or, more precisely, heteronormative) society...” (Nowlan 3). This defiant attitude emerges after the 1980s, in which the queer population fought back against the discrimination the gay community faced after the gay scare and the physical and mental violence members of the LGBT community faced that evolved far beyond the AIDS scare (3). This defiance came with five simple demands: 1; The straight community support complete tolerance and acceptance of the queer community; 2; queers be equal immediately, everywhere including the straight community; 3; straight society accepts the queer community exactly as they are, without revision; 4; refusal to accept the inaction of the medical field towards finding a cure towards AIDS; 5; an end to homophobic violence, homophobic law, homophobic mis/under/non-representation of queer life, and demonization of the queer community by
religious organizations (3-4). These demands and ideals have bred the second wave of Queer and Gay Cinema, branded New Queer Cinema.

New Queer Cinema can be broken into two sub-categories of cinema: queer cinema and gay cinema. Both are uniquely different yet each challenges the spectator’s mindset of binary oppositions of normal versus abnormal (Nowlan 5). The normal would be considered heteronormative life and the abnormal would be anything unlike it, most obviously, homosexual relationships. Pendleton defines the two cinemas through association; queer cinema means to question sexuality, identity, and community (Pendleton 47). Queer cinema focuses primarily on “the outsider status characteristic of the films that spawned the term in the first place” (48). On the other hand, gay cinema “seems to take homosexuality as a given. That is, these films assume that we all know what a gay man or a lesbian is, and then go about to depict their lives in a more or less realistic manner” (Pendleton 49). Grindstaff defines queer in “the term 'queer' speaks the unspeakable... [and] simultaneously represents the normative injunctions against same-sex desire...(Grindstaff 224). He also quotes historian David Halperin, noting, “Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. It is an identity without an essence” (224). Queer cinema deals more closely with the feelings of isolation one might experience belonging to the minority community, such as the LGBT community (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender). So while the two sub-genres still belong to the New Queer Cinema movement, queer cinema begins by setting the stage for the introduction of the abnormal in the binary opposition Nowlan comments on. Alternatively, gay cinema does not portray the
LGBT as the abnormal, and instead as completely socially acceptable, as if already assimilated and victors of the five demands of the original Queer Emergence.

Focus Features caters to Gay cinema and Queer cinema through the four different films. Focus Feature’s film, *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), grapples with the queer stereotype by creating a universal love story and contradicting genre conventions of the western cowboy. Set in Wyoming and Texas, the film tells the story of two young men – “a ranch-hand and a rodeo cowboy – who meet in the summer of 1963, and unexpectedly forge a lifelong connection, one whose complications, joys, and tragedies provide a testament to the endurance and power of love” (focusfeatures.com/brokeback_mountain). The film had a dual reaction on the public; some believed the film was universal and relatable for even the heterosexual community while some called the film “peculiar” and notes that the homophobic realities of the film are a part of the past” (Cooper & Pease 252). Marketing and publicity on Focus Features’ website portrays the film as a love story instead of loudly labeling the piece as a member of gay or queer cinema. The film was a box office hit, attracting “cross-over audiences far beyond the gay market” (Cooper & Pease 251). This angle of universality through the love story was equated to other stories such as *Romeo and Juliet*, *Tristan and Isolde*, etc. Universality may have helped promoted a larger audience and spectatorship of the film, but the peculiar aspect of the film is more heavily relevant to queer cinema. The characters, Ennis del Mar (Heath Ledger) and Jack Twist (Jake Gyllenhaal) go their separate ways after declaring “’they ain’t queer’ and that it was ‘just a one-time thing’” (Cooper & Pease 255). The truth is, the boys are queer, and they hold a relationship with each other in secret that spans over twenty years.
The characters of *Brokeback Mountain* fail to live within the standards of "normative." The characters *think* they live in this normative; both men move on to marry and have children and even maintain their jobs as main breadwinners. Both men, however, cannot shake the attraction felt, even as distance and homophobic society looks down upon the queer community. As a young boy, Ennis was forced to witness the murder of a man who was rumored to be a homosexual. Here, the film is harking back to the five demands of the New Queer Emergence; Ennis is terrified of his homosexual relationship with Jack because society is not able to end the homophobic violence nor can society accept the relationship exactly as it is, a love between two men. The film overall focuses on love in unacceptable places and makes the film more accessible to a general audience while still pushing a queer agenda without preaching. Queer cinema must be careful to entice but not alienate the largely "heteronormative" audience. The film does not *blatantly* promote or ask for a better treatment of the gay community and does not act as an advocacy film. Instead, asks the audience to sympathize with the two masculine icons of cowboys as they struggle to understand their emotions and alienation.

