

Gender and Identity in Media Analysis:

Milk

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Abstract

Milk (2008) is a film that recounts Harvey Milk's journey in becoming one of the first openly gay men to hold an official public position in United States government. This film is a social commentary on how "other" sexual orientations were viewed in the 1970's, and how it was the responsibility of the people in power to pave the direction in which society should respond to minority groups. This analysis recognizes the realities constructed by communication, as well as the uses of communication in writing history.

Keywords: identity, sexual orientation, social reality, culture, intersectionality

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“How do you teach homosexuality? Is it like French?” (Sant, et al., 2008) *Milk*, directed by Gus van Sant, is a biographical film that follows the journey of Harvey Milk (played by Sean Penn) as he becomes the first openly gay man to hold a public office position in the state of California. This film highlights the importance of communicating identity through sexual orientation. *Milk* acts as a concise representation of how communication is constitutive, in that it puts meaning to reality.

The beginning of Harvey Milk’s story is led by his internal conflict to fulfil both his avowed identity—the attributes he characterizes himself with—and his ascribed identity—the attributes others characterize him by. Milk grew up in a conservative family and lived a heteronormative lifestyle for most of his life, meaning that he followed the rules of social institutions that depended on “presumption of natural binaries” (DeFrancisco, et al., 2014, p. 16). Fearful of possible rejection and backlash, Milk remained “closeted” to his family, and kept his romantic relationships a secret. After meeting a man in New York and falling in love, Milk moves to San Francisco and opens a camera store in a predominately gay community called The Castro. Finally living in a safe and accepting environment, Milk can freely express his sexual orientation, which is his physical and romantic attraction to other genders, in this case being other men (DeFrancisco, et al., 2014, p. 15).

Since this film takes place during the 1970’s, threats to regulate gay rights is one of the main conflicts of the plot. At the time, researchers did not have much information on sexual orientation or gender expression, so there was a lack of understanding in homosexual psychology and lifestyle. To put things in perspective, many believed that homosexuality was a mental illness

that required treatment and cures; this belief can be partially blamed on principles of the critical/cultural theory, which explains that culture and environment influences the understanding communication and reality (DeFrancisco, et al., 2014, p. 41). Communication constructs realities by giving meaning to representative symbols, whether they be tangible, such as an object, or abstract, such as a word or action. Moreover, social realities are constructed by culture, so each culture has a different set of norms and expectations. In *The Castro*, homosexuality is the norm, so walking around with same-sex partners or performing androgynously is not considered rebellious. In contrast, the neighboring conservative districts viewed Castro residents as “radicals, deviants, and incorrigibles” because they did not meet their own social expectations (Sant, et al., 2008).

Although our society has become more accepting of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ+) community, there are still conflicts regarding opposing expectations, especially when considering intersectionality. Intersectionality is largely influential in constructing realities, for it incorporates all the experiences individuals have as members of various cultures—for example, a Black lesbian woman will have different life experiences than a White lesbian woman. A strictly religious individual will probably have very strong moral opinions that impact his or her view on the transgender community, but the study of communications evaluates how conflicting morals are shared. While the United States has made huge strides in LGBTQ+ history, such as with the legalization of gay marriages in 2015, it can be argued that these are just steps in achieving equality in a society that favors heteronormativity.

In terms of the film, there is significance in having gay representatives—and representatives for minority groups, in general—in politics, because these individuals can support voices that are otherwise silenced by institutionalized biases. Since gender and identity construct

communication and realities, it is important that cultures are shared so that outgroups may become aware of these different realities. In other words, if realities are not expressed, how can they be recognized and understood so that they may become a part of accepted constructions? If Harvey Milk had not taken the initiative to speak on behalf of The Castro and other gay communities across the United States, conservative votes would have stripped the inalienable rights of thousands of minority individuals.

In conclusion, we construct realities through our use of communication, and the film *Milk* emphasizes the importance of understanding and representing contrasting realities. The identities we formulate and present as individuals ultimately impact the cohesiveness of society, so we should be conscious of the ways we view and present ourselves. Along with that, we should respect others for their differences in sexual orientation and cultural values.

References

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