



## The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies

*Vito Russo*

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Praised by the *Chicago Tribune* as "an impressive study" and written with incisive wit and searing perception--the definitive, highly acclaimed landmark work on the portrayal of homosexuality in film.

### **The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies Details**

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Author : Vito Russo

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## From Reader Review The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies for online ebook

### **Jase Brown says**

Fascinating, important book. Although dated by 30 years now, there is still a lot to find here. Calling it a "revised" edition is pushing it a bit, since the core of the book seems unchanged, except for the addition of a further chapter covering the period up to late 1986 from about 1980 (the first edition came out in 1981). This last chapter is a bit incongruous, going back to some of Russo's earlier arguments but not all of them; as well, some of the seminal films of the period (Victor/Victoria, Personal Best, La Cage aux Folles, Making Love) were covered in depth but at times the 80s period is reduced to little better than a list. There are a few films I'd like to go back and view from a new perspective, and there's some assertions Russo makes that at this point we won't know where his judgments came from (Ryan O'Neal as a notorious homophobe, for instance). If nothing else, it's amazing to see how far we've come, or in some cases haven't, and be reminded of the way things were.

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### **Micah Horton hallett says**

This brilliant book needs to be updated now. It has a few flaws, but just a few, and for a book that purports to simply detail the history of homosexual representation in mainstream American movies from the silent era to 1986, Vitto Russo accomplishes so much more. The Celluloid Closet is a manifesto, a road map and a mid-eighties view from the trenches on the struggle for visibility, viability, representation and social and artistic expressions of gender, sexuality and difference that are STILL being fought across media Russo could not even imagine at the time of his writing.

Read this book.

Read it and weep. Read it and empathize. Read it and remember. Read it and get angry. Read it and get ready to take to the streets again. Read it and know that you aren't alone. Read it and hear the deafening silence of all who died feeling alone or monstrous or like the butt of a throwaway joke because of a conspiracy of lawmakers, religious dogmatics and the false mirror they held (and hold), up to the world.

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### **Alarra says**

Read this for an essay, and I enjoyed it, having seen the docu a few times. The book has more space for a deeper look at some of the examples that flies back on film. One of my favourite random facts in the book: Greta Garbo once "expressed...her desire to play in a film version of Oscar Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray with herself in the title role and Marilyn Monroe as a young girl ruined by Dorian". Imagine how AWESOME that could've been?

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### **Thomas Knoch says**

One of the books that really shaped the way I look at life and my favorite art form, the movies. I had to buy it over and over because I would lend it to friends who would baldly state, without any doubt, "You know I'm not giving this back, don't you?".

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### **Spiderorchid says**

This was a very interesting book that deserves its reputation as a classic but does have (at least in my opinion) a few flaws.

First and foremost, the research that went into this book is excellent. Russo describes the development of gay characters in motion pictures from the silent movies and the early talkies until the mid 1980s.

The best part is the one about the early days up to the 1950s (or what Russo calls the stereotyp of the "sissy"). It's very detailed and features a very good analysis of why characters were described as they are, how the audience reacted and which actors specialized in those roles and what their characteristics are. It also describes early lesbian parts and how for example the real-life character of an actress like Greta Garbo added to what was finally shown on film.

Very interresting if extremely depressing is the part that covers the 1960s and '70s. Russo shows how homosexuality was not - as one could have hoped in those times - shown in a realistic or sympathetic way but how it degenerated into some kind of freak show, designed to shock "normal" audiences and confirming the worst clichés.

And here we come to the book's most serious flaw (apart from the fact that it sometimes comes down to a listing of movies that lack the elaborate analysis that went into the earlier works from the 1920 to '50s): the author has a message. Well, of course he has - he wants to show how stereotypical and ultimatly wrong and damaging the portrait of homosexual people in movies is. What gets lost on the way is the fact that there are a few - if only a very few - movies that are not like that. He mentions them in passing, but never do they get a spotlight and that's sad. As important as it is to show all that is wrong in the movie-industry, I don't think you should ignore when something's actually good.

