



Where's Our Dykeback Mountain?

LGBT media at the crossroads
by Laurie Koh

Above: Angelina Maccarone's riveting *Unveiled* is about an Iranian immigrant (Jasmin Tabatabai) who, in male disguise, falls for her coworker Anne (Anneke Kim Sarnau) at a German sauerkraut factory. It might have been the "Dykeback Mountain" of our time.

"I wish I knew how to quit you." Anyone? Anyone? That's right, it's the phrase uttered by one dreamy mcdreamy cowboy to another in *Brokeback Mountain*—words which, thanks to TV ads, *Saturday Night Live* jokes, and the legions of folks who saw Ang Lee's film, became a ubiquitous, oft-parodied catchphrase.

But what if I quote a phrase from director Angelina Maccarone's stunning narrative *Unveiled*, about an Iranian lesbian who dons male disguise to work illegally in Germany, finding precarious love along the way? Or how about a reference to *Gypo*, director Jan Dunn's poignant Dogme 95 film about a young Czech refugee woman who reignites passion in a middle-age English housewife? Both are gorgeous works which, though produced on a smaller scale, have moments that pack the same punch of humanity that *Brokeback* wields. Critically they've been well-received and *Gypo* even opened at Cannes. Wolfe Releasing has given both films a modest release, but why aren't either of these films the "Dykeback Mountain" of our time? Why, for that matter, isn't there a "Bhangra Mountain" about South Asian lesbians? And why isn't there a steamy soap opera about the lives of intersex folks called "The I Word"?

Frameline addressed these very questions in June when it hosted Persistent Vision 2006, a conference of panels and workshops on queer media issues which ran concurrent to the organization's 30th San Francisco International LGBT Film Festival. Frameline held the first and only other Persistent Vision conference five years ago, and the landscape has changed considerably since then. Following an unprecedented barrage of mainstream queer screen content, it's time to ask: whose vision of queerness are we watching?

I want my gay TV

In asking about the current state of LGBT media, Persistent Vision zeroed in on television with a panel called, “Queer Channel Explosion.” Money talks in the wide world of media, and currently TV is the outlet with the most “cha-ching” potential for LGBT filmmakers. This format has never before opened so wide for these media makers as it has over the past year, and I’m not talking about mainstream channels, which have brought us fare such as *Queer as Folk*, *The L Word*, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, and *Six Feet Under*, but the three queer cable channels launched specifically to serve LGBT demographics: Q Television Network, Here! TV, and Logo, which is owned by MTV. Broadband is fast becoming another outlet, with Bravo’s soon-to-be-launched OutzoneTV.com leading the pack.

Not surprisingly, the birth of these channels coincides with a rising awareness among advertisers that the queer market is an untapped gold mine. Us DINKs (Double Income, No Kids—yes, it’s an actual marketing term) have, according to a recent article in *Real Screen* (“Time to Think Pink,” April/May ’06), the cash flow and a proclivity for brand loyalty to make us a very attractive consumer group. But even as more and more money is invested into queer content, it remains to be seen how far out on the limb these networks will go in representing the full spectrum of LGBT communities.

Of the bunch, Logo seems most willing to engage diversity. For instance, the channel airs the original series *Noah’s Ark*, about a group of African American gay men living in Los Angeles, and documentary works like *The Aggressives* (Daniel Peddle, director), which tracks a group of tough butch lesbians of color in New York City, and *Trembling Before G-d* (Sandi Simcha Dubowski, director), which delves into the spiritual dilemmas faced by gay and lesbian Orthodox and Hasidic Jews. The channel also runs several reality-based series featuring diverse people and has picked up some short works like *Dani and Alice* (Roberta Marie Munroe, director) about the little-talked-about phenomenon of domestic abuse within lesbian relationships. But the programming on struggling subscription channels QTV and Here! TV is overwhelmingly white and male. To varying degrees all three networks are playing it safe as they focus on getting off the ground, the latter two especially going for a segment of the queer population known to have disposable income.

“Are these expressions tokenizing? Healing? Empowering? Are they the best we can do?” asks Shawna Virago, director of Tranny Fest, the San Francisco film festival dedicated to transgender cinema. “Are current queer mainstream films and programs critiques of our conservative climate or are they compromising assimilations?” She adds, “I think mainstream America is warming up to stereotyped representations of trans experience, that is, MTFs [male-to-females] who act like ‘ladies.’ Hollywood could never portray a trans woman like myself, or like most of the trans people I know. Hence the importance of festivals like Tranny Fest.”

Who is missing?

