



Milk (2008) and The Times of Harvey Milk (1984): The Double Filmic Resurrection of the Mayor of Castro Street

by Sara Villa

"If a bullet should enter my brain let that bullet destroy every closet door." (Milk qtd. in R. Shilts 1982: 444) This sentence was recorded by Harvey Milk just one week after his appointment as the first openly gay man elected to a political office in the United States. The tape with his recorded will was to be played in the event of his assassination. Eleven months later, on one of the saddest days in San Francisco's political history, Milk was shot to death together with Mayor George Moscone, as he had so clearly foreseen in his recording, after a terrifying series of death threats.

Both the recently successful biopic *Milk* (2008), directed by Gus Van Saint, and its prestigious predecessor, academy-award winning documentary *The Times of Harvey Milk* (1984), choose to take a non-martyrological perspective¹ on this tragedy and to use the reappearance of Milk's figure on screen as a two-fold soothing ritual. On the one hand, these films function as a memorial reactivation of his speeches and active political approach in defense of gay and civil rights, in two highly heated historical moments for the GLBT community: the AIDS anti-gay backlash of the 80s² and the

¹ In an interview on *The Times of Harvey Milk* producer Robert Epstein argued: "I think it would be a mistake if he gets too sanctified. His story is significant because he was such an everyman. He was a man of history in that he understood what kind of leadership was necessary." A. Willmore, Interview: Rob Epstein on "The Times of Harvey Milk", 24th November 2008, <<http://www.ifc.com/news/2008/11/interview-rob-epstein-on-the-t.php>> (10th July 2010)

² In 1981 even newspaper headlines were identifying the new disease with a terminology that included "gay pneumonia" and "gay-related immune deficiency" and indirectly contributed to a homophobic climate which was associated the pandemics with the sole homosexual community. (M. D. Grmek, R.C. Maulitz, J. Duffin 1993: 2-16)



Proposition 8 debate over gay marriage of the years 2000³. On the other hand, these cinematographic productions help the unending process of public mourning which, for this iconic figure of the gay movement, as well as for Mayor George Moscone, is still ongoing.

The tragic event is therefore tragically reenacted on screen at the very beginning of both movies, not only as a reminder of the ultimate sacrifice that two major defenders of civil rights had to undergo, but also to remove it from being the films' ending and thus, the symbolic signifier that their fight against discrimination of any kind was lost. In both movies death rather becomes a leitmotif which is constantly exorcised and overcome by Milk's belief in the constitutional keystone of equal rights for all American citizens, as well as by his fight to give a finally hearable political voice to the gay community from within the establishment.

From a more personal perspective, Milk's political action was also a way to defy his own fears of death, in a historical moment when being homosexual implied being under the threat of anti-gay raids by the police, arrestation, job loss, psychiatric treatment, and both private and public violence which could even include murder (N. Miller 1995: 362-366).

The gloomy, lingering presence of a premature end is stressed in both movies from an extremely sensitive and intimate point of view. *The Times of Harvey Milk* lets his friends and collaborators speak about it: Anne Knonenberg (Milk's campaign manager) thus touchingly stresses the difficulty in bearing the amount of hate mail they kept receiving during and after Milk's political candidacy, while friend Steve Ammiato, a teacher manifesting against Proposition 6 (which aimed at banning homosexuals from working in California's public school system) (K. A. Foss 2007:84), admits that when he heard on the radio about Harvey's death he suddenly felt as if they had always known it was going to happen. *Milk*, on the other hand, shows it from the perspective of the politician's private life, in a touching scene where, on his 40th birthday, Harvey says to his lover Scott Smith that he will "not make it to fifty years old". This reference is made again in the movie when, at the very peak of Milk's political career, during his crowded birthday party, Scott jokingly comments "maybe you will then make it to 50 years old

³ Proposition 8, also named California Marriage Protection Act, was passed in November 2008 and states that "Only marriage between a man and a woman is valid or recognized in California." (Original Text of Proposition 8

<<http://voterguide.sos.ca.gov/past/2008/general/text-proposed-laws/text-of-proposed-laws.pdf#prop8>> (10th July 2010). On 4th August 2010 Judge Vaugh Walker declared Proposition 8 to be unconstitutional, since it "8 fails to advance any rational basis in singling out gay men and lesbians for denial of a marriage license" (qtd. in R. Barnes and S. Somashekhar "Judge strikes California's ban on same-sex marriage, Proposition 8" in Washington Post, 5th August 2010

<<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2010/08/04/AR2010080400716.html>> (5th August 2010)



after all," and the film audience is once again reminded of the awful unnaturalness of Milk's death by murder.

