

MAIN MENU

Click on a decade to view the **LGBT+** films of that period. You can also simply move through all films chronologically using the arrows at the bottom of the screen within each decade section.



DIFFERENT FROM THE OTHERS

1919

Germany

No other country showed the ardent interest in exploring LGBT characters and themes in its films like Weimar-era Germany. The silent production *Different from the Others* remains a landmark work as the earliest feature-length film to portray gay men in a deliberately sympathetic light. The filmmakers intended the picture as a condemnation of then-current laws criminalizing gay sex and an argument for a more tolerant view of homosexuality. Its plot concerns

the blackmail of a virtuoso violinist who enters into a relationship with his male student and then commits suicide when their affair becomes public. The storyline would be recycled in principle in later films dealing with the subject. Gay and lesbian characters continued to appear in German films until the rise of the Nazi regime, when copies of such works were declared “**decadent**” and summarily seized and destroyed.



GIRLS IN UNIFORM

Generally held to be the first major “lesbian-themed” film, this influential work was one of three by female director Leontine Sagan and another product of the socially liberal Weimar Republic. It employs the oft-repeated cinematic trope of **female pedagogical eros** in a boarding school. A newcomer to the strict, all-girls school develops a crush on one of the more compassionate teachers, who must later painfully rebuff her student’s attachment. Distraught, the girl tries to jump from the landing of the school’s grand staircase, but is stopped by the other students.

Germany

In America, it was nearly banned, until Eleanor Roosevelt objected and facilitated its limited release. Its chaste, romantic undertones would prove to be a popular form of non-stereotypical, queer female representation; it was remade as a **1951 Mexican feature**, the same year as the French film **Olivia**, also directed by a woman and recycling the same boarding-school plot. When the social climate was again liberalized after the Second World War, it was also remade in the new West Germany as a somewhat more well-known **1958 color feature** with Lili Palmer.

1931



CALL HER SAVAGE

1932

United States

Not unlike Europe prior to the fascist ascendancy of 1933, Hollywood prior to that time also lacked a centralized system of censorship, churning out films rife with innuendo, adult situations, and even at times nudity and profanity. 1934 saw the formal adoption of the **Production Code**, the rulebook that would govern film content for the next few decades. A Production Code **Seal of Approval** was now necessary for a general Hollywood release; without one, studios risked fines and commercial failure. Homosexuality

was an especially taboo subject under the Code, whereas it had been frequently addressed before. "**Pre-Code**" films, though, rarely treated LGBT characters in a serious manner. The 1932 Clara Bow melodrama *Call Her Savage*, exemplary in this vein, features the popular gay, male cinematic stereotype of **the pansy** during a comic sequence in a bar. Like most all representation of LGBT individuals in Hollywood at the time, the characters are perfunctory, derisive, and irrelevant to the larger plot.



DRACULA'S DAUGHTER

1936

United States

Predating film, there has long existed an association between predatory villains and “gayness,” perceived or explicit. With the enforcement of the Production Code, this diabolical duality simply replaced the overt stereotyping of the **pre-Code era**. One of the first examples was Universal’s more tepid sequel to their pre-Code horror opus **Dracula**. *Dracula’s Daughter* is noted as cinema’s first incarnation of the “**lesbian vampire**,” a literary stock villain rooted in the 1872 novella **Carmilla**. No less than four script versions were submitted to the **Production Code Office** and rejected, and once filming began with a new script, oversight continued to avoid any implication of “sexual perversion” between the Countess

and her female victims. Nevertheless, these elements remained, and were even exploited in contemporary advertisements that proclaimed, “Save the women of London from *Dracula’s Daughter*!” More “queer” villains would only continue to populate movie screens. Audiences had already met Charles Laughton’s nebbish yet authoritarian ship captain in 1935’s **Mutiny on the Bounty**, but would soon see even swishier villains in big releases like 1938’s **The Adventures of Robin Hood**, 1942’s **Casablanca**, and 1950’s **All About Eve**. It was prolific director **Alfred Hitchcock** who in the coming decades would become the foremost singular source of such predatory “queer” representations.



