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THE B WORD update

CHASING AMY AND BISEXUAL (IN)VISIBILITY IN CINEMA AND MEDIA

by Maria San Filippo

The way the world is, how seldom it is that you meet that one person who just gets you. It's so rare. And to cut oneself off from finding that person, to immediately half your options....

- *Chasing Amy*

When asked for a description of my dissertation project, I say that it is about representations of bisexuality in film. The most popular reply—proffered with considerable regularity by people from diverse areas of my life—has been “You mean like *Chasing Amy*?” This 1997 independent film written and directed by Kevin Smith, about a self-proclaimed lesbian who is forced to question her sexual identity after meeting and falling for a man, clearly occupies a prominent place in cultural consciousness around bisexuality. (For better or worse, the



Uncomfortable visual pleasure.

Chasing Amy (1997), Kevin Smith, View Askew Productions. All photos courtesy of Miramax Home Entertainment, Buena Vista Home Entertainment, and The Criterion Collection

other recurring response has been “You mean like *Basic Instinct?*”) In beginning to think about why *Chasing Amy* should summon this nearly metonymic association with cinematic bisexuality, I recognized several ways in which this film provides an apt entry into many of the points I take up in my dissertation. To start with, *Chasing Amy*’s female lead, Alyssa Jones (Joey Lauren Adams), noticeably embodies a trope that I explore at length: *bisexual (in)visibility*. In choosing to cast a petite blonde with a Minnie Mouse voice and decidedly femme stylings, *Chasing Amy*’s creators could be accused of complicity in dominant cinema’s reliance on safely gender-conforming depictions of queer women. But Alyssa’s femme appearance also serves to contradict cultural assumptions about what queer women look like. Indeed, it is the fact that Alyssa is *not* “visibly queer” (whatever that means) that allows for the film’s first act revelation on the part of lovelorn Holden (Ben Affleck), his sidekick Banky (Jason Lee), and presumably a substantial number of spectators who would not have surmised Alyssa’s sexual preference from the fairly vague hints given in the film’s trailer (“She just needs the right guy”) and tagline (“It’s not who you love. It’s how”). Whatever the filmmakers’ intention, this casting decision serves to foreground

what is a recurring issue of *(in)visibility* both in queer media representation and in the everyday experiences of many bisexual/queer women. Indeed, *Chasing Amy* engages with a number of similar identity struggles faced by bisexuals: the widespread belief that bisexuality is “just a phase” or “the easy way out,” bi-phobia on the part of both heterosexual- and homosexual-identified individuals (“Another one bites the dust,” Alyssa’s lesbian friends say upon hearing she is dating a man), combating the stereotype of the promiscuous bisexual, and so on.

As a film aimed at and embraced by straight *and* queer audiences, *Chasing Amy* represents a clear instance of the contemporary industry trend that I term *crossover cinema*: films that are strategically designed to cross demographic boundaries in order to appeal to multiple niche audiences. As the third installment in Kevin Smith’s “New Jersey Trilogy”—albeit considerably more intelligent than its predecessors *Clerks* (1994) and *Mallrats* (1995)—*Chasing Amy* owes more to Richard Linklater and Quentin Tarantino than to New Queer Cinema. Its hyperarticulate, endlessly referential dialogue and slacker mien aims itself at, and flatters, an alternative subculture of clever-yet-disillusioned (and primarily heterosexual) young adults

Maria’s writing is fluent and a pleasure to read, as if it came from the air she breathed. But the arguments she advances in her dissertation, now becoming a book, are original and potentially unsettling. Bisexuality in contemporary cinema, she maintains, has become ever more present yet is rendered invisible and thereby nullified by specific narrative mechanisms, even in films as ostensibly destabilizing (regarding sexual identities) as Brokeback Mountain or Mulholland Drive. Maria has already established a strong record of interdisciplinary research and teaching of the highest quality, personal commitment, and integrity. I am fortunate to have been able to work with her in seminars, as her dissertation director, and now as a colleague at UCLA.

- Janet Bergstrom

PROFESSOR, UCLA DEPARTMENT OF FILM,
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much like the ones that people Smith's films. But in departing from the heteronormativity of Smith's world (suburban New Jersey) for the big city of Manhattan and a boy-meets-lesbian plotline, *Chasing Amy* includes references presumably lost on its core audience but recognizable to in-the-know queer spectators (one sequence in particular takes place at the Lower East Side girl bar Meow Mix and includes a cameo by *Go Fish* scribe and prominent lesbian Guinevere Turner). This inclination of *crossover cinema* to touristically venture into queer subcultures is a topic I explore in depth.

