

Aula 8

GAY MOVIES (1895-1969)

META

To introduce students to a selected list of classic gay movies, trying to discuss about their conditions production, circulation and reception.

OBJETIVO

To provide some historical information about the way the issue has been dealt with by the film makers;
To present some of the classic gay movies and their historical importance;
To illustrate how gay issues are represented in classic movies.

PRERREQUISITO

Notions about the formation and development of gender studies;
Notions of the main concepts employed in gender studies.
Familiarity with the relationship between literary theory and gender studies.

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INTRODUCTION

After a brief research on the web about the theme, we found a series of interesting lists of queer films, what must be understood as movies which deal with important gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender characters or aspects, or which may have same-sex romance or relationships as a plot device or as a central issue.

What surprised us most was that there are movies which deal with this issue since 1895. Now let us take a look at the history of cinema to see how this issue have been dealt with by the film directors, as well as how it has been received and interpreted by the critics, historians, and, most important of all, the audiences and the public in general.

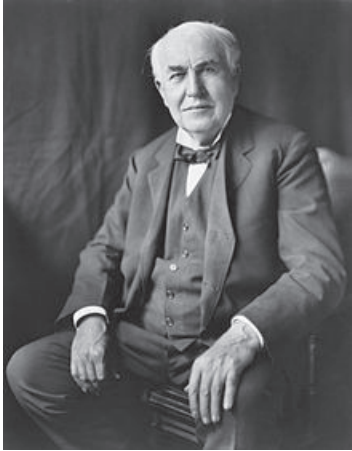
We begin with *The Dickson Experimental Sound Film*, a film made by William Dickson (1860-1935) in 1895. It is held as the first known film with live-recorded sound, being the first motion picture made for the **Kinetophone**, a proto-sound-film system developed by Dickson and **Thomas Edison** (1847-1931). It consisted of a Kinetoscope accompanied by a cylinder-playing phonograph. So far, there was no attempt to synchronize picture and sound throughout the film. It was produced at the “Black Maria”, Edison’s film studio. There is no evidence that it was ever exhibited. Now that it was digitized and restored, we can say that it is the only surviving Kinetophone film with live-recorded sound.

The film features Dickson playing a violin into a recording horn for an off-camera wax cylinder. The melody is from “Song of the Cabin Boy”, from *Les Cloches de Corneville* (in English-speaking countries, *The Chimes of Normandy*), a light opera composed by **Robert Planquette** (1848-1903) in 1877. In front of Dickson, two men dance to the music. In the final seconds, a fourth man crosses from left to right behind the horn. The running time of the restored film is seventeen seconds. The accompanying cylinder contains two minutes of sound, including twenty-three seconds of violin music, what is supposed to be the film’s soundtrack. After its restoration in 2000, *The Dickson Experimental Sound Film* was selected for inclusion in the United States National Film Registry.



William Kennedy-Laurie Dickson (1860-1935) was a Scottish inventor who devised an early motion picture camera under the employment of Thomas Edison (post-dating the work of Louis Le Prince).

Fonte: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Kennedy_Dickson



Thomas Alva Edison (1847-1931) was an American inventor and businessman who has been described as America's greatest inventor. He is credited with developing many devices in fields such as electric power generation, mass communication, sound recording, and motion pictures. These inventions, which include the phonograph, the motion picture camera, and the long-lasting, practical electric light bulb, had a widespread impact on the modern industrialized world. He was one of the first inventors to apply the principles of mass production and teamwork to the process of invention, working with many researchers and employees. He is often credited with establishing the first industrial research laboratory.

Fonte: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Edison

Jean Robert Planquette (1848-1903) was a French composer of songs and operettas. Several of Planquette's operettas were extraordinarily successful in Britain, including *Les cloches de Corneville* (1878), the length of whose initial London run broke all records for any piece of musical theatre up to that time, and *Rip Van Winkle* (1882), which earned international fame.