The 2008 film *Milk* is unlike *Brokeback Mountain* as the film exerts a political agenda. The film focuses on Harvey Milk (Sean Penn), a gay rights activity in the 1970s; "elected to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, becoming the first openly gay man to be voted into major public office in America. His victory was not just a victory for gay rights; he forged coalitions across the political spectrum" (focusfeatures.com/milk). The biographical film follows the rise of a political figure fighting the homophobic fears of the United States. Furthermore, Penn’s character "seeks equal rights and opportunities for all... at a time when prejudice and violence against gays was openly accepted as the norm"
This harks back to another point of the Queer Cinema Emergence; the film’s world lives within the times of the AIDS scare and the unjust laws passed against the LGBT community. Milk fights against Proposition 6, an initiative in California that hoped to ban gays and lesbians and possibly anyone who supported gay rights from working within California State public schools.

*Milk* utilizes a large aspect of the heteronormative society by playing on universal "normative" themes. New York Time reviewer A. O. Scott, in his November 26, 2008 review notes that for the film, “...power lies in its uncanny balancing of nuance and scale, its ability to be about nearly everything — love, death, politics, sex, modernity — without losing sight of the intimate particulars of its story. Harvey Milk was an intriguing, inspiring figure. ‘Milk’ is a marvel” (Freedom Fighter in Life Becomes Potent Symbol in Death”). *Milk* hopes to bring together the two elements of the binary opposition to fight towards a good fight led by Harvey Milk. Throughout the film there is a portion of society that does distance itself from the freedom fighter. The city’s elite gays keep a distance from Milk, “discomfited by his confrontational tactics” (Scott “Freedom Fighter”). While Harvey Milk is murdered at the end of the picture his death is not a hate-crime against the homosexual but instead an act of revenge from Dan White after being refused his former political seat.

The release of *Milk* was met with its own cultural and political controversies. While the film focuses on Proposition Six, spectators dealt with the current controversy of Proposition Eight in California. Proposition Eight moved to restrict the definition of marriage to same-sex couples having the constitutional right to marry. It prevented any future marriages of same-sex couples but it did not affect the domestic partnerships or same-sex marriages performed before 2008. Furthermore, the film’s director, Gus Van
Sant, is an openly gay filmmaker. Hollywood Reporter Steven Zeitchik noted this issue in his 2008 review of the movie, “Politics? Focus won’t ‘Milk’ it.” Zeitchik went to say, “…’Milk’ is made by gay filmmakers, features the polarizing Penn and puts itself squarely in a political context. Milk’s fight against California’s anti-gay-rights Proposition 6 — a drama the movie deals with in great detail — spookily parallels the current California fight over the anti-gay-rights Proposition 8” (Zeitchik “Politics?”). Focus Features had to balance a gay filmmaker, political turmoil in contemporary times, and political turmoil within the film. Marketing approaches were carefully deliberated, hoping not to alienate the heteronormative people as the “enemy” as a whole, and instead settled on individuals. Harvey Milk existed as a queer character, an outsider as an openly gay politician, and an outsider for his own relationships.

The third Focus Features film, *The Kids Are Alright (2010)*, shifts away from “queer cinema” and into the market of “gay cinema.” Due to the small number of lesbian-related films produced, lesbian films will be combined into the “gay cinema” category. *The Kids Are Alright* is a movie that “combines comedic surprise with poignant emotional truth in a funny, vibrant, and richly drawn portrait of a modern family” (focusfeatures.com/thekidsareallright). The modern family, a family is a same-sex lesbian couple who through the aid of the same anonymous sperm donor, gave birth to a daughter and son. The film involves their children’s request to make contact with their “bio-dad” Paul, played by Mark Ruffalo. “Bio-dad’s” introduction into their normal and modern life creates tensions and causes the family to re-define what family truly is.

The film falls under Pendleton’s standard of gay cinema in its acceptance of “homosexuality as a given” (Pendleton 49). The mothers Nic (Annette Bening) and Jules
(Julianne Moore) briefly engage in oral sex on screen and even watch man-on-man porn before their son interrupts them. The film gains its R rating from the explicit portrayal of sex, both straight and homosexual. While the film is unique in its modern lesbian family unit, the story is still at the core about a family and its struggles to redefine itself. *The Kids Are Alright* should have then a large gay community following but also accessibility to a larger market. In an interview with Doris Toumarkine for *Film Journal International*, filmmaker Lisa Cholodenko notes, “An obvious audience is a gay audience, but is there such an audience? There are gay people in the audience and a population of gay people who will come to see the film.” Cholodenko responds further with “But it’s not a gay film per se. I believe it does its job to cross over and will pull in a wider audience” (Toumarkine “Family Dynamic: Lisa Cholodenko Explores Modern Parenthood In ‘The Kids Are All Right’”). Even the director Cholodenko recognized the spirit that Focus Feature embodies, stating, “What’s great is that it [the film] has an indie spirit, a particular, singular independent vision, and is pushing some boundaries. Yet, with its package and the overarching themes for mainstream audiences, we’ve woven our two objectives” (“Family Dynamic”). As the years move on and Focus Features produces more films, there is a distinctive shift away from “queer” cinema into “gay” cinema as society becomes more accepting of these new and modern families.

