Apple pie, baseball and drag queens: The persuasive elements in current gay-themed films

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APPLE PIE, BASEBALL AND DRAG QUEENS:
THE PERSUASIVE ELEMENTS IN
CURRENT GAY-THEMED FILMS

by

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A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

Communication Studies

Department of Communications
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
May 1997
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May 1997
ABSTRACT

This study examines two recent gay-themed films (Philadelphia and To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything Julie Newmar) using Fisher's Narrative Theory. The researcher wants to discover how the films gained success given their controversial themes. The films are analyzed based on the presence of Reich's cultural myths and Reike and Sillars' value systems. The purpose is to show how the presence of elements in the films, that Americans already accept as true, makes the newer, controversial elements more engaging. The study finds an overwhelming presence of cultural myths and value systems that qualifies both films as persuasive devices. Background on popular opinion toward homosexuals as well as homosexual themes in other forms of media is also included.
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CHAPTER 1

AN OVERVIEW

Introduction

This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. Matthew 13:13

This quote from the New Testament illustrates the necessity of narrative in effective communication. To get people to accept new ideas, these views often have to be presented alongside beliefs that are already accepted. Film provides strong vehicles for such conveyance. Recently, some successful films have effectively presented ideas in a positive way, ideas that were, not too long ago, considered undesirable.

The 1990s have witnessed a significant change in the depiction of gay people in major United States box-office films. In the past, gay people had little representation on the movie screen. When gay characters appeared, they were often depicted as villains.

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or lunatics (Corliss, 64). In the 1980s in films such as *Protocol* and *St. Elmo's Fire*, gay people started to make a more positive appearance but even then they were minor characters and, in most cases, were used only as "tokens" (Russo, 1987). This lack of exposure is no surprise given that a film's goal is to make money, and during earlier decades the majority of people were not interested in even seeing the lives of gay people depicted on the screen, much less paying to see them. Any film that attempted to show gay lifestyles in mainstream theaters would in turn fail. At least this was the logic that dissuaded many investors from such an idea.

This film taboo was shattered in 1994 by the film *Philadelphia*. In this film, Tom Hanks portrayed a gay man with AIDS (Magill, 1994; Corliss, 1994). Not only did Hanks' character receive a sympathetic representation, but the audience also saw his lover (often in films that do depict a gay character, there is no mention of lovers and the character is presented as basically celibate), his gay friends, etc. (Russo, 1987). The film was successful and even garnered an Oscar for Hanks. It is true that gay-themed movies had been made earlier than *Philadelphia* (*Kiss of the Spider Woman*, *My Own Private Idaho*, *Parting Glances*, *The Crying Game*). I am looking only, however, at U.S. films made in the 1990s that not
only were widely shown but heavily promoted.

As a result of the success of Philadelphia, more gay themed films have been released by major Hollywood studios. In recent years, there has been a rash of comedies: The Bird Cage; Jeffrey; To Wong Foo, Thanks For Everything Julie Newmar. These films have also extended sympathetic portrayals of the gay characters, despite the comedic nature of the films.

This study investigates how these films are benefiting the gay community by examining how gay protagonists are presented as sympathetic characters. I will do a rhetorical analysis of the films Philadelphia and To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything Julie Newmar using the narrative theory of persuasion to show how these films derive their power to engage audiences and how that power is employed to bring about sympathetic depictions of the protagonists. I have chosen these two films because they are both mainstream films recently released, they represent the genres of comedy and drama, and both were quite successful. Philadelphia and To Wong Foo, Thanks For Everything Julie Newmar made $76.9 million and $36.5 million, respectively.

Importance

Such a study is important to many fields of communication
research. At the heart of this study lies the potential impact of mass media (in this case, film) on audiences. This study employs the narrative theory to show how films create a series of events that are subtly persuasive. The more researchers learn about the power of films, the more they can move to an understanding of how films have shaped popular thought on other subjects in America.

The relative youth of the gay movement lends another layer of importance to a study of this kind. The Equal Rights Movement has helped African-Americans and women achieve overall acceptance. By this, I mean it is generally illegal to discriminate against either group, but it is still acceptable to discriminate against homosexuals in many areas and in most parts of the country. Homosexuals are still dismissed from the armed services, and gays have lost parental rights to their children simply because of their sexual orientation. A Defense of Marriage Act that defines marriage as a union between one man and one woman has been signed by President Clinton. The purpose of this bill was to insure that, should a state decide to recognize gay marriage, the federal government would not (nor will any other state if it does not wish). Despite discrimination, public support for gays has increased over the past two decades (Hugick, 1992). Acceptance for gays and lesbians is being gained, but this acceptance is in many ways slow and reluctant. Films can help with
this acceptance.

Politicians use video to sell themselves; businesses use it to sell products; advocate groups use it to sell ideas. So how could Hollywood use visuals, in the form of film, to sell acceptance of a minority population? In answering this question, critics can gain insight into past social movements and any benefits received from film representation. The question I want to answer, though, is how films use narrative stories to transform what many people in America would initially consider an unsympathetic character into a sympathetic character, not only transform a character, but do so in a way that yields a box-office hit.

**Literature Review**

A literature review has uncovered many studies involving films and their effects on a particular social movement as well as studies of gay characters in mainstream cinema. To better understand gay characters in American movies, however, researchers must first look at attitudes toward homosexuals in American society.

*Public Attitudes Toward Homosexuality*

In a 1992 Gallup poll (Hugick, 1992), it was found that 57%
(as opposed to 38%) of Americans think that homosexuality should be considered an acceptable alternative lifestyle, an increase from 51% in 1982. When asked whether or not homosexual relations between consenting adults should be legal, less than 50% (48%) said yes; 44% said such relations should be illegal. Those who were less likely to accept homosexuality as an alternative lifestyle were conservatives, Republicans, people aged 50 and over, and people with no college education.

Beran, Claybaker, Dillon, and Haverkamp (1992) conducted a telephone survey among the residents of Columbus, Ohio, that measured respondents' attitudes toward six minority groups (women, Jews, African Americans, alcoholics, gays, and communists). Among participants (who were not themselves gay) it was found that women, African Americans, and Jews received the highest level of support. Alcoholics received less support; gays received even less, and communists received the least.

These studies give a basis of how Americans feel toward homosexuals. Looking at homosexuality in American media and reactions to it can also give further insights into American attitudes towards homosexuals.
Media and Homosexuality

Compared to the past decades of television, the 1990s have witnessed a boom in the number of gay characters on television (Hudis, 1992). Television shows such as *Roseanne*, *Melrose Place*, *L.A. Law*, and *The Simpsons* have featured recurring gay characters. Comedy Central, a cable network devoted to comedic programming, launched a program called *Out There* which features gay comics exclusively.

Some marketers attribute this surge in gay characters in television to the growing knowledge of the consumer power of the gay community (Hudis, 1992). A spokesman for AT&T explains, “The particular market segment (homosexual) is a good one to target because it’s composed of affluent, highly-educated, and very brand-loyal consumers” (Fitzgerald, 1994). Indeed, the gay community spends $514 billion a year on products.

Increased spending by the homosexual community, however, has not given homosexuals unrestricted representation in mass media. While one might appeal to the gay community, one risks losing other segments of society. Television programs take risks when planning gay themes. Most recently, the television show *Ellen* risked losing sponsors after it was rumored that the character or Ellen could reveal that she is a lesbian (Wilke, 1996). (Despite
possible backlashes, the producers of Ellen have announced that this rumor is true.)

Such examples are not limited to television. In 1993, when Lynn Johnston added a homosexual storyline to her comic strip “For Better or Worse,” 20 newspapers either canceled carrying the comic strip completely or pulled it temporarily (Astor, 1993). In 1993, the StarTribune in Minneapolis introduced a column about homosexual life. After ten weeks, the StarTribune had had 475 cancellations (Gelfand, 1993).

All this creates a difficult situation for members of the media: how can equal time be given to a minority group in America without alienating a larger group? It is precisely this situation that makes the success of Philadelphia and To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything Julie Newmar all the more interesting and worthy of study. It should be noted that Tri-Star Pictures marketed Philadelphia as a courtroom drama, not even mentioning the AIDS or homosexual themes (Miller, 1993). However, this omission could not have carried the movie past opening weekend had people been turned off by those themes.