Fonte: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Planquette



Frame from restored version of *The Dickson Experimental Sound Film* (1894/95)

Fonte: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Dickson_Experimental_Sound_Film

In his book *The Celluloid Closet* (1981), Vito Russo, a film historian, discusses the film, claiming that it was titled *The Gay Brothers*. Russo's naming of the film has been used widely online and in some books, and his assertions that the film's content is homosexual are well known by scholars and the film lovers. Those who doubt his assertion, which is unsupported,

argues that the word “gay” was not used during that time as a synonym for “homosexual”. Besides, according to some critics, there is also no evidence that Dickson intended to present the two men dancing as a romantic couple. Even so, given the lyrics of the song Dickson plays, which describes life at sea without women, it is open to many different interpretations. But, despite all the dispute on the interpretation of the film, it presents one of the earliest examples of same-sex imagery in the cinema. An excerpt of the film is included in the documentary based on Russo’s book, also titled *The Celluloid Closet* (1995).

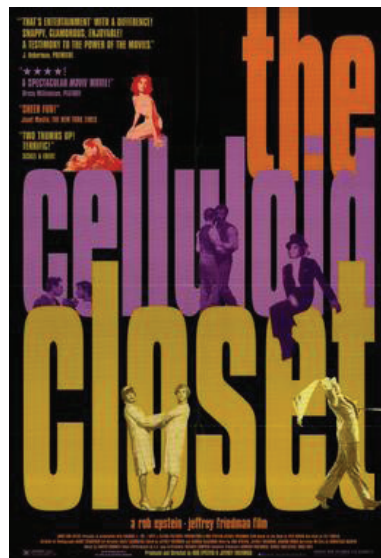


Vito Russo (1946-1990) was an American LGBT activist, film historian and author. He is best remembered as the author of the book *The Celluloid Closet* (1981), described in *The New York Times* as “an essential reference book” on homosexuality in the US film industry.

Fonte: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vito_Russo

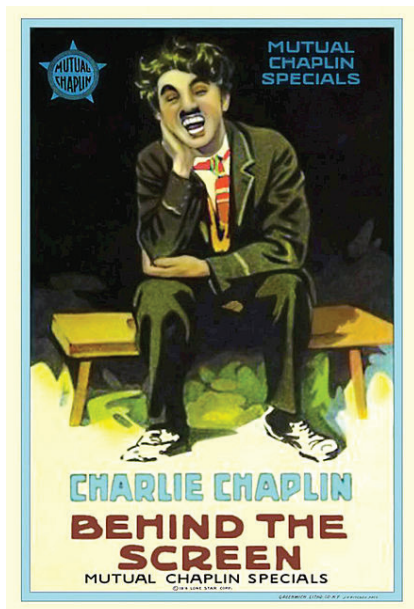
The Celluloid Closet is a 1995 American documentary film directed and written by Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman. The film is based on Vito Russo’s book of the same name first published in 1981 and on lecture and film clip presentations he gave in 1972–1982. Russo had researched the history of how motion pictures, especially Hollywood films, had portrayed gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender characters.

Fonte: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Celluloid_Closet



In 1916, *Behind the Screen*, an American silent short comedy film written by, directed by, and starring **Charlie Chaplin**, was launched. The film takes place in a silent movie studio. Charlie Chaplin plays a stagehand named David who has an enormous supervisor named Goliath. David is overworked but is still labelled as a loafer by the lazy Goliath and his supervisor. A country girl (Edna Purviance) arrives at the studio in hopes of becoming an actress, but is quickly turned away by Goliath. Most of the other stagehands go on strike to protest against the interruption of their lunch break. Only David and Goliath remain on the job. The girl returns and dresses in one of the striking stagehand's clothes. Disguised as a man, she gets a job as a stagehand. David discovers that the new stagehand is a female. When he gives her a series of quick kisses, the action is seen by Goliath, who makes effeminate gestures at David. Edna, in turn, hears the strikers' plans to blow up the studio helps them with their villainous plot.