Focus Features’ newest film, released in June 2011, challenges the audiences with combining both “gay” and “queer” cinema standards in *Beginners*. Director Mike Mill’s retells the story of his own father coming out as gay at the age of seventy-five, after forty-five years of marriage to Mill’s mother. Not only does his father come out, Hal (Christopher Plummer) come out of the closet, he finds himself a much younger boyfriend, and is
diagnosed with cancer. The film is two stories in one of the past as the audience learns about Hal’s new lift at seventy five and his tragic early end from cancer, and one of the present as Hal’s son Oliver (Ewan McGregor) while deeply mourning learns to fall in love with aspiring French actress Anna (Melanie Laurent). Christopher Plummer’s character changes his entire life and “not before long has tied on a rainbow scarf, gathered new friends and found a young lover, Andy (Goran Visnjic), as Olivier stands by, playing the role of the witness and supportive, confused son” (Dargis “Remembering When Dad Came Out”). The audience learns and understands Oliver’s confusion, one of the main pieces of confusions being how his own father could deny who he was for forty-five years. Hal can only explain that at the time he married Oliver’s wife, she took off her Jewish star and Hal took off his gay flag. The story of the past references the queer cinema, how the times greatly reflected how Hal was shaped as a homosexual man, as the queer, who had to hide who he was. Further, Hal also can represent the gay cinema as he joins gay book clubs, movie going clubs, goes out to gay clubs, and so on. In a span of only six years, Focus Features has managed to successfully balance the needs of queer cinema, gay cinema, and capture the hearts of the larger general movie-going market.

While “arthouse” cinema might be one of the three strains of queer and gay cinema, it proves to be the most successful. In an interview between New York Times, critic Stephen Holden and Michael Zam, Holden is queried about the world of gay cinema. Holden notes that, “I don’t know if there is such a thing as gay cinema, at least in Hollywood’s mind. There is an independent gay cinema, but it has almost nothing to do with the mainstream” (Holden 2001). Holden continues his thoughts on independent gay cinema further in the interview stating “There seems to be an established independent gay cinema, and I don’t
know how much larger a market there is for it then already exists. Some films do quite well, but only in that limited, un-Hollywood way” (Holden 2001). What both Zam and Holden fail to recognize, perhaps due to the date of the interview in 2001, was that Hollywood would have no choice but to embrace this new “independent gay cinema.” Thanks to the success of all four Focus Features films, the “arthouse” cinema has been able to embrace the two genres without alienating the general public.

Focus Features’ films’ success is measured in their awards on the film award circuit. Each of the four Focus Features films has been a recipient of an Academy-Award and several award nominations. At the 78th Academy Awards, Brokeback Mountain won Best Director, Best Original Score, and Best Adapted Screenplay for the picture, and in one of the most famous upsets, lost best picture to the 2005 film Crash. The film went on to win Golden Globe Awards (Director, Picture-Drama, Original Song, Screenplay) and BAFTA Awards (Direction, Film, Supporting Actor, Adapted Screenplay) (awardsdatabase.oscars.org). These awards are the epitome of Hollywood and the film world. At the 81st Academy Awards, Milk received Best Original Screenplay and Best Actor In A Leading Role. It was nominated at the 62nd BAFTAs for Best Film, Actor, Screenplay, and Makeup and Hair. Sean Penn was again nominated for Best Actor at the 66th Golden Globe Awards. The Kids Are Alright earned Annette Bening a Golden Globe Award for Best Actress in a Motion Picture Musical or Comedy and the film won for Motion Picture Musical or Comedy (awardsdatabase.oscars.org). At the BAFTAs Mark Ruffalo, Annette Bening and Julian Moore were all nominated for their roles and the film was nominated for Best Original Screenplay. At the 83rd Academy Awards Bening and Ruffalo were nominated for Best Actress and Best Supporting Actor. The screenplay was also nominated for Best
Original Screenplay. The film *Beginners* has only released onto the market in June 2011, thus has not been given any Oscar Nominations as of yet. As of December 6, 2011, Christopher Plummer was nominated for a Screen Actors Guild Award and Golden Globe Nomination both for the category of Outstanding Performance By A Male Actor in a Supporting Role.

Focus Features’ involvement with Gay and Queer Cinema does not remain in the past. At the official 2011 Sundance Film Festival a small budgeted film *Pariah* was picked up by Focus Features for worldwide rights (http://focusfeatures.com/pariah). The film is the expansion of the 2007 short film *Pariah* written and directed by Dee Rees. The film’s trailer, made available on Focus Features official Youtube Channel in June begins with the statement and definition of a pariah as a being without status or name. This isolated character falls neatly into the real of the queer character, the character that lives beyond the heteronormative. As the trailer continues further the spectator learns the protagonist of this upcoming film will be a seventeen-year-old female to male transgender lesbian of the African American community, Alike. The film will touch upon many elements of Gay and Queer cinema from the isolation of the queer character to the struggling lifestyle of a coming-out lesbian African American. The film will surely be the first of many that Focus Features will introduce involving the transgender community, further solidifying its positive and successful relationship with Gay and Queer Cinema.
Works Cited


Web. 11 July 2011.


Web. 10 July 2011.