

AMERICAN CINEMA OF THE 1980S

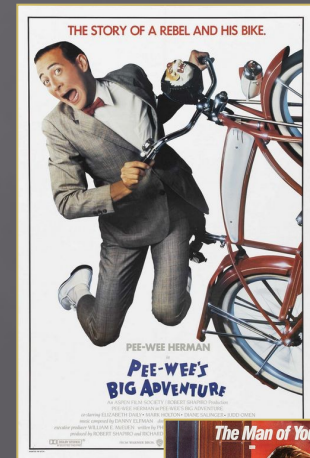
Topic Six: LGBTQ+ CINEMA

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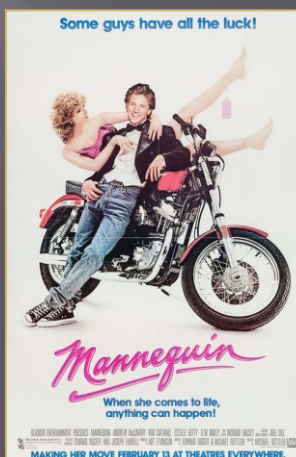
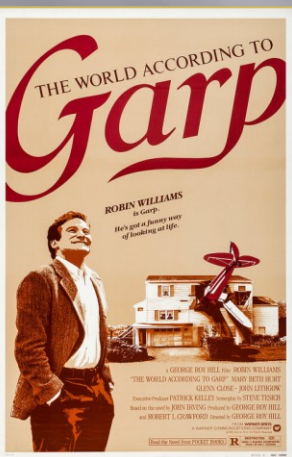
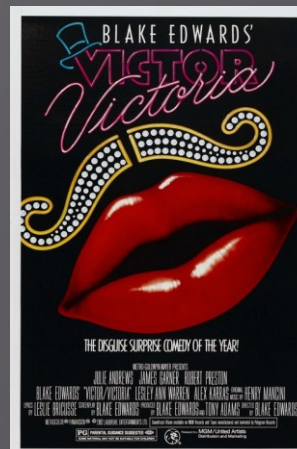
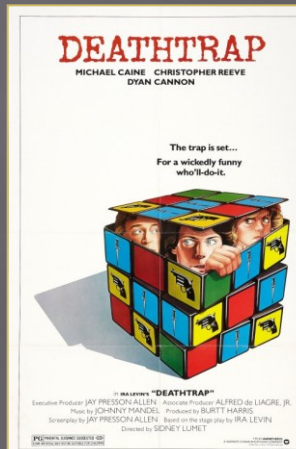
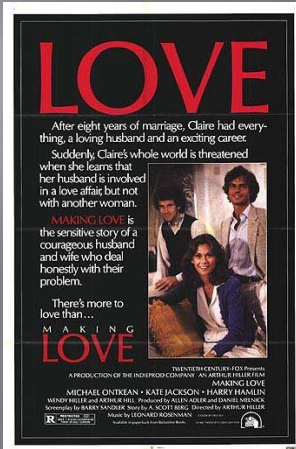
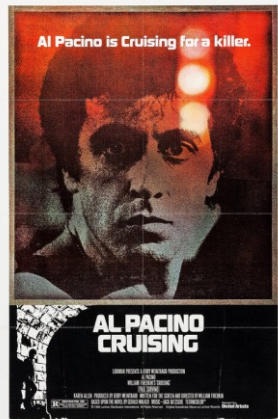
Targeted Learning Outcomes

To develop a demonstrable understanding of:

1. 1980s Hollywood and charges of homophobia
2. 1980s Hollywood and Queer-friendly Output
3. 1980s Hollywood and Queer-coding



LGBTQ+ Cinema



LGBTQ+ Hollywood

LGBTQ folks – especially gay men – have occupied an important albeit limited position in historiography on Hollywood cinema of the 1980s

In these histories, LGBTQ+ folks are usually portrayed as monstrous – either as threatening, grotesque, or both – with most ending up dead

They usually open to activists protesting, disrupting the filming of, and denouncing as homophobic, *Cruising* – a thriller set in gay leather-bars