Also he has a tendency to ignore (or propably he really doesn't see it) irony or a twisted sense of humour. For example, someone who criticises "Victor/Victoria" for not showing an explicit sex-scene between Toddy and his lover hasn't understood the movie (I agree about his criticism about the fact that James Garner's character had to see that Julie Andrews is a woman before he kissed her - I love that they altered this in the stage version). The same can be said about his comments about over-the-top farces like "La cage aux folles" and "Tootsie" - but most of the time his evaluations of the movies he's discussing are well written and to the point (for example "The children's hour" which I always thought was overrated - Russo shows beautifully how this movie actually enforced prejudices).

It would have been great if this book had been updated since (the revised edition was published in 1987) - I'd like to see what the author would have had to say to contemporary cinema and the gay characters today.

All in all a good and informative book.

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### **April says**

Albeit a dated book, it's a very informative look at the portrayal of homosexuality on film and the extent of

which it has been previously caged. Despite flaws, I never lost interest; it was for me the first glimpse into the transformation of film and how far it has come in the past century or two. It also introduced me to a number of new movies I watched and enjoyed and for that I am eternally grateful.

\*also the 1995 documentary *The Celluloid Closet* by Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman is a compelling watch too. The likes of Susan Sarandon, Tom Hanks and Whoopi Goldberg cameo to talk about roles they've took (e.g Tom Hanks in *Philadelphia* and Whoopi in *The Color Purple*) accompanied by their own opinions as to how perceptions have shifted in society as well as the journey of both acceptance and intolerance of same-sex affection with regards to filmmaking. I enjoyed it more than the book, ~~but Tom Hanks' face likely swayed my opinion.~~

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### **Matthew says**

A classic in film criticism and queer history, Russo's prose can be a tad dry, but it is an illuminating look at how movies and the dominant culture have dealt with homosexuality in the 20th century.

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### **Richard Deras says**

Rating: 3\* of five

A groundbreaking revelation when it came out almost 30 years ago, this book, as revised by its author in 1987, is very dated; and it's never been my idea of a prose paradigm.

I admit I was going down the primrose path of nostalgia when I decided to read this revised edition. I'd read the first edition as an eager young slut-about-town, yearning to impress the Older Men (25! 30! Oh, those old roues!) I was seducing in job lots with my encyclopedic knowledge of their old-fashioned world.

\*snort\*

But I did learn a lot, and it's always useful to do so. I wasn't aware that queer subtexts in Hollywood movies were the prime motivating factor for the introduction of the Production Code. I wasn't aware that the hoi polloi didn't know some of its major heartthrobs only throbbed for their own kind (Rock, of course, but Farley Granger, Randolph Scott, Burt Lancaster, ye gods what fun it would have been to be there then!!)...but I've known all that for a long time now, and I found it dreary to go back and read the uninspired prose of the late Mr. Russo without the sense of discovery and amazement I brought to it the first time.

You can't go home again. I suppose one shouldn't want to, either, but the urge hits once in a way, less and less often as the years pile up. I expect I'll stub my toe on this rock again. I'd say, if you're an average straight person, this book could be informative and possibly even interesting if you like the movies a lot. But it sure won't be entertaining.

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### **Isaac Timm says**

Russo study of film is fantastic, but I was also moved by his views on advocacy, and his powerful insights on

being an outsider, and how stereotypes, even positive ones, cause harm. The term Russo uses, ghettoized, really pulled together many of the ideas I've seen in other book aimed at historical analysis. An amazing work that covers a broad scope of time and theme but does not lose the reader, or become dry and sterile.

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### **Jeffrey Richards says**

While Vito Russo's ground-breaking and definitive tomb mapping the representation of homosexuals and homosexuality on film published in 1981 (and updated in 1987) it is far from dated. Whether you're into queer studies or not, this is a must read to see how far we have come and how far we still have to go in regards to how homosexuals (and all minorities, really) have been treated throughout the history of the American cinema. Highly recommend!

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### **Evan says**

#### **HIGHEST RECOMMENDATION:**

Russo's is an impeccably argued tract. I can't imagine a better thought-out analysis of the predicament of gays and lesbians and their presentation in film in the pre- and immediate post-Stonewall era of the cinema. He zeroes in on the wider attitudes of society, nails the nature of the mixed messages in films with overt or coded gay content, even in films that were supposedly relatively enlightened. This book proves a film study can be written with a popular clarity and still adhere to scholarly rigor. Bravo all the fucking way on this one!

