'... And the Theatre was Full of Poofs, and I Thought it was Fantastic': Researching the history of gay men and the movies

Scott J. McKinnon
University of Wollongong, scottmck@uow.edu.au

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Abstract
The history of gay men and movies has often been discussed as matter of representation and in terms of images on screens. those boys in the band and their eventful party; Al Pacino's nights in the leather bars of New York; a bus called Priscilla; two cowboys in love. Also the focus of inquiry had been the gay men on and behind the camera. Rock Hudson, Rupert Everett, George Cukor, Gus van Sant. More recently, a growing number of researchers have begun to contemplate and investigate the gay men in the cinema audience. this chapter disucsses the use of oral history interviews as a methodology for investigating the history of that audience.

Keywords
theatre, full, poofs, i, was, thought, '..., fantastic';, researching, history, gay, men, movies

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... And the Theatre was Full of Poofs, and I Thought it was Fantastic

Researching the History of Gay Men and the Movies

Scott McKinnon

The history of gay men and the movies has often been discussed as a matter of representation and in terms of images on screens. Those boys in the band and their eventful party; Al Pacino’s nights in the leather bars of New York; a bus called Priscilla; two cowboys in love. Also the focus of inquiry has been the gay men on and behind the camera. Rock Hudson, Rupert Everett, George Cukor, Gus van Sant. More recently, a growing number of researchers have begun to contemplate and investigate the gay men in the cinema audience. This chapter discusses the use of oral history interviews as a methodology for investigating the history of that audience. It is a valuable tool for exploring gay men’s use of the movies in the development of personal narratives around gay identity and subjectivity. The memory stories of gay men also reveal the use of cinema as an access point to gay culture and community. Providing a space for the voice of gay men as cinema audiences adds to our understanding of the role of the movies in the history of that culture and that community.

This paper draws on research conducted for a larger project which investigates the history of cinema and cinema-going within the gay male communities of Sydney from 1950 to 2009. That project uses oral history interviews, the close reading of a range of films and the study of inter-textual sources as the three primary ways to explore the place of the movies within the development of gay culture, community and identity in Sydney. To date,
15 interviews with gay men have been conducted to discuss their life stories and their memories of the movies, both gay and otherwise, and it is these interviews that inform the analysis here. Ranging in age from their 80s to their 20s, these men's experiences of sexuality differ greatly according to the changing attitudes of the society around them. Their movie memories reflect both the changes and also the consistencies in gay experience across that time.

These memory stories suggest the value of thinking about the movies as more than a set of images on a screen or as an industry that can also be an art-form. They reveal cinemas as social venues which have provided access to gay community; they reveal the place of the movies in gay men's sense of their own developing sexual identity; and they reveal the diverse and complex relationships gay men have with the way they are represented on screen.

The ways in which gay men and lesbians have been represented has, until relatively recently, been the major preoccupation of gay cinema history. A sign of the growing visibility and political activism of gay communities in the 1970s and 1980s was the development of a critical voice with which to challenge cinematic depictions of homosexual characters. Vito Russo's *The Celluloid Closet* is the best known example of an engagement by openly gay researchers with the formerly closeted screen-homosexual. Overly political and unashamedly angry, Russo's work finds homophobia in a broad range of Hollywood films. He states:

As expressed on screen, America was a dream that had no room for the existence of homosexuals. Laws were made against depicting such things onscreen. And when the fact of our existence became unavoidable, we were reflected on screen and off, as dirty secrets.¹

The question of the representation of gay and lesbian characters on screen continues to be a focus of research, updated and readdressed to take into account changing notions of sexual identity. In recent years, however, there has been a growing level of interest in the gay male cinema audience. Various researchers have used a range of critical perspectives and methodologies in investigating questions of gay male spectatorship and cinematic reception practices.

Brett Farmer's *Spectacular Passions*, for example, takes a psychoanalytical approach in investigating the ways in which gay men have mobilised film as a significant site for the investment and production of their own queer desires, fantasies and meanings.² Farmer argues that research which focuses on the homophobic representation of gay men on screen sits in contrast to gay men's enjoyment of the cinema, and that an interest in gay male spectatorships is more inclusive of those for whom cinema is an 'integral, even foundational' part of their lives.³ Farmer's work sits within the theoretical frameworks of spectatorship and film theory, and is a specific attempt to offer a non-heterosexual perspective within these fields.