ROPE

United States

1948

Alfred Hitchcock's crime drama *Rope*, adapted from the play that was in turn based on the real-life 1924 murder of a young Jewish boy by two closeted gay college lovers, cements the stereotype of the **villainous male homosexual**; albeit heavily veiled. In the play, the two killers are understood to be gay through dialogue. Excising such script material to bypass censorship concerns, Hitchcock instead asked the actors to stand close together in certain scenes to get the point across. In real life, both actors were in fact gay. Hitchcock was the prime supplier of

such film characters at the time. His stone-cold Miss Danvers in **Rebecca**, released eight years earlier, is one of his best-known examples of coded, lesbian villainy, sharing much with the Countess in *Dracula's Daughter*. In 1951, audiences saw Farley Granger—one of *Rope*'s killers—assume the protagonist opposite the coded gay psychopath in **Strangers on a Train**. But it was 1960's **Psycho** that employed the most twisted, coded-queer killer yet: the swishy, cross-dressing mama's boy Norman Bates, played by Anthony Perkins. Perkins—like with the actors in *Rope*—was himself gay.



CAGED

United States

1950

Reportedly intended as a **Bette Davis-Joan Crawford vehicle**, but aborted after Davis' lack of interest in making a "**dyke movie**," *Caged* can also be described in terms of the LGBT themes it enforces through its implicit, **Code-era** stereotypes. When lead character and new inmate Marie cries over her dead husband, her bunkmate ensures that

soon she won't even think about men anymore; characterizations of decidedly butch, minor female roles soon follow. As with *Rope*, the majority of audiences of the day were likely not as keen in discerning its thematic subtleties. Eleanor Parker, who portrays Marie, was nominated for the **Oscar for Best Actress** for her performance as the protagonist.



SUDDENLY, LAST SUMMER

A handful of films in the latter half of the 1950s challenged the Production Code with an array of risky themes—and found success doing it. Among the most shocking of these was *Suddenly, Last Summer*, with all its overwrought, Southern-Gothic glory from **Tennessee Williams’** play intact in the film version with Elizabeth Taylor, Katharine Hepburn, and Montgomery Clift. Sebastian Venable, the recently deceased gay cousin of Taylor’s character who is seen only in flashback and from behind, would reinforce one of the blackest LGBT stereotypes in popular

United States

culture with **his tragic fate**. In the scene that likely landed Taylor her **third Oscar nomination**, her character is coaxed by Clift, the psychiatrist, into spilling the truth of what happened to Sebastian: while the family was vacationing in Spain, the local teenage boys Sebastian had been propositioning for sex one day ganged up and cannibalized him in broad daylight. The Production Code granted the film approval to feature a gay character who meets such a ghastly demise on the basis that it “illustrate[d] the horrors of such a lifestyle.”

1959



VICTIM

Great Britain

What was elucidated through implication in *Suddenly, Last Summer* is revealed full-force in director Basil Dearden's groundbreaking 1961 UK feature *Victim*, which resurrects the revolutionary spirit and blackmail-laden plot of *Different from the Others* in a story about a barrister whose career and marriage risk calamity from exposure of a gay affair. Released to high controversy at a time when censorship was beginning to break down on both sides of the Atlantic, it is the

first English-language film to use the word "**homosexual**" and the first major English-language film released in the Production Code era to explicitly deal with the experiences of a gay leading character. In addition, it is perhaps the first portrayal by a major actor—Dirk Bogarde, a leading man of British cinema at the time—of a central gay character. The film is considered to have directly impacted Britain's later decriminalization of homosexuality with the **1967 Sexual Offences Act**.