Films and Public Movements

According to Rushing (1985), films "reflect the changing consciousness of our times, simultaneously envisioning exigencies
and imagining responses” (p.199). True to Rushing’s statement, many scholars have attempted to find patterns between film depiction and group acceptance for a particular group. Although not much literature exists on films that aid in the homosexual social movement, quite a bit of literature concerning women and African Americans does exist.

Mizejewski (1993) performed a rhetorical analysis of contemporary films involving female detectives. She discussed how Hollywood’s use of a woman protagonist (as opposed to the usual male) not only creates an unusually strong female character but also changes the traditional detective genre. Powers, Rotham, and Rotham (1993) looked even deeper at the evolution of women characters in film. Looking at top box office films from 1946 to 1990, the trio of researchers conducted a content analysis that measured such things as predominance of women characters, the primary goal of the women characters, and the occupation of women characters. Not surprisingly, they found that changing trends in representation characterize the film industry. The trio also discovered that, in many ways, this changing representation of women paralleled the growing social movement of women.

In looking at film history and depictions of social groups, women had a distinct advantage over racial minorities. That
advantage was inclusion. Rhodes (1993), in a discussion of the presentation of African-Americans in early American cinema, pointed out that African-American characters were rare. African-Americans, who were portrayed on the film screen were most often exaggerated stereotypes. Bourne (1990), in her analysis of films with African-American themes, discussed how the rise in African-American characters and themes during the late 1960s and early 1970s coincides with the growing social movement among African-Americans during that time. Bourne concluded her paper by saying, “Everyone should have the right and opportunity to see themselves reflected in the cultural expressions of the land in which they live” (p.19). Gay people have had this opportunity for some time but, until the last few years, what they saw was not very comforting.

*Gay themes in films*

Much information exists on the subject of homosexuals in films. The *Celluloid Closet* by Russo (1987) is considered by many to be the major book on this subject. Russo began his book at the very beginning of film (he starts with an old clip from 1895) and traced it to the present looking not only at the films’ gay characters but also gay references, homoerotic situations, gender confusion, etc. His
analysis of the earliest films discussed the use of the "sissy" (an
unmasculine male character) and the loathing heaped on such a
character within the film. Eventually characters were not just sissies
but were actually depicted as being homosexual. Russo explained
that when homosexual characters actually emerged in films, they
often faced an unhappy ending. In fact, in looking at 39 films
containing a gay character, Russo found that the gay character died
in all but one film. Death is only natural in one of the films, all other
times it is murder or suicide. The one film that does spare the life of
the gay character does not spare him bodily harm; the character is
castrated. These 39 films range in date from 1919 until 1986, which
shows the lack of improvement over the years in the presentation of
gay characters. Russo asserted that many studios felt that in order to
have a gay character in a film, they had to ultimately condemn the
lifestyle in the film, which entailed the downfall of the gay character.
Considering Russo's points, the theme of acceptance in Philadelphia
and To Wong Foo becomes all the more revolutionary.

Narrative theory is used to better understand how this theme
of acceptance emerges. A review of the literature has shown that the
narrative theory is a popular tool in studying film.
Use of Narrative Theory on Film Studies

Other researchers have employed the narrative strategy in their study of film. Medhurst (1993) used narrative theory in analyzing the persuasive nature of Oliver Stone's JFK. Some film critics labeled JFK as propaganda (Auchincloss, 1991). In seeking to explain the power of the film on the audience, Medhurst found a strong link between the film and the Adamic myth (the fall of man in Adam and the redemption in Christ). He also found that the presentation of this myth on the screen served as a guide for the audience members to live their lives.

J.F. Stone (1993) similarly analyzed another of Oliver Stone's films. J.F. Stone created a Motivational/Metaphysical Model (a model that involves analysis on the Physiological, Psychological, and Metaphysical level) designed to point out how the narrative structure of the film Platoon contains mythic qualities that, basically, heighten viewer identification. He finds that the tension and confusion embodied in the film functions to make the film more realistic to the audience. The audience would then be more receptive to and convinced of the horrors associated with the Vietnam War.

In both of these studies, the narrative strategy was an effective tool in looking at how a cinematic film can go beyond being
simply entertainment to being a successful carrier of a message.

The Narrative Approach

The Narrative Approach in communication studies has been popularized by the writings of Walter Fisher (1978, 1980, 1984, 1985a, 1985b, 1987a, 1987b). Fisher asserts that all forms of human communication are basically storytelling, and that humans use storytelling to arrive at truth.

One of the premises of Fisher's Narrative Approach is that the credibility of any story is subject to whether or not it "rings true", meaning how consistent it is with other stories thought to be true. The truth of a narrative is based in large part on what the rhetor's intentions are and the interpretation of the audience. A narrative can affirm new ideas and images, it can reaffirm existing ideas and images, it can purify ideas and images, it can subvert ideas and images, or it can eviscerate ideas and images. (Fisher, 1987a).

In studying films using the narrative approach, a researcher must look at the new ideas presented and analyze how they are presented. In what preexisting truths are the new ideas submerged? The new ideas are still present but they are synthesized with ideas already held as true. This attachment makes the new ideas more palpable. I am reminded of the song from Mary
Poppins, "A Spoonful of Sugar Helps the Medicine Go Down."

Following this analogy, I will then use the narrative theory to determine what the sugar is in To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything Julie Newmar and Philadelphia. I've already labeled the medicine: the social acceptance of homosexuals.

In examining the use of "true" stories, this study not only looks at how positive stories about homosexuals are affirmed but how existing negative stereotypes are subverted and even eviscerated.

**Conclusion**

I already designated the two films I have chosen as successful based on their box office success. Homosexuality is such a distasteful idea to many people in America that neither Philadelphia or To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything Julie Newmar could have done so well without some effective persuasion techniques.

With the premise that these films were successful, all that is left is to find how the persuasive devices were constructed and how they were set up in the narrative of the film. The narrative approach provides a theory to discover such information, with its emphasis on the persuasive power of stories. It is my hope that this study will help us better understand the relationship between social movements and mass media.
Outline of Thesis by Chapter

Having used this chapter to give an introduction to the problem, this study can now begin to analyze the two films and try to determine their levels of persuasion.

Before moving into the actual analysis, however, this study will provide an explanation of my methodology. This explanation will comprise chapter 2. Chapter 3 will focus on an overview and background (including plot, setting, and character) on the two films under study. Chapter 4 will be the analysis of the films where the results that was found through the research will be reported. In chapter 5, this study will conclude, discussing such things as implications, limitations to my study, and directions for future study.
CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY

Narrative theorists contend that the story or narrative is the strongest and most popular metaphor used by humans to explain events and to persuade (Larson, 1995). Communication theorist Walter Fisher, who defines narrative as any sequential set of human events, asserts that it is human nature to use stories to arrive at truth. Fisher (1984, 1987a) bases his approach to the narrative theory on five premises concerning human behavior:

1. Storytelling is an inbred human characteristic; it does not need to be taught.
2. Humans base beliefs and behaviors on “good reasons” (i.e., reasons that compel humans to accept and integrate ideas.)
3. “Good reasons” are determined by history, biography, culture, character, and the structure of native language.
4. A story’s believability is determined by whether or not it is consistent with other stories that are accepted as true.
5. The world contains many stories and humans must choose among them in order to determine which ones provide “good reasons” (Fisher, 1984, 1987a)

According to Fisher, a narrative derives its success (as a tool of persuasion) depending on whether or not the narrative has coherence and fidelity.

Coherence, as defined by Fisher, refers to whether or not the story is logical. Do the characters react in a logical manner? Do the events of the story unfold in a logical manner? Do the pieces of the narrative fit together to form a whole? Basically, any element in the narrative that is recognizable to the audience must be consistent with what the audience already knows about that element. Consistency with past experiences leads to coherence.

Fidelity also refers to how consistent elements of a story are, but in fidelity the concern is on how consistent a narrative is to other narratives already accepted as true. Fidelity is based on people’s perception of what makes a story “true.”