The history of cinematic reception within gay culture, addressed less in terms of psychoanalytic theory and more as historically and spatially-constituted practices, has been investigated by a number of researchers, including Richard Dyer and Janet Staiger. Sitting within significant bodies of work investigating film and film audiences, Dyer and Staiger have, for example, each separately explored gay male readings of the films and the star persona of Judy Garland.⁴ Such research encourages a contemplation of movies as not only a set of images projected onto screens, but as objects of social and cultural enquiry whose true importance often lies outside the walls of the cinema.

**Movies and Memory**

While Dyer and Farmer both quote, to varying extents, from letters sent to them by gay men about the movies, frequently missing from contemplations of the gay male audience is a significant place for the voice of that audience. Memory work obtained through oral history interviews is a valuable approach allowing for inclusion of that voice. By exploring the memories of gay male cinema-goers, it is possible to complicate any notion of a homogenous gay male audience; to locate examples of cinema-going events and practices which are unlikely to have left a written record; to develop a sense of the experience of participating in those events; and to explore the place of the movies within the construction of narratives around gay male identity and community.

Important to this is an understanding of the history of the cinema as more than the story of the production of films; or the reputedly representative characters seen on screens; or of the experiences of a theoretical spectator. It is a history which acknowledges and addresses the place of the movies in everyday life and which examines the event of watching a movie as being one in which 'the audience is paying to be part of a larger social experience consisting substantially of non-filmic elements'.⁵ The history of the movies is as much about these non-filmic elements (the cinema buildings, the reviews, the others in the audience,
the talk before and after) as it is about the images that were projected on
the screen.

While arguing for the value of oral history as a methodology in
researching cinema history, I acknowledge that memory is frequently
an unreliable source of information about those images. The moment
of reception of a film is fleeting and lost to time. The memories recounted
to me in interviews are reconstructed and influenced by a range of factors,
including the experiences of the interviewee since that time, the process
of the interview itself and the media framing of films. These memories
are not simply a record of times past. As noted by Nancy Huggett, 'an analysis
of the way in which aspects of cinema-going are narrated can shed light on
how practices of cinema-going are situated within wider cultural discourse
of the past and present'.

A memory of a movie is rarely a discrete recollection of a particular text
but is often one element of more detailed narratives. Several interviewees
struggled to remember any specific films, recounting instead cinematic venues
or other more general experiences of watching films. Bowles and Huggett
have described this as 'the modest role allocated to the movies themselves
in... narratives of cinema-going'. So while some interviewees did offer
insightful interpretations of particular film texts, more often the outcome
of these interviews is a broader understanding of the place of the movies in gay
community and of the location of the movies in personal narratives.

The use of cinema memories in such narratives has led in some cases to
more difficult topics than I first expected to encounter when asking about
going to the movies. As noted by Huggett, 'finding out about cinema-
behaviour was remembered as giving rise to feelings of difference and
isolation. For example Kerry, a 57-year-old man who grew up in rural
New South Wales, described himself as 'a movie fanatic from a very
early age' who was aware that 'the things I was interested in were quite
unusual'. When asked how the other people in his life responded to his
particularly strong devotion to the movies, Kerry recounted difficulties
with several family members, particularly his father and older brother.
Kerry remembered that his father 'was bemused, and let's just say he
was extremely negative about my interest in films'. Kerry stated that his
brother 'would lay shit on the whole movie thing and I'm sure, well I
know, because I've spoken to him, we're much closer now, um, he just
thought it was a pooper thing to be interested in'.

Kerry was especially fascinated by Hollywood actor Deborah Kerr and he
would carefully create a list each year of his top 20 female actors, of which
Ms Kerr was always number one. This love of female stars, for their glamour
and beauty, is included in the narratives of several interviewees with a sense
of fond nostalgia, yet also an acknowledgement that this love led to feelings
of difference and isolation. The love of these stars is placed within a narrative
Childhood Movie Memories: In Love with the Movies
For some particularly avid movie-goers, a childhood interest in the
movies that went beyond what was considered to be acceptable masculine
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of difference and isolation. The love of these stars is placed within a narrative
point of both adult gay identification and memories of childhood experience. Childhood questions about feeling different and isolated because of movie fandom are remembered, reconstructed and answered from the point of view of a current model of adult sexual identity.

