

Changing the Face of Homosexuality through Film

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Film review of ***Eating Out*** by Q. Allan Brocka
2004 Pink Film Festival Entry

June 2004 marked the 10th Pride Month of lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgenders (LGBT) in the country. The Philippine cinema took part in the celebration through the Pink Film Festival 2004, the 2nd International Gay and Lesbian Film and Video Festival in the Philippines. The Festival, which was a collaborative effort of the Mowelfund Film Institute and ProGay Philippines, brought together film artists, the corporate sector, cultural leaders, and the international community in celebrating gay pride. But more than a celebration of pride, the Festival served as the LGBT sector's call for acknowledgment from other sectors of the Philippine society. Although there has been some progress on how the Philippine society views homosexuality, it is undeniable that the LGBT sector continues to be one of the marginalized groups in the country.

First organized in 1999, the Festival has come a long way. From 30 titles during the first festival, the 2004 festival had 40 titles from 15 countries. The titles included an Asian category, international film premieres, and the country's own films and videos.

Among the Philippine films that were screened were *Macho Dancer* by Lino Brocka, *Burlesk King* by Mel Chionglo, *Ang Lalaki sa Buhay ni Selya* by Carlos Siguion-Reyna, and *Pusong Mamon* by Joel Lamangan. The Festival also showcased the award-winning films directed by Nick De Ocampo and other gay and lesbian titles from the Mowelfund Film Institute and the University of the Philippines Film Institute.

A crowd favorite was the sex-comedy *Eating Out* by Hollywood-based director Q. Allan Brocka. The young director is the

nephew of the late National Artist for Film Lino Brocka. Though the two never met, the rise of Q. Allan Brocka in the filmmaking industry, particularly in the indie film category, proves the younger Brocka worthy of carrying the surname.

Eating Out has bagged awards from several international film festivals. Among these are the Levi's First Feature Award at the Frameline San Francisco International Lesbian and Gay Film Festival; Audience Award, Best Gay Film, and Best Film of the Festival at the Phoenix International Lesbian and Gay Film Festival; and Best Feature Film at the Honolulu Gay and Lesbian Film Festival. When the film was screened in New York, San Francisco, Toronto (Canada), and Auckland (New Zealand), all tickets were sold out.

The movie, which is a product of one of the director's screenwriting classes when he was a student at the California Institute of the Arts, revolves around the story of four college students. Caleb (Scott Lunsford) is every gay man's fantasy — perfectly sculptured body, a face that could launch a thousand Pride marches, sensitive, fresh out of a relationship, but straight. Kyle (Jim Verraros, an openly gay 2002 *American Idol* finalist) is the gay roommate of Caleb. Every bit a romantic, Kyle is a college student majoring in Music. While he can play the saxophone very well, he cannot seem to hit the right notes when it comes to the music of the heart. Whereas Caleb is the unattainable straight guy, Marc (Ryan Carnes) is the unattainable gay guy, at least for Kyle. Gifted with a gorgeous body and an amazing talent at playing the piano, Marc is *the* man of Kyle's dreams. What Kyle does not know is that Marc is just the same as he is, looking for the right guy who can sing a duet with his heart. Completing the quartet is Marc's ex-girlfriend Gwen (Emily Stiles). Gwen always ends up with the wrong guy, because each guy turns out to be gay, until Caleb comes along.

The film begins with Caleb walking out on his girlfriend, Tiffani, after another unsuccessful attempt at fulfilling her rape-fetish. Down in the dumps for a moment but not one to give up on finding the woman for him, Caleb joins gay roommate, Kyle, at a party. While drinking beer, Caleb is instantly smitten by a furious Gwen, who walks across the room screaming at a guy after finding out that he is, again,

gay. Given her vulnerability, Caleb immediately makes his move on Gwen hoping to get her attention, and eventually her love. However, instead of hooking up with the girl he wants, Caleb finds himself being hooked up by Gwen to her best friend, Marc. The confusion worsens when Kyle formulates a plan that had Caleb pretending to be gay, hoping that Gwen, who always falls for gays, would fall for Caleb and Marc would finally notice Kyle. Regrettably, the plan fails and for a moment, Kyle loses both Caleb and Marc.