As Virago points out, for every representation of an LGBT identity that hits the big screen, countless others are left in the shadows. *Brokeback* was in part a smash hit because it was pointedly marketed toward straight people as a universal love story (the film sold *itself* to us

queers). Perhaps Americans are ready to squint their eyes and glean universal truths from a gay cowboy movie, but not yet from an Iranian-German lesbian love story. And in this country the representations that get left out are often those of queer people of color, transgender folks, or anyone with atypical gender expression (when’s the last time you saw a butch lesbian on network TV who wasn’t treated as the punch line of a joke?).

In theaters, boundary-pushing films like *Boys Don’t Cry*, *Monster*, and *Transamerica* have gotten a wide release, but these indie productions were not conceived and produced from within the system but rather managed to break in from the outside. Even as Hollywood has grown hip to the profit potential of queer stories, the system is still by and large run by folks who’d rather take a monetary risk on *Will and Grace* than on a sitcom about African American lesbians.

The festival circuit is still where it’s at in regards to screening opportunities for those on the queer margins. Frameline’s director of programming Jennifer Morris feels personally responsible for

delivering a diversity of content at the organization’s festival.

“We always try to have either a lesbian film or a transgender

film on closing or opening night. We try to include a broad cross-section of the LGBT community within the festival as well. We do a lot of copresentations. Festivals can do that, but for theatrical releases, it’s very difficult.”

Festivals like Frameline aim to put the entire rainbow spectrum center stage. Niche festivals play another kind of role, that of giving the LGBT community’s marginalized members a collective powerful voice. In the Bay Area, these festivals include the Queer Women of Color Film Festival, Tranny Fest, and the Oakland International Black LGBT Film Festival. Such gatherings are empowering for queer minorities who feel estranged from the values of mainstream gay culture, or for trans folks negotiating their place within gay communities that are in turns welcoming and hostile. Says Virago, who spoke about the topic on a panel at Persistent Vision, “Niche film festivals at their best are vehicles for empowerment and experimentation that festivals geared toward Hollywood or the ‘mainstream’ indie industry no longer want anything to do with.”

Filmmaker and panelist Madeline Lim, founding director of the Queer Women of Color Film Festival, points out that gathering niche films into one screening experience is instrumental in helping to deflect damaging stereotypes. “The more films there are about what it means to be an Asian Pacific Islander queer woman of color, for example, the harder it is for anyone to say, ‘Oh, all API dykes are like this or like that,’ because here are 50 films about that experience.” The films in her festival challenge stereotypes by showing the complex diversity of the filmmakers’ communities. This year subject matter included a transman dealing with Tourette’s Syndrome, women and girls living on the streets of Mexico City, queer desire in Asian American high school girls, a mixed-race transman looking for his roots, and the Bay Area Native American two-spirit community.

Lim also believes that the LGBT media movement must help makers assuage the financial burdens of filmmaking so that more stories can be told. She says, “Film is a bastion of privilege because it’s so expensive to make. Folks who have the least access to funding—the poor and working class, people of color, immigrants—remain poorly



MTV's Logo, part of a new bevy of LGBT television channels, has shown the most promising commitment to diversity by picking up works such as Daniel Peddle's doc *The Aggressives*, about the lives of butch lesbians of color.

represented in mainstream LGBT media." Therefore, with hard-won funding from grants, Lim teaches free digital filmmaking workshops to queer women of color and FTM [female-to-male] trans people of color in the Bay Area through her Queer Women of Color Media Arts Project. "I believe in demystifying technology for my students. Due to economic and survival issues, or lack of access to technology, queer women of color often don't think to go into film or media." To date, she's instructed more than 200 filmmakers, who in turn have produced over 80 films, many of which screen at niche festivals.

In the niche festival model, the monetary factor barely registers in explaining filmmakers' motives. Films are made for the sheer act of expression, and activist films thrive in this realm. Educational works such as *Toilet Training: Law and Order in the Bathroom* (Tara Mateik, director)—a film with strong ties to the PISSR organization (People in Search of Safe Restrooms)—is about the need for gender-neutral bathrooms so that trans folks can answer the basic call of nature without the fear of harassment. The work may never see the light of day outside of the festival circuit or the classroom, but it serves as a rallying point and fundraising tool for the grassroots work of groups like PISSR.