A narrative that has both fidelity and coherence becomes a persuasive tool that can affirm new ideas, reaffirm existing ideas, purify ideas, discredit ideas, or even eviscerate ideas. In this study, I watched both movies looking for coherence and fidelity to see how each film could become a tool of persuasion.
Fidelity

In gauging fidelity, the researcher is faced with the problem of how to decide what stories are accepted by Americans as being "true." This study will rely on two different sources to help understand what elements in the two films an American viewing audience would possess a preexisting acceptance. The first source is Reich's cultural myths which discusses myths that Americans typically accept and are receptive to. The second source is Rieke and Sillars (1984). They list and describe the major value systems found in America. While Reich's cultural myths are based on overall American ideas, Reike and Sillars' value systems will help understand to what degree specific groups in the United States would respond positively to the themes in these two films. Once the presence of cultural myths and values is established, this study can then return to Fisher's arguments and look at the effect that these elements may have on the homosexual themes present in the movie.

Reich's Cultural Myths

As cultures evolve, so do stories that center around the predominant values of that culture. These stories or myths become an intrinsic part of that culture. People who grow up in a culture are surrounded by these myths, and the myths become a part of
that person's reality (Larson, 1995). In order to examine the presence of "true" American stories in the two films in this study, researchers must first understand the basic cultural myths present in the United States.

In *Tales of a New America*, Robert Reich (1987) identifies basic cultural parables in the United States. He states:

In America the vehicles of public myth include the biographies of famous citizens, popular fiction and music, feature stories on the evening news and gossip...They anchor our political understandings...What gives them force is their capacity to make sense of, and bring coherence to, common experience. The lessons ring true, even if the illustration is fanciful. (p.7)

Reich continues by delineating exactly what "lessons" or cultural parables would ring true for most Americans. Reich lists four such parables.

1. The Mob at the Gates--Reich’s first parable concerns the need for vigilance on the part of Americans lest they be overrun by "dark" forces. This theme is present in many different forms of media. In the news, viewers see different political groups telling them how they should be concerned about such issues as illegal immigration, abortion, and drug use. On television, commercials advise Americans to call certain pest control agencies or they will be overcome by termites; they are also told to use certain antifreeze or
their cars will not last the winter. These are only a few examples of a popular message in American society, the message that Americans have to be on guard if they want to remain on top.

2. The Triumphant Individual—In American culture, this myth refers to an individual who takes on adversity, believes in him or herself, works hard, and eventually becomes successful. The classic example of such an individual is Abraham Lincoln. A more recent example, however, would be Kerry Strug. The young gymnast overcame her badly hurt ankle to perform her second vault in the final team competition of the 1996 Olympics. Although the second vault hurt her ankle even more, Strug stuck the vault; her team won the gold medal. The media attention Strug received afterwards was massive. Americans seemed captivated by the story. (Some groups, however, expressed concern over such a young athlete pushing her body that hard. Again, this concern goes back to the “Mob at the Gates” myth).

In regards to the triumphant individual, Americans also see this myth used in political campaigns. Many politicians (an example would be Bob Dole) like to talk about their humble beginnings. Doing so portrays them as being self-made individuals and ties them to this myth that is so popular in America. Politicians also use this myth to hurt their opponents. In the 1996 presidential race,
Steve Forbes was publicly derided by opponents for having inherited his wealth rather than earning it.

3. The Benevolent Community—Another myth Americans often played upon by politicians is the benevolent community which concerns the willingness to help others in their time of need. During the 1996 presidential election, Bill Clinton was seen helping rebuild African-American churches that had been burned. In 1997, Al Gore helped flood victims build levies. This study uses politicians as examples because these are people who are trying to persuade the majority of Americans to some point of view.

Politicians are by no means alone in their use of this myth. Advertisers use this myth as well. A recent commercial by a major airline dealt with the fact that the airline was donating tickets to sick children and their families so that the children could fly to specialists in different parts of the United States. This study cannot say that increased revenue or more votes are the sole impetus for any of these good deeds. It can be said, however, that the politicians and businesses who engage in such activities love to tell their audiences all about what they have done.

4. Rot at the Top—Americans are prone to believe that those in a position of power are prone to corruption. In the news, viewers hear of large corporations discriminating against certain employees.
The 1996 boycott of Texaco by African-American groups is an example. Politically, such events as Watergate and the Teapot Dome scandal have created a distrust for government officials. In advertising, consumers are told by one long-distance carrier how another long-distance carrier is cheating customers by rounding up their connection times to the next minute. This societal myth serves by making all Americans suspicious of powerful figures.

Each of these four myths has a persuasive influence on Americans. Americans accept these myths as true. They are part of American culture and mindset. The power of these myths is evidenced by the way in which they are employed within society as tools of persuasion, for example, by politicians and advertising.

As this study examines the two films, it will look for the presence of these myths. This study will also look to see what character(s) uphold those cultural myths. For the protagonists to be compelling, the cultural myths must center around them (as opposed to the antagonists). Should these conditions be met, researchers could then know (using Fisher’s arguments) that the film contains elements of persuasion. The film becomes a persuasive tool, that despite it subject matter, is using existing “true” myths to attract audiences.

Upholding cultural myths can certainly make the film’s
The work must be selfless and waste is not tolerated. To people who subscribe to this value system activity, duty, and dedication are positive aspects while dereliction, poverty, and infidelity are negative.

2. Enlightenment Value System—To accept this value system is to accept the idea that people live in an ordered world governed by natural laws. They must live in harmony with nature, and it is the role of government to help enforce that harmony. The human mind, however, must not be limited by government as people should be allowed to find their own answers through reason. Those who are prone to follow the Enlightenment system would consider knowledge, freedom, and individualism to be good qualities and would consider dictatorship, fascism, and ignorance to be bad.

3. Progressive Value System—A spin-off of Enlightenment, the Progressive system has evolved into a distinct value system. This system calls for a continuance of growing and learning without end. Good qualities under this system would be evolution, progress, and change. Negative qualities would be old-fashioned, regressive, and backward.

4. Transcendental Value System—Another derivative of Enlightenment, the Transcendental Value system differs from Enlightenment in that the Transcendental rejects reason. Instead,
Transcendentalism places its emphasis on intuition as a means of arriving at knowledge. Transcendentalism is only fully adhered to by small groups, typically youths, but many Americans become transcendental on certain issues. Positive transcendental qualities are compassion, equality, and individualism with negative qualities being hate, anger, and coldness.

5. Personal Success Value System—"The Lord helps those who help themselves" would be a phrase many who fall under the Personal Success Value System would agree with. In contrast to the Puritan Work Ethic, where people work hard out of obligation to others and God, the Personal Success Value System says individuals work in order to gain personal achievement. Dignity, identity, and individualism are all good qualities while coercion, dullness, and routine are negative qualities to those who subscribe to the Personal Success Value System.

6. Collectivist Value System—In this value system, working together for the good of all is the emphasis. Opponents may refer to this idea as socialism or communism while proponents would see it more as community support. The Collectivist Value System is actually predominant in the United States as many people have a feeling of belonging to a group in some aspect of their lives (i.e. being on a sports team, a member of a social movement, a church
member, etc.). Positive qualities to a collectivist would be brotherhood, cooperation, and equality; negative qualities would be inequality, selfishness, and disorganization.

If it is assumed, then, that most all Americans subscribe to at least one of the above value systems (and again, most subscribe to parts of different value systems) then it can be determined from the movies *Philadelphia* and *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything Julie Newmar* which value systems are found in the messages of the films. For each value system, this study will examine the existence and the strength of that system in each movie.

**Coherence**

Fisher (1987) breaks coherence down into three categories: structural, material, and characterological.

Structural coherence refers to a story that is logically organized and told. Typically, a structurally coherent story progresses in the order of beginning, middle, and end. The plot supplies reasons for the character's actions. The characters must also make sense in terms of the setting. How does the setting affect the actions of the character? Structural coherence refers to how well the elements of a narrative fit together.

Material coherence refers to how well a narrative resonates
with similar narratives. This does not refer to how well the message of one narrative matches the message of an established narrative but how similar the styles are between similar types of narratives. An example would be a child asking to be told a story. The story is begun only to be interrupted by the child saying, “you have to start off with ‘Once upon a time...’.” In this example, the child is demanding material coherence. A materially coherent narrative is one that follows established protocol for whatever genre that narrative falls under.