Sir Charles Spencer Chaplin (1889-1977) was an English comic actor, filmmaker and composer who rose to fame in the era of silent film. Chaplin became a worldwide icon through his screen persona "the Tramp" and is considered one of the most important figures in the history of the film industry. His career spanned more than 75 years, from childhood in the Victorian era until a year before his death in 1977, and encompassed both adulation and controversy.
 Fonte: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charlie_Chaplin



Theatrical poster to *Behind the Screen* (1916)
 Fonte: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Behind_the_Screen

Salomé is a silent film produced in 1923 by **Charles Bryant** and starring **Alla Nazimova**. It is an adaptation of the **Oscar Wilde** play of the same name. The play is a retelling of the biblical story of King Herod and his execution of John the Baptist, who, in Wilde's play, is called Jokanaan. The execution is done at the request of Herod's stepdaughter, Salomé, whom he loves desperately. Salomé is held as the first art film to be made in the U.S.

There is a curious rumor about the film. It seems to have started while the film was in production and has been asserted by some chroniclers of Hollywood, that the film's cast was composed entirely of gay or bisexual actors in an homage to Oscar Wilde, as a demand of the star and producer Alla Nazimova. Although it is now impossible to say that it was true, there are extras who say that a number of the cast members were indeed gay, but not all of them. What can be said is that Nazimova was thought of as a lesbian, and several of the female courtiers are men in drag.

Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde (1854-1900) was an Irish poet and playwright. After writing in different forms throughout the 1880s, he became one of London's most popular playwrights in the early 1890s. He is best remembered for his epigrams and plays, his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and the circumstances of his imprisonment and early death. Fonte: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oscar_Wilde



Charles Bryant (1879-1948) was a British actor and film director. Fonte: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Bryant_\(actor\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Bryant_(actor))

Alla Nazimova (1879-1945) was a Russian actress who immigrated to the United States in 1905. Although her accepted birth year is 1879, that is far from certain since there are different sources that indicate 1878 or even 1876 (an October 1905 passenger list gives her age 29).

Fonte: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alla_Nazimova



Another important film is *Victor and Victoria* (in German, *Viktor und Viktoria*), a 1933 German musical comedy directed by Reinhold Schünzel and starring Renate Müller, as a woman pretending to be a female impersonator. At the same time, Schünzel, the director, shot the film in a French-language version, *George and Georgette*, starring a French cast. In 1935 Michael Balcon produced an English version, *First a Girl*, directed by Victor Saville. There was also a remake *Victor and Victoria* in West-Germany in 1957, by Karl Anton. In 1982, at last, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer released **Blake Edwards'** remake of the film, *Victor/Victoria*. Later, the same director created a successful stage musical on the film. In both, **Julie Andrews** was the star.



Film poster

Fonte: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Viktor_and_Viktoria

William Blake Crump (1922-2010), better known by his stage name Blake Edwards, was an American filmmaker.

Fonte: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blake_Edwards



Dame Julia Elizabeth Andrews (1935-) is an English actress, singer, and author. Andrews, a child actress and singer, appeared in the West End in 1948 and made her Broadway debut in *The Boy Friend* (1954). She rose to prominence starring in Broadway musicals such as *My Fair Lady* (1956), playing Eliza Doolittle, and *Camelot* (1960), playing Queen Guinevere. In 1957, Andrews starred in the premiere of Rodgers and Hammerstein's written-for-television musical *Cinderella*, a live, network broadcast seen by over 100 million viewers.

Fonte: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Julie_Andrews

Another great classic which deals with the issue of homosexuality is *Rope*, a 1948 American psychological crime thriller film directed by **Alfred Hitchcock**, based on the 1929 play of the same name by Patrick Hamilton. The film was adapted by Hume Cronyn with a screenplay by Arthur Laurents. It was produced by Hitchcock and Sidney Bernstein as the first of their Transatlantic Pictures productions. **James Stewart** is the protagonist. It is considered the first of Hitchcock's Technicolor films. The original play was said to be inspired by the real-life murder of 14-year-old Bobby Franks, in 1924, by University of Chicago students Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb.

Rope narrates the story of two young aesthetes, Brandon Shaw and Phillip Morgan, who strangle to death their former classmate from Harvard University, David Kentley, in their Manhattan penthouse apartment. They commit the crime as an intellectual exercise and want to prove their

superiority by committing the “perfect murder”. After hiding the body in a large wooden chest, the murderers host a dinner party at the apartment, which has a panoramic view of Manhattan. The guests, who are unaware of what has happened, include the victim’s father. His mother is not able to attend, because of a cold.

