

Emanuel Levy

GAY DIRECTORS, GAY FILMS?

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It's a good thing that Emanuel Levy, an American film and sociology professor as well as former critic for *Variety* and *Screen International*, emphasises at the outset of *Gay Directors, Gay Films?* that this is a personal book. His choice of five directors - Pedro Almodovar, Terence Davies, Todd Haynes, Gus Van Sant and John Waters - might otherwise seem too narrow for an authoritative study in that they are all largely white, middle-class males.

Levy's inquiry into the connection between sexuality and artistic output rests heavily on aligning homosexuality with outsider status. Consequently, films do not have to deal with overtly gay themes or characters; in Levy's view, any marginalised character or alternative lifestyle can be related to a gay perspective. The oppressed or abused women of Almodovar, Davies and Haynes' films, as well as Van Sant's alienated working-class youth and Waters' taboo-busting weirdos, all gather neatly beneath the outsider umbrella.

The book works best as a broad introduction to the fascinating work of these significant directors, with brief biographical introductions and summaries of 70 films across five decades. The range is extensive, not just between the directors but within their own oeuvres. There's quite a gulf between the dark erotic themes of Almodovar's *Matador* and his campy farce *I'm So Excited*, for example, or Waters' coprophagic *Pink Flamingos* and *Cry Baby*'s parodic charm.

Levy peppers his overview with cross-references and occasional anecdotes from past interviews (including gems like Waters' notorious statement, "If someone vomits watching one of my films, it's like getting a standing ovation"), but his material is so voluminous that the book's driving question quickly gets lost amid his comprehensive cataloguing of the diverse material. Perhaps the strongest connection he finds between the films is that they tend to challenge what mainstream society deems "normal", setting up alternatives by championing or exploring different, supposedly deviant characters and lifestyles. Ultimately, though, that may simply be a hallmark of good, rather than gay, filmmaking.

At the end, Levy acknowledges "significant links between gay men and [all] women, grounded in the historical marginalization of both groups." Yet only one of these groups, in today's film business, continues to be marginalised, and that group is significantly omitted here.