Characterological coherence refers to the believability of characters in a narrative. Would such a character behave in such a way given his/her personality and background? This is a question to be asked in determining characterological coherence. For example, a television commercial that featured a known vegetarian endorsing the beef industry would have low characterological coherence.

In determining the coherence of these two films, this study will examine each film based on these three categories.

Conclusion

In watching Philadelphia and To Wong Foo, Thanks for

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Everything Julie Newmar this study will determine fidelity by looking for the four cultural myths (according to Reich) and the six value systems (according to Reike and Sillars). The mere presence of the myths and value systems is not enough, this study will also look to make sure that these elements center around the protagonists (the gay men). Should these American myths and values exist and be centered around the protagonists, the films would then fulfill Fisher’s definition of fidelity. Then this study will look to see if the films uphold Fisher’s definition of coherence. If it is found that these films contain both fidelity and coherence, researchers can move closer to an understanding of how two mainstream films concerning homosexuality could find success in the United States.
CHAPTER 3

THE FILMS

Before a narrative study of the films in question can begin, some basic elements of those films must first be outlined. This chapter will outline these elements that include the studio that produced the film, the director, the actors, the year it was produced, the characters, the setting, and the plot.

Philadelphia

A product of Tri-Star pictures, Philadelphia was released in 1994 and was directed by Jonathan Demme. Demme was also the director of Silence of the Lambs, a movie that was not well-received in the gay community (Ehrenstein, 1992; Taubin, 1994; Simpson, 1992). Philadelphia stars Tom Hanks, Denzel Washington, and Antonio Banderas.

In the film, Tom Hanks portrays the character of Andrew Beckett, a gay lawyer who has AIDS. In a discrimination suit,
Andrew enlists the help of Joe Miller, a personal injury attorney played by Denzel Washington. Antonio Banderas, in a smaller role than Washington and Hanks, portrays Andrew's lover Miguel. Jason Robards and Mary Steenburgen are also cast in supporting roles.

Andrew Beckett's family, although not realized through individual characters, is portrayed as being an extended, supportive group. The family is a pervasive character in the film.

Philadelphia, the City of Brotherly Love, provides the setting for the movie. Andrew Beckett, despite recently receiving a promotion to junior partner, is fired from a large law firm. The basis for his dismissal is that he was irresponsible, but Beckett feels that the real reason is that he has AIDS (Kaposi Sarcoma had made his disease apparent to his employers).

Beckett decides to sue the law firm for discrimination. After being turned down by nine lawyers, he approaches Joe Miller. Miller is homophobic and initially refuses to take the case. Later, as he witnesses a librarian trying to make Beckett go to a private room to study, he accepts the case. In the trial, Beckett faces a tough ordeal as the defense tries to denigrate his character. Beckett is not only painted by the defense as being a poor lawyer but a morally corrupt person because of his homosexuality. In the end, however, a guilt-ridden defense witness reveals information that is helpful to

The plot not only focuses on Beckett's attempts to win his case but also traces Joe Miller's progression from a homophobic individual to a more understanding one. Miller initially pulls away from a handshake with Beckett when he learns he has AIDS. Later, Miller is disgusted when propositioned in a drugstore by a gay man. At other times, Miller is able to attend a party at Beckett's home and socialize with Beckett's gay friends. At the end of the film, Miller gingerly adjusts Beckett's oxygen mask as he lies dying in the hospital.

These themes inherent in the plot of Philadelphia concerned its producers. As a result, different advertising schemes were employed to get audiences.

*Behind the Scenes*

The posters for *Philadelphia* made no mention of AIDS or homosexuality. The posters emphasize the courtroom drama aspect of the film. This emphasis was done so as not to alienate Middle American viewers. However, the studio used test audiences for three potential "trailers". The first trailer did not mention AIDS or homosexuality. The second emphasized courtroom tactics and
glossed over specifics. The third was upfront about AIDS and discrimination. Surprisingly, test audiences were most receptive to the upfront approach (it should be noted, however, that research also revealed these individuals were more comfortable discussing AIDS than homosexuality). As a result of their research, the theater previews and television commercials for Philadelphia (the most powerful tools used to attract audiences) were more truthful than the posters (Miller, 1993).

**Public Response**

The reviews for Philadelphia were mixed. While The American Spectator described it as being “merely banal” (Bowman, 1994, p. 64), New Statesman & Society said that “it’s the film’s grip of everyday banality that really makes it worthwhile” (Romney, 1994, p. 35). American Historical Review said that Philadelphia did not go far enough in its depiction of living of AIDS (Sluhovsky, 1994). The New Yorker, however, said, “if at times (the film) feels reluctant to handle the unpleasant grit of life, that only guarantees the practiced ease with which it contemplates transcendence” (Lane, 1994, p. 149).

Regardless of the reviews, Philadelphia received a large number of accolades. Tom Hanks won the Best Actor Oscar for his
role as Andrew Beckett. Bruce Springsteen also won an Oscar for Best Song, and the film was nominated for Best Original Screenplay. The film (which cost $25 million) grossed $76.9 million.

Reactions from the gay community were mixed. The Gay and Lesbian Association for Anti-Defamation named *Philadelphia* the "outstanding studio film of the year." Some individuals from the gay community, however, do not share GLAAD’s opinion. Actor-writer Scott Thompson gives the following reaction:

I am tired of the ginger treatment of homosexuality. It’s insulting to the public. It says they are so stupid they wouldn’t accept an honest portrayal. If Hollywood is using this movie to make America love us, they are making them love a false image. I don’t want that kind of acceptance. (Corliss, 1994, p. 63)

Specific objections have been raised over the way Andrew and his lover are dealt with in the film. Many felt that the portrayal of their relationship was too conservative. A scene where Andrew and Miguel are shown kissing was cut from the final film (Taubin, 1994). Another objection lies in the family of Andrew Beckett. Some felt that the universal support they showed towards their gay son was unrealistic (Corliss, 1994).

John Gallagher, who is a writer for the *Advocate*, the nation’s oldest gay magazine, counters such arguments by saying, "Philadelphia is just one panel, not the entire quilt. But as a primer
for people who are new to the issue, it is pretty effective” (Corliss, 1994, p. 64). Tony Kushner, author of *Angels in America*, agrees and states:

It tells (the straight majority), if you are going to be a decent human being, you can’t just casually despise a huge segment of the human race. And if you are going to address AIDS, you are going to have to address homophobia (Corliss, 1994, p. 64).

**To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything Julie Newmar**

Steven Spielberg’s Amblin Entertainment and Universal Pictures were the studios that produced this 1995 comedy about three drag queens. *To Wong Foo* was directed by British director Bebe Kidron (*Used People, Oranges are Not the Only Fruit*). The film starred Patrick Swayze, Wesley Snipes, John Leguizamo, and Stockard Channing.

Noxeema Jackson (Snipes) and Vida Boheme (Swayze) are crowned the joint winners in the Drag Queen of New York competition, winning a trip to Los Angeles to compete in the Drag Queen of America pageant. After the pageant the duo runs into Chi Chi Rodriguez (Leguizamo), a depressed contestant who lost out to Vida and Noxeema. Feeling pity for Chi Chi, the two winners decide to take him with them. They cash in their tickets and buy an old car to drive to LA. During the trip, Vida and Noxeema decide to
teach Chi Chi the finer points of being a drag queen.

Shortly after beginning the long road trip, the trio become lost. While on a rural road, they are stopped by Sheriff Dollard. The patrolman takes a liking to Vida, forces Vida to get out of the car, and tries to grope "her." Vida pushes the patrolman to the ground knocking him unconscious but not until after the patrolman has determined Vida's true gender. The trio continues on its way.

The three travelers face another problem when their car breaks down. They are towed into nearby Snydersville, a very small Middle America town, and are forced to wait out the weekend for the car to be fixed. The locals seem oblivious to the fact these visitors are men and, instead, mistake them as "career girls."