1961



THE CHILDREN'S HOUR

Audrey Hepburn and Shirley MacLaine star in what can be seen as the American companion to *Victim*. First courting controversy as a **1934 play**, William Wyler was forced by the Production Code to bowdlerize his **1936 screen adaptation**; but by 1961, with censorship lessened considerably, Wyler remade his own film without any changes to the source material. The plot concerns a malicious girl who spreads a lie at her school that Hepburn and MacLaine, her two teachers, are lovers, leading to the removal by horrified parents of every child from their care and rapid ostracizing by the community – regardless of the truth. After admitting to really being in love with

United States

Hepburn all this time, MacLaine's character is so ashamed that she hangs herself. Despite **five Oscar nominations**, the film was eclipsed somewhat by **Breakfast at Tiffany's**, Hepburn's glitzier, more upbeat vehicle released only two months prior and eventual taker of the Oscars. In **These Three**, the title of the 1936 adaptation, there is no suicide, and the alleged lesbian affair had been changed to an illicit heterosexual one involving one woman's fiancé. Lillian Hellman, the original playwright, had based the work on **the true story** of two schoolteachers in Edinburgh, Scotland whose lives were similarly destroyed in 1810 by a student's lie of an affair between them.

1961



WALK ON THE WILD SIDE

After films like *Suddenly*, *Last Summer*, *Victim*, and *The Children's Hour*, the Production Code was revised to permit a bevy of previously prohibited content. Homosexuality was among these newly permitted subjects. The cavalcade of so-called "**adult**" **films** that proliferated in the wake of these changes included several with LGBT characters, one of which was this Depression-era bordello melodrama.

United States

Old-Hollywood star **Barbara Stanwyck** caused a stir at the time by taking on the role of the brothel's lesbian madam. In response to the backlash, Stanwyck notably fired back in an interview with gossip columnist Louella Parsons: "**What do you want them to do, get a real madam and a real lesbian?**" Worth noting is the suitable ill fate of Stanwyck's character, who is sent to prison with her workers in the end.

1962



ADVISE & CONSENT

Director **Otto Preminger** was no stranger to testing the limits of censorship, and his films of the previous decade had been among those that most frequently challenged the Code. Now that audacity was becoming a trendy mode of cinematic expression, his second picture of the 60s became the first postwar Hollywood film to include **a scene set in a gay bar**. During election season, a married, conservative Utah senator, one of the film's minor characters, confronts his gay ex-lover there after being threatened with blackmail over their wartime affair.

United States

In the end, the senator commits suicide. The tragic gay subplot functions mainly as a metaphorical plot device for the lengths to which people will go to gain power. The next time a gay bar would be seen in a major Hollywood film would be twice, in 1968, in two controversial crime thrillers: in **The Detective**, a neo-noir starring Frank Sinatra as the titular investigator looking into the brutal murder of a gay man; and in **The Boston Strangler**, starring Tony Curtis as the eponymous killer in a role that diverged greatly from the actor's earlier comedic parts.

1962



REFLECTIONS IN A GOLDEN EYE

After the early-60s breakthrough of the first leading-role LGBT representations, such characters and themes populated the screen in the form of minor characters during mid-decade. It was not until 1967 that gay major characters would reappear. One of the first was the main character in John Huston's adaptation of the polarizing Carson McCullers novel, which marked an early portrayal by **a major Hollywood actor in a gay role**; in this case, a closeted army major, played by Marlon Brando, obsessed with one of his privates and stuck in a sexless marriage to his wife, played by Elizabeth Taylor. Unfortunately, despite both Huston's veteran reputation and its all-star cast that also included Julie

United States

Harris and Brian Keith, the film—like its source material—puzzled audiences with its abstruseness. A popular critical point was the ethereal gold hue that suffuses every scene. Nevertheless, the risk and character complexity Brando took on in playing his role earns merit. Keeping with the tradition of tragedy, Brando shoots and kills the object of his desire when he discovers the private watching Taylor's character as she sleeps. **The Sergeant**, released the following year, saw Rod Steiger in an identical role, but one that pushed things a step further: after being violently rebuffed by the private to whom he is attracted, the titular character retreats into the woods and shoots himself.

