

# Film and ideology – milk assignment



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Assignment 2 - Film and Ideology The definition of the word ideology can be represented in many ways. Today's basic understanding of the word can be defined as "the body of ideas reflecting the social needs and aspirations of an individual, group, class, or culture" (Farlex, 2009). Gus Van Sant's exceptional biopic Milk (Gus Van Sant, 2008) depicts the story of Harvey Milk, the slain gay-rights activist who became the first openly gay man elected to any substantial political office in the history of the planet.

Harvey Milk's life changed history - his courage still motivates people today, his ideals still teach people today and his hope still inspire people today. The release of Milk in 2008 has helped to bring back a new sense of appreciation for the hope and passion that Harvey Milk died for. Milk beautifully shows the fights and struggles Harvey Milk had to go through to gain the trust of the people and in order for his ideologies of a brighter tomorrow for all queer people to be fully appreciated by everyone.

Harvey Milk was an individual who did not die in vain; his efforts in fighting for gay rights left a lasting impact on the people of this planet and his hope still lives on to this day. Simply put Harvey Milk's ideology of fighting on and instilling hope in the fight for gay rights when no one else would, immortalized him - "Without hope, life's not worth living" (Milk, 2008) It is now June 7th 1977, the sun has set on the Castro district of San Francisco, and the crowd that has gathered in the street outside Harvey Milk's camera shop is becoming more and more, impatient and angry.

We know watching that the reason that everyone is angry is due to the reports about voters in Dade County, Florida, having voted to overturn a

local gay-rights ordinance, giving momentum to a backlash whose most visible public face belongs to Anita Bryant. We know we have reached the climax of the movie. So much is happening all at once in the life of Harvey Milk that you wonder how he has not yet lost his head. His impish upbeat attitude and overly positive optimism in the face of multiplying frustrations makes you look up in awe at the wonderment that is Harvey Milk.

The gay residents of the Castro are angry and looking to Harvey for leadership. Though not yet elected to office and having lost 3 years consecutively, Harvey rises to the occasion and leads the angry crowd to city hall where he picks up a bullhorn and address the crowd in a way only Harvey Milk can - turning an angry mob on the verge of a violent riot to a enthusiastic mass willing to fight for their rights the proper way. In the space of a few minutes Harvey goes from a whisper to a shout, from an intimate message of consolation and support to a defiant public speech.

Milk shows us that it is these moments, these distinct modes of address, are connected, and that the link between them is what defines Harvey Milk's aspirations and ideals. According to Dr. Harry M. Benshoff, an associate professor of Radio, Television, and Film at the University of North Texas, queer theorist focus on how sexuality was and is a product of culture, not some sort of biological given. In Milk it is clearly stressed that Harvey too did not believe that homosexuality was a genetic disease.

In the scene of the 1977 June 7th march, just before he leaves the store to lead the mob to city hall, Harvey answers the telephone only to be greeted by a scared and confused teenager whose parents believe him to be ill

because he is gay. Harvey's disregard of homosexuality as a genetic disorder is abundantly clear in this scene when he reassures the teenage boy that he isn't ill and that being gay is perfectly normal. Dr. Benshoff goes on to say that following the work of Alfred Kinsey and Sigmund Freud, queer theorists argue that human sexuality—or indeed, race, gender, class, etc. are not either/or propositions, but are rather fluid and dynamic socially-defined positions. To suggest that there is one norm (straight white man on top sex for procreation and nothing else) is grossly misleading and only serves to foster rule by the same and persecution of everything else. Throughout Milk we can see that Harvey, though a very passionate gay-rights activist, is not only looking out for the queer folk. He holds dear to the ideal that everyone is equal. In a way he embodies what Kinsey and Freud say. He did not believe in just one norm.

In his fight for gay-rights he isn't trying to one-up the vast heterosexual majority by over throwing them and getting homosexuals to run the world, he is merely trying to get them to see that homosexuals are no different from any other person. Harvey Milk was trying to break down the social barriers that led to narrow minded thinking of just one social norm. In Milk during one of the public rally's he had, Harvey said that " all men are created equal. No matter how hard you try, you can never erase those words" - he believed these words with all his heart.

To Harvey Milk, he wasn't just fighting for gay-rights; he was fighting for a way of life that did not constrict its citizens to conform to just one social norm. Milk, Gus Van Sant's film project that was close to two decades in the making, was released on the 26th of November 2008 and marks the 30th

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anniversary of Harvey Milk's death and the brief but brilliant political career he led. Harvey Milk was unfortunately gunned down on November 27th 1978, three weeks after his biggest political victory.

The San Francisco city supervisor had been in office less than a year when he spearheaded a statewide campaign to defeat Proposition 6, a ballot initiative that called for the mandatory firing of gay teachers in California. Milk however arrived in theaters three weeks after the biggest political setback the American gay rights movement has suffered in years: the passage of Proposition 8, which reversed the California Supreme Court ruling that legalized same-sex marriage.

As untimely as the events that unfolded prior to the theatrical release of Milk, it begs the question on how did Proposition 8 change the meaning—the symbolic and ideological significance as well as the real-world function—of Gus Van Sant's Milk. The passing of proposition 8 transformed Milk from a delicate, serious-minded period biopic that was directed by the brilliant Gus Van Sant into something much more urgent. Milk was suddenly this shining beacon of hope that reinstated the hope and passion that was Harvey Milk into today's gay-rights activist.

There are some moments in the film that in retrospect seem as though it is speaking directly to the audience of the present. As the Proposition 6 results start to roll in, Harvey tells his followers: " If this thing passes, fight the hell back. " Those eight words speak volumes to the people who are fighting against the proposition 6 of today, proposition 8. " Somehow, when 8 passed, something else happened that was even more intense than the

campaign, which is good. It was an inspiring reaction that showed strength to the people who were against Prop 8.