It is in Snydersville that the majority of the film's action takes place. The citizens of Snydersville are beset with problems and difficulties: A young girl is madly in love with a local boy who is oblivious to her, a housewife is beaten by her husband, a local man and woman must deny their attraction because they are of different races, an older woman has not spoken in years, and a local youth is plagued by a bad stuttering problem. During the weekend spent in Snydersville, the three drag queens solve all these problems and inject life and excitement into the sterile town.

Sheriff Dollard, after looking in ballet classes and florist shops,
finally tracks the three drag queens to Snydersville. Using a megaphone, he announces to the town the horrors associated with cross-dressing men. In a show of affection and respect, the citizens of Snydersville defend their visitors and drive Sheriff Dollard out of town.

After their car gets fixed, the trio depart Snydersville with sad goodbyes to their new friends. The film ends with the crowning of the Drag Queen of America, Chi Chi.

**Behind the Scenes**

*To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything Julie Newmar* was written by Douglas Carter Beene. Beene said that he wrote the movie partially as a response to *The Gay Agenda.*

*The Gay Agenda* was a persuasive film produced by members of the religious right. The film showed the more shocking individuals of the gay community as representing the entire community. The film also showed how such individuals, representing the gay community, were taking over the streets of America. Beene says, “I thought to myself, what if a group of drag queens took over a small town and changed it forever?” (Mason, 1995, p. 64).

In regards to casting, *To Wong Foo...* was originally slated to be
a low budget film that used real drag queens (Mason, 1995). The interest shown by the top male actors, however, changed that idea. Thirty-eight actors including Robe Lowe, James Spader, Willem Defoe, and John Turturro auditioned just for the part of Vida. (Busch, 1995).

As pointed out by some reviewers (Travers, 1995), the use of such stars as Patrick Swayze and Wesley Snipes was to attract heterosexual as well as gay audiences.

Public Response

Rolling Stone described the casting of Snipes and Swayze as Universal Picture’s way of protecting its investment. Says the magazine, “Casting is key; it needs to say, ‘Just kidding, folks”’ (Travers, 1995, p. 87). Rolling Stone does contend, however, that the casting makes for “flamboyant fun” and that the characters do not turn into “butts for straight jokes or grotesque parodies of women” (Travers, 1995, p. 88).

Some reviewers, such as Sight and Sound, felt that the characters were not developed enough; “They...remain as cardboard cut-out as their image of womanhood” (James, 1995). Rolling Stone also said that perhaps if the audience could see the men without their make-up, the film would be more humanized. (Travers, 1995).
Real drag queens have found fault with some elements of the movie. Most notable is that the men are in drag all the time. Coco Lachine, a professional drag queen in New York, says in response to such accusations:

The situations may not be real—I mean, I would never wear a red crepe de chine long-sleeved outfit for a car trip, and most drag queens don't wear dresses all the time—but the feelings are real, the parts of the movie about family and love and things we go through. (Mason, 1995, p. 114)

Another criticism about the film is that the main characters are basically presented as celibate. *The New Yorker* says that the film "uses drag as a convenient way of not thinking about sex" (Lane, 1995, p. 96). The fact that the three drag queens do not have love lives does serve as a source of complaints from the gay community (Mason, 1995). Kidron defends her movie, however, by stating:

We're not stating gay sex is not good. [The film] is more like a fable--*The Wizard of Oz*, if you will. I don't think the movie pulls its punches. It is uncompromising in what it does. I painted in broad strokes for a broad audience and tried to make a film that everyone would want to see. (Mason, 1995, p. 114)

*To Wong Foo...* garnered a Golden Globe nomination for Patrick
Swayze as Best Actor in a Comedy/Musical and for John Leguizamo as Best Supporting Actor. The film grossed $36.5 million (Fahner & Scanlon, 1996).

**Conclusion**

This background information is important to consider in order to analyze the two films. The plot, settings, and character, along with the remarks of critics, have to be taken into account when discussing the believability of these films. Each of these elements contributes to the coherence of the films. Using this information, research can now begin by looking for the presence of fidelity and coherence in these two films.
CHAPTER 4

THE FINDINGS

Both films were found to contain a high degree of fidelity and coherence. This chapter will discuss those findings and how this study arrived at that conclusion. The chapter begins by discussing the elements of fidelity in the film. Then, it turns its attention to the way each film merits Fisher's definition of coherence.

Fidelity

In gauging fidelity, this study looked for the presence of stories accepted by Americans as true. *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything Julie Newmar* and *Philadelphia* both contain Reich's (1987) Cultural Myths and Rieke and Sillars's (1984) Value Systems. In discussing this material, each film will be examined separately. This discussion will first explore the cultural myths and then the value systems that were present in each film.

40
Philadelphia

Cultural Myths

The Mob at the Gates--Denzel Washington’s character, Joe Miller, begins his opening statement to the jurors by telling them:

The behavior of Andrew Beckett’s employers may seem reasonable to you; it does to me...but no matter how you come to judge Charles Wheeler and his partners in ethical, moral, and in human terms, the fact of the matter is when they fired Andrew Beckett because he has AIDS, they broke the law.

This scene illustrates that Philadelphia places an emphasis on upholding the law. Even though the film uses other cultural myths to present sympathetic portrayals of homosexuals, it uses the “Mob at the Gates” myth to say that even if you hold a prejudice against homosexuals you must not let that prejudice interfere with justice and equal rights.

In the film, one of the witnesses for the prosecution is Anthea Burton, an African-American clerk who works with Beckett. She testifies that she has at times felt discriminated against at the firm, citing an instance where she was asked to wear earrings that were less “ethnic.” Some viewers would perhaps have one opinion on racial discrimination and a different opinion on discrimination based on sexual orientation. This scene attempts to show how the two
types of discrimination are not that different.

The Triumphant Individual--At the heart of Philadelphia lies the "Triumphant Individual" cultural myth. Reich (1987) describes the triumphant individual as someone who works hard, takes risks, keeps the faith, and eventually gains success. Reich also says that usually the individual is a loner, someone who challenges the establishment. Andrew Beckett is such an individual. Beckett faces many obstacles at the beginning of the trial. He has AIDS, he has no job, and he is suing a major law firm that can afford top attorneys while he can find only a personal injury attorney to take his case. Despite these limitations, Andrew Beckett perseveres and is successful in his quest. Beckett's ordeal lends itself perfectly as an example of Reich's Triumphant Individual. In upholding this myth, the character of Beckett gains the most sympathy.

Joe Miller, to a lesser degree, also qualifies as an example of the triumphant individual. He overcomes prejudice, peer pressure, and lack of experience to successfully win the discrimination suit.

The Benevolent Community--Further sympathy is built around Andrew Beckett's character when the film uses "middle American" characters as agents of support. Viewers see the support Andrew
receives from his homosexual friends. In terms of persuasion, however, it is the support of non-homosexuals that is more powerful. The non-homosexuals in the film are Beckett’s family (which is quite large), Joe Miller, and the jury. Among all these people who eventually show support for Andrew Beckett, there exists individuals from different backgrounds and with different personalities. Audiences could probably find at least one character in this group to whom they can relate.

After Joe Miller’s initial meeting with Andrew Beckett, Miller discusses his attitude toward homosexuals with his wife. In a heated tone, he says, “Think about it, those guys humping up together trying to be macho and faggot at the same time. I can’t stand that shit!” Homophobic viewers would likely relate to such a statement. Joe Miller, however, is not the “bad guy.” As the film progresses, Miller’s attitudes change and he becomes one of Beckett’s close friends. As homophobic viewers watched a homophobic character accept a homosexual, those viewers could perhaps see that the same ability to change lies within themselves.

Rot at the Top--The myth of the corrupt lawyer is predominant in America. Andrew Beckett fails to uphold this myth by stating that he loves being an attorney because every once in a while you can
achieve justice. Beckett’s former employers, however, are perfect examples of the Rot at the Top myth.

Because of this myth against powerful people (including lawyers), Americans are more predisposed to believe a powerful law firm to be less than honest. The characterizations of the partners support these suspicions. There are many shots in the film of the partners at the defense table looking stern and unflinching, even in moments of laughter in the courtroom. The audience comes to see these men as cold and cruel.

