"Everyone in the World is Bent" - A Potted Account of Britain's Queer Cinematic and Televisual History

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"Everyone in the World is Bent" - A Potted Account of Britain's Queer Cinematic and Televisual History

by theviciouslily

Summary

In which I offer my continually updating analyses and opinions on Britain's queer films and TV programmes old and new.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Introduction

This meta started life as a continuation of a very informal primer on British television which I published on my tumblr, entitled *Y'all Don't Know Shit about the BBC*. I had intended to finish it off with a timeline of queer television in Britain, but since the list ended up getting a bit long, I had to split it off into a separate project. When the list started getting so long that I realised that I was never going to be able to publish it and feel satisfied with its level of completeness, I had to reevaluate. Since Tumblr's not so great when it comes to making edits to posts that are already circulating, I decided that thing to do would be to post what I've done so far here on AO3 and make continuous updates as I comb my way through more and more material.

I started this project because I was getting frustrated with people assuming that the context for queer media surrounding *Sherlock* is no different to the American history of queer media. While I had been working on this for a good while beforehand, I'd by lying if I said I wasn't spurred on to actually publish it by Autostraddle's body count post. However, it's probably not for the reason you're thinking of. To perfectly honest, judging characters solely by their deaths is a method of analysis that I find rather reductive. So, as a counterpoint, I want to share my opinions on the shows I've seen. I've also decided to include my thoughts on queer movies as well. Since the membrane between the film and TV industries is much more porous in the UK than it is elsewhere, it didn't feel right to talk about one and not the other. This list is neither comprehensive nor objective. I vary in how much or how little I have to say about each entry. I try to wait until I've seen something before I include it in the list, but this isn't always workable. There are no spoiler warnings, so my advice is to scroll slowly. Finally, this list is not a list of what I consider to be "good representation", largely because I intend for this to function as an almanac than a rec list. On top of that, I've found that "good" and "bad" in this context are parameters that are only as flexible as tumblr orthodoxy, which doesn't make for very edifying criticism.
Two middle-class marrieds (Trevor Howard and Celia Johnson) conduct an emotional affair to the plangent strains of Rachmaninoff in a leafy suburbia seemingly untouched by the war. I’ll be the first to admit that this rather blunt description woefully undersells what is generally regarded as one of the greatest British films of all time. Obviously, it's not strictly a gay movie, but it was written by a gay man and its theme of forbidden love has led to it developing a significant gay following down the years. Amongst its devotees is Todd Haynes, who paid tribute to one of the film’s most famous scenes, where the couple’s final farewell is cut short by the interruption of a clueless friend, in *Carol.*
Monitor (BBC One, 1958 - 1965)

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Arts programming strand from the earlyish days of television captained by Huw Wheldon. One 1959 episode, an early effort from a young Ken Russell, focussed on Scottish painters Robert Colquhoun and Robert MacBryde. The film makes no mention of their relationship, despite being set in the tiny Suffolk cottage where they both lived and worked. The only hint of domesticity we see is the passing of a mug of tea from one Robert to another.
Drama about a vicar who is falsely accused of sexually assaulting a teenage boy. This movie can claim to be the first British film to ever deal with the topic of homosexuality, albeit without really confronting it directly (By all accounts, it wasn’t until *Victim* that the word “homosexual” was actually uttered on a British cinema screen).

The Reverend Howard Phillips (Anthony Quayle) is the new curate in the town of Bellington. Having served with the Paras in the war, he’s a far more modern cleric than the now-retired Reverend Peters (Noel Howlett). As well as doing the traditional ministering to the needy, he advocates for teenagers in juvenile court and lets the kids play rock and roll at the church youth club. You could even say he was an early example of a trendy vicar. He’s well-liked by his congregation, and especially by Hester Peters (Sarah Churchill), who after years of being held hostage by the demands of her widowed father’s clerical office, is desperate to get married and finally get laid before she’s swallowed whole into the maw of spinsterhood. Unfortunately for Hester, Howard is quite oblivious to her feelings for him. Having thus far eschewed marital companionship, Howard lives with his mother (Irene Browne), who warns him that he needs to be careful with Hester. He heeds her advice, and when Hester does inevitably force the issue, she still ends up hurt despite Howard letting her down as gently as he can manage.

One day, Mary (Leigh Madison), one of Howard’s teenage parishioners, confides in him that she’s been knocked up by her boyfriend, Larry Thompson (Andrew Thompson), the local bad seed. The rev’s all ready to go and help Mary break the news to her dad only to hear later that night that Mary has been knocked down and killed as she caught her boyfriend canoodling in a bus shelter with Michelle (Liliane Brousse) the French exchange student who helps Howard’s mother with the housework. After the inquest, Howard summons Larry to the vicarage and tries to get him to admit that he was responsible for Mary’s death. Larry refuses and, seizing his advantage when he hears a potential witness enter the house, noisily trashes the living room and rips open his shirt. When Hester comes in to see what’s going on, she actually believes Larry when he says that Howard tried to “interfere” with him. When word starts getting around - helped along by Larry, of course - Howard
finds himself ostracised from the community. He gets bricks through his windows, his tyres slashed, Michelle is returned to France by the cleaning agency he hired her from and the church is deserted on Sunday. It’s only after Howard’s mother intercedes by telling Hester she let her hurt feelings over being rejected by Howard cloud her judgement when she already knew Larry was a devious wee shite. With that, Hester gets on-side and tricks Larry into revealing that it was all a lie, and the rest of the community finally see sense. All of a sudden everyone in town is coming over all contrite, but Howard remains resolute in his decision to leave Bellington for good, the whole experience having destroyed his faith in the common goodness of ordinary people.

*Serious Charge* is a rather muddled film. It starts off as a social problem film about youth culture, but it doesn’t maintain the focus long enough to properly incorporate that into the main character’s central conflict. On the whole, it’s pretty ambivalent towards teenagers. At the start of the film, we see Howard sticking up for Larry’s younger brother Curley (Cliff Richard in his first film role) in court by explaining that kids don’t become responsible adults overnight and he’s seen many formerly delinquent teens become successful soldiers after not just one but several false starts. But we’re never in any doubt that Curley is little more than a perennial patsy for his big brother. The possibility of Larry’s reformation is never discussed. (Honestly, I think Howard was laying it on a little thick when he said that Larry was responsible for Mary’s death. He didn’t shove her out into the road or anything, but he did cheat on her and fail to take any responsibility for the baby.) They all seem pretty confident of his intractable wickedness. Michelle, being the only foreigner in town, is the only one who comes close to challenging this assumption, because she’s the only one who recognises the behaviour of Larry and Curley’s domineering, belt-happy father as abuse. Unfortunately, it doesn’t occur to anyone that Mr Thompson might be at the root of Larry’s behavioural problems (RD Laing’s view of the broken family as a major breeding ground for mental illness would not fully penetrate the public consciousness for another year or two). In fact, despite the film’s demonstration of its awareness of the flaws of corporal punishment, Larry’s comeuppance comes in the form of yet another beatdown from his dad. Not only are we supposed to feel righteous about this particular act of child abuse, but we’re expected to think that this time is somehow different from all the others.

Any attempt at an overarching thesis statement on youth culture ultimately gets lost in Howard’s storyline. We’re not given to believe that it’s the town’s teenagers who are sending him anonymous hate mail and vandalising his property, but the supposedly “respectable” members of his own parish. Unfortunately, the film chooses to hobble what could have been a quietly powerful ending about mob mentality and the frailty of human decency by having Curley’s probation officer (Judith Furse) turn up at Howard’s door on her way to court with Curley in tow just as Howard is getting ready to move out, thereby causing him to magically recover his vocation and his faith in humanity as a result. Nor does the film succeed as a subversive indictment against homophobia, because the town is reacting to what they believe was an assault, not a consensual encounter. Because the culture of the time makes no distinction where two men are concerned, the film simultaneously occupies space as an oblique condemnation of homophobia and an early depiction of communal paedophilia hysteria. Even without the undertones of the latter muddying the waters, *Serious Charge* doesn’t work as a polemic because of its failure to name the beast. It’s a bit like those anti-Nazi movies that came out just before the start of the Second World War where nobody except Charlie Chaplin actually had the nads to say the J Word.

In his book, *Brief Encounters*, film historian Stephen Bourne said the movie might have been more honest if it had made Curley, someone who Howard could have conceivably been attracted to, his accuser. For that reason I think *Serious Charge* is ripe for a remake, although I would expand a little on Bourne’s suggestion by saying that I would opt for Curley and Howard being discovered by Hester when they were on the verge of having consensual sex and Curley claiming in a blind panic that Howard tried to assault him.
This is the earliest surviving gay-themed drama in British television history, and it's not even set in Britain. It's about Polish exile Jan Wiciziewsky (Peter Wyngarde), who's hiding out as a houseguest in the antebellum south and torn up inside by his love for Eric McClure (Graydon Gould) a handsome army officer who's come to stay at the plantation. As will become apparent over the course of this project, I am a total drama slut, so this particular brand of overbaked melodrama is right up my alley. The low production values only add to its appeal because they serve to make the characters' emotions all the more heightened, like they're bouncing off the plywood walls. However, there is one instance where the show's primitive methods work to its advantage. Back in the day, static camera setups were the norm due to the limitations set by the technology in use. This meant that on the few occasions that the camera did move, it had a much greater impact on the viewer compared to the dynamic cinematography of today. We see a similar phenomenon in force here with the soundtrack. Throughout the first act, the only music we hear is the diegetic singing from the church on the plantation, but the moment Jan sees Eric for the first time is overplayed with a few non-diegetic piano chords. It's understated by the standards of the story, but the effect is tangible even to a contemporary viewer because you can feel in that moment what a departure it is from the stylistic norm of the play. It's like hearing Ilsa's chord in *Casablanca* for the first time.
Film based on the play by Shelagh Delaney. Adrift at school and alienated by her maternally challenged mother, Jo (Rita Tushingham) forms a tentative romance with Jimmy (Paul Danquah), a Black sailor from Liverpool. The two of them part reluctantly when Jimmy returns to sea soon after Jo’s mother, Helen (Dora Bryan) turns her back on her to move into a bungalow with her fancy-man-turned-husband, Peter (Robert Stephens). Seemingly unfazed, Jo finds work in a shoe shop where she meets Geoffrey Ingham (Murray Melvin), a textile student. The two become fast friends, with Geoff moving into Jo’s cavernous but dilapidated flat when she manages to wheedle out of him that he was kicked out by his landlady after she caught him with another man. When Jo discovers that she’s pregnant, Geoff endeavours to help out in any way that he can, even going so far as to offer to marry Jo for the sake of the baby. As the due date creeps closer and Jo becomes increasingly distressed at the prospect of the baby’s arrival, Geoff seeks out Helen to inform her of the situation, which ultimately results in Helen barging back into Jo’s life after being thrown out by Peter, kicking Geoff out in the process and leaving the audience to wonder if Jo will make a better go of motherhood than her own mother.

*A Taste of Honey* is often cited as an example of a kitchen sink drama, but it marks a point when the genre was starting to expand its interest beyond the existential angst of the Angry Young Men of the post-war generation to those further on the fringes of working-class society. It’s one of the earliest if not possibly the first British film to feature an openly gay character who is also working-class, subverting the still-lingering misconception that homosexuality is solely the preserve of the soft-handed higher orders and therefore an impossibility for a “true” salt-of-the-earth working-class male.

The film innovates further as even as it nigh-on originates the *Gay Best Friend* trope, it does remember to give Geoff some motivation for wanting to look after Jo besides him feeling indebted to her for putting him up in her flat. Like Jo, he’s also felt that his life was lacking direction, to the point of feeling indifferent towards his own continued existence, and taking care of her gives him sense of purpose. He’s the one who comes up with the idea of getting married and Jo jokingly suggests that
he become the father of her baby, he responds sincerely that that is something that he would want to do, perhaps recognising that this might be his only opportunity to become a parent. Barring a miraculous return from Jimmy, who had wanted to marry Jo before being called back to his ship but ultimately failed to take the plunge, I would have said a marriage between the two of them would have been the best possible course of action available to the characters at the time, even if it's obviously not the one that would be pursued in an ideal world.
Again, not technically a gay interest programme, but still important. Gilbert Harding was a curmudgeonly TV personality who appeared on panel shows like *What's My Line*. In this interview with John Freeman, the conversation turned to the subject of his relationship with his mother. The general consensus has been that this was Freeman laying the ground to try and get Harding to out himself on the air, but it didn’t take. Harding died a few weeks after at the age of 53. You can listen to a Radio 4 dramatisation of the events surrounding the interview [here](#).
Victim (1961)

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Thought to be the first work in film or television to deal directly with homosexuality until the rediscovery of *South*, this thriller stars Dirk Bogarde as a lawyer facing the threat of blackmail over a previous relationship. Generally credited with galvanising the government into acting on the findings of the Wolfenden Report, which had recommended that homosexuality be decriminalised, although it wasn’t until 1967 that the law was finally changed with the passing of the Sexual Offences Act.
The World Ten Times Over (1963)

Drama about Billa and Ginnie (Sylvia Sims and June Ritchie), two best friends who live together and work as dance hostesses in the same Soho nightclub. Ginnie spends most of her time with her married boyfriend, Bob (Edward Judd), who has fallen hook line and sinker for Ginnie’s Marilyn Pixie Dream Girl schtick and is on the verge of finally divorcing the trophy wife chosen for him by his father. Billa, meanwhile, is grappling with an unplanned pregnancy and a visit from her well-meaning but utterly clueless father (William Hartnell), a teacher who no longer knows how to relate to his daughter now that she’s an adult. Along with her pregnancy troubles, Billa is in love with Ginnie, but the strongest indicators we get are only from when the camera shows Ginnie from Billa’s perspective. The ending, where Billa and Ginnie resolve to stick together after their respective relationships with the men in their life implode, exists in a Thelma and Louise #galpals space of plausible deniability. As such, it would appear that The Killing of Sister George was the first truly unambiguous depiction of a lesbian relationship in British cinema.
The Family Way (1966)

Drama directed by the Boulting Brothers in which northern newlyweds Arthur Fitton and Jenny Piper (Hywel Bennett and Hayley Mills) are thwarted in their attempts to consummate their marriage by a series of mishaps starting with a cancelled honeymoon and multiplying as they are forced to move in with Arthur’s parents (Marjorie Rhodes and John Mills) when they can’t get on the waiting list for a council house. Once Jenny’s mother and father (Avril Angers and John Comer) catch wind of the situation, they invite themselves over for an emergency summit with the elder Fittons while Arthur and Jenny are out.

Mr Fitton reckons that between this and Arthur’s cultured interests, that there’s “something very odd and very queer” about his son. Mrs Fitton counters that having trouble getting a marriage off the ground isn’t any gayer than bringing your best bro on your honeymoon like he did. She goes on to say that even if Arthur were gay, it shouldn’t be something they should punish him for because he would have been born that way, and that a proper father would protect a son like that instead of throwing him to the wolves. For all his uphill-both-ways bluster, Mr Fitton is genuinely chastened upon hearing this, and swears to his wife that he’d never turn his back on Arthur if he thought Arthur really needed him. Watching this film now, it’s almost jarring to hear anyone in this time period, let alone a working-class character, express a compassionate view on homosexuality. Much like Consenting Adults, it contradicts the uncritical viewpoint of the period between the end of the Second World War and the Sexual Offences Act as a kind of wasteland. However, the decade between the Wolfenden Report and decriminalisation saw the subject being broached more openly and a softening of public opinion. What makes Mrs Fitton’s stance stand out is that it isn’t an intellectual posture of the kind seen in Late-Night Lineup, but a genuine heartfelt conviction based on nothing more than her love for her son.
Consenting Adults (BBC Two, 1967)

Interviews from gay men and women in a two-parter in the Man Alive series. What’s striking about these documentaries is that even though they’re artifacts from an era us youngsters tend to regard as the Dark Ages, there were still people who managed to travel in hope, like the Canadian chap who said he wouldn’t want to change even if he could, despite the difficulties he’d had finding a partner and being subjected to homophobic abuse, or the female couple living together in Wandsworth just as happily as any husband and wife.

The second episode was followed by a roundtable discussion on BBC Two’s Late Night Line-up programme, which is noteworthy in and of itself for a few reasons. Even the medical and psychological professionals in the group handle the distinction between homosexuality and paedophilia incredibly clumsily, which makes me wonder about the history of the latter as a distinct psychiatric pathology. However, what stood out the most was how radically different my takeaway from the programme was compared to people at the time. I saw flickers of light shining in a great darkness, whereas they could only focus on the most negative aspects of the most (understandably) downbeat interviews.
The Killing of Sister George (1968)

The Killing of Sister George (1968)

Dark comedy about June Buckridge (Beryl Reid), a middle-aged actress best-known for playing the kindly titular district nurse on the inoffensive soap opera, *Applehurst*. Although she often goes by her character’s name when she’s off-camera, in reality George is a rude, cigar-smoking alcoholic. She lives with her much younger girlfriend, Alice (Susannah York), and their relationship is often combative to the point of verbal and physical abuse. Alice (whom George has given the unenviable nickname of “Childie”) harbours aspirations towards becoming a writer, but works in a draper’s shop and is dependent on George for financial and emotional support, while George resents the very idea that Alice might want to spend time with anybody, male or female, who she thinks might pose a threat to her hold over her. This precarious situation is aggravated when George learns that her job might be under threat after accosting some nuns in a taxi. Worse still, George suspects that Mercy Croft (Coral Browne), the BBC executive sent to reprimand her after the nun incident, has designs on Alice as well as plans to fire George.

I’m surprised that *Sister George* hasn’t been granted a place in the pantheon of greats alongside *Mommie Dearest* and *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane*, particularly since it shares a director with the latter. While it lacks the horror elements of the *grande dame guignol* films that gay icons like Joan Crawford and Bette Davis are famous for, it does feature a larger-than-life female protagonist of a certain age refusing to go down without a fight. Having said that, rather than being a melodrama enlivened by moments of high bathos, *Sister George* is a black comedy that deals with the protagonist’s toxic behaviour with some measure of realism, which understandably limits opportunities for camp.

Rather than being remembered as one of the lesser psychobiddy films, *Sister George* gained no small measure of notoriety as the first film to play in British cinemas that featured a sex scene between two women before it was sank at the box office by the inevitable backlash from censors and critics alike. While the film was not the unrelenting cavalcade of displeasure its reputation had led me to believe it was, time has not been able to work its magic on this particular scene. I’m told it only lasts two minutes, but it felt like twenty, and not one of those minutes was even vaguely sexy. I get that Mercy Croft seducing Alice was supposed to be sinister rather than arousing, but it’s surprisingly that it doesn’t even come across as attempting to titillate a straight male audience. New York Times critic Renata Adler described it at the time as one of the worst sex scenes she had ever seen:

> Miss Browne approaches the breast with a kind of scholarly interest, like an icthyologist finding something ambivalent that has drifted up on the beach. The scene goes on for ages...It is the longest most unerotic, cash-conscious scene between a person and a breast there has ever been on screen, and outside a surgeon's office. Not much of a first."

Can’t say I disagree with her. It must have been a difficult scene for Robert Aldrich to direct, because what it conveys far more than menace is awkwardness. It doesn’t feel like anybody really knew what they were doing.
Trainspotter Benjamin Fowler spends his bank holiday weekend indulging in his hobby, and it’s about as exciting as you’d imagine it would be. The Radio Times described it as “a voyage of self-discovery.” I took this to mean that he was going to have some sort of hookup in or about a train station, but what actually happens is he gets saddled with Jackie, the son of an elderly rail enthusiast, to accompany him on his trip through the Harecastle Tunnel, only for this guy to dinghy him for an old acquaintance he bumps into in the station toilet. Benjamin doesn’t really get much out of the trip overall, except feeling depressed by all the various secrets that strangers he’s met over the course of the weekend have willingly or inadvertently revealed to him. For what it’s worth, Jackie doesn’t seem particularly burdened by being gay or upset about not having very much in common with his dad.
Swinging caper film and future fountain of dad-memes in which Michael Caine and his squad steal half a million quid in gold bullion from a Turin bank. One of the minor characters in the gang is Camp Freddie, whose presence doesn’t make anyone else on the crew uncomfortable and who isn’t the butt of anyone’s jokes. He’s just Camp Freddie because that’s who he is.

Additionally, the venture is being bankrolled by Mr Bridger, an incarcerated gentleman gangster played by none other than Noël Coward. While the film never explicitly mentions Bridger’s orientation, it does lean pretty heavily into Coward’s own *Transparent Closet*. You don’t have to stretch too hard to view the man’s adoration of the Queen as a kind of diva worship. Plus, Keats, Bridger’s chief flunky on the inside, is even played by Graham Payn, Coward’s RL partner of thirty-odd years.

Bridger is also the one who drops my title quote. The line has something of a double meaning in the context of a conversation about recruiting an expert from outside the criminal underworld, “bent” being a British colloquialism that can mean “gay” or “corrupt.”
Come Dancing (1969)

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Film school short from Bill Douglas about what appears to be two guys silently chatting each other up in a seaside café, their interaction overplayed with commentary from the titular ballroom dancing programme. Only, when they head down to the pier to hook up, one of them pulls out a knife. Fortunately, the other guy manages to survive by giving the would-be gaybasher an unnerving grin that sends him packing.
A much-maligned comedy directed by Stanley Donen (of Singin’ in the Rain fame) about Harry (Richard Burton) and Charlie (Rex Harrison), a middle-aged gay couple living in East London. They live in a flat above Harry’s barber shop, where Charlie often does a shift to supplement his non-existent earnings as a has-been actor, along with Harry’s bedbound, arthritic mother (Cathleen Nesbitt). Charlie is anxiously awaiting the delivery of a summons for an importuning charge, and the film follows him and Harry in the run-up to the court date. (Presumably the then recent event of legalisation was ignored for fear of nullifying the plot altogether.)

Much of the stank surrounding this movie seems to originate from the marketing rather than the film itself. It started life as a play and was well received by critics when it played in the West End. It received similarly positive notices when it transferred to Broadway, but great pains were taken in the Playbill to assure audiences of the leads’ and the director’s inveterate heterosexuality. Such tactics proliferated in the making of film which, when coupled with the press attention that could reasonably be expected from two such great egos as Burton and Harrison, a film that might have otherwise come across at the time with some measure of sincerity collapsed under the weight of its own publicity. New York Times critic Vincent Canby went as far as to describe it as a “stunt movie,” with the apparent ridiculousness of two men in a relationship serving as the hook to pull audiences in.

I saw this film with little to no knowledge of the media circus that engulfed it. At a distance of nearly fifty years, it leaves an altogether different impression. I wouldn’t rate it very highly as a comedy. There are a few decent drags scattered throughout the script but Charlie’s repetitive verbal tics coupled with Harrison’s lacklustre comedic timing make for a rather wearying watch. Nevertheless,
there are elements of the film which call into question its reputation as a mean-spirited throwback that was regressive even by the standards of its time.

In some respects, the film is surprisingly progressive. It is the earliest depiction in British film that I’ve come across of two gay men in a relationship living together and sharing a bed. We also see Harry express his longing for children and how any outlet he has for those feelings is inevitably squelched by the homophobia of those around him, whether it was the sneering condescension of the parents who drove him out of the Scout troop he led or the baseless paedo panic of his brother-in-law, who suspected Harry of something sinister just because his baby son started crying while Harry was playing with him. Finally, the end of the movie shows that, in spite of all the insults, arguing and general marital strife, these two do genuinely value one another. Whatever they might be going through as a couple, they leave their home to confront the external threat posed by the law together.
TV play set in a pub in south London. Bob and Pip (Dinsdale Landen and Edward Fox) are unlikely friends from their national service days, and Pip spends his Christmases with Bob, his wife Iris (Rosemary Leach), and their kids. Bob has recently hired Rosemary (Sharon Duce), a nubile young barmaid in a mini-skirt, who Iris has worked out Bob is planning to leave her for. She has also sussed that Pip is her husband's boyfriend. Rather than feeling hurt or betrayed, she reveals that she’s known for ages and that she’s quite happy with their arrangement. She pleads with Pip to do whatever he can to prevent their man from running off with this interloping trollop. Eventually, Rosemary is too weirded out by the set-up they’ve got going and she leaves them to share an awkward Christmas together. My research leads me to believe that this programme contains what was the first same-sex kiss on British television and, to their credit, these two give it some welly - no coy pecks on the cheek here.
Breeze Anstey (ITV - HTV, 1972)

Breeze Anstey (ITV - HTV, 1972)

Rural drama set in the twenties, but a tale as old as time. You're living with your BFF and everything’s going great. You’re running your herb business together and frolicking naked in the river when all of a sudden her boyfriend’s back and it all goes tits up. Or not, so to speak. Straight crushes and unrequited love are sadly a fact of life for many of us, so the premise is enduringly relatable, but other than that there isn’t very much to say about it. Worth a watch if you can find it.
Are You Being Served? (BBC One, 1972 - 1985)

Classic sitcom set in Grace Bros. department store, the most memorable character therein being Mr Humphries (John Inman), possibly the very embodiment of camp. At the time, he was derided by the Gay Liberation Front for being an effeminate stereotype, but time has since done quite a bit to rehabilitate his reputation. Murray Healy’s study of the show claims that what prevents him from being written off when viewed through a modern lens is that he’s never embarrassed or ashamed about being the way he is. Love him or loathe him, you can still say “I’m free” and people will know what you mean.
The London Weekend Show (ITV - LWT, 1973 - 1979)

Current affairs programme aimed at teenagers. Originally starting life in a magazine format, it evolved into a single-issue documentary strand, with lesbians being the subject of a 1977 episode. This consisted of interviews with two women, Claire and Joanne. Claire is 21 and moved from Ireland to London, where she works as a clippie on the buses. She talks a bit about how she decided to come out to her parents. She realised that being super-serious about it would have meant making a trip home just to tell them, so she went for the more practical option of telling her dad first the next time he came over for a visit so that he could relay the news to her mother. Neither of them were especially surprised, and as time went by they both got more used to the idea. Her mum told her that she personally didn’t like the word “gay” as an alternative for “lesbian.” Claire suspects that this is because her mother finds it too flippant, that she doesn’t think Claire is taking seriously how “horrendous” her situation is. She hasn’t felt like it’s been an issue at work. Although London Transport wouldn’t allow her to be filmed on their premises, a few colleagues came along with her to the cafe where she was being filmed and appeared on camera to show their support.

Joanne is a business student at Kingston Polytechnic. She was in a similar situation regarding her parents’ reaction to her coming out and they expressed concerns about her appearing on television to talk about her sexuality (an issue that Claire didn’t mention, presumably because her family were over in Ireland and wouldn’t be able to watch the programme). She’s joined at her interview by some of her student pals, most of whom express their support. One bloke, not so much, clearly unable to wrap his head around the idea that gay people can exist without causing mass depopulation. Claire was also turfed out for her interview, with her and her pals decamping to the student union for fear that it would result in bad publicity if she were to be interviewed in the poly proper.

These days, Kingston, now a university, has a small but strong LGBT community, according to The Student Room. I have my own epilogue to add regarding Claire’s employer. I live in East London and on the day I was on my way to watch these interviews at BFI Southbank, I did a double take when I saw one of these pull up at my street corner.
I love living in the future.
Bermondsey’s distaff counterpart took the form of a teleplay - this time about the end of an affair between Jackie (Alison Steadman), an army recruit, and Chrissie (Myra Francis), her boss. The mood of the piece is understandably melancholy - Jackie’s leaving the Army because of a pregnancy that resulted from a rape on a night out off-base - and it packs in a lot of drama for 30 minutes set in just one room. Nevertheless, it does contain some really tender moments, not least the kiss, plus a fantastic use of Dusty Springfield in the soundtrack.
Penda’s Fen (BBC One, 1974)

David Rudkin’s contribution to *Play for Today* is generally remembered for its unsettling look into England’s pagan past. It has a very grand sweep, but at its core it’s about Stephen Franklin (Spencer Banks), a teenage martinet whose discovery of his orientation sparks off an existential crisis that causes him to doubt the Christian vision of England that he’s venerated for so long. It’s quite striking in its resemblance to *Angels in America*, another play that features supernatural happenings and gay characters questioning their country’s national mythology. The first time I saw this, I was a bit stunned that no one seemed to have realised at the time that it was a gay play. On reflection though, I can see how all the stuff with gargoyles and hands getting chopped off might have thrown some casuals off the scent. I even went to a symposium on the film at the BFI where they had all sorts of lectures about the setting and the history that influenced its development and halfway through one of the audience members commented that "No one's mentioned the milkman [who Stephen obviously has a crush on]."
Speak for Yourself (ITV - LWT, 1974)

Speak for Yourself (ITV - LWT, 1974)

London-based local documentary strand where members of the public were invited to contribute material about subjects close to their hearts. One episode featured a film made by the Campaign for Homosexual Equality (CHE), which largely focused on the group’s counselling work and how some of its members had dealt with coming out and their attitudes towards marriage and relationships. Seeing everybody enjoy themselves at their riverboat social, it’s clear that a weight’s been lifted compared to how things were in Consenting Adults. Watching documentaries like these, I find myself wondering where all these people are now. Did the couples stay together? Did they ever get married or civilly partnered? How many of them survived the following decade?
The Happy Prince (1974)

Storytime!

Throughout my stretch in the Catholic education system, my classmates and I attended several religious retreats at a local convent. Rather than spending the day fasting and doing penance for our innumerable sins, it was actually a bit of a skive. Once the obligatory stop at the chapel was got out of the way and we filled in a few worksheets, that left the rest of the day to be filled with visits to the tuck shop, old-school school dinners with turkey dinosaurs and other pre-Jamie Oliver delicacies and extended playtimes in the sprawling wooded gardens.

The day’s agenda usually included a video. (And I do mean video - the educational sector clung to VHS until the very last.) Rather than sticking with the usual RE fayre like Jesus of Nazareth or The Miracle Maker, on more than one occasion we were treated to The Happy Prince, an animated adaptation of Oscar Wilde’s short story. It caused a bit of a stir amongst my thirteen-year-old classmates when the Happy Prince asked the Swallow to kiss him on the mouth just before their deaths. There was confusion in the ranks as the Swallow was played by a female voice actor but was referred with male pronouns by the omniscient narrator.

I can’t quite remember how the story fit into any of the lesson plans over the years. Perhaps the nuns were just happy to endorse a story where God shows up at the end to drop the moral on the audience with all the subtlety of a Saturday morning cartoon PSA.

Sidebar: On my final visit to the convent, this time as part of a different secondary school at the age of seventeen, the nuns made it a double feature with If Only I Had a Green Nose, an alarmingly off-model American animation in the Veggie Tales vein of explicitly Christian morality tales. The story follows a town of wooden hobgoblin creatures as they try to outdo each other in keeping up with various nose-painting fads. It ends with the protagonist getting a factory reset from Eli, the carpenter and thinly veiled God allegory who first whittled him into existence. I had originally remembered the story ending with Eli delivering the following message…

“...but in my recent research I discovered that what he actually said was…

“I’ll always help you to be the way you were meant to be. The way I made you.”

Somehow that sounds kind of sinister. In any case, I remember what I thought upon hearing it, knowing as did by then that I was gay and aware of the utterly repugnant statements the bishop who had confirmed me had made on the subject:

That’s not true.
Johnny Go Home (ITV - Yorkshire, 1975)

Johnny Go Home (ITV - Yorkshire, 1975)

Investigative report into juvenile homelessness in London that was instrumental in the conviction of serial child abuser, Roger Gleaves. Much like the Consenting Adults roundtable, it does a very poor job of clarifying the distinction between homosexuality and paedophilia. To be honest, that strikes me as poor journalistic practice, but then you’d have to assume that the programme-makers were aware that such a blunder could be made in the first place in order for them to address the issue.
Single drama based on the life of Quentin Crisp. John Hurt gives the performance of his career as the great stately homo of England and his journey from suburbia to art school, to court and all sorts of other interesting places, in a programme that proved to be one of the key milestones in queerness’ journey to the mainstream in Britain.
The Other Woman (BBC One, 1976)

Play for Today episode in which Kim (Jane Lapatoire, right) leaves Robin (Michael Gambon), her married lover and takes up with a Niki (Lynne Frederick, left), a much younger women, who works as a temp.

