

Milk, identity politics and Gus Van Sant's art

By Joanne Laurier
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Directed by Gus Van Sant, screenplay by Dustin Lance Black

The subject of Gus Van Sant's new movie is Harvey Milk, a 1970s liberal activist and the first major openly gay politician to be elected in the US.

Milk opens with footage of the 1969 Stonewall riots in New York City, a violent protest by homosexuals against police brutality. Other images of men being beaten by police and crammed into paddy wagons—or hiding their faces from the camera to protect their identities—speak to a time when being gay was illegal or semi-legal in many places and, in general, there was widespread harassment and victimization of homosexuals.



A scene from *Milk*

Harvey Milk was born on Long Island, New York, in 1930, the son of Eastern European Jews. The Korean War veteran held jobs on Wall Street and in 1964 worked for the presidential campaign of right-wing Republican Barry Goldwater. Swept up by the "counter-culture" of the 1960s and 1970s, Milk openly acknowledged his sexual orientation and eventually fell in with a bohemian milieu in San Francisco. He became an advocate of gay rights, and finally, ran for public office.

Elected to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors in 1977, Milk was assassinated in November 1978, along with the city's mayor, George Moscone. Van Sant's film essentially recounts Milk's six-year career in San Francisco politics.

Milk (Sean Penn) first appears, toward the end of his life, speaking into a tape recorder in a darkened room. He explains, "If a bullet should enter my brain, let the bullet destroy every closet door" (i.e., impel gays to come "out of the closet".) Milk is recording a personal testament in response to death threats he has been receiving since his unsuccessful campaign for the California State Assembly in 1976.

Full color washes over the screen and the film backtracks to the origins of Milk's career as an activist and eventually, a politician—his meeting a handsome young hippie, Scott Smith (James Franco) in 1970, who will become a long-time lover. Milk starts growing his hair and exchanges his business suits for jeans and T-shirts. The couple leave New York for San Francisco in 1972, where they open a camera

shop in the Castro district. (By 1969, San Francisco had more gays per capita than any other American city.)

The storefront business soon becomes the hub of neighborhood political activity and Milk decides to run for political office. He starts assembling a core team, often by pulling people off the street. One such recruit is the enthusiastic Cleve Jones (Emile Hirsch), a gay teenager and former prostitute from Phoenix.

In order to get elected, Milk forms alliances with various organizations, including the local Teamsters' leadership. In exchange for a pledge by union leader Allan Baird to help in the hiring of more gay truck drivers, Milk becomes instrumental in organizing a boycott of Coors beer by gay bars. (The AFL-CIO began the boycott of Coors products in 1977, when 1,500 members of Local 366 of the Brewery, Bottling, Can and Allied Industrial Union walked off their jobs in a dispute over the company's desire to subject its employees to polygraph, or lie-detector, tests.)

Because of his outspokenness about his sexuality, Milk's efforts to seek support from the more established, and wealthier, figures in the gay community are rebuffed. Their attitude was summed up by Rick Stokes, a gay rights attorney: "I'm just a businessman who happens to be gay."

In both 1973 and 1975, Milk loses his bid for the city's Board of Supervisors, but he is an effective speaker and his popularity is growing. "My name is Harvey Milk and I want to recruit you," is his pitch directed to the non-gay segments of the population.

Lesbian activist Anne Kronenberg (Alison Pill) takes over as campaign manager from a disillusioned Scott. Milk then successfully pushes for a ballot initiative, approved by newly-elected Mayor Moscone (Victor Garber), that replaces the old set-up in which members of the Board of Supervisors were elected on a citywide basis—with the top vote-getters winning seats—by a system under which supervisors were elected by district. Milk crows over the fact that now all groups—Blacks, Chinese, Hispanics and gays—will have their own representatives.

Moscone also supports Milk in 1978 in his opposition to Proposition 6, an ordinance that would have excluded gay teachers and their supporters from the public schools. This extremely right-wing measure was even opposed by Ronald Reagan, as well as President Jimmy Carter.

We see television footage of orange juice spokesperson and anti-gay bigot, Anita Bryant, pushing the Christian fundamentalist campaign. In California, Proposition 6 is being forcefully promoted by State Senator John Briggs (Denis O'Hare). Milk challenges Briggs to a debate in his Orange County territory and argues: "If it were true that children mimicked their teachers, you'd sure have a helluva lot more nuns running around."

On his third try, Harvey wins a supervisor's seat in the district that includes The Castro, and Proposition 6 is resoundingly defeated,

including in Orange County. Fellow supervisor Dan White (Josh Brolin), a former cop and Irish Catholic, is both attracted to and repulsed by the flamboyant gay man, leading the latter to suspect that White is "one of us."

White first resigns as supervisor, then lobbies unsuccessfully to get his job back. On November 27, 1978, Dan White enters City Hall and murders Moscone and Harvey Milk. Tens of thousands of mourners march from The Castro to City Hall in a candlelight vigil.