The depiction of the partners as wrong-doers is necessary if audience members are to accept the outcome of the trial. Employing the Rot at the Top myth proved the perfect means to that end.

Value Systems

Puritan Work Ethic—As a lawyer, Andrew Beckett appeared to embody the Puritan Work ethic. The first time viewers see him, he is working well into the night on some project for the firm.

Looking deeper, a viewer can also find the Puritan Ethic embodied in Andrew’s legal struggle against the firm. Reike and Sillars (1984) describe the benefit of this value system as “striving against an unknowable and frequently hostile universe” (p. 138). The toll of the trial is, indeed, great for Andrew. His health suffers,
embarrassing moments from the past are publicly revealed, and Andrew's friends and family are subjected to stress and burden. Despite these costs, Andrew pushes forward with his discrimination lawsuit. His goal is justice. Andrew's struggle (in his work and his lawsuit) embodies the positive elements of duty and dedication.

**Enlightenment Value System**--Andrew refuses to accept the "status quo" when he is fired. He feels that his dismissal is wrong, and he pursues justice. Enlightenment says that government (in this case law) must be used to keep elements in natural harmony (Reike and Sillars, 1984). Enlightenment also places emphasis on reason as a way of discovering truth. In the trial, viewers see Andrew's side build a case that is not merely emotionally appealing but reasonable. The prosecution's use of reason to prove truth mirrors the path of enlightenment. Philadelphia espouses the ideas of knowledge, freedom, and individualism while attacking dictatorship.

**Progressive Value System**--With the way Philadelphia handles its subject matter, it would be difficult not to find elements of the Progressive value system in the film. As I have earlier noted, Philadelphia was considered ground-breaking in its positive portrayal of homosexuality. Reike and Sillars (1984) describe
progress as a "fundamental value in America" (p. 139). The Progressive's emphasis on continued learning and growth would certainly apply to a society gaining new insights into homosexuality, AIDS, and discrimination. The film's attack on old-fashioned stereotypes would also uphold the Progressive value system's ideas.

Transcendental Value System--Despite being fired for incompetence, Andrew Beckett feels that his disease is the real cause of his termination. The partners deny that they even knew Andrew had AIDS, but the jury believes differently. This element of the film is a strong example of the Transcendental value system which espouses intuition as a means to truth (Reike and Sillars, 1984). Andrew's intuition about the reason behind his dismissal, when pursued, proves to be true and valid. This analysis may appear to be a small example of the Transcendental value system. It is Andrew's feeling of discrimination, however, that sparks the trial, and the trial is the dominant setting of the film. Andrew Beckett is fighting for compassion and equality, which Reich and Sillars (1984) define as positive aspects of the Transcendental Value System.

Personal Success Value System--Andrew's goal in his lawsuit is justice. Achieving justice does not just benefit an individual but
also benefits society at large. To look at his struggle as benefiting society is to examine the Puritan work ethic. When a critic looks at his struggle as being a personal quest, however, he or she is using the Personal Value System.

Andrew's struggle is to validate himself, although different, as competent and respectable. Despite the accusations and innuendo flung at him by the defense, Andrew successfully proves his case and wins the lawsuit. Andrew's character embodies the positive qualities of dignity, identity, and individualism that are espoused by the Personal Success Value System ideology (Reike and Sillars, 1984).

Collectivist Value System—A person who subscribes to the Collectivist Value system would be engaged by the supportive groups shown in Philadelphia. Andrew's large family provides a group that encourages and soothes Andrew in his difficult goal. The film also shows Andrew's friends helping take care of him, such as the friend who applies make-up to cover his lesions.

In speaking of groups in the film, the partners of the law firm also form a group. From the images of them sitting at the defense table, they appear as a relatively large, strong group. Their group, however, is not based on positive aspects of the Collectivist Value
System such as cooperation and equality (Reike and Sillars, 1984). Their group is elitist with Jason Robard’s character serving as dictator. Because of these deficiencies, the partners fail to qualify as upholders of the collectivist value system.

Because Andrew’s side supports this value system while the defendants do not, a Collectivist would probably have his loyalties and sympathies fall with Andrew Beckett.

*To Wong Foo. Thanks for Everything Julie Newmar*

Cultural Myths

The Mob at the Gates--This myth is used rather interestingly in the film. A common argument used by those opposed to the gay lifestyle is that, by recognizing homosexuality, Americans will put the morality of their society in jeopardy. People who maintain such a statement are, themselves, employing the Mob at the Gates cultural myth. They are saying that Americans must be diligent in attacking homosexuality or it will destroy American society.

In *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything Julie Newmar*, however, the Mob at the Gates myth is used to prove the opposite perspective. In the film, ignorance and discrimination, not homosexuality, are shown as the potential threats to American
society.

Sheriff Dollard represents ignorance and discrimination. At the end of the film, the citizens of Snydersville stand up to him and denounce his intentions. The Sheriff is forced to leave while the citizens are shown celebrating and partying. Sheriff Dollard was the threat, and only by overthrowing him can the film's conflict be resolved.

The Triumphant Individual--For an individual to be truly triumphant, he/she must overcome adversity (Reich, 1987). An example of the Triumphant Individual in this film is embodied in the character of Chi Chi.

Chi Chi's initial attempts at being a drag queen are mediocre at best. Even if the viewer has no prior knowledge of what makes a good drag queen, the narrative of the film allows the audience to see his shortcomings. At the first pageant Chi Chi falls on stage, Chi Chi describes himself as "a loser," and Noxeema and Vida do not even consider Chi Chi a full-fledged drag queen, calling him instead "merely a boy in a dress."

Despite these deficiencies, Chi Chi follows the examples of his traveling companions. He keeps working; he makes sacrifices. In the end he is rewarded. As Julie Newmar herself goes to crown the
Drag Queen of America, the viewer sees that the winner is Chi Chi.

Chi Chi’s success is even more profound when considering that he has stuck to a goal that is unconventional and typically frowned upon. Such persistence shows true commitment.

The Benevolent Community—At the heart of *To Wong Foo...*, lies the myth of the Benevolent Community. Reich (1987) describes this myth as the story of people’s willingness to help out someone in his/her time of need. Again, the three protagonists are stranded in Snydersville, a small middle America town during the weekend. The people in the town are far from worldly and viewers would, no doubt, expect the citizens of Snydersville to be less than accepting of three drag queens. Initially, the citizens seem oblivious to the true gender of their visitors. Sheriff Dollard appears toward the end of the film and reveals the truth. In a show of support and kindness, the citizens of Snydersville stand up to Sheriff Dollard and protect their new friends.

The idea of the benevolent community is also present, to a lesser degree, in the three protagonists. The three drag queens, functioning as a smaller community, do many kind and generous deeds along their journey. For example, Vida and Noxeema decide to take the dejected Chi Chi along with them on their trip; Noxeema
befriends a repressed older woman in Snydersville, giving her a new outlook on life; and Vida helps a battered wife escape from her husband's abuse. Chi Chi gives fashion and make-up tips to a young girl so that she can win the heart of a man that Chi Chi wanted as well.

The only individuals in the film who do not support the idea of the benevolent community are those who have negative attitudes toward the lives of the three characters, namely Vida's mother (who has disowned her son) and Sheriff Dollard.

*Rot at the Top*--Sheriff Dollard, being a policeman, is a figure of authority and power. In his attempts to fondle Vida and his referring to Noxeema and Chi Chi as "spicks and niggers," Sheriff Dollard becomes of man of questionable morality. Reich (1987) describes the sub-themes of this myth as corruption, decadence, and a lack of morals or ethics. The actions of Sheriff Dollard support these sub-themes.

By linking the character of Sheriff Dollard with this parable it makes him even more of a villain. Viewers are not dependent on Dollard's attitude toward homosexuals (which many viewers might relate to) in order to distrust and dislike him. He shows early on with his abuse of power, the type of individual he truly is. Just as
Sheriff Dollard becomes more unlikable, so do his ideas.