For the gay community, Milk's end was a tragic shock which became a watershed as powerful as Stonewall⁴. As pointed out by Tory Hartmann (Harvey Milk's political consultant) in *The Times of Harvey Milk*, the first reaction to his ultimate sacrifice for human rights was, for many homosexuals, to come out, and proudly assume their identity in public as a sign of indignation for what had occurred. At the same time, the tragedy brought the nation's media spotlight on San Francisco as the place where homosexuals were not only glad to be identified as such, but also willing to fight for equal rights even at the cost of their lives. The heterosexual empathy which Milk had attracted during his career, trying to work in favour of all San Francisco's minorities (including the Asian, Black and Senior sections of the community) was also shared after his murder beyond the boundaries of California (J. Loughery 1998: 400-401).

However, there is another way in which death did mark Milk's life and both biopic and documentary manage to reveal it in very interesting ways. The New York City Milk one encounters in the first half of these works is a standard financial analyst of Jewish origins, in his three-piece-suit, who *happens* to be gay (N. Miller 1995: 396-398). He could be fired for his homosexuality in a 1960s America where being gay is a criminal act⁵ and a mental disease listed on the Diagnostic and Statistic Manual of the American Psychiatric Association (R. L. Spitzer 1981: 210-215). This initial Milk is not only closeted, but also obliges his boyfriends to conceal their shared sexual preference. In *Milk* the protagonist warns Scott Smith that he could be arrested for kissing him in the subway and laughingly suggests him to love in a safer way. In *The Times of Harvey Milk*, the voice off informs us that all of Milk's friends believed he was a very conventional fellow until he started becoming an associate producer of Broadway shows.

The closeted Milk, in fact, dies when his financial analyst persona starts going hippie, befriends with key figures of New York's theatre avant-garde, including *Hair* director Tom O'Horgan, grows a pony tail, burns his credit card while manifesting against the Vietnam war, and finally moves to San Francisco, to remove, once and for all, the closet's door (R. Shilts 1982: 43-46). Death, in Milk's life, as well as in the movies inspired to it, also means the liberation from an old self which had suffered the constant fear of discrimination. This may be one of the reasons why *Milk's* opening titles are coupled with images of police anti-gay raids in several bars, together with the

⁴ On 26 June 1969 an anti-gay police raid to the Stonewall Inn in New York City led to a violent confrontation between the GLBT customers who were attending the bar and the agents.

⁵ Only in 1980 the New York Court of Appeals ruled that "the state's consensual sodomy law was unconstitutional" (Aa. Vv., "Sodomy Repeal and Privacy", Undated, <<http://www.prideagenda.org/IssuesExplained/SodomyRepealandPrivacy/tabid/96/Default.aspx>> (10th July 2010) In 1978 the Supreme Court of the United States did not overturn the sentence of a man who was convicted of having consensual sex with another man (C. E. Morris III 2007:362-364)



related newspaper headlines of the time, such as "Police Start Crackdown on Homosexual Bar and Arrest 6" (Miami Herald, 17th November 1971).

Discrimination per se, as Milk pointed out, wasn't the only type of death-in-life for a gay individual. The conspiracy of silence, or death by invisibility, which followed the terror of prejudice was another form of moral ending for a gay homosexual, to endure within private walls. Not surprisingly, this soon became one of the most memorable recurring themes of Milk's Political discourse: the toxic, deathful nature of the closet:

"You must come out [...] Break down the myths, destroy the lies and distortions. For your sake. For their sake [the sake of the people you know] For the sake of the youngsters who are becoming scared by the votes from Dade to Eugene [where gay rights ordinances were being repealed.]" (H. Milk qtd. in R. Shilts 1982: 438-439)

It seems almost natural, then, to find Harvey's own speeches accompanying archive footage of the Castro in *The Times of Harvey Milk*, or uttered by Sean Penn during a staged version of 1978's Gay Freedom Day Parade in San Francisco. Both movies directly quote his words in favor of coming out as a form of liberation, but also as a political tool to pave the way for full integration.