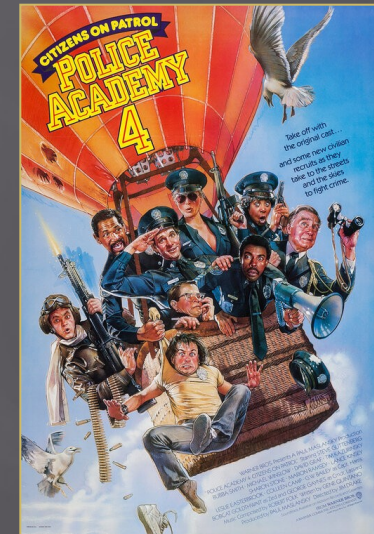
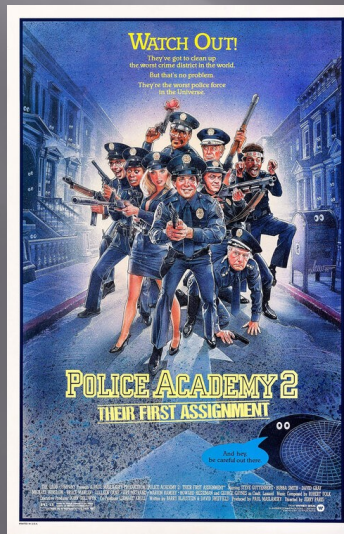
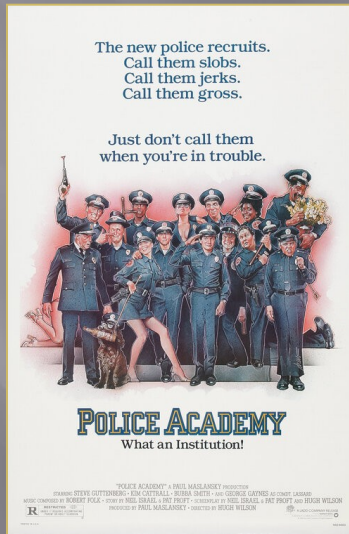
They tend then to conclude with discussion of charges of homophobia levelled at *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) and *Basic Instinct* (1992)

While these extreme examples position 1980s-Hollywood as overtly homophobic, perhaps more pernicious was rampant casual homophobia

1980s-Hollywood & Casual Homophobia: *Teen Wolf* (1985); *Police Academy* (1984–1987)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k2sc1QTYKF4>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d4Ljj8W1hE8>



LGBTQ+ America in the 1980s

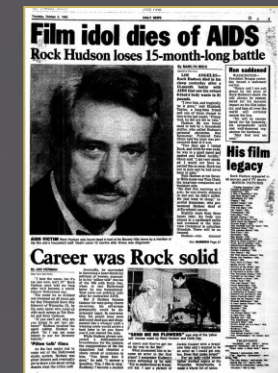
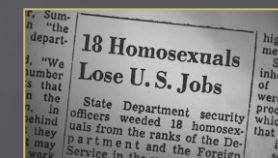
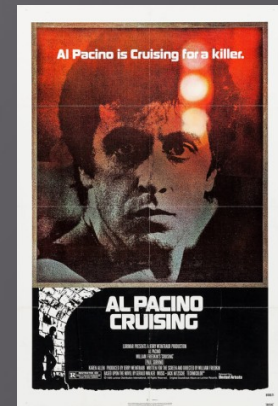
Casting 1980s American cinema's relations to LGBTQ+ life in terms of the horrific permits comparison to the general culture

After all, this decade is generally considered to have been one of the most overtly homophobic in recent American history

A strategic alliance with evangelical powerbrokers begat Reagan Whitehouse policies at odds to the earlier liberal gains

And general homophobia was amplified by fears of AIDS and gay men; encapsulated in the death of film star Rock Hudson

Such views posit that relative gains in visibility and acceptance won in the 1970s fell victim to conservative political conduct



1980s Hollywood and LGBTQ-Sensitivity

These dark narratives reflect a climate of homophobia shaping much of Hollywood's conduct and output, although not all of it



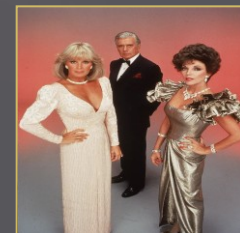
While typically associated with the 2010s, sensitive mainstream American LGBTQ-themed output actually predated this time