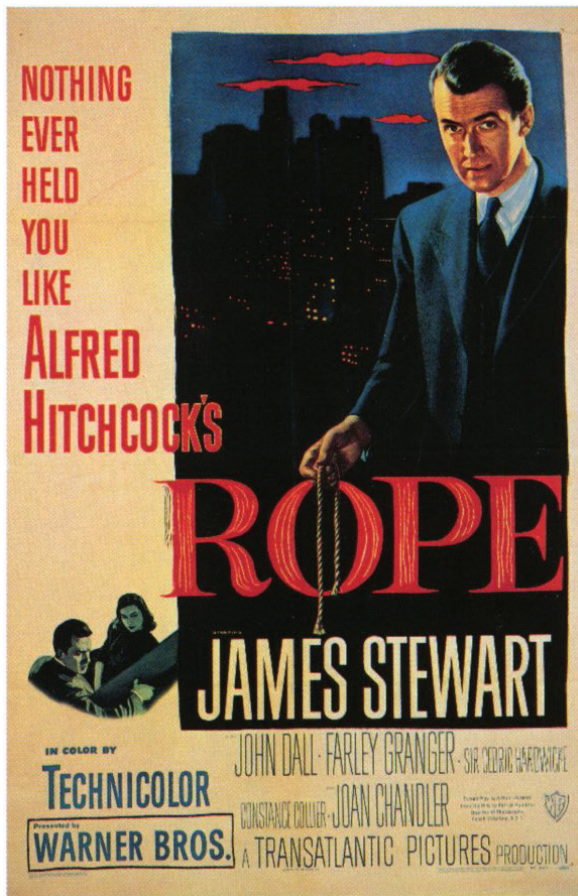
Brandon uses the chest containing the body as a buffet table for the food, just before their housekeeper arrives to help with the party. Their idea for the murder was inspired years earlier by conversations with their prep-school housemaster, Rupert Cadell, played by James Stewart. Rupert had discussed with them the intellectual concepts of Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*, and De Quincey’s art of murder, as a means of showing one’s superiority over others. He is also one of the guests of the party, since they believe that he would approve of their “work of art”. At the end of the movie, after rationalizing the episode and the way the guys were behaving, as well as the elements which are shown, like the rope itself, Rupert lifts the lid of the chest and finds the body inside. He is horrified and deeply ashamed at the same time, realizing that Brandon and Phillip used his own rhetoric to commit a murder. The professor disavows all his previous talk of superiority and inferiority, seizes Brandon’s gun and fires several shots out the window to attract attention. As police sirens approach, Rupert pulls up a chair next to the chest and the film ends.

According to Scott Badman & Connie Russell Hosier, in an article published in 2017 (<https://www.us.mensa.org/read/bulletin/features/gay-coding-in-hitchcock-films/>), Hitchcock was exposed to gay communities in both England and Hollywood, and he worked with many gay and bisexual professionals in various aspects of film production, including writers and actors. Thus, he knew their subculture well, what suggests that the gay codes in his movies were not an accident or an oversight. They were intentional, and he knew exactly what they implied. In the case of *Rope*, screenplay writer Arthur Laurents and both young leads, John Dall and Farley Granger, were gay or bisexual, and Hitchcock knew it. He used Granger again in *Strangers on a Train* (1951).

According to the same author, *Rope* is infused with many homosexual subtexts, including one of the most amazing “sex scenes” in Hollywood history. After he had come out as gay later in life, *Rope*’s screenplay writer, Arthur Laurents, said in a DVD commentary of the film: “What was curious to me was that *Rope* was obviously about homosexuals. The word was never mentioned. Not by Hitch, not by anyone at Warners. It was referred to as ‘it.’ They were going to do a picture about ‘it,’ and the actors were ‘it.’”

However, Hitchcock avoided gay stereotypes in his portrayals of Brandon and Philip, but he could also have easily incorporated indications that they were straight. Other directors regularly “straightened out” characters that were gay in the source material. He chose neither option for Brandon

and Philip, keeping their homosexual relationship as just another, rather minor, aspect of their twisted personalities.