At that time fighting against the internalized taboo of homosexuality, and the subsequent secrecy of gay life, meant contradicting the same dictates of the gay businessmen who had slowly gained political clout, such as Jim Foster and Rick Stokes. Founders of the Alice B. Toklas Memorial Democratic Club, which actively worked against sexual discrimination, Foster and Stokes had gained the help of liberal politicians, but still preferred to support gay-friendly heterosexual candidates rather than openly gay ones (W. L. Williams and Y. Retter 2003:146-150). In *Milk*, a scene presents us with a meeting between them and Harvey, where the soon-to-be supervisor stands out as a brand new, uncloseted type of political candidate for the whole GLBT community.

In Milk's own life the acceptance of the closet signified a death almost as bad as that by assassination. It meant the passive acceptance of a stigma for a condition which nobody could fully accept unless it was spoken out. This is why in both the documentary and the biopic dedicated to Milk strong focus is given to the full, public assumption of queerness both as a form of rebirth and as the most positive reaction to discrimination.

Yet, coming out was far from being a safe move, even after the Stonewall riots and within the boundaries of a city area, The Castro, that was coming to be known as a gay enclave (N. Miller 1995: 395-396). Two weeks after the repeal of Miami-Dade County's anti-discrimination ordinance, which granted equal rights to homosexuals in the workplace, a San Franciscan gardener, Robert Hillsborough, was stabbed to death. The reason for his death was his being a "Faggot," as shouted loud by the murderers who stabbed him fifteen times (R. Shilts 1982: 183-188). The episode is fully reminded in *Milk*, in a fictional scene where Harvey is asked to recognize the body of the man,



identified by the policeman as “a fruit who was walking home with his trick.”(*Milk*, Scene 4)

Mediatically speaking, as happened with the police harassment of homosexuals in gay bars, these deaths by prejudice rarely hit the nationwide news. Being gay, as Anita Bryant was proudly arguing during her Save the Children campaign (N. Miller, 1995: 402-405), was a “deviant lifestyle” (A. Bryant qtd. in *Playboy* May 1978: 74), it was not normal, nor wanted by God. How could therefore a gay death raise the indignation of the press? Sadly, this is the type of rhetoric on which Ms Bryant based her whole discriminating politics. Both movies thus preferred to have her original voice speak her hatred toward homosexuality, which was always disguised as a generous desire to reaffirm the law of God on Earth.

Unfortunately, her declarations are a shockingly remarkable example of the homophobic climate which surrounded not only hers, but also Senator Briggs’ political activism against homosexual teachers. As Jim Elliott (auto machinist and union member who became a friend of Harvey Milk during the Coors beer boycott) argues in *The Times of Harvey Milk*, unfortunately at that time for many people the taking of a homosexual’s life could be seen almost as “a service to society” (*The Times of Harvey Milk*: Scene 10).

Yet something completely different did happen when Milk’s life was tragically ended by Dan White. The first gay politician elected in city office in the USA served for only eleven months, passing the first San Francisco gay rights ordinance, but also working in favor of the other minorities which inhabited district no. 5. He had demonstrated he was both happy to be a “queer”, immigrated into the city and glad to have become a sharp, self-scarifying politician who wanted to represent all his citizens. He had made his homosexuality open and had fully associated it to his political fight for civil rights, so that the negative stigma on homosexuality could be removed through a political action which defended all (K. A. Foss 2007:74-77). His death, unlike that of many gay victims, couldn’t but become part of the hit news. As he said to an interviewer soon after his election, he was now a gay within the establishment: “They now have to deal with me and it feels fantastic.” (Interview qtd. in *The Times of Harvey Milk*, Scene 6)

Nonetheless, as Frances Fitzgerald points out in *The Times of Harvey Milk*, his death “seemed the end of the Castro.” (F. Fitzgerald in *The Times of Harvey Milk*: Scene 10) And the White Night Riots which followed the shockingly bland sentence of Dan White to 8 years of prison for manslaughter expressed the violence which this minimization of Milk’s death had unleashed. The appalling violence of that day is only rapidly quoted in the biopic, which prefers to visually end the movie on what happened immediately after the politician’s death. The same night of the assassinations, a peaceful, silent candlelight vigil of thousands people filled the Castro and reached City Hall in a respectful and sadness-filled atmosphere.