This play came out of a whole school of feminist thought that I don’t really understand. Before the BBC Store was all but razed to the ground ahead of its official closure in November 2017, it had a really in-depth article about the development and production of the play that could have explained all this to you. I had been relying on that article to provide a bit more background for you because I struggled to sum it up in a concise manner. There is a certain aspect of play that I find hard to ignore but at the same time leaves me rather stymied in my attempts to provide any insightful analysis.

There’s really no other way to describe it but:

LESBIAN RAPE CUL-DE-SAC!

For the unaware, Rantasmo of Needs More Gay defines this concept as one where the event in question has neither any discernable buildup nor any proportionate consequences. Kim and Niki get into an argument because Kim resents that Niki is interested in her but wants to be wooed and appreciated a little rather than being content to put up with Kim’s inconsiderate behaviour in exchange for a shag. Niki pours some of Kim’s paint down the sink, Kim responds by grabbing Niki and kissing her before we cut to an oversaturated red-and-white montage of O faces and overlapping limbs. And of course I’m thinking, “Oh right, angry sex. I’ve heard about that.” Except the montage ends with Niki crying in the corner with overdone bruise make-up on her arms...and then we cut to Kim playing a sulky game of Scrabble with Robin.

Uh…

A bunch of other stuff happens, but I basically spent the rest of the runtime with my jaw on the floor. All I can say is if it was supposed to be some tortured second-wavy metaphor for asserting the power of the patriarchy or whatever, it falls fantastically flat. Also, Kim doesn't state directly that the sexual abuse she suffered at the hands of her father made her gay, but she gets pretty close. Not wanting to
put too fine a point on it, the programme has not aged well. It's a product of a time when people perhaps didn't fully understand the ramifications of using these two particular elements in this way (or indeed of combining them) in a medium directed at a wide audience with little in the way of access to alternative sources of information.
**Scum (BBC Two, 1977 (unaired) and 1979)**

Hugely controversial *Play for Today* episode that exposed the failures of the country’s juvenile detention system. So incendiary was the original teleplay that the BBC banned it from transmission, prompting writer Roy Minton and director Alan Clarke to remake it for the big screen two years later with most of the same cast.

Set in a closed borstal, it focuses predominantly on the efforts of Carlin (Ray Winstone) to reestablish himself as top dog after being moved from his previous prison for assaulting an officer. Much like its protagonist, *Scum* is preceded by its reputation for violence, with one of its most infamous scenes showing Carlin bludgeoning an inmate with two snooker balls in a sock.

I had heard talk of some sort of gay scene that was not reproduced in the remake. Since it was usually mentioned in the same breath as the violence that led to the ban, I went in expecting something fairly substantial. Instead, it’s just a really awkward rape “negotiation” where Carlin recruits Rhodes (Ian Sharrock), a new arrival to the wing, as his “missus,” emphasising his not-gayness all the way. While I didn’t miss cringing through this scene in the remake, it does at least serve to make Carlin a little less one-note in his characterisation since we get to see him on the back foot as he tries to “sell” Rhodes on the idea.
A Superstition (ITV - Yorkshire, 1977)

Single drama about Oliver and Harry (Hugh Burden and a pre- Brideshead Anthony Andrews), a couple who’ve left London after Harry was blinded in a car accident and are now living in Antibes, frittering away their time until Oliver grows restless and they move on.

Life isn’t great - Harry’s no longer able to pursue his career as a film editor and Oliver is understandably still carrying a lot of guilt over having been the one who was driving on the night of the accident - but it could be worse. Their money will run out someday but they’re in no great rush to go back to work and they have Milos, their houseboy, to clean up after them. When Oliver discovers that Milos has a man who he sees in town, he tells Harry nothing of this mystery man’s identity. It’s only when Harry is alone at the house that the man, Curtis, appears unannounced and reveals himself to Harry as Oliver’s ex-boyfriend and longtime stalker. Ever since Oliver dumped him years ago, Curtis has been following him around Europe, ousting any incumbent boyfriend Oliver might have had. Curtis usually caps this off with manipulating Oliver into sex, and this occasion is no different from the previous ones, except this time instead of refusing to get back with him, Oliver hacks him to death with a machete and leaves his body floating in the pool, and then kills Harry for an encore.

For a story that turns on the overpowering magnetism of a toxic relationship, this play isn’t very sexy. It takes place between in that feted interregnum between the sexual revolution and the onset of AIDS when everything was up for grabs, but this is not reflected in the dynamic between Oliver and Curtis. Because there is almost no physical contact between the two of them, Curtis’ creepiness lacks any tangible sexual edge. I wouldn’t go so far as to say that the play is completely regressive. Harry actually calls Oliver out for continually letting Curtis back into his life as a way of punishing himself for being gay. The story shows how Oliver’s inability to escape the internalised homophobia rooted in his past not only prevents him from truly living his life in the present, but, with the murder of Harry, it also leads to him destroying the lives of the people he loves.
Drama about Jim (Ken Robertson), a geography teacher living in London who spends his evenings trawling the bars in search of a lasting relationship. Although he never has much trouble meeting guys, he struggles to turn these hookups into anything more substantial, and so the film meanders through his efforts on the scene and his largely uneventful days at the comprehensive where he works.

Gay loneliness isn't a subject that's usually handled in a nuanced manner. The idea seems to be that you leave in the morning with everything you own in a little black case and that as soon as you step off the platform at Euston you'll be up and dancing on the floor and lock eyes with the love of your life before you've even had a chance to unpack. In a lot of stories, regardless of orientation, the point when our hero gets on the bus to the big city is the full stop. What often goes unacknowledged is that getting up the courage to leave is something altogether different from actually achieving what you set out to do once you get there. Thus far, *Nighthawks* has been the only movie that has really spoken to my experience of trying to meet and keep someone, and its age does less to distance it from contemporary queer life than you might think.

In his review of the film, Andy Townsend talks about how the film gives us a glimpse of a London that was “pre-Ikea, pre-gastropubs, pre ‘lifestyle,’” which has since disappeared forever. Honestly, even though I don’t want to contemplate the idea of a pub without even a toastie machine to give me succour, London hasn’t changed as much as all that. Demographics have shifted, neighbourhoods have come and gone and there’s a great deal more money in evidence on the urban landscape, but there is still plenty in this film that will be recognisable to the modern Londoner. Housing is still undersized and overpriced and bicycles remain the sole preserve of those with a death wish. Even with advances in public acceptance and technology eliminating the need for bars catering to a specifically queer clientele, the struggle to build a relationship with someone who is, at the outset, a complete stranger, with no promise of any common interests, goals or even mutual attraction is still very real.

There’s also no reassurance that your efforts will ultimately be rewarded, and this is reflected not just in the events of the film but in its structure. Although there are a few separate undercurrents that come to a head over the course of the runtime, such as Jim’s colleague Judy making a drunken pass at him after the staff Christmas party, there isn’t an overriding plot driving things forward. Although this doesn’t deprive the film of tension since Jim’s motivation is clear and plenty of screen time is devoted to him pursuing his goal, the payoff for this storytelling choice doesn’t really hit home until the ending.

In the final sequence, Jim gets roped into accompanying a friend and past shag to a late-night art show. Rather than immediately returning to Jim’s flat for an evening of undoubtedly disappointing sex, they stop off at The Streets, Jim’s usual watering hole, to dance awhile and delay the inevitable. Slowly, the camera tracks up and away from Jim in one long take, surveying the dozens of men crammed into the bar before eventually fading out.

For me, this ending was almost unbearably bleak. Although Jim isn’t exactly alone in the world, he is no better off at the end of the story than he was at the beginning. Like your man with the wraparound shades said, he still hasn’t found what he’s looking for. There’s no guarantee that he ever will, and that’s what hardest to take. For all his efforts, Jim could very well spend the rest of his life looking for Mr Right without ever finding him. I wouldn’t describe it as a tragic ending, since it is not one
that delights in its own cruelty towards its characters, but the brutal honesty of it genuinely shocked me. It reminded me of the closing lines from *My Own Private Idaho*, another film where the protagonist is denied closure on the emotional void they’ve been trying to fill over the course of the story:

“I’ve been tasting roads my whole life. This road will never end. It probably goes all around the world.”
Coming Out (BBC One, 1979)

Play for Today in which closeted romance novelist Lewis Duncan (Anton Rodgers) writes a gay article in the popular Arbiter magazine under the alias “Zippy Grimes” that inadvertently causes a sensation amongst its readership. Although Lewis lives with his partner, Richie (Nigel Havers) and is out to his colleagues, he remains resolute in the preservation of his public closet. Harry (Hywel Bennett), his editor, urges him to capitalise on the controversy by unmasking himself in the next issue, or at the very least to respond to some of the letters that have inundated the office.

He acquiesces and meets a few of his readers. One is a middle-aged woman whose son, Jamie, has recently come out to her. She acts as an audience proxy as Lewis tries to reassure her that her son won’t go through life alone. She isn’t convinced and the last we hear of Jamie is that he and his mother are headed for Lourdes.

Lewis also patronises a rent boy (in more ways than one) who wasn’t exactly thrilled with his article. In fact, what’s surprising is that it’s not until about midway through the play that we find out that the article didn’t strike such a strong chord because it was some sort of heartfelt plea for compassion, but instead an editorial claiming that gay men aren’t in any position to demand better treatment if they refuse to get their own house in order and sort out those pesky importuners bothering straight men in public bogs. This doesn’t go down well with Lewis and Richie’s politically-motivated frenemy Gerald (Richard Pearson), who in turn reveals Richie’s affair with his partner, Gunther (Michael Byrne), out of spite. With his personal life in tatters and nothing left to lose, the last we see of Lewis is him alone in the new house he and Richie were supposed to be sharing, typing out a new article.
I really did not get this movie when my dad made us watch it. I could understand its appeal to him and my mum, what with it perfectly capturing the optimistic New Town zeitgeist of their own adolescence, but this sweet and tender comedy of a teenage boy’s infatuation with his high school’s first ever female footballer sailed clean over my twelve-year-old head. The intervening years have since opened my eyes to its charms, and there was also one brief queer moment that slipped under even my ridiculously over-primed gaydar until I read the programme notes from a BFI screening of the movie.

There’s a scene early on in the film where Gregory gushes about Dorothy to his pal Stephen (William Greenlees) during their Home Eekies class. He starts off by asking Stephen if he’s ever been in love, which leaves Stephen unexpectedly stumped for a brief moment before Gregory continues with his stream of euphoric logorrhoea. When he explains that he’s in love with someone on the football team, Stephen shrugs it off as a phase, paying more attention to his biscuit mix than to Gregory.

The film is embedded with an ever-so-slightly offbeat sense of humour. Visual and conversational non-sequiturs abound. In a way, Stephen’s non-reaction to the idea of Gregory being in love with one of their male classmates contributes to that vibe, because it’s the exact opposite of the reaction you would expect from someone living in this particular time and place.
Whicker’s World: California - (ITV - Yorkshire, 1980)

Whicker’s World: California (ITV - Yorkshire, 1980)

Investigative news programme documenting the international exploits of renowned journalist, Alan Whicker. In 1980, he travelled to San Francisco to document the SFPD’s efforts to recruit gay and lesbian police officers in the wake of the Harvey Milk assassination.
The Kamikaze Ground Staff Reunion Dinner (BBC One, 1981)

Experimental *Play for Today* episode about the annual booze-up of a retired World War 2 ground crew team that prepped kamikaze pilots for their final mission, the hook being that all the characters are played by white actors. (Uppity students and trouble with the unions? I guess we’re [Not So Different](http://example.com) after all!) The squad sad sack does a bit of weepy-drunk reminiscing about sending his crush off to his death, to which the rest of the crew respond by jeering at him and calling him a sissy.
The House on the Hill (ITV - STV, 1981)

Studio-bound drama series set in a Victorian mansion in Glasgow’s West End (on Claremont Terrace, I think, for those of you playing along at home), with each episode taking place in a different year with a different set of residents. During the Second World War, the house gets used as a general purpose space by the Army, with the basement secretly doubling as a gay bar for British and American soldiers in the evenings. Intentionally or not, there is some factual basis in this setup. The Club was a gay bar housed in 4 Queen’s Crescent in the Park area in the early eighties. You can check out a whole bunch of related ephemera at the LGBT History Scotland website here.

The final episode, set in the then-present, sees the house being used as digs for a few of the principals in Glasgow’s top-drawer Christmas panto, among them Robbie Kerr (Rikki Fulton), a career dame on the verge of retirement with a troubled marriage. We do have one coded gay member of the crew who plays a noticeably straighter bat when interacting with the press. Other than that, there isn't much to report, although it's worth noting how attitudes to "the damehood" have changed since this originally aired. These days it's generally regarded as a bit of fun and decent earner over the Christmas period for all sorts of middle-aged male performers, so it's rather odd to watch Rikki Fulton's character put on airs as though he's some grand Shakespearian thesp.
Adaptation of the 1939 novel by Evelyn Waugh chronicling the relationship of Charles Ryder (Jeremy Irons) with the beautiful but troubled Sebastian Flyte (Anthony Andrews) and his family of Catholic aristocrats from the twenties up to the Second World War.

This is the part where I out myself as a dreadful philistine and confess that the vast majority of the story’s religious themes go clean over my head, despite my having been born a Catholic. That doesn’t matter nearly as much as your English teacher would have you believe though, because the relationships between the characters are contemporary and compelling enough that they stand on their own merits. When Charles arrives at Oxford, he’s aware of Sebastian’s existence, but they don’t actually hit it off until Sebastian throws up through his living room window. That’s a meet cute worthy of *Skins*. In those first couple of episodes when they’re together at college or alone at Brideshead they’re so in love that it just radiates off every frame. That only makes it all the more devastating when their relationship founders under the strain of Sebastian’s alcoholism. Despite marriage, artistic success and even finding God, there’s a lingering emptiness in Charles’ life that’s never quite filled.

I’ve gone back and forth on my feelings about *Death of the Author* over the years, but *Brideshead* is definitely one of those instances where I have to disregard authorial intent altogether. Just as people are rarely capable of fully understanding themselves, they don’t always fully understand the things they create. I wholly reject Evelyn Waugh’s analysis of Charles and Sebastian’s relationship:

>“Lord Sebastian Flyte is the attractive, wayward and helpless younger son whom Charles meets in Oxford, where he, Sebastian, is the idol of the fashionable aesthetic set that was prominent in English university life in the 1920s. Charles’s romantic affection for Sebastian is part due to the glitter of the new world Sebastian represents, part to the
protective feeling of a strong towards a weak character, and part a foreshadowing of the love for Julia which is to be the consuming passion of his mature years.”

It’s not even because our understanding of human sexuality has changed so much between the time the novel was set and the present day, it’s that the story itself does far more to disprove that argument than it ever does to support it. In a later episode, years after Charles and Sebastian have lost touch, Julia (Diana Quick), Sebastian’s sister, asks Charles about his motives for marrying Celia Mulcaster (Jane Asher), the sister of an Oxford acquaintance who he was never in love with, Charles’ first response is to say that he was primarily motivated by her physical attractiveness and the social advantage the marriage would generate for him and his career, but when gives himself a moment to consider his answer, he admits that he went through with it because he was lonely and missing Sebastian. He goes on to have an affair with Julia, but even then, twenty years after they first met, Charles admits to himself that he still thinks about Sebastian every day and that he feels his presence through his relationship with Julia: he might as well walk about with “NOT OVER IT” tattooed across his forehead.
Long-running soap and controversy-magnet created by Phil Redmond and one of the flagships of Channel 4’s launch. By far, its most famous scene was the kiss between Beth Jordache (Anna Friel) and Margaret Clemence (Nicola Stephenson), the first lesbian kiss on British television to take place before the watershed. Channel 4 was predictably set upon with complaints when it first aired, but it ended up drawing even more when the kiss was cut from the Sunday afternoon omnibus. It was used by Danny Boyle in his love montage in the opening ceremony for the 2012 Olympics in London, thus providing the first ever same-sex kiss seen by audiences in 77 countries.
The Dresser (1983)

Adaptation of Ronald Harwood’s stage play set in the Second World War about Norman (Tom Courtenay, right), the dresser and general dogsbody to a third-rate Shakespearian actor known only as “Sir” (Albert Finney, left), who is dragging his rag-tag company of actors bodily across the provinces in a tour that has been blighted by various blitz-related mishaps. Also dancing attendance are Sir’s wife, “Her Ladyship” (Zena Walker) and his dependable stage manager, Madge (Eileen Atkins).

As we get to know Sir over the first few scenes, it becomes clear that he is in the throes of what we can assume is Alzheimer’s disease. After an episode at the local market, Madge and Her Ladyship are in agreement that Sir is too ill to go on and that the performance must be cancelled. Norman, enabler amongst enablers, will hear nothing of this, and insists that he and Sir be left in peace to prepare for the evening’s performance of King Lear.

The Dresser is one of the less well-known Best Picture nominees in the award’s history. Movies about showbusiness are an Academy staple, but it failed to make a lasting impression. This is not terribly surprising as overt staginess can be a turn-off for a lot of moviegoers, even though the screenplay does take advantage of the medium by showing events that the audience is only told about in the play. However, I am surprised that it hasn’t had any recognition in the field of queer cinema. Not only is Norman the protagonist, but he’s a gay character, and more specifically an effeminate gay character, who has depth and complex motivations that even he doesn’t entirely understand. For a viewing public raised on the likes of the Carry On films, this is a pretty radical departure from the established norm.

Having seen the show’s 2016 revival with Ken Stott and Reece Shearsmith (twice!), the film does a lot to round out the sharper edges of his character. There’s a scene in the second act where Norman unleashes a torrent of venom on Irene (Kathryn Harrison), a newbie who tries it on with Sir while
Norman’s back is turned, and there were gasps in the audiences I was in when Norman calls her the “company mattress.” In the film, the rant remains, but that line is cut, amongst others. Tom Courtenay plays Norman’s vulnerabilities much closer to the surface, whereas Shearsmith’s performance was definitely a song sung in the key of Ollie Plimsoles, leaning far more on the Jerkass side of Jerkass Woobie.
Spitting Image: Long-running topical sketch show devised by God among ad men Martin Lambie-Nairn starring puppets created Roger Fluck and Peter Law. Long before Tumblr was cracking jokes about Coalition shipping, and even before Electric Six had their way with Tony and George, Spitting Image was providing the politician slash in the form of The Two Davids. David Owen and David Steel formed an alliance between their two parties, the SDP and The Liberal Party. There was a bit of back and forth over what they were going to call this new venture, causing the general public to assume that the SDP had subsumed the Liberals entirely. This assumption was made manifest in Spitting Image with the Steel puppet being small and slightly squeaky while the normal-sized Owen puppet towered over him. They have a bit of a dom/sub dynamic going on in their relationship (“Oh, hurt me, David!”), which seems to be a recurring theme for MPs in fiction (e.g. House of Cards, The Politician’s Wife). The real David Steel wasn’t wild about his puppet because he thought it damaged his credibility with the public. He was the one who had the longer and more distinguished political career out of him and Owen, and he was taller!

One sketch from 1992 featured a pretty memorable send-up of Tom Robinson’s sardonic protest song, Glad to Be Gay, in which Jason Donovan and fellow Technicolor Dreamcoat wearer Phillip Schofield sing all about how they’re glad not to be gay, not that there’s anything wrong with that, of course:

“We might be single, handsome and gifted, but when we’re around, shirts stay unlifted.”

Not only is the song funny, but even if you were to take it perfectly seriously, it actually paints a pretty positive picture of gay men. Lad culture was ascendant in 1992, and the way Jason and Phillip assert their heterosexuality is by getting completely rat-arsed, pissing up walls and generally being a public nuisance. In contrast, gay guys are cultured, attractive and never so much as fart in public. The whole thing was a dig at Donovan’s lawsuit against The Face magazine for alleging that he was gay. He won, but the backlash against his decision to sue in the first place was so strong that it effectively killed off his career for a number of years.

(Source)
Public school drama set in the 1930s loosely inspired by the life of Soviet double agent, Guy Burgess (renamed “Guy Bennett” in the film). Rather than getting into any of his spy doings, it focuses solely on his schooldays. Scandal is afoot in an unnamed house of an unnamed public school when a student hangs himself after being caught in flagrante with a fellow pupil by a master. Prefects respond with a crackdown on their House’s perceived immorality with varying degrees of enthusiasm. Bennett (Rupert Everett) is the black sheep in this family as the only openly gay pupil in the school, although he’s not the only one who’s been pushed to the fringe of the herd. His best friend, Judd (Colin Firth), is a staunch Communist who is thoroughly disillusioned with the public school system and the societal structure that it perpetuates.

It’s in this rather tense climate than Bennett starts a relationship with Harcourt (Cary Elwes), a boy from another house. This attracts the ire of the Gods, the senior prefects whose ranks Bennett hopes to join in the following school year. There’s some political back and forth as the various prefects attempt to keep Fowler (Tristan Oliver), the pupil who’s spearheading the current moralistic purge, from becoming Head of House. This ultimately results in Bennett taking a serious beating in order to prevent his affair with Harcourt from being made public. He also gets shafted out of his chance to be a God, which in turn kneecaps the plans he had for a career in the Diplomatic. The realisation that the system he’s idealised and strived to succeed in for so long has rejected him for being openly gay is the turning point that sparks off an exploration of Marxism as a possible alternative.

I liked the romance between Bennett and Harcourt, but it ultimately takes a back seat to the in-House infighting. We don’t learn enough about Harcourt for us to feel like there’s a tangible relationship with a real person that’s worth fighting for, which has the unfortunate effect of lowering the stakes of the beating. Honestly, I thought Guy was going to realise that Harcourt was a drip and that he should get with Judd since he’s the only other dude who gets any proper character development, but that doesn't happen.
The Jewel in the Crown (ITV - Granada, 1984)

Multi-million-pound television epic based on a series of novels by Paul Scott about the end of British rule in India. Famous for being an example of Granada’s Thatcherite largesse. Less famous for having one of the most layered and complex gay villains ever in the form of colonial police officer and recreational sadist, Ronald Merrick (Tim Pigott-Smith). At the absolute surface level, the A plot of the first few episodes is ostensibly about him and Indian-born Englishman Hari Kumar (Art Malik) engaging in an arms’-length pissing match over the affections of proto-Chummy volunteer nurse Daphne Manners (Susan Wooldridge), but it becomes quite clear that Daphne is merely the conduit for Merrick’s Frolloesque crush on Hari. Things go up shit creek pretty quickly when Daphne and Hari are attacked in the Bibighar gardens, where Daphne is gang-raped by an anonymous group of Indians and Hari is forced to watch. Merrick arrests Hari and some of his colleagues from the English-language newspaper where he works, but Hari doesn’t confess, even when Merrick tortures and sexually assaults him.

Eventually, the public furore that resulted from the attack dies down. Hari is left to languish in prison on trumped-up political charges, Daphne dies in childbirth and Merrick transfers out of the police and into the army. The action moves to the garrison town of Pankot and the story focuses on the Laytons, an officer-class family with two twentysomething daughters, Sarah and Susan (Geraldine James and Wendy Morgan). Merrick spends the next few years ingratiating himself with this family, initially by acting as best man for Susan’s husband, Teddy (Nicholas Farrell) and eventually by marrying Susan after Teddy gets killed in the jungle, with Merrick himself losing an arm and being disfigured in the process. All the while, he and the people around him are reminded of his role in the Bibighar affair and the ensuing civil unrest. Eventually, he’s murdered in his bed just days before independence, presumably by the nationalist network of the Hindu scholar Pandit Baba (Marne Maitland) in an act of vengeance for Bibighar.

And none of this is your standard coded-gay-villain schtick either - Merrick is explicitly confirmed as gay in the final episode. However, the details of the plot beyond the basic elements that were laid out at the starting block - a love triangle between him, Daphne and Hari - appear to have been eroded from the collective consciousness. This makes for an interesting contrast with Brideshead Revisited, which people tend to grasp as having a gay aspect to the story pretty quickly because
Charles and Sebastian’s relationship gets a lot of development in the first half of the series. Although the roots of Merrick’s behaviour towards Hari seem much clearer to a modern audience, it’s comparatively vague by eighties standards. That said, I can’t say I really blame anyone who has a hard time keeping up - this is one dense motherfucker. *Brideshead* might have been just as long, but it didn’t have to juggle nearly as many overlapping plot threads or characters.

Speaking of other characters, Merrick is by no means the only queer character in the series. There’s also Dmitri Bronowsky (Eric Porter), an aristocratic Russian refugee who fled to India and reinvented himself as the adviser to the Nawab of Mirat. He’s urbane, well-informed thanks to his many spies and a crafty old bugger to boot. He tricks Merrick into outing himself to him pretty easily when he meets him for the first time at Susan and Teddy’s wedding. He flatters Merrick to get him to relax and then goes on to say that they have a lot in common. He points out an attractive officer in the crowd at the reception and asks Merrick if he would agree that the young man in question is beautiful. Merrick starts to say “yes,” but cuts himself off mid-sentence when he realises what he’s just said.

Also of interest is Barbie Batchelor (Peggy Ashcroft), a retired missionary who is the paying guest and companion of Mabel Layton (Fabia Drake), Sarah and Susan’s step-grandmother, and a thorn in the side of Sarah and Susan’s mother, Mildred (Judy Parfitt). When Mabel dies of a stroke, she’s utterly heartbroken and pleads with Mildred to respect Mabel’s wishes to be buried next to her late husband. She even gets on her knees and begs, saying how much she loved Mabel and that she doesn’t want to be haunted by her if they bury her in the wrong grave.

This request ultimately falls on deaf ears, and Mildred evicts Barbie from the house she had shared with Mabel, forcing her to move in with the vicar and his wife, Arthur and Clarissa Peplow (Antony Brown and Carol Gillies). When she’s unpacking her stuff, Clarissa tells her that there have been rumours at the club that it would have been inappropriate for her to move in with the rest of the Laytons because of there being “two pretty young girls” in the house, and that she needs to hear Barbie deny this ridiculous accusation. Barbie says that she doesn’t even know how to respond to that, because if it were true she would be inclined to deny it. She answers honestly and says that she doesn’t know, but that she doesn’t believe there’s anything “unnatural” about enjoying Sarah and Susan’s company and caring about what happens to them.

The most openly gay character in the series is RAMC corporal Sophie Dixon (Warren Clarke). We first meet him when he’s Merrick’s rehabilitation nurse. Merrick derides Sophie’s camp manner, which he refers to as a “song and dance act.” However, we find out that he’s also an exceptionally brave soldier, and ought to have been decorated for gallantry. Merrick challenges him on this, asking him if he’s “a hero or a bloody pansy.” That’s one of the more tragic aspects of Merrick’s character - he doesn’t think it’s possible for him to be a hero. This ties in with an interview that Tim Pigott-Smith gave where he talked about how he thought something inside Merrick died when Daphne rejected his rather business-like marriage proposal. It’s as if that was the last chance for him to be “normal.” His failure to be straight leads to a resignation to surrender himself to all his worst instincts because the choice is to be a hero or a pansy. There’s no way he can be both.

Sophie, for his part, is far more secure in himself. He’s chatty, gregarious and regards himself as the mother of his barracks. We find out that he acted as a mentor and confidante to Pinky (Richard Tolan), one of his subordinates who found himself in hot water after snooping around in the office of the camp psychiatrist, Dr Samuels (Ralph Arliss), reading soldiers’ medical records in the hopes of making some sense of his sexuality. Spurred on by this knowledge that there are other men like him in the world, he ventures into the bazaar and strikes up a relationship with a young Muslim man (Bhasker Patel), with the assistance of Merrick’s manservant, Suleiman (Albert Moses), who has a sideline in pimping. (The young man doesn’t get a name, so for the sake of clarity, let’s call him, “Farid.”)
Farid asks Pinky to leave his watch as a token, so he can be sure that Pinky will come back. Pinky gets caught in the office by Merrick, who reveals that he has the watch he gave to Farid. Merrick effectively threatens to out Pinky if he doesn’t let him look at the files himself (he’s looking for Susan’s medical records to find out how best to manipulate her following her nervous breakdown). Fortunately for Pinky, when the doc finds out about this, he’s very forgiving. He sets Pinky up with a new deployment in Bombay to get him away from Merrick and even finds his watch for him, although without realising the full significance of its recovery, meaning that Merrick never actually grassed him up. It was all a setup to get at Susan’s files.

In the final episode, Dmitri provides historian Guy Perron (Charles Dance) with his explanation of Merrick’s murder, which sees another queer character enter the frame. This information comes from Khansamar, one of Merrick’s servants who had been informing on him to Dmitri. While Merrick was working in Mirat, away from Susan and his stepson, Edward (Jonathan and Nicholas Haley), he had a lot of young men coming to his house looking for work. Usually, they would get turned away by Khansamar, but when Merrick spies Aziz, an attractive young man who bears more than a passing resemblance to Hari, looking for work, he tells Khansamar to give him something to do. Since these events are coming to the audience via a third-hand account, our picture of the ensuing sexual relationship between the two of them is somewhat obscured. When Khansamar sees Aziz coming out of Merrick’s room one morning, he doesn’t think much of it - he already knew his boss was a bit of an oddball. One night, however, Khansamar finds Aziz nursing a nasty gash on his face. He asks Aziz where he was, and he says that he was with a girl in the bazaar. Khansamar asks him if the girl’s husband caught the two of them together and Aziz says yes, although Khansamar doesn’t really believe that lie that he’s feeding him even as he says it. In the morning, he sees the bruises on Merrick’s knuckles and is disgusted with Merrick’s behaviour, wondering why Aziz would even tolerate it in the first place.

Aziz gets sent packing after this incident, and more young men start turning up looking for work again (they had stopped coming after Aziz had been hired) and Merrick is later found strangled and mutilated in his bedroom, with “Bibighar” scrawled across his mirror. Dmitri surmises that Aziz had been convinced by Pandit Baba’s network to put up with Merrick’s harsh treatment so as to be their man on the inside. He suspects that Merrick didn’t put up a fight against his assailants because he wanted to die. Dmitri’s theory is that Aziz was the first man he had ever slept with, and that by doing so he inadvertently destroyed his belief in his own racial superiority and causing a Javert-style Blue Screen of Death.

In addition to these supporting roles, there are some interesting offhand bits worth commenting on. When Sarah ends up at a house party in Calcutta, her date tells her that the Maharanee who’s hosting it is so rich that she pays for the expense account of her husband’s mistress and that the two of them are good friends. In fact, her and the mistress had been lovers at some unspecified point in the past. Sarah is surprised to hear this, but not so much by the concept of two women being in a relationship. It’s established earlier in the evening that her gaydar is pretty sharp when she mentions that she won’t have to worry about one of her date’s pals being into her. At another house party, Guy warns some soldiers to “beware the mysteries of the Orient” or some such bullshit to alert them to the presence of some transgender guests, but one of the privates is like, “Whatever, Brobot. We know what’s up.” Given that we can see male and female couples in the background in a few of the frames, it’s probably not all that far-fetched to assume that they did know what kind of party they were at. Sure, it does feel as if it’s being played for laughs, especially given that it was filmed in the eighties, but the last shot we see of the soldiers is them dancing with the ladies in question and looking like they’re enjoying themselves a lot more than Guy is, so nuts to him!