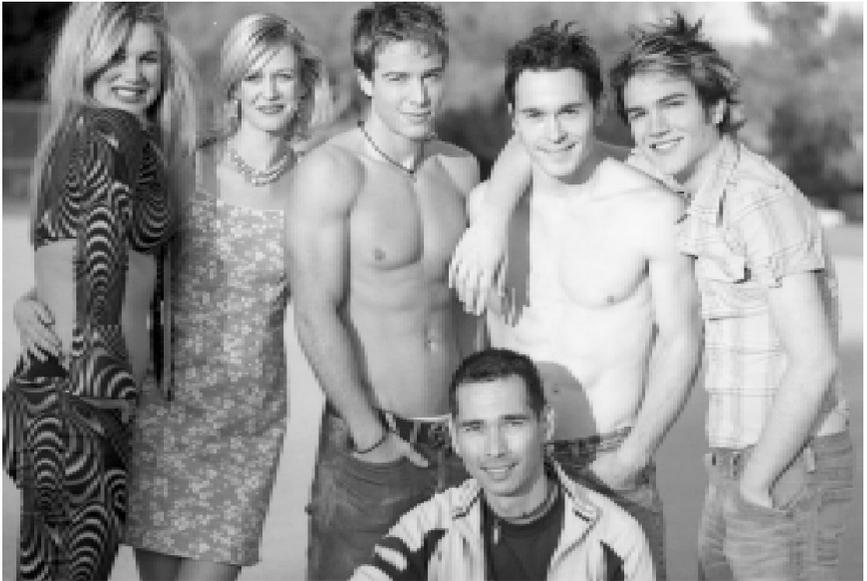
The film reaches its climax when Kyle decides to host a dinner for Marc and Caleb. The dinner turns into a riot as Kyle invites the family of Caleb, and an uninvited Tiffani also shows up. Over a dinner of some extremely huge sausages, all the wrong secrets are revealed to Caleb's family. Fortunately, the baffling situation is cleared up right after Caleb's family and ex-girlfriend leave and the two pairs of best friends are left in the house. The movie ends with Gwen shrieking in rapture, having found out that Caleb was not really gay and that he was in love with her. On the other hand, Kyle finally finds himself with the man he wants to play his music to, Marc.

The film is delightfully funny, light-hearted, and sexy. One can observe that the director uses satire and romantic comedy as approaches in treating the film. Satire is a literary technique of writing or art that makes fun of its subject (Wikipedia 2004). On the other hand, romantic comedy refers to a specific type of story that revolves around the romantic relationship of two people, whose primary components are romance and comedy (Krutnik 2002).

Some filmmakers of the romantic comedy genre have notably begun to produce movies that cater to a specific audience defined by sexual orientation. In the past two decades, niche audiences have been targeted by these filmmakers, and groups that used to be marginalized or ignored in cinema began to be portrayed sympathetically in film. The inclusion of gay relationships in comedies is a noteworthy development since the early 1990s. Independent films whose target audiences are primarily the gay and lesbian community began to bring homosexuality and same-sex relationships onto the big screen. Gay characters and scenarios have also been included in other films that are targeted for wider audiences (Krutnik 2002). Examples of such

movies are *The Broken Hearts Club: A Romantic Comedy* and *Trick*, both released in 1999. These movies provided its audience with a look into the lives of gays and lesbians.

Brocka employs humor in *Eating Out*, instead of issues melodrama. The latter is a sub-genre under melodrama where current events are portrayed dramatically, with the hope that a moving scene will evoke an emotion from the audience (Wikipedia 2004). One of the controversial movies that used issues melodrama was *The Priest*, produced in 1994, which features a gay Catholic priest struggling with his homosexuality amid his responsibilities as a man of God. Another movie that employed issues melodrama was *Soldier's Girl*, which was released in 2003. The movie was adapted from the real-life tragic story of Barry Winchell, a young US soldier who was beaten to death for falling in love with Calpernia Addams, a transgendered performer in a local nightclub located just outside the military base.



(From left to right) *Eating Out* cast Tifanni (Rebekah Kochan), Gwen (Emily Stiles), Marc (Ryan Carnes), Caleb (Scott Lunsford), and Kyle (Jim Verraros) pose with director Q. Allan Brocka (seated). Retrieved from <http://www.ariztical.com/images/eatingout/group-director-copy.jpg> on August 5, 2004.