1967



THE FOX

Canada

Along with *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, *The Fox* marked another early portrayal by a major actor in an LGBT role, and also one of the first to feature **a major actor in a same-sex love scene**. Here it was Sandy Dennis, on the heels of her **Oscar-winning** success in 1966's **Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?** Dennis and Anne Heywood portray two farm-dwelling friends met with the appearance of a drifter, played by Keir Dullea, who ramps up the sexual tension in the household and eventually prompts the women to express their desire for each other. Though LGBT representation was increasing in the late 60s,

storylines were still riddled with stereotypes; those of *The Fox* were noted even at the time and explained by some critics by the rather dated 1923 D.H. Lawrence story on which it is based. The ending exemplified such criticism: before a relationship can develop any further between the women, Dennis' character is crushed under a falling tree in a death *Variety* described as "**phallic**." Though limited by such pathos, the film gains credit for its then-bold depiction of LGBT sexuality featuring a major actor, a task that would be avoided by virtually every major male actor for many years going forward.

1967



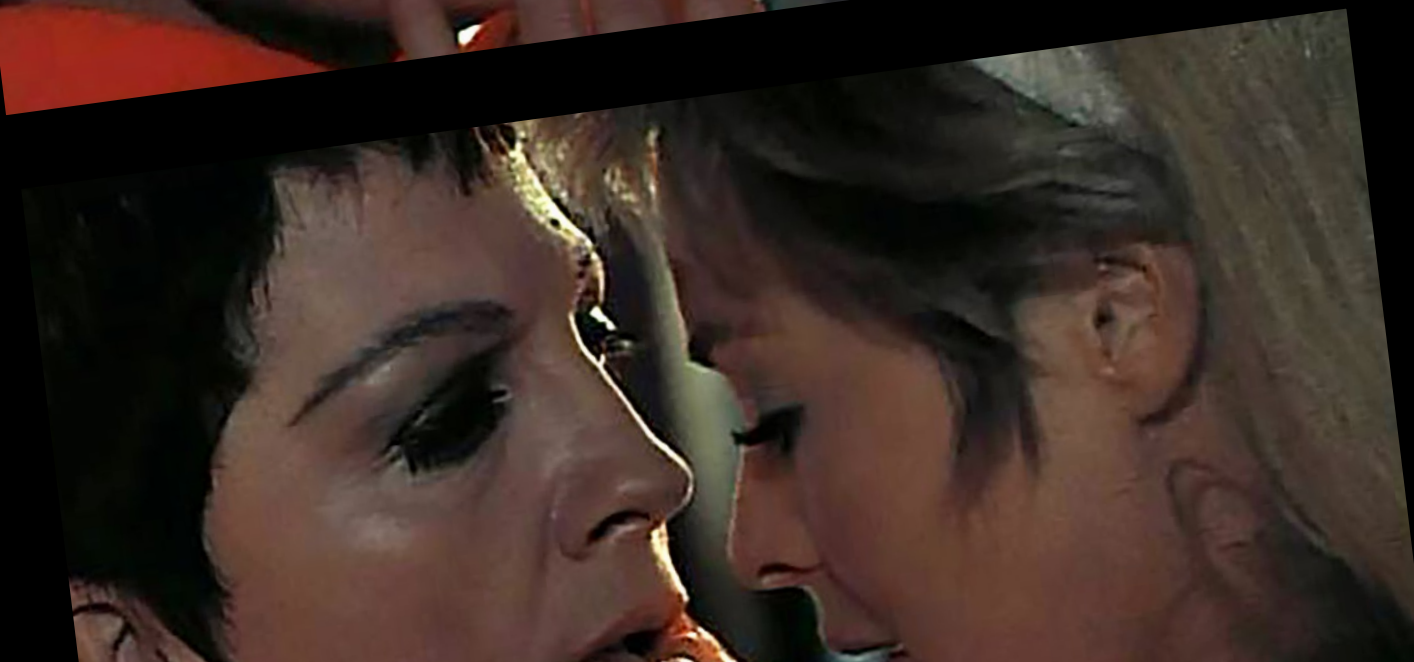
THE KILLING OF SISTER GEORGE

The Killing of Sister George was the second major work of the decade to feature a major actor, Susannah York, in **a lesbian role requiring love scenes** – but this time much more sexually explicit. The film can actually be said to boast two such roles: Coral Browne, well-known mainly in Britain, took the other. Despite its title and ultimately tragic denouement, its plot notably steers clear of killing off any of its characters, the majority of whom are all gay. Protagonist Beryl Reid plays an aging actor whose television character is killed off right before her younger female lover,