So yeah, this sucker is an absolute behemoth. This 1800-word summary of the various queer elements in the story barely scratches the surface in terms of the plot as a whole. Performing any sort of analysis is a pretty daunting task, but I’ll give it a go.
Merrick is the most prominent of the queer characters, and the character with the greatest presence in the series as a whole. His fatal flaw is his chronic inferiority complex. He’s incredibly self-conscious about his grammar-school background and feels like an outsider amongst the upper-class authorities of the Raj. Thus, he’s the character with the greatest vested interest in preserving the status quo - having power over Indians in every aspect of life allows him to compensate for his insecurities about his class and, ultimately, his sexuality.

Merrick’s MO is to single people out for special attention, for good or for ill. Hari had the bad luck to be “chosen” because he threatened Merrick’s belief in his racial superiority. When he first sees Hari, he watches him wash, and the camera leaves little doubt as to where his interests lie. It’s only when Hari opens his mouth and reacts to Merrick’s questioning like any toff getting grief from some uppity rozzer would that Merrick takes exception to him.

After Merrick gets shot down by Daphne, he expends a lot of effort trying to prevent her from “ruining” herself on an Indian, but it becomes clear that the person he wants to rescue from their attraction to Hari is himself. When he questions Hari, he tries to get a rise out of him by insulting Daphne, in what turns out to be a telling instance of psychological projection, by saying that she’s “the one who likes Black cock, and the more the merrier.”

The interrogation deteriorates from run-of-the-mill police brutality into sexualised torture pretty quickly. Hari is forced to strip, tied to a trestle and caned. However, it’s not until several months after the fact that we find out about the full extent of his trauma. Eventually, some officials come knocking to investigate his bogus political detention, and when the questions turn to Merrick, they ask Hari to clarify his allegations of obscenity:

“He asked me if I was enjoying it. He said, ‘Aren’t you enjoying it? Surely a randy fellow like you doesn’t exhaust himself just having it once?’ He had his hand between my legs at the time.”

It’s unclear as to whether or not this incident crosses over from sexual assault into all-out rape (where was his other hand?), but for our purposes, that distinction isn’t particularly relevant. Bottom line: Merrick is bad news. He even forces Hari to agree with him that there’s no such thing as real love between human beings, only power and fear, so that’s some Voldemort shit right there.

Of course it would be a much less complicated world if every person who did evil things was also an unreconstructed psychopath, but there are times where Merrick demonstrates that he is actually capable of being thoughtful and considerate. When Daphne KBs him, she tries to smooth things over being mentioning how much trouble he went to over the dinner. This is expanded on in the book, where she notices that he put girly soap in the bathroom just for her to use when she came round. When she recounts the incident to her aunt in a letter, she goes on clarify that she also spotted a bar of a more manly brand as well, so she wouldn’t want her to “get the wrong idea.” Having said that, when Daphne is about to meet him for the first time at a party, she says that she hopes he’s gay because she hates it when men pretend that they haven’t noticed that she isn’t very attractive.

The series touches on Merrick’s struggle to reconcile his homosexuality with his sense of masculinity, albeit not as directly as it deals with him playing out his fears about his sexuality via a smokescreen of racist aggression against Hari in particular. It’s an undercurrent in his interactions with Sophie. Sophie might be as camp as Christmas, but he’s also burly and beer-swilling and nowhere near the physical description one might come up with when asked to think of a particularly queeny gay man.

In terms of the end of Merrick’s arc, it feels like a lot has been left unanswered. Since the audience gets a third-hand account of the events leading up to his death, we never find out what it was that
made Aziz so special, what it was about him that forced Merrick to question his belief and his actions for the first time, beyond his resemblance to Hari. Perhaps, the end of the Raj meant that there was a sense of reflection abroad in Mirat. Dmitri seems to have been touched by it. He thought Merrick was a man of the past, and that this was why he was so good at keeping order in the later stages of his career, but why he could never be expected to thrive, or indeed survive, after independence.

This is in contrast to Guy, who Dmitri identifies as a foil for Merrick by saying that he is a man of the present. While Merrick’s sexuality ostensibly drives him to an existential crisis, among other things, Guy is completely unfazed when Sophie tries to chat him up on VJ day, and is able to turn him down gently without the episode triggering a massive freak-out.

It’s hard for me to corral my thoughts about Jewel into one cohesive sentiment because of the number of different perspectives we see throughout the story. All I can say is that I think it’s this that has led to it ageing so well. It’s incredibly ahead of its time and would fit in very well in this golden age of television that we’re currently living in.
What Can I Do with a Male Nude? (1985)

What Can I Do with a Male Nude? (1985)

Short film from *Nighthawks* director Ron Peck about the history of male nudity in art. Mostly extols the virtues of muscle magazines.
(Source)

I don’t even know where to start with this one. I picked the DVD up off the shelf from my local indy cinema without really glancing at the back. It’s a then-contemporary drama done in the style of a pulpy 50s noir flick. It stars Denis Lawson as a spiv who agrees to run an errand for a friend and finds himself getting roped into a massive conspiracy perpetrated by the secret state. When he goes on the run, he’s aided and abetted by Hugo Silver (Simon Callow), a gay spy who’s done a Burgess-like about face because he’s fed up with watching people get screwed by the system, himself included. Sadly, Hugo doesn’t make it to the last episode, but the real payoff for his rather gruesome death doesn’t come until the very final shot, because the knowledge that he and others died to get the protagonist to that point only serves to make the final twist all the more gut-wrenching.
Screen Two drama from Andrew Davies about Jo (Jenifer Landor), an American psychologist on secondment to a school in the Cotswolds who develops feelings for Helen (Charlotte Coleman), one of her teenage patients.

Helen is initially resistant to Jo’s offer of help to curb the bad behaviour that has made her a thorn in the sides of her teachers. It’s not until Jo brokers a deal with her to get her to participate in therapy on the condition that Jo will let Helen teach her how to ride a horse that she starts making any progress. While training on Helen’s farm, she starts to see how Helen’s disruptive behaviour most likely has its roots in her home life. Her father is an overbearing tyrant, her mother is cowed and ineffectual and her older sister, Shirley, is withdrawn to the point that she doesn’t speak.

Helen and Jo continue spending time together at the farm and Helen eventually reveals that her sister is mute because she’s been traumatised by the sexual abuse she suffered at the hands of their father. Helen goes on to say that he attempted to molest her as well but that she managed to fight him off. She vows never to let a man touch her ever again. Jo, clearly out of her depth, tries to reassure her by telling her that she won’t always feel that way. Helen responds with what is probably one of my favourite declarations ever:

“That’s pigshit! You know I love you.”

This catches Jo off-guard, so much so that when Helen asserts that Jo loves her too, she doesn’t deny it. Jo, for her part, never does anything to act on her feelings for Helen or behaves in a way that makes Helen feel threatened or unsafe. Honestly, if I hadn’t had it pointed out to me ahead of time, I don’t think the idea of Jo reciprocating Helen's feelings in any way would have occurred to me at all. It’s certainly a difficult statement to respond to in a responsible manner, especially without any advance warning.

In the end, Jo arrives at the farm one day to find that Helen has shot her mother and father. She
explains that her father's suicidal and homicidal urges were common knowledge amongst their neighbours, thereby providing the perfect cover for her to frame him. She and Shirley are finally free from their abuser, and Helen can manage the farm independently so that they have an income to live on without having to rely on any adults, although she does tell Jo that she wants her to come and live with them. Judging by the look of utter horror on Jo’s face, that’s not going to happen. I was way more gutted for Helen than I was for Jo when I saw how things had ended - with a bit more forensic knowledge, Helen might actually have been able to pull it off. God knows that fucker deserved to die. Her mother ended up being collateral damage, but maybe that shows just how hurt Helen was that she failed to protect her and her sister.

In later years, we've seen dramas like Rather You Than Me and Inside No. 9 which are much more confident in dealing with the conflation between being gay and being a victim of sexual abuse. In those shows, we never get the sense that the characters’ confusion and uncertainty about the matter is shared by the writers. This is not the case for Inappropriate Behaviour, where even a professional psychologist doesn’t know how to handle it, and it’s unclear as to whether this is a character choice or symptomatic of a lack of a clear editorial standpoint. Given the period, that’s not terribly surprising, but as was the case with Consenting Adults, I’d need to know more about the psychiatric community’s stance at this point in time to put it into its proper context.
Maurice (1987)

A Merchant Ivory joint based on E.M. Forster’s novel of the same name. Maurice Hall (James Wilby) is a young middle-class man who is thoroughly average in every respect except for the fact that he’s gay. After a failed affair at Cambridge with landed aristocrat Clive Durham (Hugh Grant), he finds himself drawn to Alec Scudder (Rupert Graves), one of Clive’s servants.

I love this movie. It’s so good that I actually have a hard time coming up with anything interesting to say about it. It’s got everything you want in a romance: a meet cute, a false lead and a misunderstanding that isn’t so serious that it can’t be resolved by the credits in time for a happy ending. Granted, that happiness is somewhat tempered by the knowledge that the First World War is just around the corner, but the film wisely chooses not to call attention to this. Although the book wasn’t published until after Forster’s death in the 1970s, it was never meant to be a period piece. Having the onset of war intrude wouldn’t serve to further Forster’s main objective - to write a story where two men find love and live happily ever after.
The Ballad of Reading Gaol (Channel 4, 1988)

The Ballad of Reading Gaol (Channel 4, 1988)

Short film of Oscar Wilde’s famous speech given at his trial on the love that dare not speak its name, each word illustrated on a different item in a different shot. You might get a bit lost, since the effect is to turn the viewing experience into a game of Cheddar Gorge, but they do bring in Quentin Crisp at the end to read it aloud in one go in case you lose track.
The Vision (BBC Two, 1988)

*Screen Two* film starring Dirk Bogarde as Jim Marriner, a washed-up TV personality who gets offered a job as a frontman for The People Channel, a Christian network backed by American money who are about to set up shop in the UK through the magic of satellite. Rather than using the standard snake oil salesman practices favoured by televangelists, they’ve opted for a much softer sell, with Jim’s non-threatening screen persona acting as one of their many ideological sweeteners. They’re flying the family values flag and are keen to capitalise on Jim’s thirty-year marriage to his wife, Helen (Eileen Atkins). Nevertheless, they still use illegal surveillance to scour Jim’s past for impropriety. When they discover that Jim has been playing away with Meg (Lisabeth Miles), a former secretary, they refuse to accept his resignation because they’ve already invested too much in him as the face of their new venture. Jim persists and they leak the story to the press. In order to help him escape from the reporters camped outside his house, Helen invites them in for tea. She starts to feed them a story about how Meg was just a smokescreen for an affair he was having with an East German policeman. When the reporters start to question the veracity of this story, Helen acts surprised that they even care about finding out the truth and tears into them for the complete and utter moral bankruptcy of their profession.

Meanwhile, Jim discovers that the resulting scandal has ultimately led to Meg’s suicide. He returns to the studios to confront executive Grace Gardner (Lee Remick). He asks if it was worth destroying Meg’s life for a television channel. Grace says that it’s about much more than television - they did it to protect family values. Upon hearing this, Jim loses his shit and takes a poker to his fake-ass cardboard living room set. While this moment is not explicitly queer, I can’t deny that seeing Melville Farr hulk out and beat the shit out of a cudgel that’s been used to bludgeon so many queer people for so long is something I find rather gratifying. It becomes especially poignant when you consider that Dirk Bogarde never came out publicly. In fact, according to the Wiki machine, one of the reasons he never became a big star across the pond was that he wasn’t willing to enter into a marriage of convenience to bolster his career. Instead, he was happily partnered with fellow actor Anthony Forwood until Forwood’s death in 1988.

While *The Vision’s* main prediction for the future, revealed in the twist, did not come to pass, it still turned out to be eerily prescient. It predicted the rise of Sky right down to the exact marketing strategy they used to crush the competition. It also prefigured the resurgence of “family values” as a form of political currency. This took the form of John Major’s “Back to Basics” campaign. This ultimately proved to be as flimsy and hollow as Jim’s cardboard living room when several prominent Tory politicians were caught with their pants down. One of the few MPs who wasn’t cheating on their spouse was Michael Brown. In spite of that, he was still dragged through the mud by the *News of the World* for taking a holiday in Barbados with his 20-year-old boyfriend, since the unequal age of consent for gay sex was still 21 at the time.
The London Lighthouse (BBC Two, c. 1989)

Documentary from the 40 Minutes strand about the world’s first AIDS hospice. Largely focuses on the centre’s innovations in nursing practice and its fundraising efforts rather than the politics surrounding the disease.
Byker Grove (BBC One, 1989 - 2006)

Byker Grove (BBC One, 1989 - 2006)

(Source)

The only episode of this Geordie kids’ soap that anyone can remember besides that one where Ant got blinded by paintballs (“PJ!! NOOOOO!!”) is the one where Noddy kissed Gary in the back of the cinema and got shot down pretty harshly.
House of Cards (BBC One, 1990 - 1995)

Before all you young whippersnappers had your Notfluxes and your Kenneth Spacemans, there was the one true FU. The OG bastard, Francis Urquhart.

But we’re not here to talk about him. There isn’t really any gayness to be found in the original version of the show until the second series, To Play the King, which deals with the tensions between parliament and the monarchy. David Mycroft, one of the King’s top flunkies, splits up with his wife and finds happiness with an air steward. He decides to come out to the press and resign from his job in one fell swoop for fear of his knowledge of his orientation coming to light by other means. More specifically, he’s concerned about having been at the same club as a politician who he saw in the company of an underage boy and that any subsequent investigation into the matter would lead to him being publicly exposed despite not having been engaged in any illegal activity himself. The King (he never gets a name, so I’llma call him “Chuck”), however, makes it clear that he doesn’t see David’s personal life as having anything to do with his work and that as his friend he’s completely supportive of David’s new relationship, having been miserable prior to his own divorce. In the end, it all turns out to be a bit of a moot point since the Chuck gets forced to abdicate, meaning that David would have probably ended up out of a job whether he decided to resign or not.

There are some good beats in this plotline. It features a neat little subversion of the usual image you see of gay bars. At one point, David gets mugged outside a straight pub with thumping techno music and scary patrons. In search of help, he stumbles into a cozy members’ club where everyone’s friendly and Somewhere Over the Rainbow is playing in the background. I had thought very briefly that this series was going to down the road of David having feelings for Chuck and having that be his main motivation, if only because one of the early scenes the share at a swimming pool seems a bit, well...charged, for want of a better word. It would make more sense than the thing he’s got going with his actual boyfriend, since the two of them work together and have been friends for years, whereas the air steward is effectively the first gay man David claps eyes on. Mind you, that plot would probably have been a bit more than anyone in 1993 could handle. Even today the stakes are such that this idea would probably work better as its own show rather than as a subplot.

Just as FU and Chuck are foils for each other, David could be read as a foil for Tim Stamper, Urquhart’s most loyal sidekick. While Chuck appreciates David’s contribution to the firm and values him as a friend, Urquhart makes Stamper do his dirty work and fails to give him the recognition Stamper feels he deserves. Eventually, Stamper turns on him, and decides to share the evidence of Urquhart’s criminal misdeeds. When the recipient of this information asks Stamper why he’s decided to stab Urquhart in the back, his eyes get a little damp as he explains himself:

All I wanted was to serve him. To be close to him. That was all. But I see now what I should have seen all along. I was always entirely instrumental to him. Disposable, like one of those little plastic razors they have now. Apparently you can get a few good shaves from them and then...you throw them away.

The show’s IMDB board had some interesting things to say about the possibility of Stamper’s one-sided devotion to Urquhart having some sort of sublimated sexually submissive dimension to it. Given that Mattie had a pretty hardcore daddy kink going on in the first series (I’m not even kidding), this certainly doesn’t seem outwith the realm of possibility. There are a lot of sexually dysfunctional or even just unusual relationships over the course of the three series. David and his steward are one of the few couples who make it to the end of their plotline without having to cope
with death or a serious betrayal. Here’s hoping Chuck found him another job for his trouble.


Yellowbacks (BBC One, 1990)

*Roy Marsden*

*Bill Paterson*

*Janet McTeer*

*Ciarán Hinds*

*Tim Roth*

*Imelda Staunton*

*Yellowbacks* (BBC One, 1990)

*Play on One* episode that takes a drastically different approach to what had become the standard human-interest-style approach to the subject of AIDS. A small-scale dystopian drama set in Twenty Minutes into the Then-Future, the action takes place in a disused and decaying hotel where officers of an unnamed and apparently extrajudicial government agency are interrogating Alex McPherson (Bill Paterson) and Dr Juliet Horwitz (Janet McTeer), two known associates of Martin Pitt (Ciarán Hinds), a missing agitator who they eager to locate. While Juliet is subjected to a brutal interrogation involving stress positions and having vast quantities of alcohol forced upon her by junior investigators Peter Pike and Cheryl Newman (Tim Roth and Imelda Staunton), Alex engages in a philosophical debate with their superior officer, David Caesar (Roy Marsden).

Over the course of the runtime, it emerges that Parliament has enacted emergency powers that require people in “Special Categories”, those suspected of contracting a virus that is unequivocally implied to be HIV, to submit to compulsory testing, registration and “voluntary” admission to a state-run “sanatorium.” Immediately before the emergency powers were introduced, Martin tested himself privately and discovered that he was positive. After his relationship with Alex broke down, he moved out of their flat and crashed with Juliet, who he and Alex had met through an activist group at King’s College. He worked as a laboratory technician and colluded with Juliet to protect her patients by producing tests with false negatives, including one for himself, until the authorities were tipped off about what he was up to. The official story is that it was at this point he supposedly confessed all to the officers who raided the lab (who may or may not have been the police) and submitted himself for admission to a sanatorium in Henley. He then supposedly left of his own free will sometime later and it was at this point that he dropped off the authorities’ radar.

Martin attests, however, in a videotape shown to Alex, that he was imprisoned in a camp in Northumberland along with other positive people. After his escape, he briefly called on Juliet to tell her of his discovery that the government has been secretly rounding up Special Categories in trucks covered with yellow plastic, hence the term “Yellowbacks,” and taking them to these camps, before disappearing again. Alex expresses scepticism at the sanatorium story, but when he learns that his interrogators are also holding Juliet in the hopes she’ll crack and tell them Martin’s whereabouts, he finally reveals what he’s been holding back - Martin is dead. He tells Juliet that Martin never escaped from the camp in Northumberland because there never were any camps. After Juliet saw him for the last time, he contacted Alex over the phone and the two of them met up in Brighton before Martin died of pneumonia a few days later in a local hospital. Alex also admits that he was the one who informed the police about what Martin had been doing at the lab out of concern for Martin’s increasingly erratic behaviour, verifying a conclusion that Juliet had already more or less arrived at independently. She refuses to believe what Alex has told her about the camps, and the audience is also left in doubt as the two of them are unceremoniously released. The officers, now back in army uniform, clear out of the hotel, taking any evidence of their presence with them.

Speculative fiction typically uses an imagined future to examine the preoccupations of its audience’s present. *Yellowbacks* takes what might be the smallest possible leap from the status quo in order to create its dystopia. It doesn’t cloak its theme in a zombie metaphor, nor does there appear to have been a massive flashpoint that resulted in a rapid destabilisation like the massacre of Congress in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. While the ending hints at a state of martial law existing in Britain, it could just as easily be business as usual for those who’ve thus far been exempted from the grasp of the law’s newly elongated arm.
The film explores what might happen if the worst of the mouth-foaming, tabloid-fuelled AIDS hysteria were followed through to its logical conclusion. You didn’t have to look too hard at the time to come across newspaper headlines and vox pops calling for everyone infected or potentially infected with HIV to be “rounded up.” Special Categories are blacklisted from society, losing their jobs and having their benefits cut until they submit to testing, with the sanatorium effectively becoming a means of incarceration, to say nothing of actions taken off the record.

A lot of the worldbuilding comes from extrapolations from several real-life influences such as talking points and even events that arose over the course of the crisis. The test-tampering strategy to disguise positive diagnoses could only have worked at a time when getting tested meant having blood drawn and analysed at a laboratory compared to today’s point-of-care tests that can give a result in minutes.

The designated Special Categories drawn up by the government include prostitutes, drug users, homosexuals, anyone known to consort with those people, anyone who’s ever had an STI and anyone who’s ever visited Africa or California. That last one might be a little surprising if you’re not super-familiar with the history of the AIDS crisis in the UK. There are still questions today about the origin and emergence of HIV but, as I learned from reading Simon Garfield’s *The End of Innocence: Britain in the Time of AIDS*, the belief amongst gay men in London in the early days of the virus was that it was spreading to the UK from the US. “Don’t have sex with Americans” was a piece of advice given at a time when no official information was available. Matthew Todd recounts in his book, *Straight Jacket*, that even as late as 1990, his friends warned him that a guy he fancied had “been to America” and was therefore very likely to be HIV-positive. Los Angeles and particularly San Francisco were hit hard by the epidemic, which is how we arrive at California being included in the list.

The yellowbacks themselves are isolation trucks, covered in presumably protective plastic, a completely unnecessary move for transporting people with a disease which can’t be passed on by casual contact. This could have easily been inspired by the infamous “Rubber Gloves Raid” on the Royal Vauxhall Tavern, wherein one of London’s foremost gay bars was swarmed by dozens of police officers sporting the aforementioned "protective" gear during one of Lily Savage’s Cabaret evenings, arresting 11 people on the completely spurious charge of “being drunk on licensed premises.”

During his interrogation, Alex alludes to propaganda claims made by Parliament that the virus can only exist in Special Categories. On 18 November 1989, *The Sun*, which had what could be described as a mutually beneficial rapport with the Tory government, infamously led with the headline, “STRAIGHT SEX CANNOT GIVE YOU AIDS - OFFICIAL.”

In his video message, Martin makes an oblique entreaty to fellow positives to weaponise themselves and infect people in power. This calls to mind the concept of the malicious infector- a gay man whose sexual appetite is so vociferous that he infects untold numbers of partners either out of a profoundly reckless disregard for their welfare or even sheer sociopathy. This spectre (for want of a better word) manifested in the media’s treatment of Gaëtan Dugas, a French-Canadian air steward who participated in a CDC study of gay and bi men’s sexual behaviour in New York and Los Angeles. In the study, he was labelled “Patient O” for “Out-of-the-Area” (or “Out-of-California.” Reports vary). The “O” was misread as a zero, and the media at large took this to mean that Dugas was the index patient for the entirety of North America and vilified him accordingly. The New York Post dubbed him “The Man Who Gave Us AIDS.” It’s only been in recent years that research has categorically disproved this assertion, with scientists today viewing him more as the common denominator in an early cluster of the disease rather than the hypocentre of the epidemic.

As well as drawing on contemporary influences from the AIDS crisis itself, the film also leans into past examples of vulnerable minorities being scapegoated and victimised by the state. Or rather, one
very specific example.

Juliet is Jewish. She never says so explicitly herself, but her surname is pronounced by all with a decidedly Germanic “w” and she’s subjected to anti-semitic abuse during her interrogation. It’s something that clearly informs her actions taken up to this point. Her extended family would have undoubtedly been affected by the Holocaust in some way. Indeed, she’s of the right age that her own parents could have been refugees or survivors themselves. It’s not hard to see why she was moved to act in the way that she did, nor why she would believe what Martin told her about the camps. Alex claims that he gave Martin up to the authorities because he “wouldn’t stop,” which may hint at Martin having gone off the conspiracy-theory deep end, (which in turn could have been the result of mental health issues brought on by the psychological strain of or even directly resulting from his infection), but that doesn’t explain why Juliet hasn’t been able to visit or even been told the whereabouts of her other positive patients.

Juliet’s background also influences her attitude towards Alex. When she sees him face to face for the first time she asks, “Have you been informing again?” At first, this seems like a strange way of phrasing this question until you consider that “informing” is the most commonly used English translation of mesirah, the act of reporting a fellow Jew to a secular authority, particularly an abusive one.

Moving away from Juliet specifically, the invocation of the Holocaust brings with it the question of the role fascism has played in getting society to this point, which the film doesn’t shy away from. At about the halfway point, we see Pike negotiating with Norman Jarvis (Kenny Ireland), a civilian official, to manufacture a fake Viral Index card (the functional equivalent of a yellow star or pink triangle) in order to intimidate Juliet into giving up Martin’s whereabouts. Pike’s more than happy to disregard procedure, and to induce others to do the same, if it means he might succeed in undermining a relic like Caesar by beating him to their quarry:

“He won’t get him, will he? Won’t get anybody. He’s a faint-hearted tweed. He’s cavalry twill. All that’s a long-past world and I’m buggered if I’m going to be looking up Caesar’s nose much longer.”

When Jarvis yields to his request, Pike reveals something of his driving motivation:

“Pitt, Horwitz, McPherson, what are they, eh? And Caesar, come to that? Dopeheads, yids, poofers and school ties. You name it, we got it. That’s the disease, Norman. That’s the real plague. And it’s here, innit? Here’s to clean-up time, and a working-class government.”

Even with today’s greater awareness of this particular rhetorical device, I didn’t realise that “working-class government” is effectively a fascist dog-whistle until I read Miller et al’s analysis of the film in AIDS on Television: Form, Fact and Fiction.

As well as acting as a rebuke of the government’s response to the AIDS crisis, the film is scathingly critical of Thatcherism as a whole. Alex identifies the othering of positives as a symptom of the hyper-individualistic, no-such-thing-as-society mindset. Rather than viewing people with AIDS as members of their own community in need of help and compassion, Caesar lets slip that the government has made no effort to develop whatsoever to develop a cure for the disease and has instead focussed its energies on isolating and containing the infected. A military man through and through, Caesar believes in destroying “as much as necessary” in order to protect society at large from this foreign threat, to which Alex responds with what I believe is the single most important question at the heart of the AIDS crisis.

“What is it that you are protecting? What is so valuable that you have to persecute the
dying?"
Three-episode mini-series based on the memoir of the same name by Jeanette Winterson starring Charlotte Coleman about her childhood and fraught adolescence in Accrington as the adopted daughter of a religious fundamentalist (Geraldine McEwan). Both the book and the series are pretty great, but I found I enjoyed the series a lot more. The book contains some allegorical diversions that can be a bit oblique. The series keeps these to a minimum because it recognises that the main story is strong enough to stand on its own.
Washes Whiter (BBC Two, 1990)

Documentary covering the history of British advertising (up to 1990, at least) in five easy episodes. The series establishes that, because it is a medium where time is of the essence, advertising deals heavily in stereotypes, particularly gender roles. This, in turn, has a knock-on effect on the visual language used to make sure a sales pitch stays on the straight and narrow. Three is the magic number when it comes to male friends in beer adverts - two blokes going down the pub together is “suspicious” and four is too many to fit into a (then-standard 4:3) television screen. Male cosmetic products historically had to negotiate the vagaries of male vanity without ever treading into the dreaded territory of effeminacy, though by the seventies, hyperbolic depictions of male virility reached a point where they circled back into camp. As the eighties saw women gaining a greater foothold in the workplace, depictions of men in advertising shifted from men competing with (and undermining) women to competing with each other, which offered some scope for unintentional homoeroticism.
You’d think a drama starring Janet McTeer about the affair between Vita Sackville-West and Violet Keppel (Kathryn Harrison) would be all my dreams come true, but it turned out to be a lot better in theory than in practice. I suspect the weakness is largely down to the script, because the chemistry between McTeer and Harrison is solid, but it takes a long time to get going and FUCK’S SAKE LESBIAN RAPE CUL-DE-SAC AGAIN!! REALLY?!

To be fair, unlike *The Other Woman*, the buildup is somewhat credible, since we Vita getting progressively depressed and agitated after Violet marries her beard and doesn’t stay in touch. It doesn’t come nearly as far out of left field as something like say, *The Politician’s Husband*, but afterwards, Vita does some more moping and the plot picks back up like nothing happened. The two of them elope to Paris, but their husbands catch up with them pretty quickly. After that, the story sort of squitters out as it ends with Vita’s rather anti-climactic death.
Drama based on the play *Hitting Town* by Stephen Poliakoff about an affair between Richard and Natalie (Clive Owen and Saskia Reeves) a brother and sister who were separated as children and meet again as adults. There’s a subplot about Colin (Karl Johnson), Richard’s reserved and slightly surly boss at the environmentalist magazine where he works, who retreats from full-time work soon after Richard joins the firm due to AIDS-related illness. One of Colin’s colleagues insists that he isn’t gay - I’m disinclined to take that claim at face value but we never get any elaboration from the man himself one way or another. Rather than going gently into that good night, Colin enlists Richard’s help in scandalising a couple of odious developers by accompanying them to a meeting so that he can cough in their general direction.
Came Out, It Rained, Went Back In Again (BBC Two, 1991)

(Came Out, It Rained, Went Back In Again (BBC Two, 1991)

(Source)

Short starring Jane Horrocks as a young lesbian packing up her bindle and heading for The Big Smoke because "they're all gay in London." Cute and fun.
Stand on Your Man (Channel 4, 1992)

Short documentary exploring lesbians’ love of country music. This was news to me because I only got into country thanks to my dad. (We were on holiday in the States and it was the only thing on the radio he could tolerate whilst concentrating on driving on the right.) I had no idea that it had been such a queer-specific phenomenon. It apparently had a lot to do with KD Lang. Plus it was a way for us girls to express our camp side, which I think a lot of people tend to assume we don’t have. It all makes sense to me, though - going from Judy Garland to Tammy Wynette seems like quite a lateral move.
Low-key mystery farce set in the 1950s about a group of well-to-do septuagenarians being menaced by anonymous phone calls. Dame Letty Colston (Stephanie Cole) is scandalised when she learns that her nephew, Eric (Peter Eyre), has not been in the country but in fact living with his hairdresser boyfriend in Fulham. Having been kicked out of their flat after an argument, Eric teams up with Mabel Pettigrew (Maggie Smith), the domineering housekeeper of his ambiguously senile mother, to extort some money out of his philandering father, Godfrey (Michael Horden) who’s always thought very little of his ne'er-do-well son. Their plan ends up failing pretty spectacularly when Eric’s mother, Charmian (Renée Asherson), admits to her husband that she knew all about his playing away over the years and that she isn’t really all that bothered by it, having done the same herself at one point in the past.
Dramedy in which Peter (Stephen Fry) invites his old university friends to his recently inherited stately pile for a New Year’s party and catharsis abounds, as is the wont of a friends-reunited flick. Roger and Mary (Hugh Laurie and Imelda Staunton) are still grieving the death of their baby son; Sarah (Alphonsia Emmanuel) is in the midst of an affair with a married man; Maggie (Emma Thompson) had a boyfriend who she wasn’t particularly fond of who recently committed suicide; and Andrew (Kenneth Branagh), Peter’s former writing partner who has since become a Hollywood shill, falls off the wagon as his marriage collapses around his ears.

Peter, for his part, is the target of a rather cack-handed come on by Maggie, who has been spurred on by a self-help book that said she should seek a romantic partnership with a friend rather than looking to build on a shallow physical relationship. Peter gently turns her down with a standard but sweet I Don’t Want to Ruin Our Friendship. Maggie asks if this means that he’s definitely gay (a possibility she put to Andrew in an earlier scene) and he explains that he’s bisexual, but that he’s not sleeping with anyone at the moment so it doesn’t really matter one way or the other.