The way forward

Activism has historically been in the driver's seat of the LGBT movement, and these days activist films are redefining the terms of traditional distribution models. Persistent Vision featured a panel called

"Who Needs a Theatre Anyway?" which covered new models of distribution, from DVD subscription services to streaming content on the internet. These models are changing the rules of the game for all filmmakers, and indeed, the theater can seem downright antiquated for those with message-driven films with political rather than monetary goals. Filmmaker Gretchen Hildebran, who spoke about social justice and anti-assimilation filmmaking on a panel called "Queer and Present Danger," is interested in the ways media can function as a tool for social good.

Hildebran's latest film *Out in the Heartland* is a portrait of gay Kentuckians who are affected by anti-gay marriage legislation in their state. She says, "My film has played at some festivals and that's great. But I am most gratified by the fact that over a 100 copies are circulating in Kentucky, being shown at house parties and community forums. That is the work that I want my film to do in the world."

It's tempting to suppose that queer filmmakers must shoulder more responsibility than more mainstream filmmakers, since they are producing content for an audience which will interpret it as a representative voice from the margins. "All filmmakers have that responsibility, whether they choose to identify with marginal people or not," Hildebran says. "If anything, privileged people have more of a responsibility to challenge the status quo, because they can get away with it more easily."

Hildebran acknowledges that this task can be difficult to accomplish, especially if you hope for a widespread audience for your work.



Gretchen Hildebran uses her film *Out in the Heartland* as a tool to build common ground around the issue of gay marriage in Kentucky.

“The greater you want your audience to be as a media producer,” she says, “the more difficult it is going to be to challenge the status quo in any way. And that’s when you see the really talented filmmakers overcome those barriers.”

Preaching to the choir

Viewing *Out in the Heartland*, one is struck by how much Hildebran’s subjects identify with their Kentucky communities. One male couple, Bob and Jeff, are raising an adopted child and love living in the state that they were born and raised in. Jeff’s parents adore their grandchild and fully support their son’s family, even though they are members of a church that is sponsoring anti-gay-marriage advertisements in support of legislation that could limit their rights. The issues aren’t simple. The church has been a place of community and a bastion of strength for Jeff’s parents for decades. But now Jeff is angry that his parents can’t see that they are supporting a structure of discrimination. Hildebran’s subjects aren’t rabble-rousers, but rather people you might find on any suburban block in Kentucky. Reflecting on her experience, she says, “people there who were on different sides of the issue had way more in common with each other than I did with any of them.”

Who is the audience for an activist film? If a film just speaks to the converted, that’s just fine says Hildebran. “At a Working Films workshop that I attended last year there was a union organizer who said something very effective: ‘the converted actually *need* to be talked to. There’s a huge pool of people in our communities who need to be supported, and need to be shown how to support each other.’ His point was, ‘start with the converted because they are who’s going to win your battle for you.’”

The most powerful films are those that pull off the neat trick of speaking to the converted while also creating new converts. Hildebran’s strategy of “finding ways for people to see each other’s humanity” has been influential in changing the minds of some conservative Kentucky residents. She met many “highly religious people who would say things like, ‘I don’t believe that homosexuality is okay, but when I found out that people were going to lose their kids or not get health insurance or lose their jobs or their homes because they were gay, that’s not okay with me.’”

It’s a matter of empathy

Like Hildebran, Frameline’s Jennifer Morris has experienced firsthand the way that a film can profoundly change an audience’s outlook, particularly when it speaks from a common-ground perspective. She was recently asked to speak after a screening of *Transamerica* at a film club in the South Bay. Although the film’s main character is a very ladylike transwoman played by a non-trans actress (Felicity Huffman), the representation is a definitive step in the right direction. The participants of the film club, many of whom are retired and conservative folks, do not know what film they are going to see before they watch it and the screening of *Transamerica* came as a complete surprise to them. “It was just amazing to talk to these people afterwards,” says Morris. “They’d never really met a trans-gender person, but after they watched that film many said they felt like they knew this person. They said, ‘Oh I have a relative like her’ and they told me how much it changed how they thought about transgender people.” Morris adds that many in the audience told her they would not have gone to see the film had they known what it was about, but were glad that they did. “That’s what a film can do,” she says. “Your mom and your dad and your grandparents can watch that film and learn something and have more respect for transgender people.”

Hildebran feels that media can help bridge these differences and create change, but not without further activism and targeted outreach. She feels that LGBT folks need to re-radicalize their communities to push resources out to the grassroots level because, “only then can people actually start dealing with the issues of what it means to be out. I hope that media makers can rise to that challenge rather than just aiming to meet the expectations of the community. But continuing social justice work is not just a queer people issue, it’s an every American issue.”

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Mainstream audiences can empathize with *Transamerica*’s transgender heroine Bree, played by Felicity Huffman.