Theatrical release poster
Fonte: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rope_\(film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rope_(film))

Sir Alfred Joseph Hitchcock (1899-1980) was an English film director and producer, widely regarded as one of the most influential filmmakers in the history of cinema. Known as “the Master of Suspense”, he directed over 50 feature films in a career spanning six decades, becoming as well-known as any of his actors thanks to his many interviews, his cameo roles in most of his films, and his hosting of Alfred Hitchcock Presents (1955-1965).

Fonte: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfred_Hitchcock



James Maitland Stewart (1908-1997) was an American actor and military officer who is among the most honored and popular stars in film history. With a career spanning 60 years, Stewart was a major Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer contract player who was known for his distinctive drawl and down-to-earth persona, which helped him often portray American middle-class men struggling in crisis. Many of the films in which he starred have become enduring classics.

Fonte: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Stewart



During the second half of the twentieth century, the first organization for gay men as a cultural minority was the Mattachine Society, founded in 1950 by Harry Hay and Chuck Rowland. Other important homophile organizations were founded during the fifties, like the West Coast included One, Inc., in 1952, and the first lesbian support network, Daughters of Bilitis, in 1955. In 1951, Donald Webster Cory published the article “The Homosexual in America”, asserting that gay men and lesbians were a legitimate minority group, and in 1953 Evelyn Hooker won a grant from the National Institute of Mental Health to study gay men.

In 1965, as the civil rights movement won new legislation outlawing racial discrimination, the first gay rights demonstrations took place in Philadelphia and Washington, D.C., led by the activists Frank Kameny and Barbara Gittings. The turning point for gay liberation came on June 28, 1969, when patrons of the popular Stonewall Inn in New York’s Greenwich Village fought back against police raids of their neighborhood bar. **Stonewall** is still considered a watershed moment of gay pride and has been commemorated since the 1970s with “pride marches” held every June across the United States. Nowadays the gay parades occur in almost every civilized city of the world.

During this period, the films which dealt with queer issues took another perspective, putting questions which have never been discussed before. *Midnight Cowboy* is a good example of it. It was launched in 1969 and based on the 1965 novel of the same title, by James Leo Herlihy. The film was written by Waldo Salt and directed by John Schlesinger, starring **Jon Voight** and **Dustin Hoffman**. Set in New York City, *Midnight Cowboy* depicts the strange friendship between two hustlers: the naive prostitute Joe Buck (Voight), and con man “Ratso” Rizzo (Hoffman).

The film narrates the story of Joe Buck, a young Texan working as a dishwasher, who quits his job and heads to New York City to become a prostitute. After a series of unsuccessful encounters, with men and women alike, he meets Enrico Salvatore “Ratso” Rizzo, a con man with a limp who takes \$20 from him by ostensibly introducing him to a pimp. After another fail, he spends his days wandering the city and sitting in his hotel room. Broke, he is locked out of his hotel room and his belongings are impounded.

He tries to make money by receiving oral sex from a young man in a movie theater, but finds out that the young man has no money. He then threatens him and asks for his watch, but eventually lets him go unharmed. The next day, Joe meets Ratso and soon begins to share his apartment in a condemned and abandoned building. Joe reluctantly accepts his offer, and they begin a “business relationship” as hustlers. As they develop a bond, Ratso’s health grows steadily worse.

In flashback, we know Joe’s past and personality. His grandmother raises him after his mother abandons him. He also has a tragic relationship with Annie, a mentally unstable girl. Ratso tells Joe his father was an illiterate Italian immigrant shoeshiner whose job led to a bad back and lung damage from long-term exposure to shoe polish. An eccentric man and woman approaches Joe in a diner and gives him a flyer inviting him to a Warhol-esque party. Joe and Ratso attend, but Ratso’s poor health and hygiene attract unwanted attention from several guests. Joe mistakes a joint for a cigarette and starts to hallucinate after taking several long puffs. He leaves the party with Shirley, a socialite who agrees to pay him \$20 for spending the night, but Joe cannot perform sexually. Shirley then suggests that Joe may be gay until he is able to perform. The next morning, the socialite sets up her friend as Joe’s next client and it appears that his career is starting to thrive.