Value Systems

The Puritan Work Ethic—A viewer could find traces of this value system in each of the three characters. Despite the snubs the drag queens receive from parents and authorities, they pursue their own desires. The film presents the protagonists’ main goal as being true to themselves by being good drag queens. They each work hard at this goal: Vida and Noxeema have already achieved accolades for their abilities, and Chi Chi rises to stardom in the course of the film. In finding traces of the Puritan work ethic in the three protagonists, however, it is not their work that so much qualifies them as it is their generosity. Vida, Noxeema, and Chi Chi are not so involved in their own lives that they exclude the needs of those around them. The same examples that were cited in reference to the benevolent community myth are equally supportive in categorizing the protagonists as having a Puritan work ethic.

Enlightenment Value System—To Wong Foo... celebrates the freedom and the individualism of its three protagonists. The film also uses the character of Sheriff Dollard to scorn dictatorship and ignorance. In doing these two things, the film supports most of the
Enlightenment Values (Reike and Sillars, 1984). Under the characteristics of Enlightenment, the three protagonists do not allow their lives and their opinions to be dictated by government. Instead, the three find their own way of living that is personally satisfying. In their description of Enlightenment, Reike and Sillars (1984) contend that government's role is to protect rights, but government can never abridge the rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Since the lifestyle the protagonists choose to follow, however, is born more out of intuition than logical reasoning, *To Wong Foo...* is a stronger vehicle of Transcendental Values than those of Enlightenment. It is this researcher's contention, however, that the characteristics of the film discussed above are enough to qualify the film as containing Enlightenment values. The film does not reject reason as a means to truth, it simply places stronger emphasis on feelings or intuition.

**Progressive Value System**—When the citizens of Syndersville are confronted with a startlingly new encounter (the three drag queens), they integrate the encounter and grow as a result. Such a situation embodies the ideas found in the Progressive Value System (Reike and Sillars, 1984). The Progressive Value System celebrates
change, just as the film celebrates the change the three protagonists have on the citizens of Syndersville. When the protagonists arrive in town, the citizens are depressed over the dull nature of their annual Strawberry Social. By integrating the ideas of the protagonists, however, the citizens develop a social event that appears to be fun and enjoyable to all. The evolution of the citizens of Syndersville in the film appeals to Progressives by supporting change and undermining old-fashioned thinking.

Transcendental Value System—Again, Transcendentalism is like Enlightenment except that the former rejects the importance of reason inherent in the latter. Under the Transcendental Value System, intuition is to be relied upon to arrive at truth. A Transcendental would say, metaphorically, follow your heart and not your mind (Reike and Sillars, 1984). To Wong Foo..., then, is probably a better Transcendental example than Enlightenment because it is in following their hearts that the three protagonists are led to their individualism and personal truth. The protagonists' desires to be drag queens is, most likely, not a product of reason.

Personal Success Value System—Just as the character of Chi Chi Rodriguez supported the cultural myth of the triumphant
individual, he also embodies the Personal Success Value System. With the help of his two traveling companions, Chi Chi gains the skills necessary to become Drag Queen of America. Chi Chi goes from being a self-described “loser” to being a dignified winner. According to Reike and Sillars (1984), dignity is a quality supported by the Personal Success Value System as are identity and individualism, two more qualities Chi Chi embodies.

Collectivist Value System—This value system relies on the same examples as the Benevolent Community cultural myth. Reike and Sillars describe this value system as “cooperative action” (1984, p. 141). Whenever viewers see groups working together in the film, they are witnessing the Collectivist Value System. The community helping the protagonists, the protagonists helping the community, the women citizens of Syndersville working on the Strawberry Social, etc., are examples of people working in groups with a beneficial aim. The beneficial aim in the film seems to be equality or mutual acceptance. Since a Collectivist dislikes inequality, this aspect of the film would most likely appeal to Collectivist sensibilities.

Another aspect of the film that would shift a collectivist’s sympathies in favor of the protagonists is that Sheriff Dollard works
alone. Viewers do not see any group support around him.

Coherence

The above analysis demonstrates that the two films in this study contain fidelity to already accepted stories. For a film to support Fisher’s narrative theory, however, it must contain both fidelity and coherence.

Wesley Snipes, one of the stars of To Wong Foo..., has stated that the movie is in no way a reflection of reality (Mason, 1995). Perhaps he is correct; however, that does not mean the film is not coherent. As stated earlier, coherence refers to the degree of logic in the film, and the two films in this study uphold the three criteria of coherence spelled out by Fisher: structural, material, and characterological.

Structural Coherence

Philadelphia and To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything Julie Newmar both have structural coherence. The plots progress in an orderly fashion. The events of the stories are also believable. For example, a lawyer with AIDS is fired in modern-day Philadelphia. His dismissal is based on incompetence, according to his employers, but the lawyer feels that his disease is the true reason. He sues for
discrimination and is successful. If such a story appeared on the local news, few Americans would doubt it. Nor would most Americans doubt the story of three drag queens, traveling cross-country, whose car broke down in a small town. After all, drag queens do exist as do cars and small towns. Such a story might be humorous and unexpected, but not unbelievable.

**Material Coherence**

*Philadelphia* is a courtroom drama. *To Wong Foo...* is a film that involves a long journey. These definitions are basic labels that could easily be applied to each film. Both films follow the patterns laid out by past films in their respective genres.

In *Philadelphia*, a controversial issue is in question. Initially, the “good guy” appears relatively weak when compared to the “bad guy.” In the courtroom atmosphere, viewers sometimes see humor, sometimes anger, and sometimes shocking courtroom behavior. The good guy prevails. The list of courtroom dramas that could be described in this same manner is large. Just to name a few are *Adam’s Rib* (1949), *Judgment at Nuremberg* (1961), and *A Time to Kill* (1996). Many other examples exist and *Philadelphia* can easily take its place among them.

In *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything Julie Newmar*, several
individuals begin a journey on a specific quest. Along the way, they encounter adversity, frivolity, and internal turmoil. At the end of the journey, the members of the party are all wiser. Past films such as *Boys on the Side* (1994), *Thelma and Louise* (1991), and *The Land before Time* (1988) could be described exactly the same. The long journey narrative is as old as Homer's *The Odyssey*.

*Characterological Coherence*

Do any characters exist in either film that audiences could never imagine existing in real life? For the most part, both films have solid characterological coherence. A few questionable cases exist, however.

As stated in chapter three, some gay viewers felt that the depiction of the universally supportive family in *Philadelphia* was unbelievable (Corliss, 1994). Would it be really shocking, however, to have a family that is totally in support of its gay son? Perhaps such a family is rare, but would audiences feel that such a family is an impossibility? Most likely they would not.

In *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything Julie Newmar*, the issue of acceptance also causes questions in terms of characterological coherence. One critic has said that most drag queens do not dress in women's clothes all the time (Mason, 1995).
It is conceivable, however, that some drag queens could remain in drag all the time. Also, exactly how much insightful knowledge of drag queens would the typical viewer have prior to watching the film? Probably not much. Most viewers would probably watch the drag queens with interest rather than scrutiny.

Another issue in this film is how believable is it that a small town such as Syndersville would readily accept three drag queens? The viewer who has seen the events of the story unfold, however, would have little trouble believing it. For example, most people would agree that it seems logical for a woman to be grateful to the person who puts an end to her domestic abuse, even if the person who helps her is a drag queen. Not only do the three protagonists help the abused woman but also a lovelorn teenager, a young man with a stutter, a reclusive older woman, a sour alcoholic, and many citizens just desperate for a little excitement. With such good deeds, viewers would probably be more surprised if the town did not accept the three drag queens.

**Conclusion**

In both films, the presence of numerous cultural myths and value systems establishes fidelity. The structure, development, and characters of the films also classify them as being coherent. By
satisfying the two qualities of coherence and fidelity, *Philadelphia* and *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything Julie Newmar* qualify themselves as persuasive devices under Fisher's Narrative Theory. It is now time to discuss what this conclusion means to communication research.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

This research has shown the presence of cultural myths and value systems in *Philadelphia* and *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything Julie Newmar*. By linking the films' narratives with such a large number of widely held American beliefs, the films contain elements that would appeal to virtually everyone. Fidelity, as defined by Fisher, is achieved through the integration of these accepted myths and value systems. Although this study does not measure the extent to which these two films appeal to American audiences, it can be said that the presence of so many cultural myths and value systems create an affinity between these films and ideas that Americans widely accept.