Feelings of difference are central to these memories. In considering the use of oral history as a methodology for researching histories of homosexuality, Elizabeth Lipovsky Kennedy has noted that, 'Not being born and raised in a public lesbian and gay culture, each gay and lesbian person has to construct his or her own life in oppressive contexts, a process that oral history is uniquely suited to reveal'.¹² The memories of Kerry and John reveal this construction as having begun in childhood and as being revealed in these cases by memories of the movies.

Childhood Movie Memories: Gazing at Men on Screen

Another element of childhood movie memories noted by interviewees in relation to their burgeoning sexuality is the sight of handsome men, in various states of undress, appearing on cinema or television screens. These sightings are often remembered with a mixture of affection and an acknowledgement of the confusion of such sightings could cause.

One such memory was recounted by Daniel, who is 35 years old and grew up on a farm in northern New South Wales. I asked Daniel about memories of Australian films, thinking that this may elicit memories of Australian films containing gay characters. Instead, Daniel's movie memory was tied to his own sexuality, not that of the characters on screen. He answered:

An Australian war movie, it might've been The Light Horsemen or Gallipoli or something like that, but there was a specific scene where the soldiers were, you know, having a nude romp on the beach and ah, that was just the movie of the week on TV, ah, one week, and I remember watching that and, you know, I remember that quite specifically, just for the naked men that were in it.¹³

A little later in the interview, I asked Daniel if he remembered having any sense that his interest in naked male actors on screen was wrong, and he answered:

I certainly didn't feel that it was wrong. I knew that it was different and I knew that it wasn't something that I could talk about or say, um, although I remember talking about that, ah, sort of group nude scene in the war movie... ah, with one of my male friends at high-
school, and I think I probably spoke about that a little bit too much and the conversation went a little way and I caught myself thinking, 'Oh, I probably shouldn’t continue thinking about this’... But, yeah, I didn’t feel that it was wrong but I did know that it was, it was unusual and different, and the other boys weren’t focusing on that.

That Daniel could not remember exactly which film this scene had appeared in is largely irrelevant. This movie memory tells us much less about a particular movie than it does about the place of movies in the construction of a narrative around a developing sexual identity. Daniel remembers the scene both for a sexual interest in seeing naked men and for his awareness that this interest needed to be kept hidden. The experience becomes associated with an adolescent feeling of difference, and reveals the need for self-regulation experienced by many gay men from an early age. The memory was located as part of a longer narrative about an eventual acceptance of identity and location of community.

Forming Community at the Movies

This location of community is a significant element of many narratives around sexual identity. The use of oral history interviews in investigating the history of gay men and the movies reveals the cinema as a point of access to that world. Several interviewees described experiences, particularly at gay film festivals, of a feeling of solidarity and community gained through watching a film in a theatre full of other gay people. This is at times contrasted with narratives of isolation and loneliness prior to ‘coming out’ and/or as an alternative means of finding gay community beyond bar and club culture.

Memory stories of encounters with gay community via cinematic space reveal the particular benefit of oral history to such an investigation as they encompass both the empirical and the subjective. As Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy has argued, gay and lesbian oral histories operate to their fullest when the empirical and subjective are seen as complementary. By embracing the subjective nature of memory work, oral history’s “empirical” goals are not compromised but expanded.14 Memories of access to gay community through the movies reveal both empirical data about the cinematic venues at which such events occurred and more subjective discourses on the emotional aspects of these experiences.

Janet Staiger has described the underground cinema movement of 1960s America as having contributed to a sense of community which would eventually play a role in the gay liberation movement. She argues that underground cinemas provided the ‘potential of finding others like oneself not only for identity but for community building’ and that, ‘the experience of going to the underground cinema contradicted impressions of isolation as it also elevated images of perverts and subjects gone awry’.15 My interviews with Australian gay men have revealed examples of 1960s and 1970s cinema-going in Australia which used Hollywood films in ‘mainstream’ cinema settings but which similarly provided access to community.