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(earlier:)

I'm well into this now and it's impressive. Russo finds a happy median between academic comprehensiveness/precision and a popular authorial voice in expressing the concepts and keeping them interesting. In fact, this book is quite fun; it seems like there was no film with even the slightest hint of homosexual suggestiveness --- going all the way back to the very earliest silents -- that Russo did not see or give mention to here. I'm learning a lot and enjoying this. Tons of well-selected stills that illustrate precisely the points that Russo makes.

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(first impression:)

I saw the 1995 same-titled documentary of this a decade ago. I don't really remember much about it other than the parade of Hollywood star narrators and talking heads, including Lily Tomlin and others. I think I was moved by some of it but also remember it being somewhat simplistic and exuding self-satisfied self-importance. I have a copy of the original 1981 book -- in its time just about the only game in town in terms of a popular study of gay cinema (I'm sorry, but I don't envision ever using the word queer). So far it has just enough academic authority without being obscurantist. It is definitely geared to a wide popular audience. The examples it cites are well selected and researched. Reading on...

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### **Carlos says**

A fascinating and frank study of the representation of the LGBT community in cinema! Russo's analysis is

incredibly insightful and a thoroughly enjoyable read thanks to the humor and irony with which the book is filled. I would recommend it to anyone who is even mildly interested in the LGBT rights movements as Russo shows how cinema more than anything serves as a barometer for the relationship between mainstream culture and the LGBT minority.

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### **Neil Schleifer says**

People's roles within a society are defined by those in power. For centuries homosexuality was defined by those in power as alternatively pathological (a mental disorder) or morally deviant and evil. Vito Russo shows how in the medium of film, from silents through the 1990's, the portrayal of gays and lesbians on film was defined by the powers that be as villainous, tainted, manipulative schemers; hiding in shadows or flamboyantly hip-swaying down the street, limp wrists akimbo, and alternately murderous or suicidal.

Some of the examples Russo provides are hilarious in their extremity; some heartbreakingly sad. If you remove the issue of homosexuality from the equation, the definition of letting others decide the image with which society labels us can apply to any minority group. The issue is universal. This book is an excellent example of that point.

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### **Jesse says**

Reread this as it was the main textbook of a Queer Film undergrad class I helped out with last semester, and my initial reaction was more or less confirmed: when analyzing LGBTQ representation in classic Hollywood and other early cinemas Russo is as enlightening as he fun to read, but when he gets to post-Code representation he goes into Righteous Anger mode and it just all starts getting very numbing and increasingly unnuanced. For some reason Russo can locate endless resistance and subversiveness in the Sissies and Bulldykes in old Hollywood musicals and comedies, but something like *Suddenly Last Summer* or *The Boys in the Band* are pegged as an irredeemable exercise in negative stereotyping—I just don't buy that line of thinking and so I didn't even bother revisiting the last chapter or two.

I also have mixed feelings because *Celluloid Closet* is widely hailed as the first study of its kind, while the late, great and now-forgotten Parker Tyler's *Screening the Sexes: Homosexuality in the Movies* is hardly ever remembered, though it was written nearly a decade earlier. *Not* that it's hard to see why this is the case: where Russo is Serious and Scholarly, Tyler is, characteristically, campy, tongue-in-cheek and can at times be baffling in regards to its allusions and in-jokes—in many ways Richard Dyer's *Now You See It* and Richard Barrios's *Screened Out: Playing Gay in Hollywood from Edison to Stonewall* are nice medians, as rigorous as Russo but retaining Tyler's sense of fun.

But it can't be denied that *The Celluloid Closet* serves as a good primer on queer film—it certainly was mine, and I'll always appreciate it for that.

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### **Karie Westermann says**

Uneven. The first section is great - the early years of American cinema and the representation of homosexuality. Russo is informed and congenial. Later, he appears to know less about his subject (oddly

enough). The same films are discussed at length and some strange omissions/slichts occur. Once we hit the 1980s, the slight and omissions become glaring. Still, an important work and one I'm glad to have read.

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