Great Britain

played by York, is seduced by the predatory female network executive behind the decision. Though the character of the executive, played by Browne, has been described as filling the “**sinister lesbian**” role, and its love triangle ends badly for Reid, the film offers the most serious and practical treatment of gay female relationships of the era. This includes featuring London’s long-running lesbian bar the **Gateways Club** as a setting location, as well as not shying away from boundary-pushing sex scenes that garnered an **‘X’ rating by the MPAA** for its American release.

1968



THE BOYS IN THE BAND

Before his reputation expanded with the likes of **The French Connection** and **The Exorcist**, William Friedkin directed the film version of the sensational 1968 off-Broadway play that was the first to steep itself so deeply in gay male life. A group of New York City men gather together for the birthday of a friend, but after an old straight buddy arrives from one man's more closeted past, the mise-en-scène devolves into a series of drunken character assassinations. Utilizing the entire original cast of the play, the movie would be equally unprecedented, referred to in

United States

retrospect as the first Hollywood film to depict gay men as "whole beings." Indeed, **no one dies, kills himself, or comes to general ruin in the end**; nevertheless, opinions have remained polarized over the years over its characters' clear angst, cruelty, and narcissism. Indeed, the emotional breakdown in the final scene of the spendthrift, self-loathing main character Michael does not deviate much from the familiar tragic gay downfall. Despite this, he offers a notably hopeful remark to a friend in the end: "**If we could just not hate ourselves so much...**"

1970



SUNDAY, BLOODY SUNDAY

Perhaps one of the first portrayals of a **happy, non-heteronormative leading character**, provocative UK director John Schlesinger's *Sunday, Bloody Sunday* concerns a bisexual male artist in an open love triangle with a married, male doctor and a divorced woman. The film is notable for depicting an affectionate kiss between the two men; likely **another first for a major film**. In

Great Britain

the end, though, the artist abandons his two lovers, defecting somewhat to the stereotypical **flighty, promiscuous bisexual**. Two years before, Schlesinger had made **Midnight Cowboy**, thought of as his signature film, which featured a brief but controversial gay sex scene involving Jon Voight's character and a young male in a movie theater.