One such example was provided by David W., who was born in 1935 and who was an active participant in the gay (or, more correctly, camp) social scenes of Sydney and Melbourne in the 1950s and 1960s. Describing the movies during his time in Melbourne, David recounted a memory from the 1950s of film screenings at a Hoyts cinema organised by the gay cinema manager:

[He] instituted this revolutionary idea of having a special session at 11.30 or something. Absolutely outrageous. 11.30 pm on a Friday night or a Saturday night, I forget which it was, at which he would show, um, a movie. And so that would be a very gay, a very camp audience that would go... and so he would show, sort of, you know, The Pride and The Passion, or um, one of those films about Roman life or the early life of Jesus or something, and we’d all sit there giggling and going through it. And so he developed, also, um – there was an Australian actor called Frank Thring from Melbourne, who had appeared in one of those historical dramas as Pontius Pilate or something like that, and so, no matter what film we were watching, at some point, it would be interrupted while this scene with Pontius Pilate condemning Jesus was played (laughs). And so we’d all wait for that. It’s a little bit like sort of going to, you know, Rocky Horror and singing along. We were all waiting for that bit of Frank Thring to say, ‘I condemn you to death’, you know, so silly. And so it would be a romantic comedy and suddenly this would come in.16

When asked how people were likely to find out about such screenings, David said:

How did we know? I think it was advertised in the press, but I think it was only outrageous people like us who would actually be going out at 11 o’clock at night. You know, real people were at home in bed, weren’t they? You know, looking after their families and their children and all
that sort of thing. It was the sort of loose-moralled ones who were out and about late at night.

David's memory encapsulates many of the issues involved in the use of oral history to investigate the social and cultural history of the cinema. First, he guides us towards the empirical, suggesting the time and place of a particular example of the cinema as a social event. However, David's uncertainty about the particular films involved and the exact time of the screening also encourage caution in the use of this evidence. Frank Thring appeared as Pontius Pilate in Ben Hur in 1959, suggesting that these screenings may well have occurred in the early 1960s, rather than the 1950s as David remembers. Yet the uncertainties do not discount the place of the story within a narrative of the camp scene of that time, in which David highlighted, with a degree of nostalgic fondness, the existence of a camp community. The story was a specific attempt to disrupt any notions of the pre-gay liberation era as a uniformly dark time of oppression and isolation.

David's memory reveals a great deal about a sense of community developed through a series of regular cinema screenings. It reveals a degree of enjoyment in being 'other', of not being one of the 'real people' but instead of being 'outrageous' and 'loose-moralled'. The time of night, the other members of the audience and the film content fostered in David a sense of himself taking part in a specific, temporary public which was part of a wider community and which felt pleasure, rather than shame, in being different.

The use of mainstream Hollywood films, reimagined by an appearance from gay actor Frank Thring in each of them, also suggests the importance of looking beyond film texts when investigating the history of gay men and the movies. The inherently camp nature of such films was made explicit by the cinema manager and his audience, in a sense inserting a gay element into films which, due to strict censorship, could not be made with any overtly homosexual content. Taken simply as texts, these films would have less to say to us about their initial reception than they do when taken in the context of David's memories of viewing them at a Melbourne cinema.

Another interviewee, Larry, had similar memories of a gay audience gathering to view Hollywood films. Larry was a young man in the early 1970s, newly out of school and working for Greater Union cinemas in Sydney. He remembered Sunday night double bills at the Randwick Ritz cinema, to which he was first taken by an openly gay colleague and which, for him, became a weekly event.

And they would do things like (laughs) Space Odyssey and Ben Hur (laughs) and my God and we'd do it. You'd get there at 6 pm and come out at 2 am in the morning and you could do that when you were young. But, um, I had not seen either Auntie Mame or Cypriot, knew nothing about them, and they were on - it didn't matter what was on, we were gonna go, cause it was sort of - yeah - and a lot of gay people went... and as soon as it sort of started, I don't know which one was on first, but I got it. You know? I got the camp humour and all that sort of thing and I was really rapt that, you know? (laughs) 'Oh! I know, I get it. I was laughing at the stuff so I thought, 'Oh, how sophisticated is that?' You know?