Peter also finds himself wrestling with a minor identity crisis since he feels like he ought to be more mature now that both his parents are dead. He hasn’t made up his mind over whether or not he’s actually going to keep the house. He asks his father’s longtime housekeeper, Vera (Phyllida Law) if she has any plans to stay on, but she explains that she’s looking forward to her retirement and that she has a hard time seeing the place as truly belonging to Peter rather than to his father. Peter says that that’s because she disapproves of him and the way he lives his life. Vera doesn’t deny this, but takes the professional approach by saying that what does with his life isn’t any of her business.

As the bells approach, a trashed Andrew angrily asks Peter if the reason he invited everyone round was so that he could show off his big fancy house, which prompts Peter to admit that the reason that the reason he wanted to see all his friends again is that he’s found out he’s HIV-positive. He tells everyone not to worry and that he could live for years yet, but given that this is just coming up on 1993 and combination therapy won’t arrive on the scene for another three years, it has to be a bit of a brave face on his part.
Vera asks Peter why he never told her and he says that he thought she would consider it a “deserved punishment.” Vera is heartbroken upon hearing this because she’s known Peter pretty much all his life and doesn’t know how he could think she would ever say something like that. Yes, she did disapprove of him, but not at all in the way he had previously thought. She hated watching him never live up to his potential and that hurt because she loved him and knew he had never found anything in life that had made him feel truly happy. They hug it out and rejoin the rest of the gang, where they reenact the silly song-and-dance number we saw them performing as students at the beginning of the movie. We freeze-frame on Peter before going to the credits, which doesn’t augur well for his long-term prognosis. Anyone who ends a movie on a still shot is pretty much a goner.

Critics found the film somewhat slight. While I’m not inclined to argue, I don’t actually think that’s to the movie’s detriment. There were a lot of unfavourable comparisons to The Big Chill, which isn’t a particularly fair jumping-off point because the only thing those two movies have in common is their basic premise of old friends meeting up after having lost touch with one another several years previous. The Big Chill is all about how a bunch of hippy-dippy boomers awoke one morning from uneasy dreams to find themselves transformed into hideous yuppies. While there is some character growth over the course of the film, Peter’s Friends spends more time showing how little the characters have changed in the intervening years: Sarah still goes through relationships like paper plates, Peter still hasn’t managed to hold down a job and Andrew is still an arsehole when he’s drunk. And yet this isn’t at all framed as a net loss. The scene where Roger and Mary start performing The Way You Look Tonight and we realise that everyone still knows their parts shows how all the outside drama going on in their lives hasn’t changed them so much that they can’t fall back into place with one another.

Peter’s Friends also doesn’t get enough credit for the approach it takes to its queer character. One of the many tumblr-spawned axia regarding the queer experience that I find myself chafing against is that the concept of a “token gay” character bears no resemblance to reality. This theory states that we tend to huddle together whether we consciously realise it or not. Chances are if there’s at least one queer person in your posse, then there’s probably another. This argument is usually used in relation to calls for increasing the number of queer characters in a given fictional universe. I don’t really have a dog in that fight since I would much rather have one complex and fleshed-out gay character than ten awkward attempts at pandering that exist to primarily to serve the audience rather than the story itself. More to the point, I’ve never really found this to be true to my own life. Growing up, I wasn’t exactly the only gay in the village, but I’ve been in situations where I’ve felt like I was The Only One. That’s not an identical experience to someone whose pals happen to be a Cast Full of Gay.

The chosen family is, quite understandably, a venerated structure in queer literature. What we don’t see so much is a queer person’s chosen family not being almost entirely made up of other queer people. I don’t doubt that the Cast Full of Gay genuinely reflects some people’s experiences. However, it does generate a certain expectation of what a fully actualised gay life looks like, particularly as it is a trope more commonly found in media targeted at queer audiences. Peter’s Friends offers a nice counterpoint because Peter never feels the need to hide anything about himself from the group in order to be accepted. Even though he most likely didn’t plan on it, he ultimately chooses to disclose his status because these are the people with whom he wants to share this burden.

The film also stands out from the crowd of AIDS movies, partly because it isn’t one. Again, because a lot of queer media presents a specific type of chosen family, AIDS-related films showcase a certain experience of the disease. Peter does not appear to be in a situation where several of closest his friends are also going to die, in contrast to something like Longtime Companion. Even Angels in America, which has a very small core cast and a relatively low bodycount, still has the devastation of an entire community going on in the background. This isn’t an attempt at Four-Yorkshireman Misery Poker on my part, I’m just saying that if Andrew and Roger were sick as well it would have been a very different movie.
The film also stands out from the pack in terms of its temperament. Lots of AIDS dramas are pretty heavy-going, since it’s a pretty heavy subject, and they’re usually quick to establish what the main theme is going to be even before anyone actually gets sick. In real life, you don’t have that luxury. What makes the last few scenes of the movie so effective is that they capture how it actually feels to learn that you or someone you love has a serious illness. You’re just dealing with your day-to-day bullshit and it dropkicks you out of the blue. There’s no foreshadowing or ominous framing to clue you in, and even if there were warning signs you only give them credit now that you have no other choice. Simply put, Peter’s Friends works because people with AIDS don’t necessarily feel like they’re living in an AIDS movie.
Out on Strike (Channel 4, 1993)

Documentary short interviewing two women, both wives of miners, who met and fell in love during the strike. The women did not wish for their identities to be revealed out of their concern for their then-school-age children, so the short consists of their narration overplayed with obscured shots of the couple walking through various date-oriented locations such as the countryside, the beach and a funfair.
Lipstick on Your Collar (Channel 4, 1993)

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The last of Dennis Potter’s lip-synced musical dramas, Lipstick on Your Collar follows Mick and Frank, two national servicemen working as language clerks. Their office is run by a collection of variously stuffy upper-class officers. Of them, the somewhat less hidebound Major Hedges (Clive Francis) seems to be coded gay, but this doesn’t go anywhere.

The musical numbers provide a few moments of note. Hedges and the rest of the officers all feel Mick up a bit in Little Bitty Pretty One and there’s some unremarkable drag tomfoolery in I See the Moon. The best by far is when Frank tears into the office after realising that he’s back late from lunch in the middle of Mick's Elvis-inspired daydream, meaning that his grovelling apology to the enraged Major Church (Nicholas Farrell) plays out to the two of them lipsyncing to the verse in Don’t Be Cruel about walking up to the preacher and saying “I do.”
Closing Numbers (Channel 4, 1993)

Drama about Anna, a housewife (Jane Asher) who discovers that her husband, Keith (Tim Woodward) has been having an affair when she stumbles on a hidden business card with an incriminating note on the reverse. She calls the number on the card, only to find out that Keith has not been playing away with another woman but with a bloke named Steve (Patrick Pearson), who informs her that her husband is bisexual and that both she and Keith may now be infected with HIV as a result of a high-risk phase Keith went through a few years prior. Once Anna gets over the initial shock, Steve introduces her to his friend, Jim (Nigel Charnock), who Steve has been caring for as his HIV has progressed into the late stages of AIDS.

I realise now I may have spoken in haste in my Priest review, because Closing Numbers is a much more obvious candidate for a British Philadelphia equivalent. It’s hard for me to believe that it actually precedes Philadelphia by a few months, because it feels like a reaction to it. At the very least, it is a far superior execution of Philadelphia’s objective of putting a human face on the AIDS crisis. While the protagonists in both films learn to overcome their prejudices, in Philadelphia, Joe Miller gets to walk away and carry on with his long, healthy life with his wife and daughter. In the end, it’s all a bit Diana and the untouchables. But, instead, in Closing Numbers, the protagonist herself may have been infected, which not only makes the central conflict more acute but delivers a more powerful message. “People with AIDS are just like you” becomes “don’t think AIDS can’t happen to you.”

On top of that, Closing Numbers also forgoes a lot of the Hollywood niceties seen in Philadelphia. There is no cosmic reward for character growth. Over the course of the film, we see how Jim’s father, Frank (Frank Mills), is so busy stewing in his own indignation over Jim “rejecting” him by having the audacity to be gay that he refuses to see or speak to him. It was all I could do not to reach through the screen and throttle him as I screamed, “Your only child is dying in agony, you stupid fuck! There are greater things at stake here than your bruised ego.” By the time Frank’s finally pulled his head out his arse and decided to visit Jim, he’s already dead. Similarly, even though Anna goes above and beyond what someone in her situation could be expected to do, this does not translate into a last-minute phone-call from the governor. Philadelphia might end with Andy’s death, but this allows the audience to find some comfort in the fact that his suffering has come to an end. Closing Numbers ends with Anna and Keith on the morning that Keith finds the beginnings of the first KS lesion on his face, with the future they had been promised crumbling before their eyes.
The film also innovates in other areas. The decision to make Keith bisexual rather than gay is not merely an afterthought. He tries to explain to Anna that neither his love for her nor his desire for sex with men is a front, and that those things are both a part of who he is. He’s also not the only one in the marriage with secrets. The morning before she gets her test result, Anna asks Keith if he married her because he was looking for a beard. Keith tells her that he married her because he loved her, and Anna reveals that she was the one who entered the marriage under false pretences. Although she was sincere in her commitment to Keith, she hadn’t been in love with him when they were first married. Her initial fear of sex had in fact been a smokescreen for her guilt about her lack of feelings for her husband, but she grew to love him when she saw what a good father Keith was to their son, Peter (Jamie Glover), and they were able to deal with their problems together, whether it was sex or Anna not being able to have any more children. What went wrong in their marriage wasn’t that Keith was bi and therefore destined to cheat, but that they stopped sharing their pain with one another.
As part of its Christmas in New York season, Channel 4 asked the city’s most famous British expat, Quentin Crisp, to deliver a Christmas message to the British public, to run parallel to the Queen’s speech on BBC One and ITV. Crisp talks about how it’s appropriate that he’s filling in for the sovereign since 1993 had a queenly theme running through it for him personally. He talks about his experience of playing Elizabeth I in *Orlando* and that he could see how the demands of Bess’ wardrobe made her a bit of a grump, and subsequently chose to deliver his address to the British nation in his civvies. However, rather than speaking of anything related to Britain, his speech is about America, and how the Clintons are ushering in a bright new day in politics. He goes on to say that he has been welcome in America in a way that he never felt in England, and urges the viewers to pack that very night.

Watching this today, I’m not sure if even someone as perceptive as Crisp could have predicted such a dramatic upending of the established norm. Britain has lapped America so thoroughly in LGBT rights that even with federal marriage equality they are still lagging behind us. The Foreign Office has even gone so far as to issue [travel warnings to LGBT Brits holidaying in the States](https://www.state.gov/). I’m no political scholar, so it’s hard for me to speculate as to why this has been the case with any authority. All I can say is that I doubt we would have had civil partnerships as early and as painlessly as we did in the UK were it not for Tony Blair’s desire to recoup some of the goodwill lost as a result of Iraq, but all that’s for another day.

Retitled *The Alternative Christmas Message*, what began as a one-off dig at a seemingly outmoded royal custom has become a festive tradition in its own right, veering from serious and heartfelt contributions from speakers such as Doreen Lawrence and Edward Snowden to more irreverent offerings from the likes of Ali G and Marge Simpson. 2011 saw a collaborative approach with a handful of speakers from Channel 4’s factual programming that year, one of them being Karen Gayle of *My Transsexual Summer*, along with others such as Katy Piper, delivering a message about the
importance of being yourself. As yet I’ve not been able to dig either of these up, so you’ll have to wait until I do to find out what I think of them.
B.D. Women (Channel 4, 1994)

B.D. Women (Channel 4, 1994)

Short documentary about Black lesbians. Notable in that it uses "Black" to encompass both women of African and Asian descent, which these days has given way to more specific terminology.
**Self Catering** (Channel 4, 1994)

TV film in which five survivors of a plane crash take on the names, and to a certain extent the personas, of famous film stars, namely Henry Fonda, Marilyn Monroe, Joan Crawford, Clint Eastwood and Meryl Streep (John Gordon Sinclair, Jane Horrocks, Noreen Kershaw, Paul Schofield and Jennifer Ehle).

As intriguing as this premise is, the film doesn’t quite live up to its full potential. We never get the payoff implied by the setup with the characters all going off the deep end and losing themselves completely in their new identities. (After all, why hire Jane Horrocks to play Marilyn Monroe if not for how well she can do the voice?)

The action is largely driven by Clint’s descent from garden-variety twat to all-out psychopath. The other characters also experience some sense of disinhibition as a result of being cut from their previous lives and society at large. Meryl appears to be suffering from amnesia, which provides ample opportunity for both Clint and Joan to take a hands-on approach to re-introducing her to the birds and the bees (and the birds and the birds). I suppose I could argue that there’s some ambiguity as to how much Meryl is deliberately playing into their hands to take what she wants from them, but that’s not a hill I have any real desire to die on.

Somewhat less skeevily, Meryl later quizzes Henry on his opinion of the surprisingly buff Clint, which unearths a hitherto untapped reservoir of bicuriosity. Henry admits he’s never really considered himself bisexual because he’s never acted on his feelings. Although we do see things bubbling a lot closer to the surface over the course of the runtime, we end up with a pretty standard civilisation-vs-savagery conflict that doesn’t bring anything new to the table.
Four Weddings and a Funeral (1994)

Like an addict trying to recapture that first high, *Four Weddings and a Funeral* remains the romantic comedy by which all other British films in the genre are measured. Many have cited the chemistry between the commitment-phobic Charles and his friends as key to the movie’s success. The core members of the group - Charles, David, Fi, Tom, Scarlett, Matthew and Gareth - (Hugh Grant, David Bower, Kristin Scott Thomas, James Fleet, Charlotte Coleman, John Hannah and Simon Callow) are all ostensibly united by their unmarried state, except for the fact that Matthew and Gareth are an item and have been living together for an unspecified amount of time.

Gareth isn’t wild about the concept of marriage, pithily dismissing weddings as a conservation prop for couples who’ve run out of interesting things to say to each other, while Matthew (John Hannah) is a little more sentimental in his outlook, believing that most people go into it with sincere intentions.

Gareth suffers a heart attack and dies during the third wedding, thus leading to the titular funeral. Matthew’s reading of WH Auden’s *Funeral Blues* is one of the film’s more memorable sequences - the audio was even repurposed for the government’s *Kill Your Speed* road safety campaign. Unfortunately, Matthew doesn’t really get much in the way of resolution by the end of the movie. He and his new partner do appear in the roll call of happy couples in the credits, but we don’t get to see them meet like we do with David and Scarlett’s respective spouses.

This movie did not make millions by rocking any boats. After the funeral, Charles and Tom commiserate together and joke about how Gareth and Matthew didn’t really fit in with their posse of singletons since they were effectively married this whole time. No one mentions how unfair it is that they couldn’t get married, or the indignity of being referred to only as his “closest friend” by the minister conducting the service. It’s really not a good look for a movie that came out at the tail end of the AIDS crisis.

Sketch show created by Charlie Higson and Paul Whitehouse, the central conceit being that the sketches get to the punchline as quickly as possible with a minimal amount of setup. Two audience favourites amongst the series’ many, many characters were Ted and Ralph (pictured above from left to right). Ralph (Higson) is the aristocratic owner of a stately pile and Ted (Whitehouse) is his taciturn Irish groundsman. Most of the sketches consist Ralph making his incredibly awkward overtures towards Ted and Ted mumbling, “I wouldn’t really know about that, Sir.”

The joke isn’t that Ralph is gay, but that there’s such a massive class chasm between the two of them that Ralph can’t get across what he wants to say. The early sketches suggest that Ted doesn’t return Ralph’s feelings, but over the course of the series their relationship develop and we see them growing closer, particularly after the death of Ted’s offscreen wife. The series finale sees Ralph drunkenly declaring himself at their local through the medium of karaoke. The rest of the pub patrons think it’s hilarious, but Ted is really touched, and the final shot of the show is of him smiling fondly as Ralph sings *Burning Love*. 

(Source)


Priest (BBC Two, 1994)

Screen Two drama by Jimmy McGovern that started life as a Brookie storyline before enjoying a long stay in Development Hell and eventually emerging as a feature film. If you’re a bleeding-heart liberal but you can’t plug into all the California oversharing they do on Glee, this is the movie for you. It stars Spawn of Ken (otherwise known as Linus Roache) as Fr Greg Pilkington, a middle-class priest who’s come to Liverpool to “do his bit for the inner-cities”. He doesn’t seem to have much in common with the liberal-minded Fr Matthew (Tom Wilkinson), who also serves the parish. Greg soon discovers that Matthew is sleeping with Maria, their housekeeper. Matthew chides Greg for judging him and swears that after a few months in their parish he’ll learn a little humility. One day, Lisa (Christine Tremarco), a girl from the local high school, confesses to Greg that she’s being molested by her father and begs him not to tell anyone else. Greg is now left with a terrible moral dilemma as to whether or not he should break the seal of her confession and reveal this information to the authorities. Meanwhile, he’s also grappling with his own guilt over his sexuality and his on-off (mostly off) relationship with his boyfriend, Graham (Robert Carlyle), who he met whilst out cruising in mufti.

The movie went on to be released in cinemas in the States but unfortunately some hoo-ha to do with the distributor and Bob Dole (of all people) meant it sank before it could get any serious critical attention (save for an uncharacteristically tin-eared review from Ebert), which is why you’ve never heard of it. But if you have heard of it, then what you’re most likely to have remembered about it is the ending. Lisa’s mother (Leslie Sharp) finds out about the abuse, and is horrified that Greg didn’t tell her. He goes to Lisa’s house to ask for her forgiveness but her mother more or less slams the door in his face. He also ends up getting outed when he and Graham get lifted by the police for screwing about in a parked car on the beach. He’s ostracised by his parishioners and his life is in tatters. When he returns to the chapel to say mass, despite heaps of support from Matthew, he remains a total pariah and the congregation refuse to take communion from him. For a moment it looks like Maria’s about to get up and go to him but she stops when she sees Lisa getting out of her pew. She goes out to take communion from Greg, and in the end they both break down in tears in each other’s arms as the rest of the congregation look on in silence, in a perfect resolution of the movie’s central thematic conflict. The film’s biggest criticism of the Catholic church is that has allowed itself to become so concerned with its own self-importance that its unyielding enforcement of baseless rules has blinded it to the suffering of its own people. Greg allows himself to get so hung up on the moral dilemma
surrounding the seal of confession that he loses sight of the reality of Lisa’s pain. The fact he ultimately didn’t betray her confidence doesn’t mean much when he really should have done anything he could to bring an end to the abuse. And in his turn, the congregation is so entrenched in prejudice and ignorance (and not a little Scouser short-arse machismo, I’d wager) that they cast Greg out in the most unchristian fashion imaginable. All except Lisa, who understands his anguish of living at the mercy of his shame and his grief now that that shame has been exposed in a way that no one else can. Any bitterness is gone, and they can be united by the sharing of their pain and the easing of their burdens.

I feel like if Priest came out today, a lot of people on tumblr et al. would decide to hate it without even seeing it because it’s a story about a gay character that’s written by a straight writer and ostensibly targeted at straight audience, much in the same fashion that people railed against The Danish Girl. One might expect them to favour Philadelphia instead, its closest peer in terms of time period and subject matter, since that was written by a gay man. While we’re here, we might as well partake in a bit of compare and contrast.

Now, while I didn’t hate Philadelphia, I really struggle to say anything particularly positive about it. Priest, on the other hand, is probably one of my favourite films of all time. So what is it about this made-for-tv-movie that puts it ahead of a Best Picture nominee? Well, for me, Priest’s overriding advantage over Philadelphia is that it has flavour. Jimmy McGovern’s confrontational approach to whatever subject he happens to be dealing with is his USP, so he’s clearly very comfortable writing a script like this that doesn’t shy away from going to the furthest possible depth of the internal conflict that’s been set up. Plus, its setting is distinctive and it informs the characters. That whole post-Thatcher, post-Hillsborough malaise hangs over everyone like a stormcloud.

Ron Nyswaner, on the other hand, stated in his interview in The Celluloid Closet that he deliberately set out to make a film to appeal to the type of person embodied in the film by Denzel Washington’s character. A perfectly worthy endeavour, but the result is so thoroughly middle-of-the-road that it’s unlikely to do anything for the viewer if their opinions are of a similar sort that the film is promoting. Right from the opening title sequence, it’s clear that “broad” is the watchword, so it also lacks Priest’s distinctiveness. Moreover, even though Priest is a deliberately preachy story, it’s still Greg’s story. He’s a fully realised character with weaknesses and a struggle that can resonate with the audience. Whereas in Philadelphia, Tom Hanks doesn’t have any discernable flaws and he doesn’t change as a result of his experiences, he’s just the conduit for Denzel’s character development. He’s far too perfect to be a real person, but then that’s a bit like ragging on Sidney Poitier for being too perfect in Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner. It’s a perfectly cromulent writing choice for the script’s objective, but not terribly substantive in the long run.

What makes Priest such a great film for me is that is both achingly familiar while still managing to throw new light on assumptions I hadn’t even realised I had taken for granted about my own life. There are handful of films and TV dramas that depict the West of Scotland Catholic experience. Play for Today episodes like Just Another Saturday and Just Your Luck look at the more tribal aspects of the longstanding mutual animosity between Catholics and Protestants and how this manages to work its way into just about every aspect of people’s daily lives. While there are aspects of this play that I recognise in the particular social niceties that I still observe even though I’ve left the country like not asking people where they went to school and not wearing football colours to any drinking establishment, my parents’ generation was the one for whom marrying out ceased to matter in any material way, so neither of these seventies-set plays feels especially relevant to my life. Orphans takes the surprisingly unusual choice of presenting Catholicism in a spiritual (and even slightly supernatural) context rather than a political one, but since my spiritual life never developed beyond being a good girl by behaving myself in Mass, there was no great depth of resonance reached on my part as a result of having seen it. While Priest is set in Liverpool, it’s a movie that speaks my language just as fluently as it might have done had it been set in Glasgow. As a child, I was vaguely
suspicious of *Songs of Praise* and its different songs, but I can still remember every word to every hymn on this soundtrack. Plus, while the parish I belonged to was less deprived and more suburban than the one that Greg serves, it was still fundamentally a working-class community like the one we see in the film.

On a more personal level, we see that Greg regards his vocation as a burden as much as an inspiration. For all its apparent incompatibilities with the priesthood, being gay isn’t enough to make Greg leave because he is certain that God wants him to be a priest and that there’s nothing he can do to change that. This brought back a memory of when my RE class was visited by a deacon who had been tasked with enticing my male classmates to give themselves to the Church, with the girls tagging along for the ride because nuns are people too, I guess. He told us that a vocation is like a toothache, because if you’ve got one then it’s always there no matter how much you try to ignore it. I didn’t realise it at the time, but this also happens to be a rather apt analogy for one’s sexuality. Just as Greg cannot hide from his occupation, his journey over the course of the movie is about learning to accept his own human nature. He admits that he doesn’t know how to be open and loving towards his parishioners because he feels so broken inside. That hit a nerve I didn’t even know I had. I wouldn’t change even if I could, but sometimes I feel like there’s a more open, more vibrant and, well, gayer me inside me somewhere, but after keeping her quiet for so long I don’t know how to let her out. That segment in *The Celluloid Closet* where Susie Albright talks about how the self-loathing in *The Children’s Hour* still gets to her despite her apparent security in her identity never really resonated with me, but this did because the movie shows the effect that all those negative feelings have on every aspect of Greg’s life.
Linger (1995)

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A short about a housewife recalling a drunken hook-up with her teenage bestie. Features some symbolic pigeon-fancying.
Disgraceful Conduct (Channel 4, 1995)

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Short about Callum Morgan (Catherine White), an RAF officer facing a sexual assault allegation from a colleague. The film opens with Cal meeting up off-base with her sister (at least I’m pretty sure it’s her sister since it’s not exposited very clearly), whose advice is that, since the case is one of she-said she-said without any solid evidence, Cal should perjure herself and deny being gay altogether. She doesn’t go through with it, choosing instead to tell the truth, telling the court the her accuser came to her room on the night in question to drunkenly berate Cal for receiving a promotion that she felt was owed to her. The charges against her are dropped, but, nevertheless, she is still discharged from the RAF, and the film closes out with “Here I Am” by Rainbirds.

The short is shot in that slightly oversaturated black-and-white that was so popular at the time, but the look does add something to the courtroom scenes. Until you see the clerk of the court tapping away on an Amstrad device, you can easily find yourself forgetting that these events are taking place in the 1990s and not the 1950s.
Dramatisation of Joanna Trollope’s novel of the same name about an affair between an unhappy housewife and the local princess of the county. Alice (Sophie Ward) has just moved to the country with her husband, Martin (Nathaniel Parker), and their three children, partly in the hopes that this will jolt her out of a lingering bout of postnatal depression. At a party, she’s introduced to Clodagh Unwin (Kerry Fox), a daughter of the local gentry who’s returned unexpectedly from New York. They don’t hit it off right away, but Clodagh soon hones in on Alice and does everything she can to befriend her. At first, Alice thinks Clodagh’s after her man and isn’t sure how to react to her heedless but benevolent meddling. Clodagh even goes so far as to land Martin a new job because she thinks it will make Alice happy, and it’s the revelation of this act that sparks off their affair. When Martin’s brother Anthony (Jeremy Northam) returns home from working in Hong Kong, he makes a pass at Alice, saying that he knows that Martin can’t give her what she needs, but she turns him down. In an act of pure spite, Anthony outs Alice and Clodagh to Martin at the church fête in front of the entire village. Martin does not handle it well. Clodagh tries to reassure Alice that Martin isn’t just upset about the violation of trust, but that his masculinity is threatened by the knowledge that his wife cheated on him with another woman. Alice isn’t convinced, but after a row with Martin escalates into him hitting her and attempting to rape her, I’m inclined to agree with Clodagh’s assessment of the situation.

In fact, I think the audience is meant to believe that Clodagh is being hysterical and unreasonable because she gets emotional at the prospect of Alice leaving her, but she’s dealing with a tremendous amount of stress without any compassion or understanding from the people around her. When she tells her parents about the affair to spare them having to hear about it from village gossip, they both react with horror and disgust. When she’s found crying alone in the woods by Lettice (Rosalie Crutchley), one of the village ladies who had guessed about the affair and may possibly be queer herself, Clodagh still doesn’t get a sympathetic hearing. Lettice basically tells her “Effie, we all got pain” and bounces. Alice doesn’t fare any better. When she goes to see the vicar the morning after the rape attempt, he responds by chastising her for her affair and calling Alice’s interfering mother-in-law to smooth things over.

In light of everything that’s happened, Clodagh wants Alice to leave Martin definitively and take the kids with her so that they can start over somewhere new and have a life together, but Alice gives her
the standard speech about how he’s her babydaddy and she can’t just leave him. Clodagh reminds
Alice that this is the same man who tried to rape her, but Alice still makes an attempt to patch things
up. Martin quashes the possibility of any rapprochement pretty quickly. He does, however, concede
custody of the kids to Alice, recognising that he is not cut out for any parental heavy lifting, and the
film ends with Alice packing up the house and, but for the children, alone.

Besides being the granddaughter of Anthony, Joanna Trollope is best known for writing stories
which fall into a subgenre known as the Aga Saga - aspirational chick-lit tales of the rural upper-
middle classes. This was a categorisation that Trollope would come to resent because it suggested a
patronising attitude towards her readers. I can’t say I found any evidence to that effect in A Village
Affair. In fact, it makes a subtle point about the necessity of equitable custody laws. Part of the
reason Alice ultimately ends her relationship with Clodagh is because of the implicit understanding
that if they were still together and Martin were to change his mind about suing for custody, the deck
would undoubtedly be stacked in his favour, despite Alice being the children’s primary caregiver and
Clodagh getting along with them fantastically.
Nervous Energy (BBC Two, 1995)

_Nervous Energy_ (BBC Two, 1995)

*Screen Two* drama starring Cal MacAninch (best known today as Lang the traumatised valet in _Downton Abbey_) about a young Glaswegian man living in London who makes a sudden trip home in a fit of mania in an attempt to make peace with his family before his AIDS-related death, leaving his partner (Alfred Molina) trailing behind in his wake.
Smack My Bitch Up (1995)

The ladies of NOW must have been pretty bored in 1995 if they thought it was worth getting all exercised over Smack My Bitch Up. Saying the song or the music video that accelerated its notoriety glamourise violence against women is a pretty superficial criticism. The Prodigy were looking for a phrase that meant something along the lines of “Yaldi” or “Vamános,” which is more-or-less consistent with the context of the track the phrase is sampled from. “Bitch” in AAVE also seems to have almost as flexible a definition as “hingmy” in Scots. More to the point, the video, while I don’t think it was intended to be taken as any sort of feminist statement, does demonstrate some insight into the gender politics of the time.

One of the attendant trends of nineties lad culture was that of the ladette. Girls were out to prove they could go just as hard as the boys when it came to hedonistic excess. Smack My Bitch Up follows this trend through to its logical conclusion, as Jonas Åkerlund’s video depicts a first-person perspective on what would appear to be one young man’s night of unfettered drinking, drug-taking, violence and sex, only for the final shot to reveal that the person who’s been throwing up blood, smashing the DJ’s LPs and having sex with a stripper is in fact a woman.

This music video made me realise that the term “ladette” is something of a misnomer. If TV Tropes is anything to go by, its definition has expanded over the years to mean a more generically loutish tomboy, but in this early instance, opening up the lad drink culture to women did not prove to be a stepping stone to more flexible forms of gender presentation within mainstream youth culture. If anything, female fashions of the time went in the opposite direction, cultivating a rather juvenile strain of hyperfemininity with midriff-bearing crop tops and overly-decorated hairstyles. I must concede that this is where my analysis of the video as a hyperbolic exaggeration of the ladette phenomenon falters a little - the likes of Zoe Ball and Denise van Outen wouldn’t have dreamed of going out clubbing in trainers and trackie bottoms.
Kim Wilde (Steven Mackintosh) runs into Paul Prentice (Rupert Graves), a friend from school who she hasn’t seen in nearly fifteen years, when the cab she’s taking to work knocks Prentice off his motorbike. All in all, a fairly standard Meet Cute. Except that when they last saw each other, Prentice knew Kim as Karl. For a hot second, I was really worried that Prentice wasn’t going to recognise her and that the inevitable reveal was what was going to lead to the second-act breakup but, thank God, that does not happen. Prentice recognises Kim almost instantly and the movie just takes it from there. Things are unsurprisingly awkward at first, but they gradually begin to rebuild their friendship and reconcile each other’s memories of their past selves with the people they’ve become since.

My preference is to tread lightly when it comes to transgender media since it’s not my area of expertise. I did elaborate a little further on my feelings about The Danish Girl than I had originally intended, but that was because it got a reaction out of me that I genuinely wasn’t expecting. What I will say is if you want a nice romantic comedy that doesn’t make you want to claw your own eyes out at how ridiculously contrived it is, Different for Girls will scratch that itch. Also, for a genre where the formation of the couple is one of its key components, many American romantic comedies that I’ve seen seem to shy away from the act of sex itself, so it makes a nice change to watch a film that doesn’t feel the need to be coy.
A Midsummer Night’s Dream (1996)

Filmed adaptation of Adrian Noble’s wildly popular RSC production of the Shakespearian comedy, going down an altogether more abstract road than the rather stiff Michael Hoffman version that was its closest contemporary.

Puck plants one on Oberon as he leaves to seek out the magical flower that will lubricate the subplot between the four young lovers, but it feels a little tepid. You’d think after a year or so of doing it on the road across the States, Alex Jennings and Finbar Lynch would have managed to make the kiss seem a bit more natural.
**Techno Babes (Channel 4, 1996)**

Short documentary from Channel 4’s *Dyke TV* strand about the lesbian techno scene. I did not love this, largely because it opens with one of the interviewees proclaiming that the techno babe aesthetic proves that lipstick lesbians are a myth. On an unrelated note, what do you guys think of my latest selfie?