As with many other scenes of *Milk*, several people who did participate to the original march became part of the film’s corresponding scene. However, remembering Milk’s and Moscone’s murders with such detail was extremely hard to emotionally



stand. When interviewed about the film, George Moscone's son Jonathan admitted that he was glad to lend for the movie the only thing he had left of his father, a tie, but that he couldn't manage to watch the final cut (qtd. in Bajko 21st August 2008). Similarly to what had happened for *The Times of Harvey Milk*, trying to see the movie would mean leaving the theatre after the first images of his father's assassination.

For the families and closest friends of both Harvey Milk and George Moscone their tragic deaths are still as hard to endure now as they were in 1984 when *The Times of Harvey Milk* won the academy award for best documentary. Nevertheless, in both cases, most of them participated, in one way or another, to the making of the films and their contribution became another form of elaboration of such appalling loss. Many appeared, through interviews, official roles and cameos, onscreen. In *Milk*, Cleve Jones can be seen on the stage of the San Francisco Gay parade as Don Amador, Danny Nicoletta has a cameo inside City Hall, while Milk's speech writer Frank M. Robinson and Alan Baird – the official Coor Boycott Organizer - played their own selves (See related interviews in *Milk's Extras*). With these choices Dustin Lance Black followed the documentaristic approach of *The Times of Harvey Milk*, in order to be faithful both to Milk and to his closest human legacy.

As Black reminded during his thank you speech at the academy award ceremony, *Milk* serves not only as a way to remember the man and politician many years after his tragic death, but also shows that his was a real life-saving story (D. L. Back 2008). Several young GLBT, in fact, learning of his appointment to the board of supervisor in San Francisco, could finally assume their gender identity as something normal, and often chose to fight for its full acceptance wherever they lived. One of the aims of producing a biopic of Milk, after the 1984 documentary, was therefore to make his story known to a new generation of gays who were similarly struggling, but may have never heard of him before. The real hope was to let his example of indefatigable political activism give hope to the still impressive number of homosexuals who choose death to escape homophobia.

Among those who attempted suicide were many of Milk's own friends and lovers, including his last companion, Jack Lira, who sadly managed to take his life. Days after this tragedy, numerous notes of sympathy reached Milk's office, often "from other lesbians and gay men who had lost their lovers in to suicide, often after they'd been arrested on a trumpet-up charge, fired from a job or dishonorably discharged from the military." (R. Shilts 1982: 276) Hope and love for life were central to Milk's own political drive and individual character, and they worked as an almost instinctive reply to the gloomy presence of death which had first distinguished his private love life and had then become part of his political career.

Both *The Times of Harvey Milk* and *Milk* leave at their very beginnings the section of Milk's testament where he shows his consciousness of being a target: "I fully realize that a person who stands for what I stand for – a gay activist – becomes the target or potential target for a person who is insecure, terrified, afraid or very disturber themselves." (Milk qtd. in R. Shilts 1982: 444-445) To Anne Kronenberg, the day of the 1978 Gay Day Parade was the moment when she became most scared of seeing a



bullet enter Milk's body, as she argued in *The Times of Harvey Milk*. In the most recent biopic we are given a couple of examples of the hate mail which Milk kept receiving, often promising him torture as awful as genital mutilation.

What has been defined as Milk's "hope litany" (J. Loughery 1998: 399) was the politician's main reply to the escalation of anonymous threats against him. It was a political discourse constantly focused on the necessity to give hope to every minority which suffered the physical and psychological aggression of discrimination. Some of the most precious documents of Milk's legacy are such discourses in favor of equal rights and this has led Richard Epstein and Dustin Lance Black to leave them as the most meaningful comment to their movies' ending shots.

On the one hand, *Milk* closely follows the whole 24 hours preceding Harvey's death, showing him on the phone in the middle of the night with his former lover, talking about *Tosca*. This particular conversation is purely fictional, even though the two were still very close, and Scott was soon identified as Milk's widow after the tragic events of 27th November 1978. Nonetheless, the scene's dialogue is not very far from what truly happened. A similar statement of Milk on the beauty of life as the one we hear him saying on the phone in *Milk*, was part of a letter that he wrote on that same night to a friend, ending it with the words "Life is worth living!" (Milk qtd. in D L. Black 2008: 112)

The very final scenes of the movie, after the assassination, show the candlelight march with quotes from Milk's "Hope Speech" (qtd. in R. Shilts 1982: 426-432) as a voice over, and the very last image left to the audience is not that of a corpse, but of the man finishing his recorded will, followed by written captions informing the public of the human legacy of Harvey Milk. Several activists who worked with him, such as Clive Jones, soon became some of the key voices of the Gay Liberation Front during the AIDS crisis and have been working for years in favour of integration. The death of Harvey Milk is therefore symbolically exorcised at the end of the biopic with a powerful message of ongoing activism that resurrects the politician's example and follows his desire to maintain and expand the movement for gay rights.