In addition to literally peering into this alternative lesbian space (seen through the perspective of two heterosexual males, Holden and Banky), *Chasing Amy* refers to this subculture by also setting its story in the figuratively "queer" world of comic book artists and aficionados, one presumably more familiar to its core audience. This metaphorical means of negotiating unfamiliar terrain (queer female subcultures) by way of a familiar route (a primarily heterosexual male subculture) constitutes one instance of a crossover cinematic trope that I call *bi-textuality*, in which bisexual discourse is articulated through analogous—but safer—transgressions of social norms. *Chasing Amy* essentially gives the

young straight male a guided tour through "gay New York," promoting empathy and tolerance for a subculture not so very different from that to which the film's comic artist heroes and their fans (diegetic and non-diegetic) belong.¹ The film's opening scene, set at a comics convention, establishes the similarities—and yet frequent incompatibility—of these two worlds, in which the elaborate bondage-style getups and idiosyncratic factions mirror similar subdividing based on self-presentation and preference within queer communities. Afrocentric comic artist Hooper (Dwight Ewell) delivers an enraged diatribe about racist subtext in *Star Wars*, only to then reveal privately that his militant image is designed to sell books. Actually, Hooper is a gay black man ("notoriously the swishiest of the bunch," he points out) who attempts at length to convince Banky that Archie and Jughead are lovers (more subtext, this time of the queer variety). Providing an immediate reminder that queerness is not always visible, this opening scene foreshadows Alyssa's own invisibility by depicting Hooper "passing" (a concept I discuss at length) as black and proud—rather than gay and proud—for professional respect.

Unlike the strategy that many crossover films employ of using homoerotic content as a

means of titillation for straight viewers, *Chasing Amy* lightheartedly addresses how female same-sex desire occupies a starring role in heterosexual male fantasy but largely abstains from playing into prurient desire for "girl-on-girl action." In the one instance in which Alyssa is seen making out with another girl (*see photo on page 1*), the shot is framed so as to include the uncomfortable Holden (downcast at having realized his crush is unrequited) and the leering Banky, thus hindering our accustomed visual pleasure in femme lesbian eroticism.

Like its metaphorical linking of respective subcultures for the education of straight male viewers, *Chasing Amy* continues providing sensitivity training via the "lessons" Holden learns from Alyssa, who justifies her active sexual past and her queer identity by saying, "I was an experimental girl—I wasn't given a fucking map at birth." Disabusing Holden of his notion that lesbian sex is "not real sex," Alyssa describes (with suggestive hand gestures, and much to Holden's bemusement) what it is that women actually do together in bed (*see photos on page 6*).

Concurrently, the homophobic perspective is voiced by the uncensoring Banky, who delivers an ongoing tirade against "faggots" and "man-hating lesbians" yet otherwise is



Alyssa gestures at what women do in bed, much to Holden's bemusement.



“Partners” Holden and Banky.

↖ *The romantic/erotic triangle, a cinematic mainstay of representing bisexuality without overtly appearing to do so, constitutes the film’s narrative infrastructure. From the opening credits’ chronicling, via comic book narration, of Holden and Banky’s rising success in the comics world, Chasing Amy also recalls the male buddy film especially in its persistent references to the homoerotic dynamic between the male duo, who share a close professional and personal partnership as comic artists and roommates—until Alyssa threatens to come between them.* ↘

Interloper in the men's world.



not presented as the stereotypical gay-bashing ignoramus but rather as the voice of reason to Holden's love-struck sap, naïve enough to fall in love with someone so clearly unsuitable. In articulating the common-sense perspective, Banky serves as Holden's foil—smart enough to see through politically correct platitudes and comic relief, to boot—at the same time as he offers homophobically inclined male viewers a not unsavory role model with whom to identify.