Otherwise, it was fine. It does explain, for the benefit of an outsider like myself, the appeal of what we now know as EDM and what makes a good techno track, which was of more interest to me than the discussion of techno identity politics.
Cold Lazarus (BBC One and Channel 4, 1996)

This requires a lot of preamble in order to talk about what amounts a single line of dialogue, so bear with me. Celebrated dramatist Dennis Potter wrote a final television series in the months leading up to his death from stomach cancer. This consisted of two separate series, *Karaoke* and *Cold Lazarus*, with the former acting as a loose sequel to the latter. *Karaoke* tells the story of the final days of Daniel Feeld (Albert Finney), an alcoholic television writer who starts hearing random strangers repeating lines of dialogue that he’s written for his latest script. The drama unfolds to show how Daniel tries to make positive use of what turns out to be the last few weeks of his life. Soon after learning of his terminal cancer diagnosis, he alters his will to submit his body for cryogenic research.

This brings me to *Cold Lazarus*, which sees the narrative takes a sharp genre swerve from an engagingly meta but otherwise traditional drama to hard sci-fi. In the year 2368, a team of cryogenicists are sifting through the synapses of Daniel Feeld’s recently defrosted and apparently insensate brain, at first purely as a research exercise and then later with a reluctant view to commercial exploitation in an attempt to secure their funding. Most of the memories are scenes that already played out in *Karaoke*, but the team also uncovers Daniel’s memories of a sexual assault by a stranger in the woods near his local church when he was a small boy. One of the research assistants leaves the lab in tears after watching it. When asked about this incident later on, one of her colleagues explains that she had been upset after viewing the memory of this “homosexual attack.” Evidently, this highly advanced society hasn’t reached a point where people have stopped conflating homosexuality and paedophilia.

I wish that line had been altered or cut altogether. It could have worked if it was intended to give some insight into the position of queer people in this society, but that isn’t something that the series has any interest in exploring. But, for what it’s worth, I do appreciate the inclusion of the sequence as in the wider context of the two series as an illustration of the long-term impact of childhood sexual abuse.
The only episode of this potboiler crime drama that I’ve seen is a two-parter focused on a mass shooting on a university campus. It takes after Gus Van Sant’s *Elephant*, at least in plot if not in style, in that the shooting was carried out by a small group of young men with romantic complications in their relationships with each other. Incidentally, Van Sant modelled his film on a BBC production of the same name by Alan Clarke, which focussed on The Troubles in Northern Ireland. Like your man from down under said: everything old is new again!
Our Friends in the North (BBC Two, 1996)

Landmark sociopolitical drama about four friends against a backdrop of thirty years of change in Newcastle. In one of the later episodes, Nicky (Christopher Eccleston) is doing some political campaigning and discussing his hopes to bring in some more gay-friendly policies as far as his remit will allow. He's then asked by a journalist if he's gay and his response is, "Why? Does it matter?"
Highlanders, Too (Channel 4, 1997)

Highlanders, Too (Channel 4, 1997)

Short documentary about the experiences of gay men in the Highlands. It highlights some experiences that are common to a lot of LGBT people living in rural areas, such as the practical difficulties of meeting any other like-minded individuals when the nearest gay bar is 250 miles away. One interviewee mentions how he and his boyfriend would go on holiday to Edinburgh (while the camera name-checks CC Bloom’s and the since-departed Blue Moon Café) so that they could actually get to be a couple for a week and then go back into the closet as soon as they returned home. Another speculates that the majority of gay men in the Highlands are most likely married and on the down-low, an assertion that’s difficult to empirically verify but certainly doesn’t seem outside the realm of possibility.

Short as the film is, it really only has time to gloss over the role that religion plays in the region’s attitudes towards homosexuality without providing any sort of introductory explanation for viewers outside Scotland. Scottish viewers can be assumed to have some familiarity with the context of one interviewee’s account of an “intervention” staged by his parents and the local meenister.

One of the fundamental cultural differences between Scotland and England evolved as a result of the Reformation, the net effect of which is neatly summarised in the light-hearted documentary, Natural Born Sinners:

While the English got away with Anglicanism - warm, woolly and, “More sherry, Vicar?” - the Scots got Presbyterianism - hard pews, long sermons and John Knox.

Presbyterianism, and specifically Calvinism, have given the Scottish character an ascetic distrust of the whole concept of sex in general that even as a modern and progressive society we still haven’t entirely shaken off. Combine this with the assumption that anything queer is more inherently sexual than anything straight and the heightened intensity of religious fervour in a rural area that hasn’t moved with the times at the same pace as the urban Central Belt and here we are.

It’s tough to ascertain how attitudes have changed in the decades since. I really only have my own anecdotal holiday experiences on the north-west coast to draw upon. I’ve yet to travel there with a partner and you can only glean so much as a tourist regardless. Coming back to the programme itself, it finishes on a surprisingly optimistic note. Despite the inherently emotionally distancing effect for many of living in the closet, some interviewees don’t see any reason why they should have to run away to Edinburgh or London or some other big city that, whatever its charms may be, can’t compare with the warmth and community of home. We end with an entreaty from the participants to those in a similar situation to come out to their families and friends or at least not to let life pass them by completely.
The Investigator (Channel 4, 1997)

Fact-based drama about Caroline Meagher (Helen Baxendale), a Royal Military Police officer who gets promoted to the Special Investigations Branch (SIB), the department tasked with enforcing the British Armed Forces’ ban on gay and lesbian soldiers. At first, Caroline’s excited about her new job and the new responsibilities that come with it, but when she goes from doing the usual run-of-the-mill investigative work a CID officer would be doing in civvy street to trying to crack a lesbian “ring,” she starts having some serious misgivings.

Her male colleagues shrug off her doubts about the inherent validity of the ban, viewing it no differently from any other military law they’re called upon to uphold. But rather than carrying out their investigations with an air of professional detachment, they make no effort to hide their disgust at the “dykes” they’re trying to “root out.” Worse still, there’s a decidedly prurient angle to their interrogation technique. Even after they’ve extracted a confession from a “suspect”, they persist in questioning her about the specific sexual acts she performed with her girlfriend until she’s reduced to tears.

For all that the proponents of the ban and of DADT in the US would harp on about the threat openly gay soldiers supposedly posed to morale, this film demonstrates just how poisonous these types of regulations are to the psychological wellbeing not just of the people they victimise but also to that of the ones actually tasked with enforcing these regulations in the first place. Rather than making a positive impact by making the Army a safer place for people to get on with their careers and their lives, Caroline discovers that her job is to expose people’s most private thoughts and feelings to public scrutiny and ridicule and end the careers of people who’ve done nothing wrong based on little more on rumour, hearsay and evidence obtained through unethical policing methods.

Chrissie, one of Caroline’s more seasoned RMP colleagues, takes a much more pragmatic view of the situation. When Chrissie first comes out to her, Caroline can’t understand how she can tolerate living under the constant threat of exposure. As far as Chrissie’s concerned though, it’s just another rule for her to follow, like hospital corners on her bed. She doesn’t waste her time feeling sorry or indignant on behalf of the people who get caught since they only have themselves to blame for not being careful enough. Her view is that Caroline needs to get over the idealistic greenhorn shit and just suck it up like everyone else.

The two of them get into an argument after Caroline finishes a particularly distressing interrogation which ultimately results in the two of them having sex. Afterwards, we flash forward and learn that the two of them carried on an affair for a few months before losing touch after Caroline received a new posting. She’s also got herself a boyfriend in the shape of Pete, who’s managed to work out that Caroline’s gay without having to be told. Despite this also having been the case with his previous girlfriend, Pete still thinks that they can “work it out” if they get married. Caroline is tempted by his rather inept proposal, if only because, as she explains to Chrissie when the two run into each other at a regimental dinner, she wants a normal life, but she turns him down.

Time passes and we see her with her at her new posting in Edinburgh, where she’s in a happy relationship with Louise (Laura Fraser), a primary school teacher. When Carol’s ordered to investigate an officer on a remote base with the chance of a promotion to follow, neither she nor Louise are particularly happy about it. Fortunately, this does not result in a hackneyed conflict where Lou accuses Caroline of being a “traitor.” If nothing else, she understands that Caroline isn’t in a position to refuse.
What do see of the investigation carried out on a particularly isolated base in the Highlands is that the ban also undermines intervention from the RMP when there’s a genuine need for it. Rather than holding a senior officer to account for unprofessional conduct, they only succeed in outing a couple of daft young privates whose only crime was not doing a better job of disguising the existence of their civilian girlfriends.

Caroline gets her promotion and moves to Belfast, but after her housemate grasses her up about Lou staying over at their quarters on a visit (they were interrupted by a car bomb before any “criminal” activity could take place), she finds herself under suspicion. At first, she believes her former SIB colleagues intend to use her as a way to out a more senior officer who she happens to be friendly with. When that fails to produce the desired result, they turn their attention to Caroline directly, using the letters from Lou that she had hidden amongst her private possessions as “evidence” upon which to form a line of enquiry. Still, Caroline does not yield. In the end, they do her for fiddling her travel expenses, in that she had claimed travel expenses for going off-base to visit Louise by writing on the relevant form that she was visiting her “fiancé,” something that would have been perfectly kosher had Louise been a man.

The film ends, a little abruptly, with a message from the real Caroline Meagher. She talks about how the Army lied to her about her discharge, feeding her the story about her expenses at the time only for her to later discover that an official document claimed that she was guilty of “disgraceful conduct of an unnatural kind.” She also points out how ludicrous it was that, with all the dangers she and her colleagues had faced while serving in Northern Ireland, the Army saw fit to devote time and resources investigating the sexuality of its soldiers. At the time the drama was made, Britain was the only country in the EEC to prohibit gay and lesbian soldiers from serving in its armed forces, and the MOD refused to publicly admit just how many service personnel it had identified as “gay suspects.”
The Full Monty (1997)

It looks as if the Magic Mike duology has now laid claim to the title (in America, at least), but for the best part of twenty years The Full Monty was the male stripper movie. It also had a much broader appeal than Magic Mike ever aspired to. You can watch it with your mum. Hell, it’s so non-threatening you can watch it with your dad. Correspondingly, the film’s gay subplot is hardly revolutionary, with the anoraky Lomper and buff Guy (Stevie Huison and Hugo Speer) getting together without actually having an on-screen conversation with one another.
Brass Eye (Channel 4, 1997, 2001)

Current affairs satire created by Chris Morris, with each of the seven episodes (six in 1997 and a special in 2001) tackling a different theme. "Sex" lambastes the exaltation of "blameless victims" of AIDS such as Ryan White and Kimberly Bergalis in a sketch where a talk show host condemns one of his guests for having caught "Bad AIDS" from his boyfriend instead of "Good AIDS" from a contaminated blood transfusion.
Bent (1997)

Adaptation of the 1979 Martin Sherman play of the same name. Max (Clive Owen) is a scenester who has to go into hiding after the Night of the Long Knives. After failing to evade capture, Max’s survival strategy is to insist that he’s Jewish rather than gay in an attempt to avoid harsher treatment. The SS call his bluff and torture him into proving it by forcing him to have sex with the corpse of a teenage girl.

Once he’s imprisoned in a concentration camp, Max paired up with Horst (Lothaire Bluteau), a former nurse who is far more willing to embrace the pink triangle. They spend their days moving piles of rock from spot to another in an act of pointless labour devised to break their spirits. In spite of their dire circumstances, they gradually find themselves falling in love.

Since they are forbidden to touch, the only means they have of consummating their relationship is by having very emotionally intense verbal sex. Max gradually overcomes his self-loathing and discovers the joy of loving and caring for another person. The two of them start discussing the possibility of a future together after the war, only for their conversation to be interrupted by the camp guards in a confrontation that escalates into Horst being shot and Max finally donning the pink triangle before throwing himself on the nearest electric fence in a fit of despair.
Motel (Channel 4, c. 1997)

Continuity strand for Channel 4’s late-night programming slot featuring set in a motel owned by the two gay robot bartenders. All I can tell you about it is that it existed, so any pointers towards the location of archive footage would be most welcome.
The Slab Boys (1997)

Filmed adaptation of the first and a bit of the second of John Byrne’s three plays about Phil, Spanky and Hector, a trio of paint mixers in a Paisley carpet factory in the 1950s. Having only seen the first few minutes of the film before I was able to acquire a complete copy after searching for the best part of three years, I had thought that Spanky might be gay, if only because of his voice. Fortunately, Do I Sound Gay? has broken the taboo on this subject, so I don’t feel as hesitant about calling attention to this trope as I might have done in the past.

Once I was finally able to watch the film in its entirety, I found that I this probably wasn’t the case, although my theory wasn’t entirely without foundation. It would give some context for why Spanky is the one who’s made the biggest step towards actually changing his life. At the start of the film, he’s already been saving up to emigrate to America, whereas Phil only applies to art school once he’s been galvanised by a sympathetic designer in the factory. Also, it’s hard to tell if the look on his face when the leather-clad Terry Skinnedar (David O’Hara) shows up unexpectedly at the local café is meant to be taken as “cockstruck” or just “generalised glakitness.” We don’t really get anything more conclusive than that. For what’s it’s worth, it also doesn’t seem to have been a possibility explored in more recent productions of the stage play, if this trailer from the Citz is anything to go by.
No sooner were the traps opened on the marketing campaign for *Love, Simon* than my tumblr dashboard was awash with claims that it was first gay teen movie ever, you guys! While I will concede that it’s the first gay teen film with an actual marketing campaign whose rollout I was able to witness in the wild, *Love, Simon* does have its forerunners, one of them being *Get Real*.

Closeted teen Steve Carter (Ben Silverstone) lives in Basingstoke, where his dad runs the local camera shop. When he’s not at school, he spends his spare time loitering hopefully around the cottage at the local park. While waiting in his usual stall one afternoon, he receives a note through a hole in the wall from another teenage boy who turns out to be John Dixon (Brad Gorton), captain of the school football team. What follows is a fairly standard *Gay Guy Seeks Popular Jock* plot, but it has its charms. I wouldn’t say the characters are particularly memorable, but I never have to strain too hard to appreciate a late-nineties aesthetic. It also manages to handle the subject of sex a lot more organically than its best-known descendant. The epistolary premise of *Love, Simon* keeps the romantic leads apart for so much of the film that there’s no real “danger,” whereas *Get Real* is a lot more forthright and does so on a level that its primary target audience can relate to.
Yellow Fever (1998)

Yellow Fever (1998)

(Source)

Short film from Raymond Yeung in which single Chinese Brit Monty (Adrian Pang) finds himself reconsidering his lifelong aversion to dating other Chinese men when Jai Ming (Gerald Chew), a cute Taiwanese guy, moves in downstairs. Most of his friends roll their eyes at his hand-wringing over the idea of breaking his own rule. Ernest (Ivan Heng) claims not to see the point in getting hung up over relationships at all (“All fairy tales have one ending - Charles fucks Camilla and Diana gets bulimia.”), but it’s a position that he struggles to maintain in the face of his own loneliness. Andrew (Charles Edwards), the gang’s token white friend, points out that Monty’s attitude is probably a product of colonialism - after a lifetime of being brought up to revere all things English, he can only imagine himself with a white knight.

After an unsuccessful night on the pull (in what I think might be Halfway II Heaven) where he’s reminded that white guys aren’t really anything special, he stumbles home half-cut to find Jai Ming waiting for him and the two of them have some amazingly OTT music-video-style sex. Monty predictably freaks out afterwards, but when he turns to Jaclyn (Yu Ling), another friend, for advice, she manages to penetrate his neuroses by pointing out that dating a white guy was never going to make him less Chinese. Upon realising this, Monty’s able to let go of his hang-ups, at least for the time being, and actually open himself up to the possibility of a lasting relationship with Jai Ming.

As the saying goes, there’s a lot to unpack, and I’ll be the first to admit that I’m not really the person best qualified to do the unpacking, but it’s not like I can’t relate. I have a complicated relationship with my accent, and particularly since moving Down South I’ve started to feel like it’s a rather unattractive feature. It’s not hard for me to see how all that cultural baggage multiplies exponentially when it doesn’t just relate to your voice but your entire body, and how the sense of scarcity in the queer dating pool can amplify those anxieties even further.
A Rather English Marriage (BBC One, 1998)

Drama based on a novel by Angela Lambert about two pensioners who move in together following the deaths of their wives at the recommendation of their mutual social worker. Squadron Leader Reginald Coyninghame-Jervis (Albert Finney) is a former RAF ace and Rich Idiot with No Day Job who took his wife Mary for granted, while Roy is a retired milkman who was besotted with his beloved Grace all their married life.

They don’t hit it off right away. Reggie treats Roy like an unpaid servant with no regard to his feelings or autonomy, but he does eventually develop an appreciation for him, particularly after his much younger girlfriend, (Joanna Lumley), ditches him after a stroke, leaving him and Roy to share the rest of their days together. So far, so *Odd Couple*, but what’s interesting is the translation of the novel to the screen. As is the wont of most novels, our leads’ backstories are more fleshed out than they are in the TV version. It provides some details about Reggie’s undemanding post-RAF career as a board member in the City:

> “Just occasionally, chance proximity on a commuter train had allowed his free hand to wander and, even more occasionally, it had encountered no defence. Then he and a stranger, their averted faces inches apart, would engage in furtive pleasure, all the more acute for taking place in public, marked only by a few seconds of quickened breathing. Those impassive, covert encounters ended in his commuting days.”

The vagueness of the passage is conspicuous - there’s no mention of hands going up skirts or down blouses. Given that Reggie’s commuter days would have been in the fifties and sixties, it’s fair to assume there would have been a much lower ratio of women to men than what you would find on the average Thameslink train today. Also, not that I’m speaking from experience, but I would imagine that a quickie in a confined public space is generally easier to negotiate between two men than it is between a man and a woman. Across the board, there was also lot more talk of dick-
twitching than I would have expected, but it got a chuckle out of me because it was just so very Baby’s First Slash Fanfic. (Gurl we’ve all been there.)

Roy, for his part, considers crossdressing as a way to cope with his wife’s death:

“Must keep busy. Tomorrow he’d wear her apron, to bring her closer. He’d wear all her clothes if he could, if it weren’t that someone might catch him at it and think he was going a bit gaga. He could wear her nighties in bed, that was the answer. Not the hospital ones, but the brushed nylon ones in soft, pretty colours. No one would see, and it would feel as though he still had her next to him.”

This is a concept that’s also touched on in Leonardo DiCaprio vehicle J Edgar in its attempt to treat the titular character’s rumoured cross-dressing habits as something other than a punchline by showing him dressing in his dead mother’s clothes. Unfortunately, the scene where this actually takes places teeters dangerously close to Narm territory, whereas Lambert handles the subject a lot more deftly in the book.

I’m getting sidetracked. Most of what pinged my gaydar in the book doesn’t make it into the TV version because the full effect of the above-mentioned elements being delivered via multiple limited third-person perspectives doesn’t translate particularly well to a visual medium. However, the biggest change by far is the ending. The TV version wraps up with Reggie and Roy dancing together to Moonlight Serenade, enjoying each other’s company and no longer stalked by the grief of their respective spouses. In the book, rather than Reggie and Roy growing old together, Roy marries a friend of his wife’s and Reggie is left to wither in a care home, begging not to be left alone. It’s pretty fucking brutal, and it doesn’t provide any real resolution for Reggie’s character growth, so this is a rare occasion where I consider a happy ending a marked improvement. Mind you, they also left out the part about Reggie having probably been a rapist (emphasis mine) -

“He had taken his opportunities where he found them - be it a compliant typist or another man’s inebriated wife after an evening of dinner or bridge.”

- so perhaps there was meant to be an element of karmic retribution in the original ending.


Famously meme-rich sketch show from Ford Kiernan and Greg Hemphill, amongst others. While largely unknown in the rest of the UK, some of its catchphrases are so deeply embedded in the Scottish consciousness it feels as though they’ve been there since the dawn of time.

(Source)

Comedy has a certain power for groups existing outside the mainstream. Inside jokes can help strengthen a sense of community, but they can also provide unique insight into shared attitudes (or
attitudes that are presumed to be shared) by members of that community. As such, *Chewin’ the Fat* makes for an interesting study in Scottish perceptions of homosexuality at the turn of twenty-first century.

A sketch that recurred throughout the series was that of the Banter Boys. Gary and James (Kiernan and Hemphill) are two camp middle-aged and middle-class men who are both hardcore fanboys of the Glasgow dialect AKA “The Banter.” Although we didn’t have the vocabulary in the nineties to describe it as such, the joke in these sketches is that the characters are appropriating a culture that they do not and ostensibly cannot belong to. They’re too posh to speak the language properly - idioms like “heid-the-baw” and “murder polis” become “head-the-balls” and “Murder, Policeman!” - but they’re also too gay and too effeminate to fit in anywhere in a regional subculture that puts a massive emphasis on projecting an image of hardened, unemotional masculinity. Over the show’s lifespan, the sketches get more overtly gay, e.g. having them fawn over some footballers in their dressing room while they get a bollocking from their manager, but the assumptions underpinning the setup don’t really shift or get challenged at any point. The sketch comes from a place of traditional Scottish derision for putting on airs of any sort, regardless of whether those “airs” are a part of your cultural heritage or even just an expression of your authentic self.

If you really want a window into the worst of nineties casual homophobia, it can be found in the first series in an isolated sketch where one average, unremarkable guy is trying to work out how to ask out Lindsay, his workplace crush, only for us to discover that, *gasp* Lindsay is a man!

This sketch probably wasn’t written to be quite as hateful as it feels, but it infuriates me all the same. Of course, it’s fine for The Banter Boys to be gay because we’re already encouraged to look upon them as freaks, but a “normal” bloke being gay? Now that’s comedy!

There are some other stray points of interest scattered throughout. One of *Sluich!* sockpuppets, who all speak Gaelic-sounding gibberish in a nod to the long-running Gaelic-language kids’ show *Dòtaman*, briefly worries if it’s gay to get his pal to check his balls for signs of testicular cancer. Betty the Auld Slapper recounts how her thirst for Rock Hudson was killed off sharpish once she found out he was a “harry’s hoofter.” (“Aw that meat and naewhere tae hing it!”) One sketch appears to be a dig at Channel 4’s late-night adverts for gay phone sex lines.

“Are you gay? Well if you’re attracted to these out-of-work actors playing gay stereotypes, you might be! Call 1-800-NIGHT-CHUG! Go on! Give your knob a bruising while your wife is snoozing!”

Is the joke supposed to be that they exist? Honestly, it flies by so quickly you don’t really have much time to contemplate just how unfunny it is.

One of the show’s better remembered standalone sketches features a teenage boy being subjected to a ridiculously over-the-top shaming by his family and friends when they discover that he has a “stauner.” Although the scene plays out like a comically overwrought accidental self-outing that goes from bad to worse, I can’t help but wonder on subsequent viewings if it was actually leaning more into parental hysteria surrounding teenage drug use than anything else, especially since the sketch culminates with the protagonist being hucked out of his house by the police. I’m not sure if the dates line up, but it wouldn’t surprise me if a source of inspiration for this particular sketch was [this somewhat shouty public information film from the Scottish Executive](http://www.scottish-executive.gov.uk/health/recreational/substance_abuse/prof_nodes.pro?n=0107000824) about a teenage girl’s parents discovering her stash of eckies. Then again, the sketch ends with the kid's mum yelling out the following in front of her rubbernecking neighbours...

"Ah hope you and yer stauner burn in hell! He's deid tae me!"

...so maybe it's a wee bit from Column A and a wee bit from Column B.
Virtual Sexuality (1999)

Virtual Sexuality (1999)

Little-known teen romantic comedy based on a series of books by Chloe Rayban that sank without a trace at the box office but has recently been enjoying a second wind as an overlooked camp classic.

Justine Walker (Laura Fraser) decides to rectify her deplorable status as a 17-year-old virgin by enlisting the help of her best prop Fran (Marcelle Duprey) and Chas (Luke de Lacey), the school anorak, to set her up on a date with local man-meat Alex (Kieran O’Brien) at a computer expo. When plot contrivances prevent them from meeting up on the day, Justine wanders off and finds a digital makeover booth where she designs her ideal man, only for a freak electrical accident (is there any other kind?) to rip through the convention centre, which apparently traps her in the body of her Sim.

There’s plenty of the usual fish-out-of-corporeal-water gubbins that you’d expect from this setup, but with the additional side-effect that Justine now finds herself spontaneously attracted to girls. Well, sort of. She is now possessed of a monster wang that seems to have a life of its own, but only when it comes to girls. She somehow doesn’t have to deal with an inconvenient stiffy when she gets the chance to use the boys’ locker room. It seems as though in this universe your sexual orientation is somehow hardwired into whatever genitalia you happen to possess and doesn’t have anything to do with your psychological makeup. This bizarre creative decision might have made some sense if the script were attempting to scotch any and all queer elements from the premise, but people just end up assuming Jake is gay anyway because of his feminine affect and mannerisms. There’s a lot of casual hostility from Alex and his jock pals, but this attitude isn’t reflected across the board. Chas’ parents are pretty chill about Chas bringing Jake round to crash at their house. They already suspect Chas is gay because he’s never had a girlfriend, albeit while trying to rationalise their way out of it (“If he’s gay then why doesn’t he have any gay friends?”), and they are both clearly a lot happier when Chas disappears up to his room with Justine Prime towards the end of the film.

By far, this film’s greatest appeal is as a time capsule. This was the era of New Labour and Cool Britannia. It’s hard to believe now that there was ever a point when the future seemed as bright as it did then. Even though I was a small child when this film was released and I hadn’t heard of it until its appearance on Needs More Gay, it’s still a pretty potent nostalgia bomb for me on another level. I may not have read any of Chloe Rayban’s books, but I definitely remember the epoch of teen fiction they belong to. My local library had a sizeable but somewhat scattershot YA collection, so I spent a significant chunk of the early and mid-oughts reading books that had either been published in the late nineties or still partook of the tropes and mindset of that period more than they did the changed world of 2001 onwards. As light-hearted and ultimately harmless as this movie was, it did remind me of just how aggressively heteronormative those books were, or at least how devoid they were of any sort of queer presence. Justine’s level of boy-crazyness and attendant love of clothes and makeup seemed to be par for the course for female protagonists like Ally Love and Georgia Nicolson. Looking back, it’s no wonder I felt so alienated.
Another fabulously dated time capsule of a movie charting a weekend of clubs, drugs, pubs and parties for five friends at the apex of the ecstasy counterculture. Jip (John Simm), the film’s protagonist, is currently experiencing a sexual crisis of confidence due to a recent bout of impotence which may or may not be being aggravated by his frequent drug use. He’s also slightly worried that his failed conquests might think he’s gay because of his current predicament, but this doesn’t prove to be a major preoccupation for him throughout the film. That said, in one of his more outlandish Imagine Spots he pictures his manager at the clothes shop where he works shoving a twenty in his mouth and raping him while telling him off for standing about and talking when he should be working which is, as far as complaints about shitty jobs go, more than a little heavy-handed.

The movie did raise a few questions for me about the Chemical Generation as a whole. If ecstasy is, as the film tells us, a brilliant empathy enhancer that makes you more open towards strangers and more loving towards your friends, why didn’t it spark off a fresh wave of sexual experimentation or at least of queer curiosity in its creative output? Other twentieth-century musical subcultures such as glam rock, disco, punk and synthpop either had roots in or significant overlap with queer culture at one time or another, but from I can gather this wasn’t the case with the music of the British rave scene in the late eighties and nineties.
Telling Tales

Autobiographical monologue series from Alan Bennett, focussing predominantly on his childhood. Since Leeds was largely untouched by the Blitz, his memories of the Anderson shelter that sat in his front garden are of hide and seek, and of self-discovery:

“No fires are started in Armley, and unused after the first few years is the air raid shelter outside our front door. Unused, that is, except as a place to hide or to play, and sometimes naughtily. So that builders’ sand and unplastered brick, I still associate, if not with sex, with the feelings that precede sex, feelings I know at the age of eight I should not be having, which no one else has but me.”
Men Only (2001)

Ages ago, I read a comment somewhere on my dash about Martin Freeman playing a gay bare-knuckle boxer in a short film back in his pre-Office days. I’ve since discovered that this may just have been referring to a generalisation made by Freeman himself about his early career. While on the lookout for this probably-non-existent short, I alighted on Men Only, a two-parter examining the lad culture of the nineties. Since I, like everyone else with internet access, am a sucker for that sweet, sweet post-Cold-War, pre-9/11 optimism, I grabbed my Tango and my Pot Noodle and settled in for a nice wee trip in the Wayback Machine. What could possibly go wrong?

Men Only gets things off to an unassuming start. Our protagonists are a gang of five-a-side mates who are each experiencing some typically zeitgeisty crisis of masculinity: Mac (Marc Warren) is a paediatrician who believes his girlfriend Katie (Esther Hall) suspects that he is at fault for their failure to conceive; Dwight (Razaaq Adoti) is a personal trainer whose own father (Earl Cameron) calls him a pussy for working out and refusing to smoke himself to death like his old man; Jamie (Martin Freeman) is unemployed and impotent; Des (Daniel Ryan) is being cheated on by his more aggressive and financially successful wife; completing the quintet is Jason (Stephen Moyer), a nightclub manager and the group’s resident alpha-male who is constantly poised for any and every opportunity to assert his virility.

It could quite easily be a sitcom - think The Full Monty but without the stripping - but it doesn’t take long for things start travelling along an altogether more sinister trajectory. After one loss too many down the Fives, they overcompensate by partying harder and taking bigger risks, a pattern of behaviour that ultimately escalates into Jason, Mac and Jamie gang-raping Alice (Zoe Telford), one of Mac’s colleagues, with Dwight and Des bystanding during the event and failing to report it afterwards. The back half of the drama deals with the fallout and the group’s attempts to rationalise what they’ve done and cover their tracks.

As deliberately shocking and brutal as this plot development is, it doesn’t completely out of left field. The show doesn’t actually open with its unremarkable shiny-happy credit sequence, but with Mac taking a Shower of Angst. Because I accidentally spoiled myself while looking for some background info on the show, I knew there was going to be a rape of some sort, so this opening scene led me to believe that Mac was going be the victim rather than one of the perpetrators. Still, even without that particular prediction coming to fruition, there are still elements of the plot that fall within my purview. The general group dynamic is presented as an ongoing five-man cock contest, but the competition between Jason and Mac seems to be driven not just by insecurity but also some deeply buried sexual tension on both sides that gets brought closer to the surface by the events of the series, but in a way that means nothing good for anyone.

It’s established that Mac sees Jason as a focal point for his own insecurities. When he struggles to meet Katie’s needs in bed by not being as aggressive as she would like, he sulks over the idea that she’d be happier shagging someone like Jason, to which Katie responds by asking him why he has to make his own issues with sex about other men.

This exchange helps lay the groundwork for a later scene. After hitting a strip club, Jason takes the lads to a brothel and offers them all a girl each at his expense. Mac is understandably reluctant to cheat on Katie, but rather than trying to egg him by accusing him of being a pussy or a bad team player, Jason instead suggests they double team one of the girls.
Now, the only other MMF threesome negotiation that I’ve seen is the one that most people are likely to have seen if they’ve seen one at all outside of porn - *Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle*. In that scene, Liane is the one who suggests it, and Harold and Kumar argue amongst themselves about how they might pull it off as heterosexually as possible. (“If it’s two holes it might not be that bad.”). Even though *Men Only* predates the emergence the “not gay if the balls don’t touch” meme by about five years, if you had asked me ahead of time how I would expect this scenario to play out in a mainstream drama in 2001, my answer would have been something along those lines. I definitely would not have predicted that it would play out with Mac being genuinely and seriously tempted by Jason’s pitch:

“You’ve never had a two-one before, have you? A real twosie-onesie. From the back. One up each. It’s fucking beautiful, mate. You can feel the other bloke’s cock as you fuck. You can feel it, Mac...”