Again the camp nature of these films is made explicit through the choices of a cinema operator and the actions of a gay audience. The weekly nature of these screenings may have further encouraged a sense of community, of joint participation in the creation of a gay space. Thus the cinema becomes a social space, not merely for the quiet and isolated consumption of moving images, but for a social event which provides access to and encourages participation in a community.

Larry's memory also evokes the emotional experience of participating in this event. He provides us with the empirical data of the time and place of the screenings and some suggestion of what was watched. He also reveals the more subjective nature of the experience itself and what he remembers it meaning to him. The story was told as part of a narrative of what Larry described as an 'escape' from a working-class background in western Sydney into a world in which he felt more at home. It is the story of a naïve young man finding a 'sophisticated' world, told both with pride and a degree of self-deprecation. His recounting of his experiences at the Randwick Ritz expresses a feeling of happiness at having found, in part through the movies, a community of his own.

Narratives of finding community through participation in gay cinema audiences were part of the movie memories of several of the men interviewed for this project. John B., whose school experiences were quoted earlier and who remains an avid moviegoer, narrated his difficult experiences coming to terms with his sexuality through a series of stories about his relationship with a range of films. He remembered a particular cinema-going experience as part of his growing acceptance of a gay identity:

I remember we went to see Beyond the Valley of the Dolls, like, another retro movie at the old Mandolin cinema, which is now the Australia
Hall. And we just sat there and laughed and the theatre was full of poofs and I thought it was fantastic. I couldn't have done that two or three years before that, but I thought at that stage it was fantastic. And it was interesting, I realised at that point, 'oh, I'm becoming part of a subculture'.

John remembers the experience of the film as being improved by the fact that the audience was made up largely of gay men and places the experience as a signpost in his narrative of 'coming out'. Being able to enjoy the film in that setting and feeling comfortable as part of that crowd is directly elided with the location of community and the acceptance of identity.

For some men who were disinclined to venture into the, perhaps, more threatening spaces of gay bars and nightclubs, the cinema has played a particularly important role in providing access to community and the removal of feelings of difference and isolation. One interviewee, John P., was born in the 1920s and spent much of his life hiding his homosexuality for fear of losing his career as an academic and scientist. He was very keen to stress the importance of both cinema and theatre to him as a counterpoint to the isolating world of the closet. He stated:

And also to be in a gay audience, so, to me going to a gay film or going to a gay film festival, and just being part of an audience which is gay, has a very important psychological boosting effect. Because it gets rid of the idea that you're doing everything in isolation. When you've spent a lifetime trying to conceal your sexuality, it's very liberating to, um, to be somewhere where you don't have to conceal your sexuality.

These movie memories encourage both a contemplation of the audience when researching the history of gay cinema and also a contemplation of the cinema as gay space when researching gay urban histories. Cinemas are rarely considered in histories of gay city life and yet they have played a role in the development of gay culture, community and identity. George Chauncey, describing 1920s New York, has noted that, '[s]ince movie going was a perfectly legitimate way to spend the afternoon, theatres were places where young men could go to search out other gay men and begin to learn about the gay world and that these visits served both as opportunities for sexual encounters as well as 'valued social (and socialising) functions'. Cinemas can often sit, along with bars, clubs, beats, restaurants and cafés, as important sites for the development of urban gay life.

Unwelcoming or Threatening Cinema Spaces

It is not my intention to romanticise the role of cinema in encouraging community or to suggest a uniform response from gay men to this, or any, aspect of the social history of the cinema. It is important to note that some interviewees recounted memories of the cinema as a threatening space and/or as a space which held different meanings at different times in their lives. Some described the fear of being 'outed' which came with seeing a gay film. Another described the space created by a gay audience as judgemental and threateningly sexualised.

Knowing that John P. had experienced great fear at times that revelations about his sexuality would end his career, I asked if it had been a 'big deal' to go and see a gay movie. He replied:

J.: Initially, but not later. So, now I wouldn't have any hesitation. But then it was a — it would have been an effort to actually go, and, ah, and see a gay movie, because of all the inhibition I was carrying in my youth.