1971



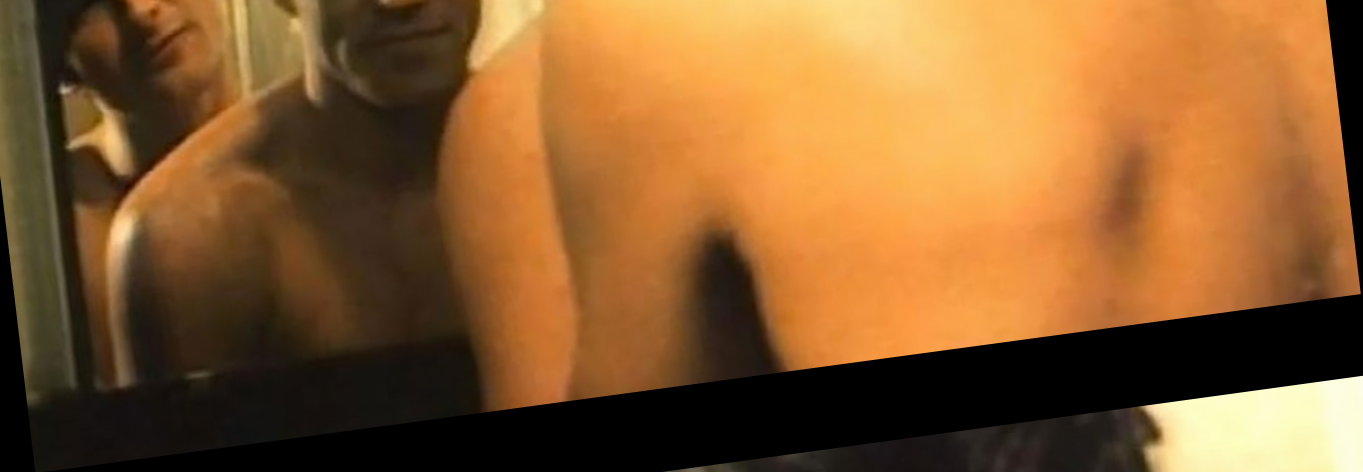
A VERY NATURAL THING

The first entirely positive portrayal of **an explicitly LGBT relationship** comes in the way of an independent film that opens with clips of proud members of a New York City **gay pride parade** and ends with a promising beginning to a romance between two men. The protagonist, a public-school English teacher, meets a man with whom an initially hopeful romance soon proves unworkable. After a lonely period, he meets a recently divorced, newly “out” man, and

United States

the future once again turns bright. Along with its eye-opening honesty in dealing with the dynamics of gay relationships, the film also did not shy away from indulgent love scenes. Due to its line “**Love means never having to say you’re in love,**” it was at the time humorously called the “**gay Love Story**” in reference to the better-known 1970 Ali MacGraw-Ryan O’Neal drama famous for a similar quip between its two primary characters.

1974



IN A YEAR OF 13 MOONS

This late-70s West German feature was among the first serious treatments of a **transgender individual's experience**, including avoiding the stereotypical pitfall of **casting an actor of the biological gender** to which the character they are playing is transitioning. Tragedy eventually befalls the trans female protagonist, however, who commits suicide by the end. English-language cinema would remain tethered to stereotyped

West Germany

casting; though thematically trailblazing, the trans female character in Robert Altman's desolate **Come Back to the Five and Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean**, from 1982, was played by Karen Black, a cisgender woman. This trend would continue even into the 2000s in films like **Transamerica**, starring Felicity Huffman in a commendable and **Oscar-winning**, though no less stereotypical role.

1978



MAKING LOVE

A succession of leading men from Harrison Ford to Richard Gere turned down both of the male parts in *Making Love*, the first major-studio Hollywood film to positively examine **homosexuality**, **coming out**, and **the resulting effects on a straight marriage**. The film repeats several feats of *A Very Natural Thing*, though within a more “heterosexual” context. Considering its distribution by Twentieth Century Fox, it was undoubtedly the widest exposure yet afforded to an LGBT-themed film since *The Boys in the Band* over a decade earlier. The film’s willingness to sensitively depict

United States

the romance between the two male leads – then still nonexistent in a major Hollywood picture – was a harbinger of the positive, mainstream firsts the decade would bring. Unsurprisingly, these firsts were explored warily by the powers that be; a warning was attached to the start of the film signaling that the subject matter “may be too strong for some people.” Roberta Flack, who sang the title song, defended the film in interviews by asserting that “**love is universal, like music**,” regardless of the gender of either consenting party.

1982



DESERT HEARTS

Eschewing the taught tragedy common among previous lesbian milestones like *The Children's Hour*, *The Fox*, and *The Killing of Sister George*, *Desert Hearts*, with its plot revolving around a soon-to-be-divorced university professor and a younger woman with whom she finds her intimate awakening in 1959 Reno is regarded as the first wholly positive

United States

portrayal of **lesbian sexuality in a major film**. Greta Garbo was reportedly so impressed with Helen Shaver's performance as the professor that the two tried to meet, but due to Garbo's poor health at the time, they instead spoke over the phone. The film's director, Donna Deitch, was gay, marking another milestone for a mainstream film.