Mac ends the evening by bolting from the brothel and running home to panic-fuck his girlfriend, as if coming inside her will mean he won’t have to think about what turned him on in the first place. Rattled by this and by Katie’s suggestion that they consider using a sperm donor, Mac has sex with Alice (Zoe Telford), a new nurse on his ward, in the hospital dispensary. After narrowly avoiding being caught in flagrante by one of his colleagues, he steals some ketamine for the lads’ next night out. This also turns into an opportunity for payback. When Jason balks at the prospect of needles, Des seizes on this run-of-the-mill phobia as a sign of Jason’s latent homosexuality, and this facile affront to his manhood is all it takes for Jason to acquiesce to what becomes a game of gay chicken played with syringes, with Mac milking the opportunity to stick it in Jason’s arse for maximum humiliation.

Mac’s filching of party favours from the dispensary doesn’t go unnoticed by Alice, who manages to elbow her way into the night out. Mac is less than thrilled as he already regrets cheating on Katie and wants to put some distance between him and Alice. Nevertheless, the rest of the lads and Jason in particular are glad of her company. Rather than being relieved that Alice doesn't have any intention of hanging onto him any more than he does to her, he spends the evening sulking like a toddler watching someone else playing with a toy they’ve just decided they didn’t want anymore.

The gang leave the club for Jason’s flat. The boys are starting to come down off the ket, though Alice is still flying pretty high at this point. Jason shows her to his bedroom and they have sex that is about as consensual as it can be when one of you is still midway through metabolising an unknown quantity of uncut horse tranquiliser. Mac sits and stews in the living room throughout.

When Jason emerges, victorious, Mac starts prodding at a barely conscious Sarah, and, after he and Jason exchange a silent, significant look, they rape her, with Jamie joining in soon after.

With Alice dropping off the radar in the second half, choosing to go to ground rather than to the police, the second half isn’t much more than a race to see who will snitch on who first and how. The only evidence of the crime, a tape from Jason’s camcorder, ultimately falls into Mac’s hands. He manages to prevent Katie from seeing the incriminating footage, ending the series on a *Karma Houdini* that must have come across as almost too cynical for words on its original airing but feels downright prescient when viewed in the light of #metoo.

Despite this strong ending, the second half doesn’t actually address the issue raised in the first of the exact nature of Jason and Mac’s relationship. The script tries to frame the revelation that Jason slept with Katie as the root of the conflict between him and Mac, but it just feels like a palm-off rather than an actual resolution. Although the suggestion of a mutual attraction between these two characters is far ahead of what I would have expected from a drama from 2001, it doesn’t actually have the guts to pay off its own setup.
Riotous adaptation of Sarah Waters’ Victorian music hall romance novel. I had to give up on the book because it hit a bit of a slump between Kitty and Diana Lethaby. The series goes by at a much faster clip and is all the better for it.
I try and watch every film and programme I write about on this list - that’s Theviciouslily Promise. Of course, there are few instances where keeping this promise isn’t practical or even sensible. When I do eventually get around to writing entries on *Coronation Street* and *Eastenders*, for example, I will definitely not be watching those shows from beginning to end. However, there are also times when I just can’t do it, and *Do I Love You?* was one of those times. There was nothing wrong with the premise - it’s about Marina (Claire Gornick) an unemployed writer from Hackney who starts to question why she’s a lesbian when her relationship with her girlfriend breaks down. That’s fine - I have no problem with movies that are small or slow or introspective or all of three of those things at once. But I found this in movie in particular to be so full of faux-philosophical wangst that I ended up skimming through most of the scenes after the first thirty minutes. There’s also a good chunk of time spent discussing dicks and straight sex in general as Marina considers the possibility of dating a man and what that would mean for her identity which, again, is a perfectly fine idea to hang a movie on, but not one that’s terribly interesting to me personally.
Anita and Me (2002)

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Black Country coming-of-age dramedy based on Meera Syal’s semi-autobiographical novel of the same name. There’s a running gag that has small-minded shopkeeper Mrs Ormerod (Lynn Redgrave) being comically oblivious to the fact that her offscreen daughter is gay. The setup doesn’t really get a meaningful payoff as the daughter is on holiday with her girlfriend on Lesbos (of course) for the entirety of the movie.
One of Channel 4’s many countdown programmes. It touches on a couple of well-known inadvertently gay musical moments, such as the homoeroticism of Jailhouse Rock or the subtext of Secret Love in Calamity Jane, as well as the fundamentals of camp. Four Poofs and Piano, the house band on Friday Night with Jonathan Ross, appear to provide some explanation as to why Judy Garland is such a massive gay icon: she was a bit of a tortured soul and that’s something that a lot of gay men can relate to, as well as the sheer melodrama of her life having a certain element of camp to it.
Calendar Girls (2003)

Calendar Girls (2003)

Defacto distaff counterpart to The Full Monty in which Annie and Chris (Julie Walters and Helen Mirren) decide to commemorate the death of Annie’s husband John by creating a charity nude calendar with their fellow WI pals which unexpectedly becomes an international phenomenon. While The Full Monty actually managed to include some gay characters, here we have to make do with Chris’ son comically freaking out over the possibility that his mum is having a lesbian midlife crisis due to her sudden inexplicable interest in photos of naked women.
Cambridge Spies (BBC One, 2003)

Dramatisation of the activities of the Cambridge Four spanning from their university days before the war to Burgess and MacLean’s flit to Moscow in 1951. There have been many iterations of the history of Britain’s most notorious turncoats, but Peter Moffat’s interpretation is the first to completely cast off the shackles of the stale-beer brand of spy fiction that has typified previous versions and replant the story as a character-driven historical drama. Coming from the world of transformative fanworks, this is an approach I support, but I can’t go so far to give this series my full endorsement.

This is not out of concern for how closely Peter Moffat did or didn't cleave to the facts. There’s nothing more tiresome than listening to someone who doesn’t understand the demands of structuring history into a dramatic narrative bemoaning a drama’s lack of “historical accuracy.” You want historical accuracy, watch a documentary. This isn't necessarily my position on all movies and TV shows based on a true story, but since these historical figures haven’t exactly been left wanting for investigation or public exposure, I am more than happy in this instance to prioritise being entertained over being educated.

Having said that, I am a big gay hypocrite, so I do care about how the sexualities of these characters are represented in the story. Even if it weren’t a case of me electing to treat the source material more like I would a novel than historical fact, the primary goal of this series was to make the Four sympathetic, so it’s of interest to me how gay you could be in a mainstream series in 2003 before you could no longer be considered relatable to a straight audience. Of the Four, Burgess and Blunt were both gay, while MacLean and to a lesser extent Philby were both rumoured to bisexual, so I’ll be examining each of them in turn.

In the series, Guy (Tom Hollander) is the most ideologically motivated of the gang, both in terms of his commitment to Communism and his feelings about his sexuality. He is very upset when the college decide not to send him down after catching him in flagrante, even though they don’t have any qualms about sacking the waiter he was in bed with. Since Guy is considered to be “one of us” by the college administration, they are content to shield him from any negative consequences of his actions because of how any public punishment would reflect on the upper classes as a whole.

Naturally, Guy isn’t happy about this, but he doesn’t go so far as to leave anyway despite the chancellor’s refusal to expel him. Rather than throwing it on the ground right there and then, he sees it through to the end and banks his status as a Cambridge man against future losses. When he winds up in court on an importuning charge, he wangles he his way out of a guilty verdict just by flexing his old college tie on the judge. While Guy would very much like to avoid going to prison, not least because he understands he’s no use to the Kremlin in Wormwood Scrubs, he isn’t worried about how a guilty verdict might have reflected on him personally. He doesn’t make any effort to conceal his sexuality. In fact, he’s as openly gay as it was possible to be in this particular time period, and he resists any attempts to try and present a false image of himself to the world.

As the years go by and Guy’s fondness for booze deepens into all-out alcoholism, his impulse control diminishes significantly. This culminates in a scene where he comes home drunk to Kim’s house in DC, where he’s been basement-dwelling while on secondment to the British embassy, and regales the dinner party gathered there with the tale how he ended up with a shiner because he didn’t realise that in America a man can discuss the finer points of theatre with a stranger in a public lavatory without it being taken as a come-on.
It would easy to label Guy as the most “aggressively” queer member of the group, but that would be too simplistic. He’s certainly the most counter-cultural, as indicated by his insistence on wearing a hooded greatcoat in the summer in the first episode. He’s also the least preoccupied with others’ opinions of him, but the aforesaid dinner party rant isn’t a result of him becoming more militant in his identity but his behaviour becoming more erratic across the board.

Anthony (Samuel West) acts as a foil to Guy. He’s the least interested in the legwork, to the point of forgoing out-and-out espionage in MI5 in favour of curating the royal family’s art collection and passing on whatever information might be useful to the Soviets. His and Guy’s friendship is already established when we’re introduced to them in the first episode, but his loyalty is of a somewhat flexible nature since he shags Guy’s longtime crush, Julian Bell (Patrick Kennedy), behind Guy’s back.

It’s when we come to Kim and Donald (Toby Stephens and Rupert Penry-Jones) that things become more frustrating. Guardian critic Mark Lawson noticed that there was something off about the series’ approach to homosexuality, but I don’t think he articulated his concerns very well.

Certainly, the opening sequences may surprise some British viewers and comfort American ones - which is perhaps rather more the point - because this country's most famous gay communists initially present themselves as vigorously heterosexual liberals…

I realise television journalism wasn’t usually as sophisticated in 2003 as it is now, but this is just straight-up lazy reporting. Not for a minute are Guy and Anthony presented as “vigorously heterosexual.” However, he does go on to say that...

Tim Fywell's direction has rather too many shots of Philby on top of women - this stressing of heterosexuality always feeling like a protection of foreign sales.

Okay, now we’re getting somewhere. The issue is with Kim specifically being depicted as straight. It was Alessandra Stanley of the New York Times who managed to hit the nail on the head:

In the series, Philby (Toby Stephens) is the least interesting of the Cambridge spies: handsome, noble, dashingly heterosexual and without any of the bons mots or layered emotions that enliven the other characters...

The trouble with Kim is that he is boring, and the fact that the plot goes out of its way to reassure the audience of his heterosexuality is part of what makes him so dull. Kim’s establishing character sequence involves shagging Miriam Block, a student who he and Guy defended from an anti-semite in the union bar (or whatever it is toffs call their union bar) who only shows up again to interrupt Kim while he’s preparing for the spy audition set up by Guy and Anthony. He also tells Guy that he’s “not at all homosexual” when Guy asks him for his opinion on Julian, just in case we weren’t reassured by watching him bang Miriam.

You can tell that Kim is supposed to be the lead out of the four not because Toby Stephens’ name is the first to appear in the opening credits or even because he gets the most screentime but because he is the most bland. As Stanley explains:

In part, the dumbing-down of Philby makes dramatic sense. The plot needed a straight romantic lead to offset all the racy gay sex. (Blunt has a bedroom scene with Julian Bell, Virginia Woolf's nephew; Burgess, arrested while cruising in a public restroom, tries to beat the rap by pretending he was just absorbed in reading "Middlemarch.") The dialogue needed a straight man.
I understand why the dialogue might need a straight man. This is actually a fairly standard Four-Temperament Ensemble, and someone has to be the boring one who the others play off against. There’s a reason you can’t remember anything about that guy in The Young Ones who wasn’t Rick, Vyv or Neil. The problem is that because Kim has been afflicted with Designated Protagonist Syndrome, instead of getting to watch him build his relationships with the other three, there are interminable stretches of time when he’s off on his own doing spy stuff that I aggressively do not give a shit about. Whether he’s rescuing his contact in Austria from the Nazis by marrying her or doing a pro-Franco aristo to help maintain his cover as a right-wing correspondent for The Times, none of it matters because it doesn’t alter the stakes for the rest of the group. Presumably Kim’s whole girls-guns-and-gallantry thing is meant to hold an aspirational appeal for the men in the audience. We even get a shot of him reacting weirdly to Guy’s live-in manservant mentioning that Guy’s the one who tops so the viewers can put their minds at rest because the audience proxy is grossed out by icky gay sex, just like you! After all, how are they supposed to relate to the other three when Anthony’s gay, Guy’s gay and cray and Donald’s a wimp?

Speaking of Donald, he’s the one who really gets the shaft in all this. Shit starts to get real in the third episode when Walter Krivitsky (Joe Searby), a potential Soviet defector, baits the CIA with a description of a Russian mole working in British intelligence: a tall, fair-haired Scot with bohemian tastes. Given Donald’s love of sweater-vests and bow ties, I’m guessing Wally wasn’t referring to his taste in fashion. However, we never see any hard evidence of what we all know “bohemian” implies. There are a couple of suggestive shots scattered here and there but, like Kim, we spend way too much time on his female love interest, in this case his wife, Melinda (Anna-Louise Plowman).

Stuff like this makes me wonder just who the target audience for this series was. I think up until Game of Thrones, you could reasonably assume that any given period drama on television would have had a predominantly female audience. Even shows with ostensible bloke-appeal like Sharpe (which is how we in the UK heard of Sean Bean before GoT) had a tangible female contingent. I suspect the over-emphasis on female characters who, let’s be real here, don’t really matter, is a concession to that trend. At the other end of the spectrum of conflicting intentions, we’ve got Kim’s solo escapades which, although they involve women, take place entirely from Kim’s perspective, leading me to believe they were written with the male viewer in mind.

It’s issues like these that bog the series down so that, in spite of there being several good scenes, I can’t wholeheartedly recommend it. I was surprised that I enjoyed it more on the second watch, but that was because I knew when to hit fast forward. Anthony’s scenes are solid and Tom Hollander never fails to ignite the screen as Guy. Most of the flab lies in Kim and Donald’s scenes, and there is a small but significant change that could have remedied that: make them each other’s love interests.

My plan would be to make this scene be the point of divergence. It’s not hard to imagine that hug going further. You could develop it into an interesting contrast with the other half of the group. Anthony and Guy’s relationship never develops into anything romantic or even casually sexual, but since they’re completely uninhibited by concerns about appearing to be straight or even particularly masculine they aren’t afraid to be openly affectionate with one another. You could take Donald and Kim in the opposite direction where they tie themselves in all sorts of knots to convince themselves that it’s just sex and that they aren’t like Anthony or Guy because they’re invested in performing heteronormativity in one way or another. It would add more layers to Kim ultimately being the one to
shop Donald to the CIA in an attempt to save the rest of the group, an event that otherwise comes off as surprisingly underwritten since the relationship between these two is the one that gets the least development.

It would also make better sense in terms of narrative economics. While I don’t doubt Melinda MacLean’s predicament is interesting enough that she could conceivably be the hero of her own story, I don’t have any interest in seeing that story compete for attention against those of the main characters in this particular series. There’s a scene where she and Kim talk about the idea of being two people at once that would work much better if she were swapped out for Donald. I know that she and Philby had an affair in real life and this is reflected in series, but what I’m proposing is basically an RPF - if facts can be added to give texture to the narrative, great, but they shouldn’t be accommodated at the expense of the plot.

I may yet turn this lengthy hypothetical into the latest addition to my graveyard of unfinished fic projects, so I should probably stop myself here. Still, I’m by no means the only one to harbour a continuing fascination with this lot. They’re the biggest influence on 20th century spy fiction behind James Bond, so you can expect a few more versions of their story to make appearances in future chapters.
The Deal (Channel 4, 2003)

Before Peter Morgan and Stephen Frears rose to international prominence with their royal RPF, they created a TV movie in the same universe detailing the early power struggle between Tony Blair and Gordon Brown (Michael Sheen and David Morrissey) within the Labour Party. Peter Mandelson (Paul Rhys) initially appears on the periphery as an in-joke for the audience on how oblivious everyone was - except apparently Tony and Gordon - to the fact that he was gay. It’s only after the death of the then-incumbent party leader John Smith (played by an unrecognisable Frank Kelly) in 1994 that he starts growing into the kingmaker persona we’re more familiar with today. (You can tell that this is when shit’s about to real because when we first see him after the news of Smith’s death breaks, he’s ditched his Frankie Goes to Parliament ’tache.) He hitches his wagon to Tony, having correctly intuited that the public would not respond well to Gordon’s more temperamental nature. Peter ends up being the one to tell Gordon that this is what’s made him unelectable rather than his nationality. It’s a pretty minor role, but if nothing else I think it’s fitting that, out of all the characters, it’s a gay man who has the best understanding of the importance of cultivating a palatable public persona.
Creature Comforts (ITV, 2003 - 2007)

Spinoff of Nick Park’s Oscar-winning claymation short comprised of animal vox pops, voiced by the Great British public, this time covering a much wider range of subjects than in the original film. In “Monarchy Business,” we meet three camp ravens (gayvens?) cracking out a few double entendres about finding queens in ASDA. When asked in another episode if they can do any impressions, they go for some standard camp comedy figures such as Kenneth Williams, Frank Spencer and Victor Meldrew.

Elsewhere, Behzad, a horse who keeps changing jobs, mentions that in his home country people can be jailed or forced into a sex change for talking smack about their royal family. It's this remark and the fact that he’s an Arabian horse that led viewers to infer that Behzad comes from somewhere in the Middle East. (Seems pretty obvious given his name but none of the characters’ names are actually mentioned in-universe.) Iran would fit both criteria as it did have a monarchy until 1979 and has been known for pressuring its gay and bisexual citizens into unwanted gender reassignment treatments.
When I’m Sixty-Four (BBC Two, 2004)

Single drama about Ray (Paul Freeman), a cabbie and occasional football hooligan, and Jim (Alun Armstrong), a recently retired teacher, who meet by chance and go on to develop a tentative relationship, much to the consternation of Ray’s grown-up children. What’s remarkable about this programme is just how thoroughly unremarkable it is. Its unflashy and naturalistic approach allows the performances from the two leads to shine through. True, the romance is strictly formula all the way, but that in no way detracts from its charm. It also contains a great visual metaphor for coming out, where Jim finally jumps off the high dive at his local pool after numerous false starts.
Following on from the success of *Tipping the Velvet*, the BBC dramatised another Sarah Waters novel. Having been orphaned as a baby, Sue Trinder (Sally Hawkins) has been brought up by the kindly Mrs Sucksby (Imelda Staunton) and her gang of petty career criminals. One of their number, Gentleman (Rupert Evans), hatches a plan to defraud Maud Lilly (Elaine Cassidy), an orphaned heiress, by marrying her and throwing her into the asylum so he can get his hands on her fortune. He recruits Sue to pose as Maud’s maid in order to press his suit on her behalf. At first, Sue is lured in by the prospect of this being her last score, but when she starts developing feelings for Maud, she begins to doubt if she can go through with the con.

While *Fingersmith* sees Sarah Waters revisiting the theme of Victorian lesbians, it’s a major stylistic departure from *Tipping the Velvet*. With all its inheritance drama and revelations of secret relations, the plot feels far more like one of the period in which the story takes place. Since we’ve already had our guided tour of the scene as it was in Victorian times, we can move on from trading on the shock value of seeing queer sexuality in what is perceived to be a very conservative genre of television to something a bit more subdued and more in line with its peers without sacrificing the authenticity of the lesbian relationship that the story turns on. I was expecting a case of second album syndrome, but instead was genuinely surprised at how much more I liked it than *Tiv*. It may yet have the longest shelf life of all the Waters adaptations thanks to *The Handmaiden*, a critically lauded cinematic remake that replants the story in 1930s colonial Korea.
**Jerusalem: An Anthem for England (BBC Four, 2005)**

Documentary about the famous patriotic hymn, and how it’s been taken to the hearts of a surprisingly wide range of people within English society. It’s best known for being the official anthem of the Conservative Party and the Women’s Institute, but it’s also beloved by old school trade unionists, rugby fans and the British Naturist Society.

Novelty pop act Fat Les covered the song for the England team’s Euro 2000 campaign in a collaboration with the London Community Gospel Choir and the London Gay Men’s Chorus. Keith Allen, the group’s de facto frontman, stated that he invited the choirs to work with them to better flip off far-right political groups who have appropriated the song for their own ends, treating it as a paean to an ideologically “purified” vision of England.
Irish drama starring Cillian Murphy as Patricia Braden, preferably known by her nickname, “Kitten,” a young transgender woman who leaves her home on the border with Northern Ireland in 1973 to search for Eily Bergin (Eva Birthistle), the mother who abandoned her as a baby and fled to London. Roger Ebert commented that the film has something of a Dickensian feel to it. Kitten’s exploits take on an episodic structure as she runs into a variety of strange and colourful characters residing in the underbelly of society, while Kitten herself remains unwaveringly kind-hearted and hopeful in the face of anything and everything the world throws at her.

I’m not much for Dickens, but by journey’s end, I was reminded of another classic. Before she leaves home, Kitten goes to confession and asks the local padre Fr Liam (Liam Neeson), who she suspects is her father, for information about her mother, but is rebuffed. By the end of the movie, Kitten is working at a peep show in Soho, where she talks to the johns over an intercom. One day, a familiar voice wafts through the grille, telling her a story about a boy who grew up without knowing his mother and father and how deeply his father regretted never telling his son how much he loved him. By way of penance, Fr Liam finally tells Kitten where she can find her mother. However, before she gets the chance to approach Eily directly, Kitten discovers that her mother had other children after her, including a younger brother called Patrick, her deadname. She ultimately chooses not to reveal her identity when she poses as a market researcher for BT so that she can contrive an excuse to talk to Eily. She returns to Ireland where she moves in with Father Liam and reconnects with her best friend, Charlie (Ruth Negga), who’s now pregnant and estranged from her family in the fallout of her babydaddy’s death at the hands of the IRA. In the end, Kitten doesn’t get closure from reconciling the myth of her mother with the reality, but by making peace with her father and building a new family with Charlie and her son. Although Kitten returns to London with Charlie and the baby, it wasn’t there but in her own back yard where she ultimately found her heart’s desire.
Imagine Me and You (2005)

I'm surprised that it’s taken this long for me to talk about *Imagine Me and You*. It is one of the lesbian movies. I don’t mean that it’s the first movie that springs to mind when you ask a straight person to think of a lesbian movie, I mean that it’s on that list of movies that all lesbians know and attempt to watch. The average gay lady can rattle off at least five or six titles, regardless of whether or not she’s actually seen any of them. Most of them come from various corners of the American indie scene, but *Imagine Me and You* is probably the best-known of Britain’s handful of contributions to the list.

Rachel and Heck (Piper Perabo and Matthew Goode) are getting married and everything is going according to plan, until Rachel shares a single glance with Luce (Lena Headey), the florist hired by her mother, while walking down the aisle, and finds herself catapulted into love for the first and at the worst possible time. The film draws some very obvious influences from the Richard Curtis films of old like *Four Weddings and a Funeral* and *Notting Hill*, such as having the leads first meet at a wedding and one of them running their own cozy little business. Much like *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, however, the film doesn’t dig too deeply into the implications of its queer storyline. We don’t learn enough about Rachel to understand why she’s been so oblivious to her own identity for so long.

Then again, nobody watches a romcom for psychological introspection. We just want that happy ending with the big dumb gesture and the 360-dolly shot of the protags kissing. If nothing else, the movie delivers on that.
Prodigal daughter Nina (Shelley Conn) returns home to Glasgow for her dad’s funeral after bailing on her arranged marriage some years previous. She now has to team up with the restaurant's cute new part-owner, Lisa (Laura Fraser), to win the Best in the West Curry Competition and save the restaurant from being sold off to her ex-fiancé’s dad. Not the worst movie on the aforementioned Lesbian Movie List, but certainly not the best or even the most memorable. It does at least give the stock romcom gay best friend the opportunity to dispense relationship advice to the protagonist on a situation where he has some genuine personal insight rather than having him be magically Close to Earth simply by virtue of gay. I do wish they had named him something other than Bobbi though.
Anthology dramedy set on a hot summer’s day on Hampstead Heath, showing several short vignettes of couples in various different relationships. At the Men’s Pond, Billy and Brian (Ewan McGregor and Douglas Hodge) segue from a conversation about blowjobs and childhood crushes on Good Life cast members to Billy trying to sell Brian on the possibility of adopting a baby together. While they do touch on practical concerns about how having a baby would impact their careers, there is also some serious self-reflection. Brian argues that most people have children to bolster their egos, but Billy, even after being disowned by his parents, is still glad that they made the selfish decision to have him.

Brian keeps pushing back against Billy’s suggestions and concessions that he’d be willing to make to get Brian onboard, including offering to give up casual sex, but the discussion boils down to one fundamental issue:

   Brian: I don’t want kids. I just want you.

   Billy: I want both.

As such, the segment’s ending is an ambivalent one. Billy heads off into the bushes for an extracurricular hookup and we leave him and Brian in something of a stalemate. For what it’s worth, I think the age gap (presumably about 10-15 years) has more to do with their opposing viewpoints on this issue than is directly discussed between the two of them in this scene. For Brian, the myth of the inherently predatory homosexual would have been a much more tangible obstacle to even entertaining the idea of gay men bringing up children in the abstract, let alone as a real possibility with actual practical considerations to make. Brian only-half-jokingly tells Billy off just for saying the word “kids” a bit too loudly in a crowd full of gay men.

For what it’s worth, though, it’s pretty rare to see this kind of conversation actually play out on screen between any couple, queer or otherwise, rather than being skimmed over or ignored altogether. Usually, someone’s already peed on a stick by the time characters stop themselves to ask how a kid might fit into their lives.
The Chatterley Affair (BBC Four, 2006)

Drama about Helena (Louise de la Mere) and Keith (Rafe Spall) two fictional jurors of the Penguin obscenity trial who embark on an affair. Inspired by the book they have been charged to read for the case, they decide to try every permutation of sex between Lady C and Mellors the gamekeeper, Julie-and-Julia-style. Keith doesn’t initially twig that the passage read out in the prosecution’s final summation is in fact referring to buggery, to which Helena responds by pointing out that it’s not just for gays, and they do eventually make an attempt. It’s worth pointing out that at point anal sex was illegal in England and Wales regardless of the gender of the participants, as was oral sex. No wonder everyone was so miserable.
Drama based on the novel by Alan Hollinghurst. Nick Guest (Dan Stevens), a recent Oxford graduate, gets invited by his crush, Toby Fedden (Oliver Coleman), to babysit his mentally ill teenage sister, Catherine (Hayley Atwell) while he and his parents take off for the summer of 1983. The family are so taken with him that Toby and Catherine’s mother, Rachel (Alice Krige) invites him to stay on, leaving him well-positioned to partake in the various excesses of Thatcher’s Britain, as Toby and Catherine’s father, Gerald (Tim McInnerny) is a newly elected Tory MP, poised to ride along on the crest of that most infamous of waves.

When he first arrives, Nick is a little apprehensive about meeting Catherine, as if he’s anticipating the development of an awkward crush. However, Toby appears to have prepped her ahead of time because not only does she know that he’s gay but she’s brimming with curiosity and eager to matchmake. She ends up indirectly introducing him to Leo (Don Gilet), his first proper boyfriend, by way of a personals ad.

I really liked the initial development of Nick and Leo’s relationship. They have what is probably one of the most realistic first dates committed to celluloid. They don’t hit it off instantly and even as they start to relax, there are still fumbles in on both sides of the conversation. Nor does the script doesn’t skip over the more mundane practical aspects of the evening like trying to find a suitable place for a shag (they eventually settle for the gated garden behind the Feddens’ house). The actual sex also takes place in more-or-less real time. Usually, when you see sex in films or on TV, they either get started and cut away or you smash-cut right into the last second before one of them comes. None of this is to say that the approach taken in this instance detracts from the eroticism of the scene. They do partake in more softé sex later on in the first episode, only for Leo to panic and dump him out of the blue to tend to his ailing ex, leaving Nick heartbroken.

As the eighties advance, Nick finds some success as a writer and throws himself into the creation of Ogee, a glossy mag targeted at professional rich bastards. His partner in matters business and sexual is Antoine “Wani” Ouradi (Alex Wyndham), a fellow Oxford alum whose father, a Dolar-Popat-type mini-mart impresario, is bankrolling the venture. Unfortunately, he’s also a domineering bully,
meaning that Wani is still pretty deep in the closet. He’s nominally engaged to Martine (Siri Svelgar), who in the final episode is revealed to be a hired gun employed by Wani’s much more understanding mother.

This is probably an entry that I’ll have to come back to at a later date because there’s a ton of stuff that I’ll be able to discuss more effectively once I’ve had a chance to read the book, but there was something that caught my attention while I was watching, namely the theme of family. Nick appears to have a good relationship with his parents and they know not to ask if he has a girlfriend. However, when Gerald makes an innocuous comment to Mr and Mrs Guest about Nick continuing the family line, it goes down like a knee in a sandwich. Later, when Catherine inadvertently stumbles on Nick and Wani’s secret relationship, Nick admits that he feels threatened by Martine not just because she can provide Wani with some security as a permanent beard, but because she can give him children and he can’t. He doesn’t directly express an interest in having kids, but he knows that he’s a far more competent and emotionally present parent to Catherine than Gerald or Rachel.
British Film Forever (BBC Two, 2007)

Documentary series made in partnership with the BFI charting the history of British film, with each episode tackling a different genre. Queer films of note such as *Victim* and *Maurice* get shout-outs, but the series also included something else that I was not expecting at all.

The episode charting the history of social realism has a segment on the work of Terence Davies. The main focus is on his most well-known film, *Distant Voices, Still Lives*, but when briefly discussing the autobiographical nature of his early shorts, the man himself says something that, no joke, changed my life.

“I didn’t know I was gay, but clearly they smelt it.”

I didn’t have quite as rough a time as Terence. They didn’t start on me until secondary school, and physical violence was about the only thing I didn’t have to put up with, but that pattern of abuse that he describes is one that I am all too familiar with. But despite being called a dyke and a man-beast, it never occurred to me that the little shits genuinely suspected I was gay. If nothing else, I didn’t really look the part. I didn’t adopt the dominant *Zettai Ryouiki* uniform trend, but I didn’t really lean that hard into the combat-trousered emo look that was the most popular alternative. I thought I looked utterly unremarkable, and accusing me of being a lesbian was just the best way the wee bastards could think of to tell me I was ugly.

Hearing Terence’s take on his experience with bullying instantly and completely changed how I viewed my own nearly ten years after the fact, though I’m not entirely certain that this has been for the better. On the one hand, there’s a certain measure of relief and perhaps even vindication in realising that what I went through was at least partly rooted in prejudice rather than some individual character deficit, but I sometimes catch myself wondering what it was about me that gave me away. Is it still obvious now? Why is there some tiny part of me that feels “better” when someone tells me I "don't look like a lesbian"?

If it seems like I occasionally hyperfocus on single lines of dialogue in shows or films that otherwise have no queer elements whatsoever, then this is why. Little things can mean an awful lot, especially when you have to learn to read every room you enter and the signs and signals you need to be fluent in are transmitted to you far more through the media you consume more than traditional spheres of cultural instruction such home, school or the workplace.
Doris Day: Virgin Territory (BBC Four, 2007)

Profile of the screen legend that touches on her place in the gay pantheon. They even use that exact phrase.
Happy Birthday Wullie (BBC Four, 2007)

Documentary commemorating 70 years of Scotland’s favourite comic book character. One clip features Off the Ball hosts Stuart Cosgrove and Tam Cowan, with whose oeuvre I have become far more familiar than I would have ever wanted thanks to my dad’s continued monopolisation of the car radio on Saturday afternoons. They were speculating on the wee man’s music tastes. Given his affinity for dungarees and tackety boots, they speculated that he might have been a fan of KD Lang and therefore potentially Scotland’s first lesbian and I had to check I hadn’t slipped into a parallel universe where Stuart Cosgrove and Tam Cowan were capable of telling a decent joke.
A Very British Sex Scandal (Channel 4, 2007)

Docudrama detailing the arrest and trial of Peter Wildeblood, a journalist who was imprisoned for 18 months after his boyfriend Edward McNally was pressured into giving evidence him by the police and his bosses in the RAF. Wildeblood went on to write Against the Law, a memoir about his experiences which, combined with the publicity surrounding the trial of him and his friends and co-defendants, Lord Edward Montagu of Beaulieu and Michael Pitt-Rivers, began to turn the tide of public opinion against criminalisation.