S.: And if you're concerned that people might see you going to this movie?

J.: That was it exactly, yes. They might see you going in... and so on. Especially when I was still a university lecturer. But you gradually get over that, so of course now it doesn't matter at all. But then it was quite different.

Thus while having eventually found a sense of community and freedom in the experience of seeing a gay film, that experience had been a threatening one at an earlier stage of his life.

John B. recounted a similar memory. The Hollywood film Making Love (1981), which told the story of a married man who leaves his wife for a male lover, was in cinemas when John was still in high school and experiencing homophobic cruelty from his classmates. About the film, John stated:

And I can still remember when the movie Making Love came out. That it was on at Pitt Street. I could not bring myself to go and see it. I was terrified, what would I do if someone saw me go and see it? But I was fascinated. I wanted to know about it. And I read everything I could about it.
This memory story acknowledges the potential significance of a film beyond the projected images which comprise it. *Making Love* plays a role in the teenage memories of a man who did not see it until adulthood. For some, the all too rare opportunity of watching a gay character in a movie finding love and happiness may have been a pleasurable and even liberating experience. For one teenager, the very existence of the film was a source of both fascination and confusion. Thus, in considering the impact of the film we must look at it as more than a sum of its parts. A purely textual consideration of this film would exclude the experience of a young man too frightened to approach the cinema doors.

John B’s memory also expresses the sense of threat that could lie around the cinematic experience, a threat which was again expressed in terms of eventual acceptance of identity and rejection of homophobia. David C., a 25 year old who came out as gay to his parents and classmates at the age of 16, has grown up with homosexuality as a part of public discourse and has never experienced the fear of having his adult sexuality ‘discovered’. However, he did describe ambivalent feelings towards watching a film with a gay audience, noting both the positive aspect of ‘shared experience’ in a screening in which you know ‘that everyone around you is relating to this in a similar way, at least, to what you are’, but also feelings of intimidation in the ‘sexual energy’ of the space. Comparing the experience to a well-known gay Sydney nightclub called Arq, he stated:

> It’s like, we’re going to watch a film, you know? We’re not at Arq, like, at all. Like, the opposite of Arq. And yet, the same behaviour... goes on just like in a more... longer haired, blacker-rimmed glasses kind of way... I don’t get sexual energy going to Hoyts, you know?... But like, you go to a gay festival and it’s just like, fuckin’ gay eyes everywhere, you’re just like – it’s just incredibly intimidating. I just want to go and watch a film yet instead I feel like I’m being cruised. Not me, personally, usually who I’m with (laughs). 24

This direct correlation of a festival movie with a gay club further suggests the importance of considering cinemas as social spaces within gay culture. David’s memory also suggests the ways in which oral history can complicate notions of a homogenous ‘gay audience’, with his description of intimidation sitting in contrast to the feelings of community and solidarity expressed by other interviewees. David’s thoughts on the movies lead to a discussion on the at times threatening, sexualised nature of gay space.

The memories of those I have interviewed are not meant to be read as representative of all gay men. The intention is to complicate, rather than assert, the notion of a homogenous gay male audience. What these memories do speak to are some of the ways in which the cinema plays a role in the personal narratives and in the understandings of identity and community of some gay men.

Providing a voice for members of the audience enhances our understanding of the cinema as a focus of social and cultural enquiry and, most importantly, encourages us to look beyond the screen when writing the history of gay men and the movies. Movie memories reveal the place of cinema within narratives around the development of gay identity and the location of gay community. They also reveal cinemas as important spaces within gay history. These memories both complicate and illuminate the history of gay men as a movie audience and suggest the significant role of the movies within the history of gay male culture, community and identity.

**Endnotes**

3. ibid., p. 5.
14 Kennedy, "Telling Tales", p. 354.
17 Larry, interview with Scott McKinnon, 24 June 2009.
19 John P., interview with Scott McKinnon, 18 February 2009.
21 ibid., p. 195.
22 John P., interview with Scott McKinnon, 18 February 2009.