In the 1980s, US media companies handled a surprisingly large number of products for, about, or sensitive to LGBTQ folks



Ironically, the commercial success of *Cruising* had spotlighted an audience existed for LGBTQ films shorn of homophobia



Such a conclusion was also supported by the success of LGBTQ-centric entertainment in other fields, like TV and pop



1980s Hollywood, the Youth Market, and the Outsider-as-Hero

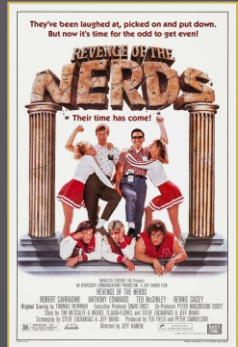
Hollywood's targeting of LGBTQ+ folks as a marginal subculture supported a broader film industry strategy of the day

While usually associated with indie cinema, the outsider as protagonist was central to Hollywood's youth market operations

The megahit *E.T.*, and success of home video, had incentivized uplifting depictions of outsiders to support alienated viewers

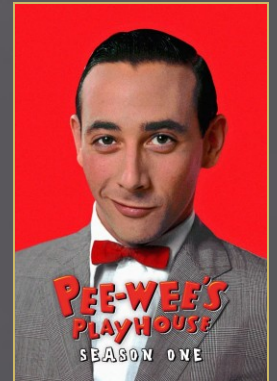
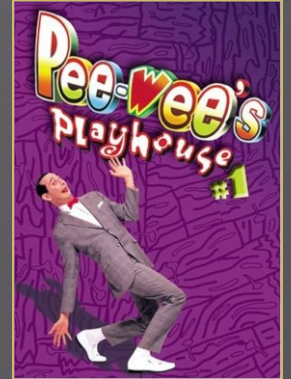
They depicted marginalized young people negotiating issues that caused problems for their real-world target audiences

Sometimes LGBTQ+ issues were rendered explicitly, in other cases they were coded like Ducky's sexuality in *Pretty in Pink*



Doty examines the Pee-Wee Herman property as an LGBTQ brand, focusing on gender, sexual politics, and its queerness

1. How does Doty read Pee-Wee as “queer”?
2. Do you find any aspects of his interpretation less-than-credible?



A Sissy Boy's (Expressionistic) World

Doty argues this ostensible children's brand also explores aspects of queer identity in a somewhat coded fashion

He suggests Pee-Wee himself is depicted as the feminine "sissy boy" often otherized in 1950s/1960s US culture

Central to this theme is a negotiation of Pee-Wee's position in relation to straight culture, esp. femininity and women

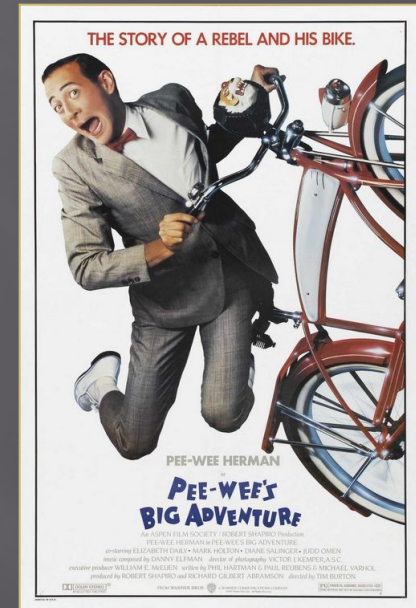
He suggests it explores Pee-Wee's relationship to his own (semi)-closeted, repressed homosexual identity and desires

He positions Pee-Wee ambiguously; stifled by homophobic culture but hesitantly stepping forward and out of the closet



Pee-Wee's Big Adventure (1985)

1. How does this film depict queer characters?
2. How does this film depict the straight world?
3. To what extent is this film homophobic?



