

Gay farce: the
promotion of the
stereotypes the film
itself claims to
denounce



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At first glance, the film Milk is a movie about the gay rights movement in SF and across the nation.

It is promoted in a manner that makes it seem like a mouthpiece for increasing tolerance and denouncing stereotypes. However, the characters are portrayed as so 'stereotypically' gay, feminist or right-winged, that it becomes challenging to see how the view helps any of their respective movements. The point is to create an 'in your face' tolerance that, through the use of a generalized emotional connection, forces the viewer to accept each role even at the extreme. The film Milk is about Harvey Milk, a local camera shop owner and gay rights activist who wins the San Francisco Supervisor seat in 1977. The film follows his life from his 40th birthday to his murder by Dan White, a fellow District Supervisor.

The movie focuses on Milk's involvement in the gay rights movement and also his fight for other groups such as union workers, women and seniors. The film has an array of exceptionally colorful characters, but of particular interest are the characters of Jack Lira (Milk's love interest immediately preceding and following his supervisor win), Anne Kronenburg (the female and lesbian member of Milk's campaign and office staff), and State Senator John Briggs (a right-winged Senator who is trying to remove gay school teachers from the Walnut Creek School District. Each of these characters represents a different group and is portrayed as such an obvious representation that it would seem to be perpetuating stereotypes until viewed from the perspective of extreme acceptance. The first character addressed is Jack Lira. Jack Lira perpetuates gay stereotypes as a promiscuous, flamboyant, drama queen that Milk initially hooks up with and

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then 'takes in', he seems to be caretaker more than boyfriend at times.

Eventually Jack ends up killing himself because Milk was late coming home.

The whole way Jack is viewed perpetuates the image of homosexuality created from social constructionism and observed by community members according to Social Learning Theory. The homosexual community has been trying to diminish stereotype and alleviate prejudice, so it seems odd that they would have a central character be portrayed as so overly flamboyant and crazy. What the director does however, is to also develop such a strong emotional connection to the character on a gut level that the viewer is forced to overlook the 'in your face' traits being portrayed. They would be unable to feel for Jack without first accepting the character fully.

In this way social constructionism is used in a unique way by forcing a new, 'unnatural' perspective by having the viewer first relate on a fundamental emotionally human level. The second character addressed is Anne Kronenburg. She fills a strong female roll in the movie and is a representative both of the homosexual movement, being a lesbian, but also of the feminist movement. Her character is viewed and called out as a 'dyke' in the film and is also initially rejected based on prejudices. The staff says, "not only is she a woman, but she's a woman who likes other women, which is doubly worse".

Pretty ironic statement coming from a bunch of homosexual men; Milk's response is to tell the boys that they need, "a tough dyke to get things done". Anne is a particularly masculine character always hanging with the boys throughout the film. As such she is a strong representative for the

feminist movement, but at the same time she embodies all the arguments against feminists by being a very 'obvious' lesbian. How she is portrayed is an example of ambivalent sexism. It is the duality of being displayed in a positive and negative light, neither of which only perpetuates the surrounding prejudice.

She like Jack, is painted to the extreme, but the director makes her such a strong, influential and successful character that again the viewer is forced to overlook the extreme portrayal in order to accept her on a universal level. In this way the overt choice again helps to diminish prejudice in a counter-intuitive way. The third character is Senator John Briggs. He is fighting to eliminate homosexual teachers in the Walnut Creek School District.

His character is extremely right winged and the prejudice he feels is blatantly and ignorantly displayed. The size of his following however, and the development of his own opinions on the subject are examples of social constructionism. Those surrounding his campaign have created a perceived social reality based on ongoing views of homosexuality. In the film you come to feel somewhat for the right-wing extremists because they are presented in a way that showcases their fear more than their ignorance.

Again in this way sympathy for the character is created, but in this instance great sympathy is also created for those involved in the gay rights movement because the director shows us how the social construct of Briggs' campaign is not really based in any kind of emotional reality of humaneness. These are just a few characters in the film Milk that demonstrate how extreme portrayals that seem fundamentally contradictory to diminishing

stereotypes and eliminating prejudice can actually help alleviate them by being 'in your face' when counterbalanced with feelings of empathy and universal emotion. Though comedic and quite humble in its attempts to make the characters seem 'real', Milk becomes a powerful representational film in its extremity that symbolizes more than just a gay farce.