In these and other ways, *Chasing Amy* serves as a meta-commentary not just on gay identity but on gay identity *films*. The romantic/erotic triangle, a cinematic mainstay of representing bisexuality without overtly appearing to do so, constitutes the film's narrative infrastructure. From the opening credits' chronicling, via comic book narration, of Holden and Banky's rising success in the comics world, *Chasing Amy* also recalls the male buddy film especially in its persistent references to the homoerotic dynamic between the male duo, who share a close professional and personal partnership as comic artists and roommates—until Alyssa threatens to come between them. More precisely, *Chasing Amy* is an example of the hybridized male buddy film and comedy of remarriage that I focus on in my final chapter. The film repeatedly stages pairs of scenes to mirror one another



"I wasn't talking about the comic."

in composition and content so as to illustrate Alyssa's infiltration into the "men's world."

Time and again, Holden and Banky's suggestively close relationship is referenced in ways both comic (Smith regular Jason Mewes, playing himself in stoner mode, addresses Holden with "Why the long face—Banky on the rag?") and serious (as Hooper tells Holden in regards to Banky, "Don't kid yourself, that boy loves you in a way that he ain't ready to deal with"). Banky himself refers to their being something more than buddies when he explains his rejection of Alyssa's presence as intended "to ensure all this time we spent together building something wasn't wasted." "She's not going to ruin the comic," Holden protests. "I wasn't talking about the comic," Banky replies.

Whereas in the first act it dawned on Holden that femme women could like women too, in the third act it occurs to him that, as he tells Banky, "you're in love with me." Attempting to convince Banky that the latter's feelings are more than friendly, Holden tells him that it would explain his jealousy of Alyssa, his homophobia, and his sense of humor (lots of "dick jokes"). Ostensibly to prove his point, Holden kisses Banky on the lips—a rare instance of a male-male embrace in American filmmaking that, as I discuss in my final chapter, is increasingly used as a means of dealing with male homoeroticism by playing it just for laughs.



Alyssa takes Banky's place.



“You’re in love with me.”

When Holden then proposes his “perfect solution”—a three-way intended to cut the tension—Banky agrees, though seemingly reluctantly. He acts visibly relieved a moment later when Alyssa refuses, telling Holden “I’m not your whore” and that, for her, being in love means “I would never want to share you.” Again bypassing the prurient scene for one that openly mocks its convention as “the perfect solution,” *Chasing Amy* also notably departs from the utopian resolution typically imposed by the coming-out relationship drama in hereby *not* allowing its newly created couple to live “happily ever after.”

Instead, at film’s close, all three of the principal characters are separated. Alyssa is again dating a woman, but because in her short time onscreen it becomes clear that she is every bit the “rag” Alyssa accuses her of being, it is implied that Alyssa is again choosing on the basis of gender. The reasons for why the romance between “soul mates” Holden and Alyssa does not work out, it is further indicated, is a twofold result of Holden’s paranoia—about Alyssa’s “promiscuous” past *and* about her lesbian past. As Banky reminds him, Holden would always be wondering “when the other shoe was going to drop.” But because Banky does not clarify his meaning, the link is drawn between promiscuity and bisexuality—either way, Alyssa is bound to betray him. This tendency to collapse promiscuity and

bisexuality together as mutually reinforcing traits is one I examine in detail. Finally, even Holden and Banky have gone their separate ways, professionally and personally, though their parting seems to have been amicable. Even without the threesome actually having taken place—as it does in *Y Tu Mamá También*, for example—the fact of two “straight” men overtly acknowledging their attraction to one another precludes their remaining buddies. *Chasing Amy* does not allow Banky to completely reform by film’s end—he’s still telling dick jokes—but he and (if the film’s aim is successful) the straight male viewer have gained some sensitivity training and at least a modicum of recognition of their own potential desires.

Chasing Amy is, I find, one of the more intelligent contemporary American films to engage with sexual identity issues and to voice in any sustained way the struggle to move beyond *compulsory monosexuality*, a term I coin to refer to the systematic and ideological ways in which social/sexual subjects are pressed to conform to either heterosexuality or homosexuality, “mono” referring to a sexuality directed at partners of only one gender.² Yet this film’s myopic inability to see beyond its own assumptions about monosexuality and monogamy remains curious and troubling. What *Chasing Amy* notably does not