1985



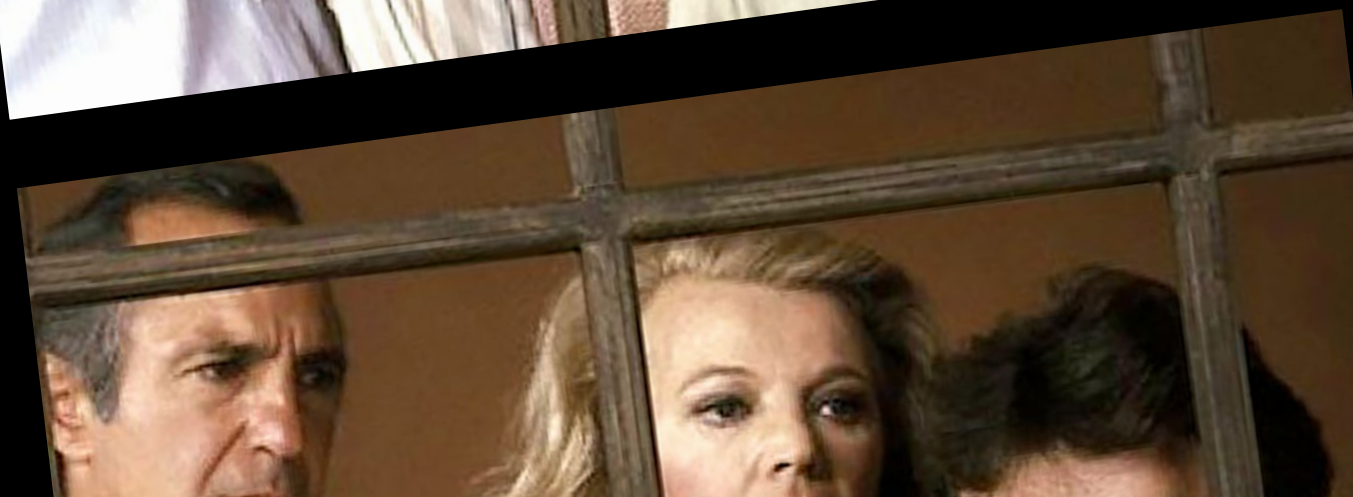
AN EARLY FROST

Though made for television, *An Early Frost* was the first feature film of any kind **to deal with the topic of AIDS**. Concerning a gay lawyer who both comes out and dispels his terminal condition to his parents, the feature was nominated for **fourteen Emmys** and held the number-one spot in the Nielson ratings the night it premiered on NBC. Despite the trailblazing sign of a TV film willing to depict AIDS, the subject in general would come to

United States

dominate many gay-themed features throughout the coming two decades, ironically returning mandatory tragedy to LGBT cinematic storylines. *An Early Frost* foreshadowed 1989's **Longtime Companion**, the first **wide-release film** to tackle AIDS, but the well-known 1993 film **Philadelphia** bore an especially striking resemblance: in a lauded performance, Tom Hanks stars as a gay lawyer suffering from AIDS.

1985



PARIS IS BURNING

Though Frank Simon's little-known documentary **The Queen** did it **first in 1968**, *Paris Is Burning* arguably did it better some twenty years later. Examining LGBT drag ball culture in New York City at the time, the film – also a documentary – gave wide exposure to the gay male **drag scene** along with the other distinct lesbian, transgender, and queer drag scenes with which it intersects. In addition, the ramifications of **race and class** on LGBT individuals was among the film's major themes. The experiences of gender-nonconforming

United States

LGBT individuals in the context of drag would be further explored in narrative form in the 1994 Australian film **The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert**, and the 1995 American feature **To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar**, each a comedic "road" movie. And though the latter film was noted for featuring major leading men Patrick Swayze, Wesley Snipes, and John Leguizamo in drag roles, it received much more mixed reviews than its Australian predecessor.