(Ironically and tellingly, one of the most important consequences of the Milk-Moscone murders was the rise of Diane Feinstein, who, as president of the Board of Supervisors, succeeded Moscone as mayor of San Francisco. Her subsequent record as a US Senator has had an unrelentingly pro-business and pro-war character.)

The movie's epilogue states that White served five years in prison. His defense, dubbed the "Twinkie Defense," claimed "diminished capacity" due to the ingestion of junk food. The police and prosecutor sympathized with White, while gays and other minorities were excused from the jury pool. Riots greeted the verdict. The ex-cop committed suicide two years after his release from prison.

Milk's strength lies in its performances and its feeling for the marginalized and oppressed. Penn, Hirsch, Brolin and Franco are on point. Brolin's Dan White, a Vietnam veteran, is played as a frustrated, tormented soul, not an irrational lunatic. Pill, as a secondary character, also shines.

To its credit, the film is consistently hostile to the police and official authority. After White resigns from his supervisor's job, there is a secret meeting at police headquarters where police higher-ups pressure White to withdraw his resignation. *Milk* implies that the cops, wanting to keep their man in City Hall, bore some responsibility for the tragic events stemming from White's change of mind.

Van Sant, born in 1952, has had an odd and chameleon-like career. (See A convenient vagueness: *Elephant*, directed and written by Gus Van Sant)

His best films so far remain his earliest ones, *Drugstore Cowboy* and portions of *My Own Private Idaho*. However, there are intelligent and sensitive moments in all his films, even the most misguided. He has seemed attracted to the Beats and other anti-establishment artistic trends, to various nether worlds, to the down-and-out and excluded. These somewhat amorphous sentiments, however, do not add up to a coherently worked out critique of contemporary society.

Milk is conscientiously made, but it ends up, almost inevitably, in unsavory political territory. While the director is no Democratic Party hack, and not necessarily a particularly fervent advocate of identity politics, a certain politics inevitably fills up the film's intellectual space.

Concern for the plight of young people, their fears, alienation and disenfranchisement, makes itself felt in *Milk*—as it does in Van Sant's aforementioned works, along with films like *Elephant* and *Jerry*.

On numerous occasions, Milk (and the filmmaker, clearly) points his supporters in the direction of the desperate young person struggling in isolation with his sexuality. "I represent the gay street people—the 14-year-old runaway from San Antonio. We have to make up for the hundreds of years of persecution," he declares. Milk himself had lovers who attempted suicide and he found his last lover, Jack (Diego Luna), hanging by a rope from the ceiling of his apartment.

This seems to be the impulse that finds most personal expression in *Milk*. This is perhaps what Van Sant feels most deeply. But the matter doesn't end there.

Harvey Milk was a politician and he operated in a big business party that would shift far to the right. He was without doubt an honest and courageous individual and believed sincerely that "'All men are created equal.' No matter how hard you try, you can never erase those words." However, his own middle class position and the lack of a genuine left-wing perspective left him firmly in the camp of liberal reformism.

In fact, the politics associated with "community control," "affirmative action" and similar slogans, whatever the immediate intentions of those advocating them, like Milk, had nothing progressive about them. They diverted attention from a head-on confrontation with the economic and political status quo and were employed to dispense perks to privileged layers among various racial and ethnic constituencies and women, while the majority of the population, men and women, white, black and Latino, suffered stagnating or declining living standards.

From the early 1970s, as the prospect of rising living standards for all faded away and a generalized decline of American capitalism set in, the Democrats refashioned themselves as the party of various interest groups. Racial and gender diversity became the vogue as any mention of class issues was smothered.

Milk became the city's first gay supervisor. Also sworn in were the first single mother, the first Chinese-American and the first African-American woman. There is no consideration by the filmmakers of an alternative method of tackling the oppression of minorities as part of the conditions facing the entire working class under capitalism. To be frank, the identity politics espoused by Milk would be taken for granted by the vast majority of gay rights supporters.

So, whether Van Sant is critical of Milk joining the establishment or not (and there are hints that he is), the latter's politics are the film's default setting.

The artistic consequence of all this is a distinct unevenness. There are moments that feel quite heartfelt and acute, especially those dealing with the conditions of gay youth and with Milk's embrace of his sexuality. At other times the director seems to be doing what he thinks people expect him to do, celebrate this or that minor electoral victory, and everything feels rather bland and predictable; at such moments Van Sant seems to be going through the motions.

One of the problems is that Van Sant, for all his quirkiness and offbeat inclinations, shows no particular interest in making an independent exploration of the *historical context*. He is all too content to borrow that from relatively conventional Democratic Party sources. He has 'handed over' his film, at important moments, to the official version of events. Intuitively or otherwise, the artist in him goes dead at such moments. The overall results are thereby much weakened.

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