The show does well at illustrating the wider context of the trial, and they even managed to get Montagu himself to contribute. I can’t say I learned much that I didn’t already know, and the dramatised sections are serviceable and ultimately subordinate to the documentary portion of the programme. It does get in a pretty sick burn on the Daily Mail though. Would recommend for noobs.
Drama by Kevin Elyot about the interconnecting lives of several gay men on a hot summer’s day in and around the titular London locale and the centrepiece of Channel 4’s commemoration of the 40th anniversary of the decriminalisation of male homosexuality. One might have expected such a drama to take place on Hampstead Heath, but Clapham was chosen because one of the plot threads is loosely based on the murder of Jody Dobrowski, who was murdered in a brutal homophobic assault on Clapham Common in 2005.

What little marketing there is positions this as the main dramatic thrust of the story, making it come across as Do the Gay Thing, whereas the film itself is actually a good deal more meandering and diffuse. We see several different aspects of modern gay life such as a couple celebrating their civil partnership, a teenager being subjected to homophobic bullying and an HIV-positive writer attending a dinner party with some friends. By far, the most memorable of the many plot threads is the story of the teenage Theo (Luke Treadaway) and his pursuit of his reclusive twentiesomething neighbour, Tim (Joseph Mawle), who may or may not be a convicted sex offender. Whilst his parents are out at the aforementioned party, he goes to Tim’s flat, ostensibly to return a pen Tim dropped at the library. Theo tells Tim about how long he’s been watching him from his bedroom window across the road and that they should definitely have sex. Tim is understandably wary of the potential consequences, but yields. Later, just as Theo’s about to leave, his parents, who offhandedly reveal that he is in fact 14 in an earlier scene, come battering down Tim’s door wanting to know why their son is in his flat. Theo manages to fob them off but the incident is enough of close shave for the movie to end with Tim closing his curtains and shutting Theo out of his life for good.

No one of my generation really has the experience of seeing a dirty movie at the pictures. I was born at the tail end of the late-eighties-early-nineties glut of mediocre erotic thrillers that was sparked off by Fatal Attraction and by the time I was in my teens the age of PG-13 tentpoles was upon us. I
think *Carol* was the first movie with a sex scene that was the film’s keystone where the characters do more than kiss in the scud that I actually saw in a cinema. And while that scene is gorgeous and beautiful and romantic, one of the things it isn’t is visceral. That’s the quality that all those nineties potboilers coveted, and *Clapham Junction* has it in spades. One very astute Guardian commenter pointed out that what makes this whole plot so effective is that it gets right to the essence of what gay sex can be:

*Clapham Junction*’s best sequence - and probably the most interesting hour of television all year - was the slow seduction scene between the gay 14 year-old and his sexually frustrated neighbour. The scene was dramatically interesting, fraught with tension and moral complexity - and incredibly hot! The actors should be applauded for their physical and emotional honesty, and their willingness to go all the way. I’m a little surprised that David Peschek dismissed the scene as porn. Not only did the scene stop short of the mechanics of porn (no erect penises, no Kerry Fox moments of unsimulated fellatio, no penetration shots), but it did something most porn tries to do and fails miserably to achieve - it felt real, and it felt erotic.

I'll leave it to more enquiring minds than mine to chew over the moral niceties and "shoulds" of the scene (should an adult be able to consent to sex with a willing 14 year-old boy, should a paedophile be able to live in a community close to jailbait, etc) and applaud the scene for capturing something of the adventure and transgression of what gay sex can be, especially for first timers. It's sometimes difficult, it's often nervous and fumbled, it often breaches received notions of good taste and it can be motivated by animal instinct as much as it can be by a desire for intimacy…

Drooling over willies and explicit sex scenes in a TV drama is fun in a pervy kind of way, but I think the significance of *Clapham Junction* is more than just providing a cheap alternative to porn. One of the reasons that gay sex is so feared and reviled is because it's hidden, and seldom represented in the media. Putting up-the-butt action on the TV screen is a great way to lessen some of the stigma surrounding gay sex. Sure, some of us bumf*ckers might like to keep it that way, and ensure that our sex lives don't become too trendy and commodified and Starbucks-ised. In that sense, I thought the sex scenes in "Clapham Junction" expertly walked the line between creating something that was realistic, erotic and very moving, and maintaining an aura of something forbidden and slightly dangerous.

Couldn’t have said it better myself, but a little context may be useful. When gay sex was partially decriminalised in 1967, the age of consent was set at 21 (which was also the voting age until 1969), whereas the age of consent for straight sex had been 16 since Victorian times. It wasn’t until 2001, after much campaigning and protracted political debate, that it was finally equalised. As a result, it’s not hard to see why there have been (and possibly still are) people in the gay community who’ve been disinclined to take the age of consent, gay or otherwise, at face value. In *Queer as Folk*, for example, Stuart displays a particularly cavalier attitude by having penetrative sex with an inexperienced 15-year-old. If anything, Theo and Tim’s storyline feels like a direct reaction to that scene because it flips the power dynamic in Stuart and Nathan’s relationship on its head. It’s a touchy subject, but you cannot expect to gain any real understanding of gay culture in Britain without at least acknowledging it. On the whole, America has a much more knee-jerky reaction to age-of-consent issues, despite its laws on the subject being so scattershot across its various jurisdictions. Because so much of the modern social justice movement approaches matters from a very obviously American point of view, that mindset has permeated queer fandom politics - there’s a reason Underage is one of the Four Deadly Sins on AO3. It’s hard to imagine *Clapham Junction*, or even the more widely praised *Queer as Folk*, being warmly received by that particular segment of today’s viewing public.
Consenting Adults (BBC Four, 2007)

The BBC’s commemoration of the fortieth anniversary Sexual Offences Act is a bit more run-of-the-mill than Clapham Junction, but less cluttered. It primarily focuses on John Wolfenden, the Vice Chancellor of Reading University who became the chair of the Home Office committee on homosexuality and prostitution, and his relationship with his gay son, Jeremy (Sean Biggerstaff).

At first, John regards the committee as a springboard to greater public recognition and warns Jeremy not to do anything that might embarrass him while simultaneously and dismissing Jeremy’s conviction that he’s not just going through a phase. As the proceedings progress, the committee’s findings hit closer to home, and we see him trying to find a way he can shape the findings into a legislative instrument that will somehow stop his son from being gay. Testimony from Alfred Kinsey sees him asking what age a person’s sexuality becomes fixed. When it becomes clear that continued criminalisation is off the table, a move he is ostensibly in favour of, he tries hedging on the age of consent and then on buggery. Mrs Cohen (Haydn Gwynne), one of the committee members, recognises, after meeting Jeremy when stops by to visit his father on a lunch break, that John is projecting his anxieties over his son onto his work. She later points out that when it comes to the interests and welfare of young people, it isn’t the state’s place to act like a good parent.

The conflict between John and Jeremy runs a little deeper than Jeremy’s sexuality. Jeremy rejects the idea that because he’s had more opportunities and a better start in life than John, he is therefore obligated to cast himself entirely in his father’s mould instead of being his own man. John harps on about how disappointed he is in Jeremy, but in truth Jeremy has done plenty of things that John is genuinely proud of in spite of himself. By the end of the film, he has a better understanding of Jeremy’s point of view, but he has hasn’t made it as far as putting it into practice. When Jeremy leaves to work as a foreign correspondent for The Times in Moscow, John makes a last-ditch plea for Jeremy to stay at Oxford and pursue an academic career. Jeremy doesn’t have a hard time telling him “no,” not out of spite but simply because he isn’t afraid to live his life for himself.
Gay MPs: Pride and Prejudice in Politics (BBC Four, 2007)

Documentary presented by Eddie Mair about the history of gay politicians in Britain. It provides some background on political scandals and contentious outings of yesteryear. The participants speculate about the possibility of an openly gay prime minister in the future and conclude that it is definitely not outwith the bounds of possibility. Some, however, did add a caveat that a gay man might be at a disadvantage as he presumably wouldn’t be in possession of a family with which he could produce a bit of “flourish” at photocalls. Of course nowadays a non-beard spouse and children are viable options for gay MPs, but I feel like some of the interviewees overstate the handicap that singledom represents to a potential candidate. We don’t really have a First Family like United States does because that role is largely fulfilled by the royals. Cherie Blair is one of the few prime ministerial spouses who had a public life that extended beyond the usual charity work, but that was because she had a career of her own as a barrister. In the event that we do have a same-sex couple take up residence at No. 10, it’s unlikely that we’d see much of them as a unit.
Comedian Stephen K Amos’ documentary on homophobia in Black Britain and Caribbean culture’s influence thereof. Interesting stuff. Quite an eye-opener for me since I hadn’t realised that this was such a big issue in the Black community.
Biographical drama about the life of Daphne du Maurier (Geraldine Somerville), focusing on her relationships with Ellen Doubleday (Elizabeth McGovern) and Gertrude Lawrence (Janet McTeer). It attempts to replicate the sweeping style of the filmed adaptations of du Maurier’s work like *Rebecca*. Unfortunately, the production values aren’t quite up to realising this vision, but it’s a sentiment I wholeheartedly support. There’s a gap in the market for lesbian melodrama, and I don’t mean the histrionics you find in shows like *Lip Service*. I mean real, sweeping melodrama, steeped in the gothic. Maybe the problem is the perception that that aesthetic doesn't appeal as much to lesbians as it does to gay men.

Nevertheless, there is one particularly enjoyable moment of high romance. When Ellen descends the staircase at a soirée she’s hosting à la the entrance of the second Mrs de Winter at the ill-fated costume party, Daphne just looks at her with complete and utter adoration. There’s also a fun little line just prior to that at this American party where Noel Coward (Malcolm Sinclair) introduces Daphne to Gertrude by saying, “Have you met Gertie? She’s one of us.”
**Death at a Funeral (2007)**

Lightweight farce in which a middle-class family gathers together following the death of the patriarch and hilarity, ostensibly, ensues. Peter Dinklage shows up as a former paramour hoping to extort money out of the estate with some compromising photos. Brothers Daniel and Robert (Matthew MacFadyen and Rupert Graves) are both suitably horrified that their dad was "a gay" and agree to pay up only for the blackmailer to be accidentally killed and stuffed into the coffin except he’s not and oh God it's all so excruciatingly unfunny. I didn’t think I could dislike a movie that had Keeley Hawes and Rupert Graves this much but here we are.
The Relief of Belsen (Channel 4, 2007)

Docudrama that does pretty much what it says on the tin, chronicling the British effort to save as many as possible of the liberated Bergen-Belsen inmates from disease and starvation. The only reason I mention it is that I got the feeling that the writers were trying to telegraph that military nurse Jean McFarlane (Jemma Redgrave) was gay. This mostly stems from a conversation that she has with a few of the RAMC officers in the camp bar about how she doesn’t play “straight” poker. It makes sense in context, but doesn’t amount to anything conclusive.
The Choir: Boys Don’t Sing (BBC Two, 2008)

Documentary about choirmaster Gareth Malone’s efforts to go all *Sister Act 2* on a boys’ school in Leicester. When he first arrives, he asks some of the lads why they don’t like the idea of being in a choir. Their response? “Singing is gay, Man!”
Biopic drama about the life of the titular comedian (David Walliams) and his relationship with his partner, Dennis Heymer (Rafe Spall). Having minimal prior knowledge of Howerd’s material, I didn’t feel the need to weigh in on whether or not David Walliams did a decent impression of his act. This meant I could get invested in the story without any of the hang-ups that viewers who are old enough to actually remember Howerd might have had.

This one’s probably one of my favourites on this list, actually. I love how the moment that Frankie and Dennis first catch sight of each other is overplayed with Frankie telling a joke about seeing a beautiful girl in the woods. I love how it becomes apparent quite early on in their relationship that Dennis is the more domestically inclined of the two but that it isn’t framed in terms of the butch-femme spectrum. Rather, it’s a case of Dennis being the one who’s more of a natural caretaker and possibly just a bit more grown-up than Frankie. I really appreciated that it isn’t afraid to broach the issue of being gay as well as being a CSA survivor and that it credits its audience with enough intelligence to know that the former is not caused by the latter. Also, I like that the audience POV in this situation is not an enlightened straight person, but another gay character. You can see how Dennis is conflicted between wanting to tell Frankie that there’s nothing wrong with either of them and not having a clue what he can do to help because living with such a deep-seated trauma is so thoroughly removed from his own experience.
Sidney Turtlebaum (2008)

Short in which Gabriel (Rupert Evans), a rent boy, meets Sidney (Derek Jacobi), a gay Jewish pensioner who spends his days visiting the grieving families of strangers so he can pick their pockets while they sit shiva. Rather than being in it for material gain or even the thrill of the grift, it’s his act of petty vengeance against being shut out of his own family after his sister, who had been his best and only friend, married and left him in the dust.
More Sarah Waters drama, albeit decamped from the BBC to The Other Side. Still grieving her father’s death and heartbroken over her former lover’s marriage to her brother, Margaret (Anna Madeley) becomes a “lady visitor” at Millbank Women’s Prison. Here she meets and falls in love with Selina Dawes (Zoe Tapper), a medium. Margaret is initially sceptical of Selina’s powers, but when Selina shows Margaret what she is capable of, Margaret realises that Selina must have been wrongfully convicted of the murder for which she was sentenced, which involved the death of a young woman at a seance that went awry.

With her father’s death rendering her a woman of independent means, Margaret and Selina plan to run away together to Italy together, only when the day of their escape arrives, Margaret discovers she’s been had. Selina manipulated Mrs Jelf (Mary Jo Randle), one of the prison wardens, into helping her by claiming that she could communicate with the woman’s dead son. Selina then subsequently fucked off with Margaret’s new maid, Vigers (Caroline Loncq), who is in fact Selina’s longtime lover and partner in fake-mediuming, playing the part of the moustachioed, gravel-voiced ghost who would appear at Selina’s seances. The two of them flee, leaving Mrs Jelf ruined and Margaret to commit Javert-style suicide, her crinolines billowing after her as she leaps into the Thames.

This is one of those stories that wouldn’t be nearly as effective with a straight couple, because we’ve seen it all before, albeit in a contemporary context: intelligent, accomplished woman works in a prison and finds herself drawn to one of the inmates. The governor and the screws all warn her to keep her distance, but she still gets sucked in, because he’s not bad, he’s just misunderstood. However, the genre trappings of the period allow you check your cynicism about this sort of story at the door and get a better sense of how it might actually feel to get caught up in a situation like this. Victorian drama tends to feel like melodrama even when it’s understated. On top of that, the stakes are higher in Affinity than they are in a straight outsider-inmate romance like, say, Captives because the chance of Margaret meeting and falling in love with another woman is so remote that it’s not hard to see why she would be more vulnerable to falling into a high-risk relationship.
*Affinity* is also more subdued than Waters’ earlier works. *Tipping the Velvet* is far giddier in its approach to sex, whereas the tension between Margaret and Selina bubbles under the surface throughout the film. The scene where Selina touches Margaret’s uncovered arm is to me more palpably erotic than any of Nancy Astley’s escapades.
Festive compilation of Gaelic comedy clips, informally compèred by the Gàidhealtachd’s very own drag queen, Seasaidh Lexy (Calum MacKinnon). Drag appears to be a relatively recent arrival to the mainstream collective consciousness in the US, thanks in no small part to RuPaul’s Drag Race. In Britain, however, it's been a comedy mainstay, right back to the days of the music hall and even further. Seasaidh Lexy shows that it has a place even in some of the most socially conservative areas of the UK, and that it’s not necessarily synonymous with flash and glamour. Her schtick is that she’s familiar and recognisable to the target audience, who are reminded of their mums or aunties when they see her act.
Boarding school drama set on a remote island off the coast of Scarborough in 1934 (although filmed in Ireland and based on a novel set in South Africa in the 1960s). Di Radfield (Juno Temple) rules over the school diving team with an iron first. She and her classmates are all in thrall to their mysterious and charismatic instructor, Miss G (Eva Green), but Di is particularly infatuated with her. She’s also Miss G’s clear favourite out of the team, but the other girls seem to be comfortable with this arrangement. However, the equilibrium is disrupted with the arrival of Fiamma Coronna (María Valverde), a Spanish aristocrat seemingly exiled to the school by her father for her part in an only vaguely alluded-to event involving a boy. Miss G.’s affections for Di are immediately withdrawn, and Fiamma is less than thrilled at the prospect of being Miss G’s new pet.

In the first act, Miss G tells the girls that the most important thing in life is not piety or kindness, but desire. At its crux, Cracks is a film about female desire. It’s a great example of how, for better or worse, our society has never taken it very seriously. If I was to give you that exact same summary but with a male teacher, you wouldn’t need me to tell you how this movie ends. The same scepticism about female sexuality that has allowed many female couples to live their lives together in comparative safety relative to their male counterparts is probably of the same provenance of the belief that a woman can’t really be a rapist. Even as I was watching, I was shocked when the film did indeed follow its setup through to its logical conclusion. Not only that, but the film exposes another weakness in our collective understanding of sexual abuse.

Most narratives concerning grooming and sexual exploitation tend to hinge on the victim being flattered by the attention of their abuser and not being mature enough to recognise that they’re being manipulated, as seen in campaigns from charities such as The Blast Project, Fearless and the NSPCC. The usual public information film warning of “don’t be like this person” is implicit rather than explicit, but nevertheless, it is still present in the idea that if kids “know the signs,” shown in these videos, they’re less likely to be victimised. I can’t vouch for the efficacy of that approach one way or another, but what Cracks does is demonstrate a scenario where knowing better isn’t enough.

In one scene, Miss G surreptitiously reads through Fiamma’s personal file, where she finds a translated letter from Fiamma’s father to the headmistress, Miss Nieven (Sinead Cusack), which reads (roughly):
Estimada Sra. Nieven,

Quisiera expresar mi sincera gratitud por aceptar a Fiamma en St. Cecelia. Creo que hay detalles del reciente comportamiento de Fiamma que usted debe conocer. Mi hija tuvo que dejar forzada nuestra ciudad movida por su desafortunado y escandaloso comportamiento.

No compartiré todos los detalles, pero es suficiente decir que mi hija estúpida se engañó en un amor ilícito con un hombre mayor, un vecino. Cuando su relación fue descubierta trajo grandes repercusiones y vergüenza a los implicados. Todo el tema vino cuando de abrupta la pareja rompió.

A pesar de que no puedo culpar solamente a Fiamma, ella es joven y más influenciable que su seductor. Puedo decir sin duda que la naturaleza de esta relación y el comportamiento de Fiamma, así como el total desprecio por los afectados me deja en una situación imposible de defenderla ella y a su honor. Mi hija dio mala reputación al nombre de la familia.

Esta relación ha realmente sacudido nuestra comunidad. Ella ha traído vergüenza a su familia. Ha deshonrado los valores que hemos mantenido orgullosamente. Y creo que la mejor manera de actuar es enviar a Fiamma a su escuela a la esperanza de que la enseñen disciplina y la den una oportunidad de aprender el significado de la responsabilidad y las consecuencias de sus actos.

Considero que tiene derecho a conocer las circunstancias de su repente de casa. Me gustaría, además, mantener este asunto entre nosotros, ya que era convertido en un tema de conocimiento público, tanto por Fiamma como por la familia.

Agradeczo por adelantado su discreción,

Suyo, atentamente

S. Coronna

I’m not a fluent Spanish speaker, but here’s my translation:

Dear Miss Nieven,

I would like to express to you my sincere gratitude for accepting Fiamma into St. Cecelia’s. I believe there are details regarding Fiamma’s recent behaviour of which you should be aware. My daughter was forced to leave our city as a result of her unfortunate and scandalous behaviour.

I will not divulge all the details, but suffice it to say that my stupid daughter was tricked into an illicit affair with an older man, a neighbour. When the relationship was discovered it led to serious repercussions and embarrassment for those involved. The matter came to a head and the couple abruptly separated.

In spite of this, I can not blame Fiamma alone for this. She is young and more easily influenced than her seducer. But I can say without a doubt that the nature of this relationship and Fiamma’s behaviour, as well as the total contempt for those affected, have left me in a situation where it is impossible for me to defend her and her honour. My daughter has disgraced the family name.
The relationship has really shaken our community. Fiamma has brought shame on her family. She has dishonoured the values that we have proudly upheld. And I believe that the best course of action is to send her to your school in the hope that you teach her discipline, give her an opportunity to learn the meaning of responsibility and the consequences of her actions.

I feel that you have a right to know the circumstances of her sudden departure from home. I would like, however, to keep this matter between ourselves, lest it become a matter of public knowledge, as much for Fiamma's sake as for that of the family.

I am grateful to you for your prompt correspondence and your discretion.

Yours sincerely,

S. Coronna

However, the written translation given in the film, of which we see a few shots, does not match up with the original Spanish letter. This letter does not mention an affair with an older man, but instead a scenario involving a failed elopement that does not appear to be based on the original text. It also leaves out the parts where Señor Coronna calls his daughter stupid and foolish. Whoever translated that letter must have felt at least some sympathy for Fiamma and tried to cast her situation in a more favourable light.

This theory isn't solely based on the letter. Like I said, I'm not a native speaker, and it doesn't look as if the production assistant who wrote out that letter was either. The key scene is when Fiamma is in a changing hut, fighting off an asthma attack after Miss G forced her into a dive despite being visibly unwell. We see Miss G’s shoes peeking through the bottom of the door. She talks about how she and Fiamma could be such great friends and Fiamma recoils. It is not anger or irritation that the woman who almost killed her is still bothering her that crosses her face, but raw fear. Again, if Miss G were a man, there’d be no mistaking why Fiamma is afraid. However, so entrenched in our culture is the myth that a woman can’t be a sexual predator that this is not a threat that a teenager, even one as worldly as Fiamma, would typically anticipate today, let alone in 1934. My theory is that Fiamma had previous experience of abuse, presumably by the older man mentioned in the original letter.

However, Fiamma’s ability to recognise the threat that Miss G poses is not a form of protection in and of itself. Much of the film sees Fiamma in opposition to Di, who is bitterly hurt at losing her place as Miss G’s favourite. It’s only when they reach a truce upon coming to the shared understanding that Miss G’s behaviour is what lies at the heart of their animosity that Fiamma starts to open up to the rest of the group. To solidify their new-found friendship, they organise a boozy midnight feast, which Miss G gatecrashes. Instead of dropping the team in it with the headmistress, she covers for them. They’re all pretty tipsy at this point, but Fiamma is drunk enough that when Miss G escorts her to her study to sober up, she’s not really in a position to protest. Di tails them and ultimately witnesses Miss G’s rape of Fiamma. So no matter how vigilant Fiamma might have remained, Miss G would have always been lingering, waiting for the right opportunity to strike. Fiamma “knew the signs,” but all the foreknowledge in the world can’t compensate for the fact that Miss G is the one with all the power and, though she may be pathetic in a way that many villains are, she is still able to manipulate the girls to her advantage.

The following morning, Fiamma makes it quite clear that she intends to alert the proper authorities, or the closest thing she can manage to a proper authority on that godforsaken island. This prompts Miss G into manipulating Di - and by extension the rest of the team - into believing that Fiamma is about to start a false smear campaign against her to put her out of a job. Di and the team follow Fiamma
into the woods to confront her with the accusation that she “seduced” Miss G. Fiamma’s incredulous reaction infuriates them and they chase her deeper into the woods, forcing her to the ground and beating her with rocks once they catch up to her. This induces an asthma attack, which snaps the girls out of their rage. As the rest of the team flees the scene in search of help, Di watches as Miss G arrives and takes charge, only for her to murder Fiamma by putting her inhaler out of reach.

This is a difficult subject to write about. The reason I highlighted the instances of Lesbian Rape Cul-de-Sac in *The Other Woman* and *Portrait of a Marriage* wasn’t that I felt like they were wrong to depict a lesbian as a rapist, just that they clearly had no idea what they had got themselves into. Just as queer people are just as capable as heterosexuals of being heroes, so too can they be villains. Everything that those two did wrong, *Cracks* does right. The buildup and consequences are commensurate with the action, and the creators clearly understand its ramifications even when the characters don’t. Moreover, it’s very rare that we see a story that shows the corrosive effects grooming can have on entire peer group, not least because sexual abuse is so often such a solitary anguish.
Offbeat dramedy from Annie Griffin, writer of *The Book Group*, set in Edinburgh’s titular yuppie nest. It’s an ensemble piece, but three of the more prominently featured characters are Purves and Pekkela (Max Bremner and Mark Gatiss), a pair of architects loosely based on London artists Gilbert and George, and their young son, Atte (Cameron Bowie). Sadly, this pilot never got picked up for a full series. I can see why, though. It has a bit of a tone problem and the murder mystery that aims to provide a focal point feels rather unnecessary. It’s a real shame because the set-up for these three has plenty of potential, especially since Atte’s old enough to be a character in his own right and not just a plot device. What would prompt such a workaholic couple to decide to have a kid in the first place? Why do they seem to have such a hard time relating to him? Why doesn’t Atte have any friends at school?

Next door to them is Rhian from Vatersay (Rose Leslie), a rather unworldly art student who’s managed to crowbar her way into lodging with their neighbour, Mrs MacIvor. She gets roped into babysitting Atte and comes to the conclusion that God has led her to him because he needs a mother. Again, this had the potential to be a really interesting conflict about gay parenting, but I guess we’ll never know how it could have worked out. Honestly, I could quite happily have watched a whole series based just around this little cluster of characters rather than the swathe we ended up with.
Micro Men (BBC Four, 2009)

Dramatisation of the rivalry between computer designers Clive Sinclair and Chris Curry (Alexander Armstrong and Martin Freeman), which is about as interesting as you would expect. It features a brief cameo from transgender computer scientist, Sophie Wilson, as a barmaid. She played a pivotal role in the development of the BBC Micro, but as a character in the story her younger self, when she was known as Roger, only shows up in the background. That said, the drama’s supposed to be about Sinclair and Curry’s protracted pissing match, so there aren’t many actual characters populating the story. One thing I did notice was that the younger Sophie had a hairdo that was particularly feminine, even by seventies standards. I’m not sure if that was a conscious choice in the costume design to allude to her gender identity or if it was just chosen to best suit the actor who played her.
Christopher and His Kind (BBC Two, 2010)

(Source)

Single drama starring Matt Smith based on Christopher Isherwood’s memoir on his days in Weimar Germany, upon which Cabaret was ultimately based. Naturally, it covers much of the same ground, but the more familiar characters are in the background and it’s Christopher’s romance with Heinz (Douglas Booth), a street-sweeper, that takes centre stage. I was a wee bit disappointed we didn’t get to see him meeting Don Barchady, but that’s a different story to the one that happened in Berlin. WH Auden hangs about to play the Vince to Christopher’s Stuart, and they have some pretty great chemistry together. Plus, I find a lot of sex on TV can come off as rather turgid, so I have to give the actors some serious props for actually making it look like fun.
The Secret Diaries of Miss Anne Lister (BBC Two, 2010)

Costume drama based on the life of the famous Yorkshire industrialist and diarist, played by Maxine Peake. It largely focuses on her relationship with girlfriend Mariana (Anna Madeley) and her best friend with occasional benefits, Tib (Susan Lynch), and the push and pull between the three of them. Watching this, it's kind of comforting to know that the world changes, but lesbian drama changes not. Even at the heat death of the universe, we'll still be here, talking about our exes.

(Source)
Oranges and Sunshine (2010)

Drama based on Nottingham social worker Margaret Humphries’ investigation in the 1980s into the illegal deportation of thousands of looked-after children to Australia throughout the twentieth century. One of the survivors she meets when she first arrives in Melbourne is Len, a successful businessman who needs to have control of every room he’s in and doesn’t shy away from being rude in order to get it.

When Margaret refuses a drunken offer from him to buy her dinner on the basis she can pay for her own damn food, he responds by asking if she’s “one of those lesbian socialists.” This throwaway comment is as much of an eighties period marker as the cars or the costumes, as this was a time when leftist queer activism started getting more attention from mainstream media as a result of the AIDS crisis and protests against Section 28.
Call the Midwife (BBC One, 2010 - Present)

Drama based on the memoirs of East End midwife, Jennifer Worth, set in the convent of Nonnatus House in Poplar in the late fifties and early sixties. Patsy Mount (Emerald Fennell) is first introduced as a tertiary character and eventually makes her way onto the main squad by Series 4. One of the touches that I’ve appreciated with her characterisation is that, although her queerness is apparent to the trained eye before it’s explicitly confirmed, it’s not the first major revelation that we have about her character. When she joins the team, we find out that she was interned in a Japanese prison camp as a child and how this has influenced her approach to nursing. That strikes me as a much more character-defining experience for someone to go through than being gay, even in a difficult time period like this one.

It’s at the start of Patsy’s tenure as a regular that we discover she’s in a relationship with Delia Busby (Kate Lamb), a nurse from the local hospital. They’re about to move into a flat together when Delia gets knocked down and suffers a head injury that means she doesn’t recognise Patsy or even her own parents. This resulted in a lot of trigger-happy fans blasting showrunner Heidi Thomas on Twitter without even stopping to consider whether or not this plotline had actually finished. Lo and behold, Delia was returned to health by the Christmas special. Honestly, I was kind of surprised that it got wrapped up so quickly. I would have loved to have had this plot end with Delia never fully recovering her memory but falling in love with Patsy all over again anyway. I thought everybody enjoyed a good amnesia fic.

There’s also an episode in Series 4 where Patsy is looking after Marie Amos (Cara Theobold), a woman whose husband has been arrested for cottaging. It manages to pack in quite a lot of interesting beats and nuances. It even includes a couple of shoutouts to Victim:
It also features a subplot about Sister Monica Joan’s (Judy Parfitt) attempts to protect the local rat population from extermination, since she firmly believes that they too are God’s creatures. When some of the nurses attempt to dissuade her by saying that some of God’s creatures are easier to love than others, she points out that it’s the others who need them the most. I can see why some people might not appreciate the vermin metaphor, but I really don’t mind even though rats are a bête noir of mine. I’m not religious myself, but I get what it is they’re trying to say - a good Christian is someone who won’t let their efforts to share God’s love be limited by their own prejudices.

We see characters espousing several different opinions on homosexuality throughout the episode. Dr Turner (Stephen McGann) met gay men while he was in the army and believes that we all should live and let live. He still touts the medically “enlightened” view that it’s a treatable illness, but does so as a kindness to Mr Amos to try and help him avoid a custodial sentence. When the subject comes up at the dinner table, Sister Monica Joan doesn’t understand why it’s a crime if there’s no actual harm being caused. Sister Winifred (Victoria Yeates) demonstrates the least compassion and does not waver in her biblically-founded opinion of sodomy, although out of all the nuns she is probably the most out-of-touch and gets taken down a peg for being a judgy so-and-so in a later episode.