Instead of using issues melodrama as a filmic treatment for *Eating Out*, Brocka chose to veer away from the portrayal of homosexuals as lonely and suicidal people whose lives seem to, more often than not, end in tragedy. Films like *The Priest* and *Soldier's Girl* used issues melodrama in their treatment primarily because the issues that were discussed — homosexuality and homophobia in the Catholic church and the military — called for a dramatic treatment. In *Eating Out*, instead of a melodramatic treatment, Q. Allan Brocka used humor to show the audience another reality — that gay men can and actually lead a happy life.

The movie portrays the gay characters as college students who are just like other college students. This manner of presenting homosexuality is more effective in gaining audience sympathy, regardless of the audience's sexual preference, because the audience can see that the gay community is similar in many ways to the heterosexual community. Furthermore, such a movie, through the use of satire, can spark change in how the gay community is viewed by society (Wikipedia 2004). Although the film may appear to be non-political, a more critical examination shows that it contributes to changing the stereotype images of the homosexual.

Identity is one of the key issues that concern members of the LGBT community. The latter's stereotype images have resulted in distorted identities of these individuals, both in the eyes of the larger society as well as their own. But the times are changing and the identities that were associated with homosexuals during the past decades have significantly changed. It is important that the heterosexual community, as well as the homosexual community, be aware of the continuing transformation of the image of the homosexual. After all, how the homosexual community views itself and how the heterosexual community views the homosexual community have a significant impact on the lives of homosexuals (Dyer 1993).

In his book on the images of different sectors of society, Dyer (1993) writes that the way a social group is represented will affect the way the members of the group construct an identity for themselves and the way they perceive other members of the group, find the roles they play in the societies they belong, and demand for the same rights

accorded to other social groups. Needless to say, a negative representation of the homosexual community will have negative consequences on the members of the community.

The word “homosexual” or “fag” often conjures images of a man whose wrists are limp and talks like a woman. Meanwhile, the word “lesbian” or “dyke” immediately evokes images of a woman who dresses and acts like a man. More often than not, members of the homosexual community are recognized on the basis of superficial images such as the haircut one sports, the clothes that one wears, and the manner by which one carries himself or herself. For example, gay men are often associated with a good fashion sense and refined manners, which are both seen as feminine (Dyer 1993).

Orquiola (1991) observes that in Philippine society, the images of homosexuals seem to be limited to those who are extremely effeminate. In most Filipino films and television shows, a gay man is often portrayed as weak, someone who is mocked by other people including those he calls his friends, and who feels that he is a woman trapped in a man’s body. Conversely, a lesbian is often depicted as someone who looks masculine, refuses to wear makeup and women’s clothes, and feels that she is a man trapped in a woman’s body. Undoubtedly, film and television have been and continue to be two major players in shaping the homosexual identity and influencing the perception of homosexuality (De Ocampo 1993). Given these images of homosexuality and conservative traditional Filipino values, it is easy to understand why members of the Filipino homosexual community find it difficult to come to terms with themselves.

Many fail to recognize the existence of several types of gays and lesbians. Some types of gays and lesbians are the *bear* (a somewhat stouter than the average man, who has more body hair than most men), the *bisexual* (a male or female person who can be attracted to both homosexuals and heterosexuals), the *butch lesbian* (a lesbian who possesses characteristics that are masculine), the *bull dyke* (a lesbian who is aggressive and masculine), the *closeted case* (a person who pretends to be heterosexual to avoid being associated with homosexuals), the *cross-dresser* (a gay man who practices dressing in clothes traditionally of the opposite sex), the *drag queen* (a gay man who dresses as a woman

for performances in a club), the *flame* (an effeminate gay man who extravagantly and flamboyantly flaunts his effeminate traits), the *lipstick lesbian* (a lesbian who prefers to put on make up and look conventionally feminine), the *transgender* (a person who gets a thrill from dressing and behaving as one of the opposite sex), and the *twink* (a gay man who is in his early twenties) (Scott 1999).

On the other hand, sociologists Stephen T. Holmes and Ronald M. Holmes offer a different set of homosexual types. According to them, there are seven types: The first type is the *secret homosexual* who chooses to keep his homosexuality to himself. The second type is the *blatant homosexual* who is identifiable to everyone because his homosexuality is manifested through his clothing style, speech, and mannerisms. On the other hand, there is also the *adjusted homosexual* who admits to being gay but does not necessarily display his homosexuality. Meanwhile, the *institutional homosexual* does not have a gay self-image. These are the homosexuals who engage in gay sex because the opposite sex is not present in their environment (e.g. military, prison). The last two types are the *homosexual prostitute* and the *homosexual pedophile*. The former tends to be young – as young as 15 – and engages in prostitution for economic reasons while the latter is attracted to children (De Koven 2003).