1990



THE CRYING GAME

Transgender individuals had English-language screen representation as leading characters since Ed Wood's 1953 turkey **Glen or Glenda**, his autobiographical oeuvre intended as an authentic social plea for trans acceptance but also considered among the worst films ever made. Even in the more respectable artistic efforts of the ensuing decades, portrayals tended toward the exploitative or stereotypical, and frequently made the mistake of utilizing **cisgender actors to portray**

Great Britain

post-transition individuals. In 1985, William Hurt starred in **The Kiss of the Spider Woman** as Luis, an individual identifying as "she;" though, as a prison inmate, Luis often assumes a more gender-conforming appearance. In *The Crying Game*, set during the Troubles in Northern Ireland, the character of Dil has been more fully able to assume her transition, thereby representing a more comprehensive depiction of a trans person, in this case a trans woman, in a mainstream motion picture.

1992



PHILADELPHIA

Preceded nearly ten years before by the similarly-themed television film *An Early Frost*, this decorated drama featured Tom Hanks in the role of a gay lawyer with AIDS who sues the firm that fired him for discrimination. Denzel Washington plays the homophobic

United States

attorney ironically hired to defend him. Hanks' nuanced and **Oscar-winning performance**, along with the film's status as a big-budget production and its basis on real events helped to further both mainstream LGBT representation and **HIV/AIDS awareness**.

1993



GO FISH

The 90s marked a watershed period when positive, cinematic LGBT representations, both independent and mainstream, **were increasing**. Transposing the dramatic spirit of *Desert Hearts* about a decade earlier into a low-budget comedic setting, *Go Fish* – filmed in black-and-white – was noted

United States

for its celebratory portrayal of **lesbian sexuality and relationships**. Lesbian sexuality would further be explored between gay women of color in another indie feature, *The Watermelon Woman*, in 1996; and in a more “mainstream” context – also between white characters – in 1997’s **All over Me**.

1994



CHASING AMY

Though hampered down a bit by the gender stigmas in its characterizations, indie veteran Kevin Smith's *Chasing Amy* offered a more honest portrayal of **bisexuality** than had been previously seen in feature films. A woman's sexually fluid past threatens her relationship with her

United States

boyfriend, played by Ben Affleck; to complicate matters, Affleck's best friend admits he is also in love with him, provoking a kiss between the two men. To try and move past the tensions, Affleck proposes that the group engage in a threesome, which soon backfires for all three characters.

1997



BOYS DON'T CRY

Though neither the first film to place a leading trans character in a sympathetic light nor the first to feature an actor of the pre-transition gender in a trans role, *Boys Don't*

United States

Cry nevertheless remains a milestone work of trans representation for its riveting performances and basis on the real-life hate murder of young trans man **Brandon Teena**.

1999



BROKEBACK MOUNTAIN

The string of more nuanced LGBT portrayals that peppered 1990s Hollywood and elsewhere increased manifold after the turn of the millennium. More leading actors were accepting LGBT roles, more roles were coming from the major studios rather than simply the independents or abroad, and much more was being required of an actor in an LGBT role. *Brokeback Mountain* typifies this sea change, featuring **major leading**

United States

men in heavily romantic roles within a star-studded, **major-studio production**. It was preceded by similarly important works with major actors embracing sexually-infused roles like **Mulholland Drive**, **Far from Heaven**, and **Monster**; it was followed by even more, among them **Little Ashes**, **Milk**, **I Love You**, **Phillip Morris**, **Dallas Buyers Club**, **Kill Your Darlings**, **Behind the Candelabra**, and **Carol**.

2005



MOONLIGHT

United States

Black LGBT characters are still woefully underrepresented in mainstream Hollywood. Though an independent production, *Moonlight* is among the first major films to focus on the experiences and sexuality of

a gay individual of color. The film was both the first comprising an all-black cast and the first with an explicitly LGBT storyline to win the **Oscar for Best Picture.**

2016



LOVE, SIMON

Hollywood's first major-studio film to depict a **gay teenage romance** concerns the forced outing of its titular character and ends with the unexpectedly positive beginning of a new and first relationship.

United States

The film was lauded for its casting that featured **several major characters of color** comprising protagonist Simon's friend group, one of whom turns out to be his love interest.



2018