This study has also shown that the two films not only contain fidelity to existing truths, but are also coherent in their own structure. The characters, plots, and setting of both films are logically organized and arranged. Although the circumstances of the
films might sometimes be surprising, audiences have little difficulty in believing that such events could happen. The elements of each film also conform to what audiences expect from films of the courtroom drama and long journey genre. The coherent nature of these films allows audiences to simply watch the film and not be distracted by improbabilities and absurdities.

The finding of this study is that Philadelphia and To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything Julie Newmar are persuasive, based on Fisher’s Narrative Theory. Both films contain fidelity to existing stories, and both films are coherent in their structure. Such a conclusion provides important implications to mass communication researchers.

**Implications**

In studying these two films, I have learned that films are not just innocent narratives aimed at entertaining audiences. Perhaps the studios planned these films to simply entertain, but the power of film runs much deeper.

It was stated in chapter 3 that Tri-Star and Amblin Entertainment approached each film with trepidation. After all, the subject matter had previously been thought to be undesirable by audiences. However, the films were released and both became
financial successes. Advertising cannot guarantee box-office success (remember *Howard the Duck*?). The films contained something that engaged audiences. It cannot be assumed from this study that it is simply the presence of fidelity and coherence in each film that gained audience appreciation. According to Fisher, however, it is the presence of fidelity and coherence that makes a narrative persuasive.

The more important discovery of this study was the overwhelming presence of cultural myths and value systems in each film. This study does not discount the importance of coherence in narratives, but few films are not coherent. For the films to be coherent is not that surprising. The fact that both films contain every one of Reich's cultural myths and have elements of every prominent value system in America, however, is quite surprising. Whether Tri-Star and Amblin Entertainment deliberately incorporated these accepted elements of American society into their stories is not for this study to say. This study can say, however, that in dealing with controversial issues it was to the studios' advantage to incorporate these elements.

The results of this study support the idea that narratives gain persuasive power by integrating accepted stories. Based on that knowledge, filmmakers have more choice in their selection of
subject matter. Ways exist to present controversial issues so that audiences will be receptive. Perhaps the subject matter is not as important as the way it is presented.

After seeing how *Philadelphia* and *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything Julie Newmar* are persuasive, researchers might assume that other films in the past have been equally persuasive. Perhaps such films had a lasting impact on popular opinion. For example, what impact might *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* have had on race relations in America? Could *Children of a Lesser God* have affected American's opinions on disabled people? Such questions are raised by this study.

In chapter 3, the *Gay Agenda*, a film used solely as propaganda against the homosexual movement, was referred to. In understanding the ways in which films can be made more persuasive, audiences would be better equipped to accurately understand propaganda pieces. Perhaps such pieces would then lose their persuasive power through narrative and have to rely solely on facts. Imagine if audiences saw through the persuasive images of political campaign commercials forcing politicians to instead discuss issues and their past records.

In chapter 3, it was pointed out that some prominent members of the gay community did not approve of these films.
These critics felt that the portrayals did not go far enough in their
depictions of what a gay person’s life is really like. Perhaps these
critics are in the minority, this study cannot say. Assuming they are
not in the minority, researchers might wonder if perhaps the gay
community defines what makes a positive portrayal differently
than do other groups in America.

These implications all point to the further need for research
into this area. In looking at the limitations of this study, the need
for even more research is made apparent.

Limitations

Both of the films in this study deal exclusively with
homosexual men. Films involving lesbians do exist, but as of this
writing not as large-scale Hollywood productions with lesbianism as
the central subject. While the results of this study are potentially
applicable to both gay men and lesbians, this assumption is far from
conclusive.

Americans do not attend every film that is released.
Attendance is not mandatory. Just because a film is engaging does
not mean a large number of people will go to see it. What makes
Americans choose to see specific films? This study does not answer
that. It can be assumed that perhaps the audiences of the two films
in this study already had a sympathetic attitude toward homosexuals. The monetary success of the two films, however, does give evidence that many people were in attendance. For all of those viewers to be of the same variety seems improbable.

Fisher's Narrative Theory states that a film is persuasive if it has coherence and fidelity. Having classified these two films as persuasive, it cannot be said to what degree persuasion (as discussed in this study) has to do with the popularity of the films. Perhaps audiences were drawn to the hilarity of three of Hollywood's rugged, leading men dressed in drag. Perhaps the "star power" of such actors as Tom Hanks and Denzel Washington played a part in the success of Philadelphia. How large a part did these other factors play in the success of the films? This study cannot answer that. This study can say, however, that based on the narrative theory, both films are persuasive devices.

This study cannot tell what factors attracted audiences. This study can suggest, however, the amount of persuasion presented to those who did choose to watch these films. The next step in this research needs to look at how successful these films were in actually persuading audiences. That is not, however, the only area left to be studied on this topic.
Directions for Further Study

As stated in chapter one, few studies exist on the effectiveness of popular film as persuasive devices for social movements. Qualitative studies such as this one are useful in researching a relatively "untouched" topic. Such research provides an overview of the problem and gives insights into how films employ persuasive techniques. Quantitative research, however, is needed to fully understand the effectiveness of such films.

In the area of films with gay themes, it would be helpful to gauge the attitudes people have toward the films. This could be accomplished with focus groups whose attitudes are surveyed before and after exposure to a film fitting the mold of the ones looked at in this study (immersing homosexuality positively with cultural myths and value systems). It would also be beneficial to survey a focus group's attitude to homosexuality before and after viewing a film that did not fit the mold of the films in this study (one where homosexuality was presented with negative aspects of American cultural myths and value systems, Suddenly Last Summer perhaps). Doing so would give support to the contention that positive links between homosexuality and cultural myths/value systems can have a persuasive impact on an audience.

Another avenue of research called for by this study involves
research focusing on members of the gay community. What were their reactions to these films? What would they have changed or liked to have seen been done differently? Compare their answers to the answers provided by a heterosexual subject group. This would help to determine what common ground, if any, exists between the two groups.

Looking at public opinion of lesbians versus homosexual men would also help in studying gay-themed films. Perhaps one group is more stigmatized than the other and films depicting that group would have to be done differently in order to be equally persuasive. Such a study would also help researchers understand how applicable studies such as this one are to lesbians.

Research should also focus on other forms of media: television, radio, Internet, and print media. What kind of messages are different forms of media sending in regards to homosexuality and how effectively are those messages received? Cabaret drag shows, which are becoming increasingly popular, offer a perfect opportunity to gauge audience impressions before and after exposure. The shows are typically live and not widely broadcast so many audience members would have little exposure to the content. Homosexuals are not necessarily drag queens, so some research would first have to be done to gauge typical linkage between
attitudes toward homosexuality and drag queens. If a high positive correlation is found, then cabaret shows might be an excellent source of study.

In emphasizing the need for quantitative research, I do not mean to imply that qualitative research has been exhausted on this subject. Indeed, there exist many areas that could use further study in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of this problem.

One interesting study would include looking at past films that had homosexual themes, perhaps one from each decade. Compare the messages of these films to the attitudes toward homosexuality from that same time (assuming survey data exist). Another helpful study would be to look at foreign films that have homosexual themes and analyze how closely those themes mirror public opinion toward homosexuals in that country. Both of these studies would provide evidence to support a positive correlation between public attitudes towards homosexuals and representation of homosexuals in media. It would still be unclear, however, whether public attitudes affect representation or vice versa. The quantitative research discussed earlier would help solve that problem.

By using this study as a starting point to further research, mass communications can gain important insights into the power of
film on social movements. The gay social movement in America is in its early stages, which makes this social movement an ideal one to study. Since Philadelphia and To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything Julie Newmar, many other gay themed films have been released: The Birdcage, Jeffrey, and Home for the Holidays. Based on the successes of these films, many others are destined to follow. Perhaps with the successes of Philadelphia and To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything Julie Newmar, future films will offer more probing depictions of gay life in America, depictions that would appease the members of the gay community who did not like these earlier films. Researchers should study the persuasive power of these future films; how will their levels of persuasion compare with earlier films? Now is the time to develop such a program of research that will give communication studies the best insights into the persuasive power of film.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