Dr. Romeo Lee, a Behavioral Science professor from the De La Salle University, writes that people tend to fall into the habit of judging a book by its cover when it comes to homosexuality, simply because they do not understand the other facets of homosexuality (Arguelles & Amojelar 1992). However, with the increasing depiction and portrayal of gay and lesbian characters and themes in local films, as well as on television, along with events such as the Pink Film Festival and movies such as *Eating Out*, the image of the homosexual community is slowly starting to broaden. Lee observes that traditional images of gay men as being effeminate and lesbians as being *butch* are slowly fading (Arguelles & Amojelar 1992). While these images will continue to be part of the images of the homosexual community, these are indications that the Filipino society in general is beginning to open its eyes other faces of homosexuality.

Gay and lesbian films play a major role in expanding the spectrum of images of homosexuals. In *Eating Out*, the gay characters appear to be just like any heterosexual men, in terms of the first thing that one notices about a person – the physical appearance. If one puts Caleb in a context outside of the film, such as in a crowded bar on a Friday night in Malate, it would be difficult to identify whether he is gay or straight. While he possesses qualities that are often associated with heterosexual men (e.g., manner of speaking and the way he carries himself), there are also certain aspects of him that some, in this case his parents, may consider as homosexual (e.g., the form-fitting clothes and the styled hair). The same thing will also be seen for the gay characters in the film. Kyle and Marc both display characteristics that one may consider heterosexual.

Going beyond the physical appearance of the characters, one observes that the lifestyle of the characters illustrated in the film is not different from the lifestyle of heterosexuals, except that some of the characters are gay. The gay characters in the film attend college, like the heterosexual characters. They enjoy participating in activities that their heterosexual counterparts usually engage in – dating, falling in and out of love, partying, and hanging out with friends. Though this may appear to be a trivial observation, this manner of representing the homosexual is essential in changing the image of the homosexual community.

In addition to the issue of homosexual identity, *Eating Out* also touches on the issue of homosexuality in general. The film gives a picture of the gay characters as people who are comfortable and happy with themselves. The living setup where a heterosexual man and a homosexual man are roommates also tears down the stereotype that heterosexual men are uncomfortable around gay men. Another remarkable scene in the film is the date of Marc and Caleb. A small get-together is being held at the home of Marc's Music professor. He brings Caleb with him to the party. At the house of the professor, Marc casually introduces Caleb to the other guests as his date. The reaction of people to what Marc said is positive. In fact, people express happiness for Marc because, finally, he has found a man. Also, during the dinner hosted by Marc where Gwen tells Caleb's family that he is

gay, the reaction of the family is far from the common experience of many gay men when they come out to their families. Instead of meeting the announcement that their son is gay with rejection and disappointment, the parents of Caleb give him a hug, reaffirm their love for him, and express their full support to their son. Homophobia appears to be absent in the movie. It renders being gay as part of everyday life, expressing the homosexual community's hopes about how the attitude of society towards homosexuality would be in the coming years.

With films like *Eating Out*, changing the identity of the gay man, not just in the Philippines but all over the world, progresses. It should be said, however, that the construction of a new identity for the homosexual community concerns not only the community itself, but also the mass media and society in general. On the part of the mass media, it is hoped that a portrayal of the homosexual broader than the traditional stereotypes is seen more in film, television, and other media. For the greater community, an increase in awareness and a change in how the gay man is viewed are anticipated. The homosexual community is, after all, composed of various peoples — students, teachers, scholars, professionals, managers, laborers, sons, daughters, and parents.

Finally, for the LGBT community, there is optimism that through films such as *Eating Out*, the community will be encouraged to engage more actively in the construction of its own identity and changing the larger society's perceptions about the LGBT community. Consequently, establishing and changing the identity of homosexuality may lead to greater tolerance and acceptance of homosexuality by society. Hopefully, both the heterosexual and homosexual communities will eventually declare without hesitation, "It's okay to be gay".

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