So yeah, it seems to have an effect on something that's similar to it: Prop. 6, that appears in our movie", Milk director Gus Van Sant was quoted during an interview with IFC. com. The activist understood the message Harvey Milk stood for in the day, and opted not to let his valiant efforts go to waste. To judge from the numerous rallies that have sprung up across the country since Prop 8 passed, many gays and lesbians are doing just that, refusing to go down without a fight. Gay rights advocates have been quoted saying that they hope to capitalize on Milk's fortuitous topicality.

The film's Oscar winning screenwriter, Dustin Lance Black, and veteran activist Cleve Jones published a manifesto for equality in the San Francisco Chronicle on November 14th 2008 and launched a nationwide campaign of mass protests and civil disobedience. The endnote of their manifesto read, "Remember always, and reflect in all your actions, that we are not fighting against anyone, or anything. We are struggling for equality". Harvey Milk was the one that picked up the flag when no one else would. He was the one that led the suppressed minority on to recognition and acceptance.

All who wear his badge, or speak his words, or hold strong to his ideals, keep him alive. Milk managed to revitalize Harvey and in a strange twilight zone sort of way enlisted today's newly radicalized generation to find their figurehead in the movie-hero version of a long-dead hero. In Milk we see that Harvey's main arsenal in his fight for equality was that he rejected secrecy and shame in favor of openness and visibility. He insisted that the fight

against homophobia begins with the act of coming out - " If they know us, they don't vote against us".

Harvey Milk realized this earlier than many of his contemporaries. He understood that in order to gain true equality gays and lesbians should serve as their own civil advocates instead of merely relying on pacts and promises made with their straight allies in high and powerful places. Though he was seen as a radical at the time, in retrospect Harvey Milk is an optimist, an idealist, a true believer in the possibilities of American democracy. Gus Van Sant understood where Harvey was coming from with his ' come out of the closet ideology'. In the interview with IFC. com Gus Van Sant sheds some light on the ideology and how it affected him. " It was Harvey's one idea that would have worked and probably did help the " No on Proposition 6" campaign...ultimately, it's an interesting concept, and that was the way he thought had a huge effect on Proposition 6. If it's not an unknown, it's not scary. If it's a known, it's friendly and you understand, ' Oh that person that I know is gay, and this other person I know is gay'. That's partly how it works". The openly gay Hollywood director went on to say, " But people did come out.

It was his drive to just come out of the closet, lock the closet, and stay out, which was followed by many people. And really, it was his death request. If a bullet should enter his brain, may it knock down every closet door — that was his last request, his will, which probably extended to many people, including me, because I came out after he was killed". This is just one of the millions of examples on how Harvey Milk's ideals and aspiration for equality for homosexuals touched and affected the lives of many closeted ones.

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Milk's screenwriter Dustin Lance Black was quick to praise Harvey Milk's 'come out of the closet' ideal a really good solution to a problem that tons of people had diagnosed but had yet to offer any answers to in an interview with ABC Radio. In the same interview he said, " In the years that Harvey put that into place, that sort of philosophy into the campaign, he won an election and a month later he was able to defeat one of the biggest, most popular anti-gay pieces of legislation in our country. He was able to defeat it, very unexpectedly, with that philosophy".

The recent anti-Prop 8 movement however seemed to embrace the opposite tactic. It was a closeted campaign, devoid of a public face, largely dependent on straight spokespeople, and run with a wary defensiveness that would have driven Harvey Milk mad. The story and context of Milk, and of the times in which Harvey Milk lived and led, make clear the continuation of this struggle we still find ourselves in. As soon as you lose a battle, another one looms before, giving you another opportunity to try to win. You win a battle, and before you can catch your breath, another struggle is on the horizon.

We fall down only to pick ourselves back up again. Nothing about progress allows for much in the way of rest, but nor does it allow for much to remain stagnant. Harvey Milk's thoughts were ones that changed the world. His thoughts turned into full out ideologies and his ideologies in turn morphed into a revolution. The ever brilliant Gus Van Sant who has a certain knack for merging the lines between now and then delivers to us a biopic that brings back to life its subject. In the post-proposition 8 viewing of this film, we can now see the rise of a new generation of activist - ones that have been instilled with a new sense of hope.

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Just as Harvey Milk's assassination, which he repeatedly foretold, has meant that he remains frozen in time as a martyr, the Proposition 8 result has, for now, has redefined Milk as a cause. Gus Van Sant's 20 year long journey of bringing to life this culturally epic subject has cemented Harvey Milk's position as an ideological leader. "Lives of great men all remind us; we can make our lives sublime, and, departing, leave behind us, footprints on the sands of time" (Longfellow, 1838). Harvey Milk's footprints would have never been forgotten, but Milk has in a way reaffirmed this stand.

Gus Van Sant brought about a hero that was long gone and risen him from six feet under to be celebrated again as if he was never gone. Harvey Milk believed in one thing above all else and that was hope, Gus Van Sant brought back that hope. "I ask this... If there should be an assassination, I would hope that five, ten, one hundred, a thousand would rise. I would like to see every gay lawyer, every gay architect 'come out' - If a bullet should enter my brain, let that bullet destroy every closet door... And that's all. I ask for the movement to continue.

Because it's not about personal gain, not about ego, not about power... it's about the "us's" out there. Not only gays, but the Blacks, the Asians, the disabled, the seniors, the us's. Without hope, the us's give up - I know you cannot live on hope alone, but without it, life is not worth living. So you, and you, and you... You gotta give em' hope... you gotta give em' hope.", were the last lines of Milk. (2435 words) References: 1. Black, D. L. (2008)

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