Inside the Mind/World of One 1950s Sissy Boy in 1980s America and Hollywood

PBA calls for greater queer representation in Hollywood films, by imaging a film from an eccentric gay man's perspective

The film invites a media-savvy queer audience to read it as an expressionist coming-of-age tale of a 1950s gay sissy boy

Faireville represents Pee-Wee's closeted life; a place of joyful pre-sexual nostalgia but constraints about emerging sexuality

It uses innuendo to suggest Pee-Wee's search for his bike is a quest for sexual identity via a series of queer sexual escapades

Straightening Pee-Wee's adventure denaturalizes Hollywood conventions, and promotes more inclusive practices like itself



Coda: Pee-Wee's "New" Big Adventure

In the final film, from 2015, Pee-Wee Herman comes out of the closet in a quasi-remake of *Pee-Wee's Big Adventure*



Pee-Wee embarks on a cross-country journey to attend the *Magic Mike* actor Joe Manganiello's birthday party in NYC



Pee-Wee and the Hollywood hunk have clearly fallen in love during a chance meeting at the 1950s diner Pee-Wee works in



Along the way, Pee-Wee meets queer characters who help him to accept overtly expressing his queer identity and sexuality



It thus semi-literalizes the largely coded queer dimensions of PBA and celebrates Hollywood's more queer-friendly attitude



A Nightmare on Elm Street 2: Freddy's Revenge (1985)

1. How does this film depict queer characters?
2. How does this film depict the straight world?
3. To what extent is this film homophobic?



An Anti-Cruising for American LGBTQ Kids

NOES 2 centralizes another effeminate man coming to terms with his homosexuality, and exploring his fears and yearnings



NB: NOES series consistently used its dream demon conceit to thematize psycho-social challenges affecting young outsiders



NOES 2 warns gay teens to avoid self-loathing or homophobic projection when grappling with their emerging sexual identity



In waking life, Jessie contends with straight worlds of school and home, ignorant or hostile to his emerging homosexuality



Tapping into his victim's fears, Freddy forces Jessie to imagine and reject his sexuality morphing into violent homophobia



CODA: The “Scream Queen” Mythos

NOES 2 has attracted a great deal of critical and fan attention for its queer-themes, upon original release and more recently

Much like *Top Gun* (1986), it was portrayed as subversively thematizing gay male sexuality in one way or another

Such readings have been hotly contested in terms of who was “responsible” for imbuing NOES 2 with its queer sensibilities

Its writer and star’s claims and denials are complicated by efforts to protect their careers in the 1980s and in recent years

This narrative of subversive creative practice upholds the authenticity of queer horror, but queer input appears manifold



In Sum

Hollywood's relationship in the 1980s to the identity formations we now call LGBTQ+ are usually cast in profoundly negative terms

Writers emphasized this group was usually connected to suffering – as victims, problems, or monsters – during a culturally conservative time

But it should also be stressed that some more optimistic and sensitive depictions took place too, due to economics and backstage agency

While common for films to deride LGBTQ characters, some explored queer-related issues more sensitively, especially youth-oriented films

Such films were not restricted to niche audience indie cinema though; this approach characterized two of the decade's most visible franchises

Course Summary

This course attempted to illuminate, and revise, understandings of American cinema of the 1980s:

1. Rather than promoting violent misogyny, some Hollywood **Women-in-danger Films** seemed to condemn such practice in order to reach out to concerned American women as audiences
2. Rather than advancing Reagan White House rhetoric, some **New Cold War Cinema** critiqued US society, esp. the politicization of entertainment that had become a grave concern for liberals
3. While often cast as the quintessential industrial-aesthetic strategy of the period, **High Concept** was a more marginal approach whose components were rarely employed in their totality
4. Hollywood **Family Films** offered less blinded promotions of family life derived from inherent conservatism, than critical assessments designed to foster multigenerational understanding
5. While supposedly championed as capitalistic success stories, the **Yuppy Films** oftentimes depicted this high-profile new social type as either unhappy or as monstrous
6. While depictions of LGBTQ+ life are often reduced to visions of suffering and monstrosity, some **LGBTQ+ Cinema** offered more sensitive portraits, albeit oftentimes in covert fashion

Final Paper

Topic: Choice of Six Prompts (derived from sessions 2-6)

General Qualities: Focused, direct, well-supported, argument-driven

Scholarly Engagement: Must use relevant set reading for top grades

Targeted Learning Outcomes/Areas of Assessment: See Syllabus

Wordcount: c.1500 words (5-6 pages of 12-font double-spaced text)

Due Date: Midnight CET Sunday 19 January 2025

Feedback: One-Page spotlighting strengths, shortcomings, tips