The Times of Harvey Milk, faithful to its documentary style, prefers on the other hand to leave room for the trial of Dan White, and show the reactions of the press and of the community to his only five and a half years he served in prison. The street violence which followed his sentence – now known under the name of White Night Riots – turned the Castro into a warfare area for hours. After this shocking, yet truthful digression, where Milk's friends express their disappointment and profound disapproval for a sentence which had turned a double murder into voluntary manslaughter, the tone of this film unexpectedly switches to a more optimistic note, in a way similar to Milk's public and private persona. The final images of the documentary are extremely similar to those ending *Milk*. They show Harvey's political activism and fervor, and his happy hand-shaking and marching for the gay parade is accompanied by the same speech chosen by Dustin Lance Black, when the politician argues that:



"You have to give them [the young gay people in the Altoona, Pennsylvanias and the Richmond, Minnesotas who are coming out] hope. Hope for a better world, hope for a better tomorrow, hope for a better place to come if the pressures at home are too great. [...] Without hope not only gays, but the blacks, the seniors, the handicapped, the us'es, the us'es will give up." (qtd. in R. Shilts 1982: 431-432)

The similarity of these final cuts is not only due to the desire, shared by their directors, to ritualistically leave the audience with a positive message of resurgence and survival over tragedy and death. The biopic *Milk* in fact wishes to resurrect both the history of the first gay supervisor of the USA and that of *The Times of Harvey Milk*. After the academy award ceremony, in fact, the latter production sadly followed the destiny of most documentaries: it was poorly distributed through the USA and its attempt of "getting Milk's story out there" (R. Epstein qtd. in Willmore 2008) did not last long.

One of the reasons of this quick disappearance was the initial homophobic reaction to HIV. In 1982 what was initially called GRID (Gay Related Immune Deficiency) was renamed AIDS (Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome), but the constant reference to the link between homosexuality and the new pandemics remained both in the public press and in the general social arena. The homophobic reactions to the disease scare were heightened by the uncertainty on its real causes. The human immunodeficiency virus was discovered on April 23rd 1984, months after the Academy Award Ceremony which cautiously introduced *The Times of Harvey Milk* as "a film about America's values and conflicts." (Official Academy Award Ceremony)

Twenty-four years later, Milk was welcomed by the mainstream audiences during another crucial year for the debate over GLBT rights in the United States. 2008 was critically marked by the ban on gay marriage through Proposition 8 in California, and it was, therefore, the perfect moment to revive both Milk's exemplary activism for civil rights and the public's interest toward the documentary which first brought him on screen. It was a positive and anti-discriminatory artistic stand in defense of equal rights, on the same wavelength of Milk's own political fight. In addition, *Milk* managed to reopen the closet where *The Times of Harvey Milk* had been abandoned during the HIV anti-gay scare. The biopic thus almost overturned the constant motif of death which distinguishes its narrative, by becoming a powerful reminder of Harvey Milk and his story, as well as a tribute to the first film production which resurrected and celebrated his committed, self-sacrificing political action in favor of equal rights for all.

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Sara Villa is a 2010-2011 ICASP (<www.improvcommunity.ca>) postdoctoral fellow at CREUM Université de Montréal with a project on Jazz Poetry and the Beat Generation. In 2008-2010 she was a research fellow in a joint program between the Center for Jazz Studies at Columbia University and the State University of Milan, where she received her PhD in 2008. She is the translator into Italian of *Windblown World* (Kerouac's journals), and the editor of a forthcoming collection of Kerouac's jazz writings. She is also the author of articles on Virginia Woolf, and on Anglo-American contemporary cinema. Her monograph on Woolf's Orlando (*I due Orlando: dal romanzo di Virginia Woolf all'adattamento cinematografico di Sally Potter/Two Orlandos: From Virginia Woolf's Novel to Sally Potter's Film Adaptation*) was recently published by CUEM, Milan.

sara.villa@unimi.it