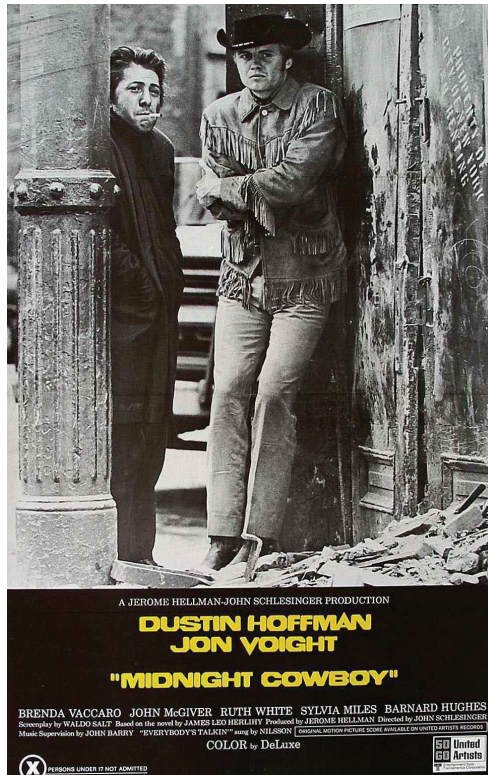
However, when he returns home, Ratso is sick and feverish. He refuses medical help and begs Joe to put him on a bus to Florida. Desperate, Joe picks up a man in an amusement arcade and robs him during a violent encounter in the man’s hotel room. He buys bus tickets with the money and they finally go to Florida. During the trip, Ratso’s health deteriorates further: he becomes incontinent and drenched in sweat.

At a rest stop, Joe buys new clothing for Ratso and himself, discarding his cowboy outfit. On the bus, Joe muses that there must be easier ways to earn a living than hustling, and tells Ratso he plans. But Ratso does not respond and Joe realizes he is dead.

The film won three Academy Awards: Best Picture, Best Director and Best Adapted Screenplay. *Midnight Cowboy* is the only X-rated film ever to win Best Picture (though such a classification no longer exists), and was the first gay-related Best Picture winner.

In 1994, *Midnight Cowboy* was deemed “culturally, historically or aesthetically significant” by the Library of Congress and selected for preservation in the United States National Film Registry.

Theatrical release poster.
 Fonte: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Midnight_Cowboy



Jonathan Vincent Voight (1938-) is an American actor. He is the winner of one Academy Award, having been nominated for four. He has also won four Golden Globe Awards and has so far been nominated for eleven. He is the father of actress Angelina Jolie and actor James Haven.
 Fonte: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jon_Voight

Dustin Lee Hoffman (1937-) is an American actor and director. He has been known for his versatile portrayals of antiheroes and vulnerable characters. He is the recipient of various accolades including; two Academy Awards, six Golden Globe Awards (including the Cecil B. DeMille Award), four BAFTAs, three Drama Desk Awards, two Emmy Awards, and a Genie Award. Hoffman received the AFI Life Achievement Award in 1999, and the Kennedy Center Honors Award in 2012.
 Fote: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dustin_Hoffman



CONCLUSÃO

We hope this lesson, although brief, has been successful in making acquainted with the what we believe to be the most important classic movies which deal with the issue of homosexuality. Of course, there are many more things which could be said about this theme. Nonetheless, our aim was to put you in touch with the basics, hoping to spark your interest in deepening your knowledge of it later. There are plenty of cinematic material available on the web. Don't be afraid of attempting. Go ahead!



RESUMO

This lesson was prepared to give you an idea of how film makers, in classic movies from 1895 to 1969, have dealt with the issue of homosexuality. Taking into account the didactic intention of this material, as well as the short period of time dedicated to the theme, we decided to selected just seven of the hundreds of films produced during this time which could be used as examples. We hope that this class can help you to get a critical view about the subject matter.



ATIVIDADES

Write a paragraph explaining the way you see gay issues has been dealt with by film makers in classic movies.

ACTIVITY COMMENT

Esta atividade tem por finalidade principal fazer com que você construa uma síntese dos principais conteúdos desta aula.



PRÓXIMA AULA

A cultura pop como objeto de pesquisa

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