In my dissertation, “Having It Both Ways: Bisexualities/Bi-textualities and Contemporary Crossover Cinema,” I argue that bisexual erotics and subjectivities play key roles in film form, spectatorship, and media industry practices. Surveying the past five decades of Hollywood cinema (*Basic Instinct*, *Black Widow*, *Single White Female*), independent films (*Chasing Amy*, *Foxfire*, *Girl, Interrupted*), art cinema (*Les Biches*, *Mulholland Drive*, *Holy Smoke*, *Persona*, *Vagabond*), and sexploitation films (*The Craft*, female vampire films, *Wild Things*), I identify a set of archetypes embodying cultural beliefs and anxieties about female bisexuality. The *rich bitch* analogizes socioeconomic and so-called bisexual privilege. The *hippie chick* explores bisexuality as an alternative value/lifestyle by associating it with the bohemian counter-culture. The *(un)committed woman* confronts the stereotype of bisexual promiscuity through the metaphor of mental pathology. And the *dreamgirl* negotiates the fantasy/nightmare of bisexual subjectivity by adopting personae that allow for gendered and ethnoracial passing. My concept of *bi-textuality* describes how these types are articulated through transgressions of gender and social norms and their entailment of class, race, and ethnicity. In this regard, I explore bisexuality’s intersections with feminist and critical race theories, and with alternative identify formations such as transgender, BDSM,⁴ and disability. Additionally, I show how film production and marketing strategies use bisexuality to appeal to mainstream and marginalized audiences, and how we as spectators and social subjects respond in fluid and unpredictable ways to bisexually coded images. Indeed, my research shows that we can and already do transcend what I term *compulsory monosexuality* (on the model of the queer theoretical concept “compulsory heterosexuality”). Thus my dissertation concludes with a comparative consideration of male “buddy films” whose representations of masculinity emphasize the homosocial.

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do, despite a dialogue-heavy script that consistently circles around sexual identity issues and a female lead who *behaves* bisexually, is to ever use the term *bisexual*. To be fair, the term *queer* is also omitted—likely in deference to its primary (straight) audience and more centrist leanings. Is it important that the film actually use “the B word”? Perhaps not, but in so meticulously avoiding its articulation, *Chasing Amy* emerges as a consummate case of bisexual (*in*) *visibility*—or unnamability—in narrative texts, and as such is a quintessential instance of the way in which bisexuality becomes a structuring absence: both everywhere and nowhere.

But far more troubling than *Chasing Amy*'s avoidance of the B word itself is the film's ultimate resistance to what the B word signifies. As expressed by Robin Wood,

Bisexuality represents the most obvious and direct affront to the principle of monogamy and its supportive romantic myth of “the one right person”; the homosexual impulse in both men and women represents the most obvious threat to the norm of sexuality as reproductive and restricted by the ideal of family.³

The line of dialogue quoted at the start of this prologue suggests how *Chasing Amy* subscribes to a romanticized ideal of “true love” between “soul mates” and moreover promotes

an accompanying conviction that monogamy with “that one person who just gets you” is the ultimate (and attainable) goal of life. In its reluctance to move beyond this heteronormative way of thinking, *Chasing Amy* ends up reinscribing the same cultural assumptions and restrictions around sexuality that it purports to deconstruct, and so finally demonstrates just how naturalized the twin tenets of monosexuality and monogamy continue to be. Even as the unconventional conclusion departs from delivering the heterosexual couple, *Chasing Amy* does not question the naturalness of the (opposite-sex or same-sex) couple itself. When Holden tells Alyssa, “I want us to be something we can't be—a normal couple,” we have seen enough to know that Holden's notion of what constitutes “normal” needs troubling—and by film's end Holden has learned his valuable lesson on that count. But he has also learned that love means never having to share. So, too, is his relationship (and professional partnership) with Banky over—as Holden learns, “some doors just shouldn't be opened.” In the pages to come, I intend to open those doors.

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Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies Program at UCLA. She recently received her Ph.D from UCLA's Cinema and Media Studies Program. This article is the prologue to her dissertation, which examines bisexual representation in fictional films since the 1960s and its implications for queer media theory. Her articles appear in English Language Notes, Film History, Journal of Bisexuality, Scope, Senses of Cinema, and in the forthcoming anthologies *American Movie Masculinity* (SUNY UP, 2008), *Global Art Cinema*, and *Race and Independent Media* (UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 2008). She has been a regular contributor to *Cineaste* since 2007.

NOTES

1. I am referencing George Chauncey's seminal work, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Makings of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).
2. I am both referencing and revising Adrienne Rich's concept of *compulsory heterosexuality*. See Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence.” In Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin, eds., *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 227-254.
3. Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan... and Beyond*, rev. ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 65.
4. BDSM refers to the diverse identities and practices associated with bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, and sadism and masochism.