

In Defense of Cholodenko: A Commentary

[This is a longer, unadulterated version of the commentary posted originally on CherryGrrl.com. Please be warned that there are unmarked spoilers in this commentary.]

As a base, begin with a lesbian independent film director.
Mix in three parts, amazing actors.
Stir in one volatile and hypersensitive community.

Add ice.
Shake.
Pour.

You now officially have your “The Kids Are All Right” cocktail.

I considered posting a review to the film, as my (now) ex-girlfriend and I had the opportunity to see it during limited release. I was a spectator, and I went into the film with no intent to discuss it through my outlet on CherryGrrl.

After the viewing, I was not certain that I would have the time to commit to the thorough and necessary analysis that such a high-quality film would deserve. It becomes difficult, as I usually have about ten to fifteen other things “on my plate” to write at any given time. Unfortunately, writing and editing for a living inhibits the ability to do so for leisure. But I digress.

My ex and I had quite a few discussions about the film, and we had a few differences of opinion on it. She actually supported the more mainstream lesbian outcry, and I agree that there were some elements that ruffled my queer feathers. I believe that the film succeeds in that way, by making people talk and debate about it. Debate, especially, people have. As critics continue to rave about it, discuss the possibilities of Annette Bening's Academy Award nomination and generally, dance a big circle around Lisa Cholodenko's labor of love, the negative reviews have jived to the beat of something else. The negative reviews, predominantly have come from those within the lesbian community. As a lesbian herself, in reply to a slew of negative comments, Cholodenko had this to say, “Maybe those people need to take their pink megaphone somewhere else.”

I have read some of the negative reviews by my colleagues and was not surprised to see the remarks shot in the direction of the film and it's major plot conflict: the affair of a seemingly lesbian mom with her children's sperm donor.

What did surprise me, though, was the vitriol spewed in Cholodenko's direction. The words used, from within the LGBTQ community she arguably *has* made films for (High Art, Laurel Canyon), like “traitor” and “sell-out” ring particularly interesting to me as an artist fighting daily to make things that resonate with me, first and foremost. So it goes without saying that the topic evoked a passionate response from me, in fact, it's this one. I was angry, frustrated and above all, disappointed by these self-appointed “critics,” who not only taint the work, but in the midst of stating their opinions with an air of authority over queer issues, discouraged others from seeing it for themselves.

At the very core of the argument here, is a general displeasure with the ease at which Julianne Moore's character commits adultery with the sperm donor of her children, played by Mark Ruffalo. Supposedly (according to aforementioned critics), this act perpetuates the stereotypes that lesbianism is not real and

can, in fact, be “reversed” by sexual intercourse with a functioning male. In addition to that big gay “no-no,” the other disservice that Cholodenko's film apparently does to “her people,” is the massive contrast between the lesbian sex scenes versus the gratuitous and lengthy heterosexual ones.

I will attempt to address these complaints in the language I'm most familiar with: snarky.

Call me a radical here, but does Lisa Cholodenko owe you or me something when we paid our \$13 dollars at the theater? Ultimately, you hope a film abides by the unspoken agreement between filmmakers and audiences to not make me sit through something that sucks (which, for those of us who saw G.I. Joe or any Michael Bay film ever, know is not often upheld).

Is it suddenly our job, as artists, to fight the battles of our respective communities? Is Tyler Perry humiliating his race by having Sanaa Lathan have an affair with a caucasian man in 2008's “The Family That Preys?” What about the commitment to the human race to tell stories that have meaning?

My other frustration with these statements was the very easily omitted fact that for once, the heterosexual male is not the dominant plot device? He is the sensitive one in this film, the character that changes, and loses, the most. Was the lesbian community so busy collectively taking notes and loading up their strap-ons with lubricated bullets that they missed that one focal point when the man doesn't break up the family, and doesn't “turn” the woman straight?

Did it ever occur to anyone that maybe that's the point? That maybe this movie just-so-happens to have a lesbian family in the same way that the object of Sanaa Lathan's affection just-so-happens to be white?

Fundamentally, this film is what the LGBTQ community should be happy they're finally getting, and it's an example on how torn as a collective we are on what matters most: how we want to be portrayed. We rant about how we want equal-footing and want to be seen the same as everyone else, but we had representation like flamboyant Jack on “Will & Grace,” and rampant opiate-fueled sex parties on “Queer As Folk.” When we finally get a film that says, “Hey, we're not the same as you, but look, we fuck up too,” from a lesbian filmmaker, we're too busy complaining because we would have preferred that the Moore's character had an affair with a woman?

From a story standpoint, can someone tell me at what point was there ever an indication that Julianne Moore or Annette Bening's characters were from-the-womb lesbians? How do we know that? Is it because they're married and have children? Perhaps they're lesbians because they're in a committed and long-term relationship at the point that we witness the film. We are spectators, and we need to remember that. In any of the aforementioned scenarios, we, as viewers, are easily as guilty of the same idiotic, presumptuous and baseless behavior that is evoked when two attractive women walk down the street holding hands.

I have cheated and I have been cheated on, and I can say, with one-hundred per cent certainty that I will never have an affair with a man. But was I able to identify with the feelings of confusion? Of course, and that's what made this film so special. All of the emotions, good and bad are real, and not exclusive to the queer or heterosexual communities. Who hasn't experienced feelings of disconnect with the person you want the most to honor and respect, who hasn't longed for the passion and mutual attraction that a relationship has at its inception? The film is about family, it's about mistakes and it's about changes. I specifically knew the feeling of self-sabotage, of trying to get your partner's attention and the danger of doing that which you know you should not.

This mainstream lesbian reaction just does not make sense to me. In fact, none of the arguments against the film do. It's well-acted, well-directed, the location is perfect and the plot is active and revealing. The film is cathartic. The portrayals are very natural, and the people (the overworked doctor, the struggling artist, the lost lothario) are very real. Those characters are universal. To try and limit them to a specific gender or sociological study is demeaning to the art.

TKAAR is as dependent on what you see on that screen, as what you're willing to see off of it.

It was not your or my story to tell, and it is not Lisa Cholodenko's job to tell it. But it was *someone's* story, and it deserves to be told.

A round of applause to Cholodenko for co-writing and directing a film that she knew would challenge fans and community alike. She has created a film that will stand the test of time when discussing the challenges of the 21st century household. She also indirectly created a film that exposed the poorly hidden elephant-in-the-room of every lesbian at some point or other: the Man fear. The unspoken paranoia to live up to an archaic and predominantly heterosexual expectation that a masculine presence creates a balance that allows "normal" relationships to function.

There's also the need in some lesbians to fulfill and surpass that expectation, by proving that they're better in bed, or have more money, or look better as a man than a man does. If that's your cross to bear, carry it with pride. Either way, it's no one else's responsibility to expose or normalize the few choices we can make within a clearly choice-less life.

What we, as queer people need to finally get is that we're not normal, and it's not our politicians, clergyman, postal workers or teachers' jobs to make that true. The only thing we have in common is we came from the same place, and we're just as fucked up as everyone else.

This community needs to get all right with that.