H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Richard Barrios. *Screened Out: Playing Gay in Hollywood from Edison to Stonewall.* New York and London: Routledge, 2003. ix + 402 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-92328-6.

Reviewed by Goran Stanivukovic (Department of English, Saint Mary's University)

Published on H-USA (September, 2003)

Pink Hollywood

Pink Hollywood

Readers who are interested in the history of Hollywood and in the representation of male and female homosexuality in popular film will like this book because of the breadth of references, lively style, and clear analysis. Two of the most important points that this book implicitly makes is that homosexuality in Hollywood movies is as old as the first Hollywood films themselves and that Hollywood has been both a promoter and a policeman of homosexuality in popular film culture, setting the boundaries for subsequent (post-1970s) cinematic representations of homosexuality. The book covers the period from the silent film of the 1910s until the post-Stonewall gay liberation of the 1970s. As the author himself says: "One of the most illuminating aspects of these movies ... is the museum-quality glimpse into how gays and lesbians were seen by others, and in some ways how they saw themselves" (p. 8). As a resource, this book is crucial to any history of gay representation on film because the book emphasizes, as Barrios says, "many films that have never been written about with reference to their gay elements and a few that are entirely unfamiliar under all circumstances" (p. 13). Even though the book stops about two decades before the emergence of the "queer" movies of the 1990s, the book's arguments anticipate some of the issues (AIDS, post-modern camp, racial issues within an urban setting) that characterize those films.

Barrios's history of gay Hollywood is a history that traces down both the patterns of representation of homosexuality and the levels of openness in displaying homosexuality in those representations. Although his analyses are captivating and rest on the acute attentiveness to details that in fact both hide and reveal homosexuality, his implicit argument, that the degree of openness in the representation of homosexuality is somehow proportionate to the political moment in which that representation occurs, requires some fine tuning. While there is no doubt that a difference exists between the ways (and the degrees of openness) in which homosexuality is represented in, say, *My Best Friend's Wedding* and *Some Like It Hot*, both of which are "gay" comedies from the 1990s and 1950s respectively, it is equally true, for example, that in *Billy Elliott* and *Love is Better Than Ever* (featuring the ever so dazzling Elizabeth Taylor), the signaling but not displaying of marginalized and repressed homosexuality subtly emerges from the closet of the delicate interplay of dance and desire. *Love is Better Than Ever* was a product of the highly conservative 1950s, while *Billy Eliot* came out of the liberal (almost rampant) 1990s. Yet what similarities in the restrained though no less titillating representations of homosexuality in these four films tell us about Hollywood's construction of gayness is the level of openness in the treatment of homosexuality in Hollywood films is not always proportionate to the degree of ideological policing of political repression of homosexuality in the world outside film. While the level of openness about homosexuality in Hollywood movies has depended (and still does) both on the public morality and the (conservative) political climate that has produced censorship, the movies such as *Billy Elliot* and *Love is Better Than Ever* show us that at two different moments in history–one militantly conservative, the other fleetingly liberal–homosexuality can only be intimated, opaquely embedded in the depth of the allegory of dance and desire, but not displayed overtly as personal ideology and an ethics of living. Looking, however, from a different perspective, these two films also show that homosexuality itself is an allegory of desire, itself a stylized artistic construct, and that because of its marginal-

ized and forbidden nature, homosexuality belongs to the realm of an artistically stylized, metaphorical representation. The book suggests that the evolution in the open representation of homosexuality on film has been more or less steady, as American society has become more liberal. Succinctly but poignantly, Barrios traces the role of the church in bending public morality toward moral and spiritual denunciation of homosexuality, and he describes the function of the state and government in producing instruments of censorship and influencing popular opinion.

Barrios is very good on the movies that came out in the first half of the twentieth century, reminding us, for example, that the central conduit for homosexuality in those films was cross-dressing. Films such as *Some Like It Hot* (featuring cross-dressed Jack Lemon and Tony Curtis), *Queen Christina* (with the cross-dressed, dazzling Greta Garbo), or *Morocco* (with Marlene Dietrich, seductive, even in a tuxedo) play a central role in the history of the representation of homosexuality in Hollywood movies because cross-dressing allowed homosexuality, and humor elicited by men in skirts or women wearing a tux, to be represented as one of the main features of those films. Charlie Chaplin, Rudolf Valentino, Oliver Hardy, Alfred Hitchcock, plus a stream of the Western movies of the 1950s (featuring muscular and violent cowboys wearing bright kerchiefs billowing around their necks) became crucial for infusing Hollywood films with homoerotic charges that resonate through many memorable episodes of macho homosocial bonding.

While Barrios's book devotes more space to the discussion of male homosexuality, he frequently makes persuasive arguments about Hollywood's role in a steady representation of more or less explicit lesbianism. The mid-1930s were the golden age of the silent representation of lesbians in Hollywood films. Marjorie Rambeau (in *The Warrior's Husband*), Greta Garbo, and Katherine Hepburn (in *Lysistrata* and *The Warior's Husband*) were among the actresses whose roles exuded lesbian desire under the guise of either male dress or female friendship. Yet what the 1930s also marked, not just in the earlier but also the subsequent history of homosexuality on film, is that glamor and gayness go hand in hand. Barrios is brilliant in his short analysis of Cecil Cunningham's glamorous make up and boas, as cinematic signifiers of the next step towards glitz and camp, that cultural representations of homosexuality in popular culture (and consciousness) were about to take in Hollywood's films since the 1970s until present times.

Barrios, a historian and film critic, is more convincing on film than contemporary queer theory (let alone post-structuralist queer film theory), which he invokes at times, but only superficially. The result is that the queer reading of the film is partial and that the use of queer theory is inadequate. In addition to an exhaustive breadth of films that Barrios draws our attention to, the book is full of splendid stills from movies that capture some of the best gay moments in the history of Hollywood films (many of which can easily be missed), and brief biographies of some of the greatest gay and lesbian icons of Hollywood. This book will be of use not only to those interested in film, the history of homosexuality in popular culture, and queer theorists, but also to lovers of Hollywood films and to those who first saw their own hidden desires brilliantly played out by Hollywood's divas and stars.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-usa

Citation: Goran Stanivukovic. Review of Barrios, Richard, *Screened Out: Playing Gay in Hollywood from Edison to Stonewall.* H-USA, H-Net Reviews. September, 2003.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=8205

Copyright © 2003 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.