Trixie (Helen George) is the most sympathetic, as a result of having bearded up for a doctor friend in her student days. She considers it hypocritical for Britain to have fought a war against fascism only to impose laws on people that tell them who they can and can’t love (a sentiment that was also expressed by a character in a post-war setting in The Idiot’s Lantern episode of Doctor Who). Sister Julienne (Jenny Agutter) just wants everyone to shut up about it. Patsy, much like every closeted person who’s been party to this particular conversation, plays her cards close to her chest. There’s a good mix of perspectives in this episode - the characters as a group aren’t anachronistically chill but neither are they uncharacteristically unkind. Trixie and Dr Turner’s more sympathetic viewpoints don’t feel out of step with the period because they stem from personal context rather than them being magically politically enlightened because the writers don’t want them to be unlikeable.

Sister Julienne’s reaction is worth commenting on as well, since it becomes less ambiguous when viewed in the context of the whole series. It’s not solely borne out of a desire to avoid an argument. In the episode immediately preceding this one, she’s forced to consider the life she might have had if she had married her boyfriend instead of taking holy orders. Rather than being reassured that family life would not have suited her, she instead wonders if she really made the right choice. She finds herself asking, “What is love if it cannot be acknowledged?” The episode then closes with a scene at the dinner table where she watches Patrick and Shelagh chatting to one another and she smiles at them because she’s happy that they’ve managed to get together after all the romantic obstacles that have been flung at them. She then catches sight of Patsy and Delia doing the exact same thing and she looks back down at her plate, like she’s intruded on their privacy by seeing something that she
wasn’t supposed to. She knows what’s up. Even if she’s not as vocal in her support as Trixie, her own experiences provide her with a prism through which she can sympathise with Patsy and Delia’s predicament over having to keep their relationship a secret.

In light of this, her attempt to shut down Trixie and Sister Winifred before they can get into an all-out barney comes across as more protective of Patsy than it does when viewed in isolation. We see a bit more of this when Patsy tells her that she’s moving out of the convent to live with Delia. She wishes Patsy well, but gently warns her that “a small amount of change is good for a community. Too much isn’t.” The camera cuts to Patsy’s reaction upon hearing this, and you can see her wondering if Sister Julienne knows more than she’s letting on. Sister Julienne is also the one who invites Delia to come and live with them in the convent when her mother is about to frogmarch her back to Wales. She even proposes it over Sunday lunch at Nonnatus so that Mrs Busby can’t object without coming off like a bad guest. She exerts her class privilege for the gayer good, which is something we also see Trixie doing when Marie Amos’ neighbours start slagging her and her husband off in public.

Speaking of Mrs Busby, she too cottons on to Patsy and Delia’s relationship when she finds out that they’re going on holiday together to Paris. She makes her displeasure known, but she also accepts that her daughter is a grown woman and that there isn’t anything that she could do or say to stop the two of them from being together. We also find out that Delia’s relationship with her mother has always been a bit combative. The tension between them is not solely a result of Delia champing at the bit to resume the life she had before her accident because this is not the first time they’ve ever disagreed. The fact that they don’t always see eye to eye doesn’t mean that Mrs Busby doesn’t love her daughter:

"I can bear it if you upset me. I’m your mam."

The sixth series saw Patsy depart for Hong Kong to tend to her father, who is dying of an unknown degenerative disorder which may or may not be genetic. There’s a tangible sense of the injustice at Patsy having to go through this ordeal without the public, undisguised support of her partner, as well as of Delia's anguish and anxiety about being separated for so long without being able to stay in touch. The storyline wrapped up when Patsy returned at the eleventh hour and, after literally years of waiting, a grateful viewing public finally saw Patsy Mount and Delia Busby kiss.

(Source)
Since Delia's arrival, there were many complaints about a lack of an on-screen kiss between the couple. That didn't really bother me in this instance since the show, despite being all about the various and sundry consequences of sex, is unusually chaste when it comes to actual romance. The programme's alpha couple managed to get married and adopt a baby without clearing first base, and the only time we see some serious hanky-panky between any members of the main cast is when premarital sex being facilitated by the pill is the official Issue of the Week. Plus, the series goes out of its way to show that Patsy is not a very demonstrative person in matters of sentiment due to her experiences as a POW, so it makes sense for her not to be particularly affectionate, even when it's just her and Delia.

I had my doubts about the sixth series having enough scope left for further character development across the board, but I was pleasantly surprised. There has been speculation about whether or not Emerald Fennell will be returning for further episodes. It appears that new recruit Valerie Dyer (Jennifer Kirby) will be taking her spot if that is in fact the case.

Valerie is a former QARANC nurse, although thus far she has been somewhat vague about why she left the army. My guess is that her offhand mention about having once been summoned to an inquiry was a Chekov's Gun and that she had a brush with the SIB, the branch of the military police that historically enforced the bans on gay and lesbian soldiers. My theory largely comes off the back of a conversation between Trixie and Valerie about Trixie's boyfriend's decision not to tell her that he is in fact divorced with an eight-year-old daughter, where Valerie warns her about being too quick to judge him for keeping this from her:

"People who have secrets, they’re usually afraid. Afraid of being laughed at or rejected or punished. Prosecuted, even. Nobody does it for fun, promise you."

Watch this space.
Fabulously retro dramatisation of Nigel Slater’s memoir of food and familial strife. Nigel (Freddie Highmore) realising that he’s gay ends up seeming pretty tame compared to all the turmoil over that lemon meringue pie.
Adaptation of the Martina Cole novel of the same name, set in Bethnal Green and Soho in the sixties and seventies. Whenever I try to recall the details of the plot, I always end up getting them mixed up with Daniel Craig’s storyline in Our Friends in the North because the two of them are so gaudily trope-tastic: peep shows, prossies, mobster’s molls, tinsel curtains, greasy spoons, all that good stuff. Anyway, the main story is concerned with the lives of childhood sweethearts Cathy and Eamonn (Joanna Vanderham and Jack O’Connell), but one of the key supporting characters is Desrae (Alan Cumming), a transgender woman who does a drag act for a living. She does make pains to state that she is female and that her clothes aren’t just for work. She acts as the only sane woman, kind of like Agrado in Todo Sobre Mi Madre.
As if I even have to say anything.

I’m gonna get all hipster-obnoxious and say that I was a massive Black Mirror ho way before everyone on tumblr was gushing over this episode, so I was already down for the third series when it was announced on Netflix. In case you’ve been living under a rock, San Junipero takes place in the titular town in California where Yorkie and Kelly (Mackenzie Davis and Gugu Mbatha-Raw) begin a relationship that appears to inexplicably straddle several different time periods, but is largely grounded in 1987 when they first meet and an unspecified point fifty-odd years in the future.

Even as I was doing my best to avoid spoilers, the hype machine on this was just unstoppable. My expectations were as high as they could possibly be. Life is full of disappointments, but San Junipero wasn’t one of them. Everyone lost their goddamn minds over That Ending and - I cannot deny it - I too felt my heart soar as the credits rolled.

I started this project partly as a reaction to the 2016 reignition of the controversy surrounding unhappy gay endings, but I’m not here to pretend that they don’t at the very least represent a recognisable trope. I’m also not here to pretend that San Junipero isn’t a deliberate repudiation of that trope, nor that a significant chunk of the positive reactions towards the ending wasn’t pleasure derived from its metatextual implications. And, much as I feel like the discourse surrounding queer endings is oftentimes reductive to the point of complete intellectual dishonesty, I myself am not wholly immune to that pleasure. However, another factor to consider when contextualising this ending is that of the rest of the Black Mirror series. Just as A Civil Arrangement rebels against the Talking Heads monologues that inspired it with its happy ending, so too does San Junipero reject much of what we’ve come to associate with the Black Mirror. Although San Junipero takes place in
the future, it is the only episode thus far to have a solid grounding in the past. It’s also the only episode to show how technology may yet enable us to live up to our best instincts rather than provide new ways for us to succumb to our worst ones.

To elaborate further on the setting, while *San Junipero* might be set in America, the decision to make heaven a Californian party town in 1987 is a choice one might expect from a writer with an outside perspective, but not in a way that suggests a lack of understanding of the story’s source of inspiration. 80s movies already have a quasi-mythical quality for Americans, and the effect is only amplified for British viewers because of how removed they are from our own lives. For someone like Charlie Brooker, who would have been a teenager at the height of the golden age of teen films, America must have seemed a kind of paradise - the yardstick by which all else would be measured up against and ultimately fail. In his novel *One Fine Day in the Middle of the Night*, Christopher Brookmyre recalls how fraught and mundane the pursuit of first love was in the West of Scotland when stacked up against the classics:

“[It] was hardly the environment for teen dreams to come true. It was far easier in the movies. For a start, the kids all seemed to be born with fucking driving licences, and their puppy love could flourish amid ice-cream parlours, soda-fountains and drive-ins. Somehow the thought of the Corporation bus, the Napoli chippy and a sticky seat in the Paisley Kelburne didn’t seem a prospect likely to cement a tentative, fledgeling amour.”

Moreover, movies like *The Last American Virgin* and the highlights of the John Hughes canon are films about social outsiders. Naturally that perspective holds an appeal for gay audiences, but none of these movies ever had an explicitly gay character. (Somebody should tell Duckie it’s okay to come out now.) *San Junipero* uses an exaggerated version of the eighties aesthetic, but it doesn’t feel lazy or derivative because, even without the sci-fi elements, it brings something to the table that wasn’t there before.
Rich Hall's "The Dirty South" (BBC Four, 2011)

I absolutely love Rich Hall’s movie documentaries. Instead of just rattling off factoids we already know about the same films that everyone thinks of when asked to consider any given topic within film history, he actually builds up a context and demonstrates how trends and cinema change and evolve over the years. In his film about the history of the American South in cinema, his discussion of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* involves hitting the audience with a hurricane of southern euphemisms before explaining in terms that we Brits can understand that Brick is “a friend of Wayne Sleep.”

Also I did not know that was how *Deliverance* ended until I saw this documentary. Rich does point out that the movie’s most infamous scene is nothing to do with sex and everything to do with savagery. As he puts it, “Why are these guys attracted to Ned Beatty when Jon Voight is standing right beside him?”
Arthur Christmas (2011)

Arthur Christmas (2011)

Aardman’s second venture into CGI is becoming something of a sleeper Christmas classic. It answers the question of how Santa manages to deliver all those presents in just one night with a high-tech army of elves led by one family where the position of Santa is passed down from father to son. One of the elves, Peter (Marc Wootton), has a pretty obvious crush on Steve (Hugh Laurie), the officious elder son of the incumbent Santa, who considers Peter to be more of an irritant than anything else.

Also, I would not be surprised if I ran into Bryony Shelfley (Ashley Jensen) in the world’s most northernly gay bar.

Just throwing that out there.

(What would you call a gay bar a the North Pole though? Answers on a postcard to the comments section.)
Monologue starring Alison Steadman as the Isobel, the mother of one of the brides in her daughter Kelly’s impending civil partnership. Isobel’s gamely thrown herself into the wedding preparations, but her husband is refusing to get involved and Kelly takes her resentment at her father’s rejection on Isobel and her fiancée, Janice. Kelly’s coming-out came as something of a surprise to both of her parents, but Isobel has warmed up to the idea after meeting Janice, who she hopes will be able to round out some of her daughter’s rougher edges.

A Civil Arrangement’s most obvious ancestor is Talking Heads, and it isn’t shy about its heritage. Writer Colin Hough even manages to sneak in a sly reference to The Outside Dog with a passing mention of tan slacks. However, the monologue also isn’t afraid to challenge its source material, and it does so just when things seem to be at their bleakest:

“I think every story should have a happy ending. At the very least, the possibility of one.”
True Love (BBC One, 2012)

A series of five semi-improvised relationship dramas set in the drab seaside resort of Margate. One episode focuses on an affair between Holly (Billie Piper), an art teacher, and Karen, (Kaya Scoderario) one of her pupils. Since these things are only half an hour long, there isn’t much time to really develop the relationship between the leads. I think the goal with the improv approach was to make the dynamic between the characters feel more natural, but instead, the interactions just come across as stiff and under-rehearsed.

(Source)
God Save the Queens (Sky Atlantic, 2012)

To coincide with the Queen’s Diamond Jubilee, Sky produced a three-part documentary celebrating sixty years of great gay comedians. It’s not exactly the most authoritative piece in the world, but it does provide a fun introduction to the post-war history of gay Britain.
Drama by Paula Milne about a group of housemates in London who first meet in 1965 and are reunited in present-day 2012 when one of their number dies unexpectedly, with each episode focusing on a different year in their shared lives. Basically it’s *Our Friends in the North* meets *This Life.*

The unofficial leader of the group is Jack (Sam Claflin, Martin Kitchen), who acts as landlord after his father buys the lease on the house, is an armchair revolutionary of the highest order. When they’re first assembled, Alan speculates that they’ve been chosen specifically to act as a microcosm of society for Jack’s thinly-veiled co-op experiment. Between them, they comprise a decently varied demographic sample: Charlie (Claire Foy, Juliet Stevenson) is a middle-class English student; Lilly (MyAnna Buring, Lindsay Duncan) and Alan left their modestly wealthy working-class families in The North to study art and engineering respectively; Orla (Jessica Gunning, Sorcha Cusack) moved from Belfast and works in a hotel to support her family back home, albeit while maintaining the pretence of being a psychology student; Victor (David Gyasi, Hugh Quarshie) came to the UK from Jamaica on a law scholarship; And finally, there’s Jay (Reece Ritchie, Ramon Tikaram), a closeted med student from Birmingham and the pride and joy of his first-generation Punjabi parents.

As is the want of the particular little subgenre that *OFitN* codified, the story is just as concerned with hitting as many period markers as possible as it is with character growth. Nobody ever just stays in and watches telly at night in these shows, so of course Jay gets gaybashed in 1979, and of course he contracts HIV. (Although I do have to give Milne some credit for holding off on that until 1990 rather than improbably having him be Patient 0.1) When I say that the beats in Jay’s plotline are cliché, it’s not intended as criticism specific to Milne’s handling of gay characters.

Orla is the first to find out about Jay when she accidentally walks in on him with a hookup at the housewarming party in the first episode. At first, she’s too shocked to talk about it, but by 1967 she’s found her chill and the two of them are besties. Jack outs him to Alan in 1973 in a typical display of thoughtless grandstanding, which leads to Alan having a retroactive fit of gay panic since he and Jay shared a room when they first moved in, but Jay brushes it off pretty quickly by telling Alan that he
shouldn’t flatter himself.

By 1979, Alan is still hung up about it, but he realises his friends are right when they tell him he needs to get over himself, and when the group reunite in the present he at least has the decency to pretend that he has. He attempts to congratulate Jay on his wedding, but it doesn’t go down as well as he might have hoped as he gets into a terminology fumble over the civil partnership by not automatically referring to it as a wedding. The fumble is significant, because by 2012 everyone was referring to civil partnerships as marriages even before the law changed. If someone’s getting arsey over semantics, it can generally be taken as a red flag (see also: Samantha’s Bond character in Clapham Junction ). Alan isn’t quite as onboard as he’s trying to be, but he is trying.

We don’t see an awful lot of Jay over the course of the series, particularly in the front half. Charlie is the implicit protagonist, so the love triangle between her, Jack and Victor dominates the story. They even manage to upstage Jay at his own intervention, but we’re clued in ahead of time that his status was not meant to be a source of any serious dramatic tension - we find out that he’s alive and happily married in the present day before anyone even mentions AIDS. His storyline isn’t so much about the countdown until a drama bomb drops, but the development of his relationship with Orla, and what this ultimately reveals about her character. In 2012, the gang discover that Orla was disowned by her family after her younger brother Declan’s death at the hands of the IRA. (He had called at the house when he was on the run in 1973 but Orla had pleaded with him not to hide out there in case doing so would endanger the lives of her housemates) Her parents’ final letter to her tells her that she should now regard her friends as her family since she had demonstrated that she valued their lives more than her brother’s. By 2012, Jay understands just how deeply she took this message to heart when he realises that her motive for buying the house in 1990 was so that he specifically would always have a home to go to in the event that he became seriously ill.

The show actually has something in common with Peter’s Friends , in that it presents a variation on the chosen family theme. With the other five members of the group, you’ve got some pretty standard Friends-Cold-Feet-Two-Pints intermarrying hoo-ha, whereas Jay and Orla make up a much smaller and more devoted chosen family of two, particularly after Jay comes out to his parents in 1979. Moreover, rather than being a standard Fag Hag setup, their closeness is demonstrated in the text and grows as a result of individual character development. Even when Orla tries to present a united front by getting the gang back together to convince Jay that he has to quit his job as a surgeon because of his status, it backfires horribly. The whole thing gets overshadowed by Charlie’s babydaddy drama. Orla realises that she was the only one who Jay needed to hear the message from.

OFitN takes a much more macro approach with the history it incorporates into the story. Those characters get involved in gang violence and police corruption, among other things, whereas White Heat is more concerned with “the personal is political.” Charlie gets involved in second-wave feminism, only to fall out of love in 1982 when she realises that Margaret Thatcher is not her friend. Since the first episode starts with Charlie and Lilly alone in the house, I had held out the vain hope that the source of the conflict between them was an experiment with political lesbianism that resulted in hearts getting broken, but I just knew, almost instantly, that Lilly had shagged her man, because that’s always what it is when two female friends fight. It turns out that this isn’t why they had a falling out, but the cause is still boyfriend-adjacent. Grumble grumble.
Drama based on the life of the beloved DJ and comedian, played by Oliver Lansley. It largely focuses on his relationship with his wife, Lee (Katherine Kelly). None of the guys we see him hook up or even live with are fully realised characters, so the audience is left to assume that none of them ever became a permanent fixture in his life on the same level as Lee. We do, however, see his friendship with Freddie Mercury (James Floyd) and Freddie mentoring him when he decides to come out publicly.
Jews at Ten (Channel 4, 2012)

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Lighthearted series of interviews from various Jewish celebrities discussing their feelings about their culture. Regular Pink News contributor Benjamin Cohen talks a little bit about how people are way more fussed about him having a goyishe boyfriend than him being gay - he still has to fend off his relatives' attempts to set him up.
The Last Weekend (ITV, 2012)

Adaptation of the novel by Blake Morrison in which old friends Ian and Ollie (Shaun Evans and Rupert Penry-Jones) and their respective partners Em and Daisy (Claire Keelan and Genevieve O’Reilly) spend a fraught August Bank Holiday weekend at run-down cottage in Sussex.

Ian and Ollie met while they were studying law at university, but their lives ultimately ended up veering off in different directions when Ian decided to pursue a career in teaching while Ollie ended up becoming a successful barrister. Along with the utterly unsurprising class conflict, the two of them have an annual tri-athletic dick-measuring contest to carry out over the weekend while their partners aren’t looking.

Ollie briefly kisses Ian when Ian and Em first arrive at the house, and for a hot second I thought that this aspect of their relationship was going to get some actual, unambiguous development, but that doesn’t happen. Em does try to stir Ian up about it after the fact and succeeds, which results in Ben retaliating by reminding Em of the difference between her and the twiglike Daisy.

Ian: It’s good to see him. Ah, no, it’s really great to see him. What?
Em: I don’t know. It just all sounds a bit gay.
Ian: [...] (Pulling Em’s swimsuit out of her bag.) Topless or not topless?
Em: Yeah, not funny.

In summary:

“You’re gay!”
“Yeah well you’re fat!”
Spiritual successor to *Between the Lines* in which former counter-terrorist operative DS Steve Arnott (Martin Compston) finds himself recruited to AC-12, an anti-corruption unit of the fictional Central Police service, by Detective Superintendent Ted Hastings, an RUC veteran with a doggedly absolute view of right and wrong.

The third series sees AC-12 investigating Danny Waldron (Daniel Mays), a firearms officer who kills a suspect who had already surrendered and then bully the rest of his squad into covering for him. At his initial interview, Ted, Steve and DI Matthew “Dot” Cottan (Craig Parkinson) all do their bit to try and aggravate Danny into blurt out his motive, but they only come close to doing so more or less by accident. Danny’s Federation rep objects to a photo of the suspect’s shot-out head being used in the interview, while Danny himself seems unfazed.

**Federation Rep:** This line of questioning is offensive. And insensitive.
**Dot:** (Sensing an opportunity.) Your man doesn’t strike me as the...sensitive type.
**Danny:** (Actually starts to panic for the first time in the interview. Says nothing.)
**Steve:** Are you?
**Danny:** Am I what?
**Steve:** Sensitive. On your personnel file there’s no recorded next of kin. Wife? Fiancée?
**Federation Rep:** This line of questioning has no bearing on the investigation.
**Steve:** We don’t know that yet.
**Danny:** (Trying to keep it together.) I’m single. (Redirecting the conversation.) The suspect was an armed criminal with a history of violence posing an immediate and credible threat to the public.

In a roundabout way, Danny’s personal life, or rather his lack of one, does eventually prove to be
relevant to the investigation. The man Danny killed, Ronan Murphy, was one of a number of men who systematically sexually abused him during his time at the Sands View children’s home. As an adult, he struggles to make any sort of connection with anyone, let alone a partner. Insinuations of any sort of queer inclination can understandably be a very sensitive subject for CSA survivors, irrespective of their orientation. This little detour in the interview wouldn’t have succeeded in getting a rise out of Danny if he didn’t find the idea of engaging in sexual activity with another man inherently upsetting.

Later, Danny seeks out Ronan’s uncle, Linus, also one of his abusers, and tortures out of him a complete list of the men involved in the Sands View ring before killing him. After Danny is himself murdered in mysterious circumstances, AC-12 review Murphy’s post-mortem, which includes a decapitated head with semen cells matching Danny’s DNA found in the mouth:

    Ted: Well, you did right to question Waldron’s private life. Mind you, never had the man pegged as a homosexual.
    Steve: I’m not sure that’s necessarily true, Sir.

It’s a pity Super Ted never caught an episode of *SVU* on one of his many circuits around the block, because then he’d realise that Murphy’s post-mortem, with this and its multiple pre-mortem knife wounds to the genitals, absolutely screams “Rape Revenge Killing!”

Anyway, much as I and just about everyone else who’s seen this show loves Ted, I do appreciate the inclusion of this instance of casual homophobia. As it was put in one comment whose provenance escapes me, he’s a character whose perspective is solidly black-and-white, which is a great benefit when it comes to investigating corrupt officers who cloak themselves in grey areas, but it also means that he lacks nuance in his understanding of the world.

He's self-aware enough that he can recognise that he was presumptuous in assuming that Steve was straight when they first met, but he doesn't realise that there might be a more tactful way of conveying the severity of the discrimination he faced as a Catholic police officer in Northern Ireland than the phrase, “Nobody’s blacker than me, Son.”

I’m not here to dwell on how Jed Mercurio handles race in the show, but since he hasn’t shied away from the subject, nor from feminist issues in policing, I would be interested to see what he might do with a major LGBT character and how that might factor into the multi-series arc. Series 5 didn’t provide anything to that effect, but there's time yet with the sixth series set to air in 2021.
Birthday (Sky Arts, 2012)

Streamlined TV adaptation of Joe Penhall’s stage play in which Ed (Stephen Mangan) is about to give birth to his daughter while his wife, Lisa (Anna Maxwell Martin), offers her support. It’s set in Twenty Minutes into the Future where men are able to carry pregnancies to term by means of an artificial womb. It’s still a relatively new practice, but it’s been embraced by the NHS because it means shorter labours taking up fewer beds (at least in theory).

There’s a conversation that takes place after the birth where Natasha, the registrar (Louise Brealey) asks Ed if his boyfriend’s been in to see him yet, which results in Ed and Lisa getting a bit harrumphed and Ed insisting that he’s 100% straight. Natasha apologises by saying that it’s just that most male pregnancies are initiated by male couples. I was a bit surprised to hear this because I’d have thought the number of straight couples with fertility woes like Ed and Lisa making use of this option would still outnumber gay couples by quite a bit. Anyway, this is really interesting watch if you can get your hands on it, and if you find all the biology and worldbuilding that goes along with Omegaverse a bit intimidating, it could be a great new AU to try out.
Chilly police thriller set in Belfast. Since everybody’s so busy trying to catch Paul Spector (Jamie Dornan), there’s not much time for romance. Still, we’ve got PC Dani (Niamh McGrady), who acts as the average copper and emotional centre of the investigation, which puts her at quite a stark contrast to the Untouchable Pillar of Ice-Cold Hotness that is Stella Gibson (Gillian Anderson). Even though there is some visible tension between the two, Stella is more interested in Reed (Archie Panjabi), the pathologist. Reed’s game at first but then ends up changing her mind, leaving us with a quandary for the ages, “What’s Croydon got to do, got to do with it?” (Word of God later clarified that Reed wasn't down because she's married, although we're never shown anything to that effect.) Regardless, Reed doesn't return in the third series, and Dani plays a minimal role in the tail-end of the police investigation, which comes to a bitter and unsatisfying end. Stella and Dani have a semi-
professional hug before Stella heads back to London. You'd think after all the trouble they'd both been to, the least they both deserved was a fuck for the road.

Elsewhere, whilst in the Foyle Clinic, a secure psychiatric facility, Spector encounters Mark Bailey (Conor MacNeill), an inpatient who appears to have a bit of a crush on him. This is somewhat unfortunate for Mark as he has a pathological fear of being perceived as gay. He was placed in the clinic after raping and killing his twelve-year-old sister in a psychotic episode that was triggered by her making fun of him for getting a gay haircut. It's possible that he has some learning difficulties on top of his mental health problems, because he believes that the hair literally changed his personality, à la *Hell Toupée*. Even though he feels remorse, he doesn't fully understand why he did it. He's not self-aware enough to recognise that he fancies Spector, but his actions give him away. In one of his earlier scenes, in which he doesn't have any dialogue that extends beyond a verbal tic, we see him staring awkwardly whilst the shirtless Spector scrutinises his splenectomy scab. He also mentions that he was once allowed to help serve food in the canteen, but that the nurses took him off that work duty because he was giving extra food to "people [he] liked." It's an all-male facility, and he doesn't say that he gave extra portions to "friends" or "mates," but to "people," suggesting a certain reticence about the nature of his affinity for them.
Comedy written by and starring Sue Perkins in which awkward vet Sara gets an unusual 40th birthday present from her friends: an ultimatum. She has to come out to her parents when they visit in six weeks or the quack therapist that her pals Jamie and Justine (Dominic Coleman and Nicola Walker) have hired to prepare her for the task will do it for her.

At first glance, coming out would appear to be an ideal subject for a sitcom - it’s a recognisable situation in human relationships with a clear setup and punchline. The trouble is that it’s such emotionally fraught and even devastating experience that it can be very hard to make it funny without coming across as merely being cruel. It’s not that I believe that certain situations are inherently off-limits to comedy, but that since the complexities of coming out have only recently in the life of the sitcom reached the awareness of the general public, writers don’t have a clear understanding of where the parameters lie in any given comedy subgenre. That’s why my favourite coming-out comedy is A Very Special Drawn Together Afterschool Special - it doesn’t have any concerns about what its audience can cope with and instead revels in taking a simple premise and making it as balls-to-the-wall ridiculous as possible.

Heading Out takes the opposite approach. It’s so broad and unthreatening it could pass for a season of Ellen, although I don’t necessarily intend for that to be read as a criticism. As evidenced by the spread of shows that I have covered thus far, I have a bias towards drama, but that’s not to say I don’t appreciate the opportunity to watch something that’s a little easier on my weary brain but still feels relevant to my life.

Unfortunately, I might be the only person in existence who liked this show. Reviews weren’t great, but one or two were optimistic, presumably conscious of the fact that sitcoms usually need a bit of time to bed in, but it absolutely tanked in the ratings. It certainly wasn’t comedy gold by any stretch, but it at least deserved a second series to wrap up the cliffhanger that the first ended on. Still, for all the ill will an out-and-out flop could have potentially incited against Sue Perkins, it doesn’t seem to negatively affected her career.

Character-driven whodunnit set in an idyllic seaside town from once and future Who writer Chris Chibnall in which DI Alec Hardy (David Tennant) and DS Ellie Miller (Olivia Colman) investigate the murder of ten-year-old Danny Latimer. In the second series, the action has moved from the murder investigation to the trial and distinguished QC Jocelyn Knight (Charlotte Rampling) is persuaded to come out of retirement in order to secure a conviction on behalf of Danny’s family. Over the course of the series, we see her growing closer to Maggie Radcliffe (Carolyn Pickles), the editor of the local paper, who knows her of old. This culminates in Jocelyn declaring herself during their clifftop picnic at sunset.

Not to go all smug on y’all or anything, but I totally saw this one coming when it first aired. For me,
the pivotal moment was when Jocelyn admitted (to Alec, if memory serves) that there was a non-gender-specific “someone” in her life with whom she regretted not being clearer about her feelings. This mirrors a conversation Ellie has with Claire (Eve Myles) on their night out about how there was a man in her life who she had really wanted to marry before she met her husband. People don’t do the pronoun dance unless they’re holding something back.

The characters' fortunes over the course of the second series are a mixed bag, but Jocelyn definitely has one of the happier endings. Sure, she's lost her mother and is in the process of losing her sight, but she's finally put things right with Maggie and even manages a reconciliation with her former pupil, who she faced off against at the trial.
I think this one might be a first - a story about a kid dealing with gender variance that’s actually targeted at kids. It's treated very matter-of-factly but it doesn’t fuss over labels in a way that might come across as inorganic for a child of the protagonist’s age. These days, we're getting more and more material focused specifically on transgender narratives, which is great, but potentially a little alienating for people who crossdress as a hobby rather than as an expression of their gender identity. This show manages to strike a nice middle ground between two simply by not bombarding its target audience with identity politics. Don’t get me wrong, this thing is much more wacky sitcom hijinks than *Ma Vie en Rose*, but it’s still a harmless, non-judgemental half-hour’s worth of entertainment.
It’s Love, Actually (Sky Living, 2014)

It’s Love, Actually (Sky Living, 2014)

Light documentary consisting of interviews with various cohabiting couples about their lives together. It features two same-sex couples - one male and one female - in amongst the rest of the cohort. Watching it, it doesn’t feel as though they contribute a proportionate level of screentime, but I’d need to get my stopwatch out and make a comprehensive study to say whether or not that’s actually true. Plus, there’s potential non-response bias to consider - the quality of your data depends on how many people actually want to take part and how much of what they say can actually be used.

A lot of the questions are about men-mars-women-venus stuff like “Who’s best at DIY?” and “Who does the most housework?” which are honestly a bit boring to listen to. What makes this show stand out is how the gay couples are included in the questions about sex with neither derision nor fanfare. Much as the concept of gay long-term relationships has largely been absorbed into the mainstream, our sex lives may still be a little mystifying to outsiders (and even to young babygays), so hearing couples talk candidly about whether or not they plan sex in advance or the sort of things they do to keep the spark of romance alight in their relationship is very much appreciated.
Drama about a group of expectant mothers in Leeds who- OH MY GOD, FUCK YOU, KIM!! FUCK YOU, YOU NARCISSISTIC SACK OF SHITE!!!!

Ahem.

Kelly Anneken and Amy Schneider - the hosts of my favourite podcast, Up Yours, Downstairs! - have pointed out a few times that one of the truisms of literary criticism is that the more you like something, the less you have to say about it. I’ve found this to be both true and untrue of In the Club, since I have a lot more to say about it than I thought I would going into it, so strap in.

Of the six core cast members in this northern babymama drama, one of them is in a relationship with another woman. Kim (Katherine Parkinson) lives with her partner, Susie (Tara Fitzgerald), and her teenage stepson, Jude (Daniel Breeze). Jude’s father, Neil (Jonathan Kerrigan), is also the father of Kim and Susie’s baby. Susie believes that Neil donated his sperm via clinical means, but what actually happened was that Kim and Neil had sex behind Susie’s back. When Kim opens their home to teenage mum Rosie (Hannah Midgley) without consulting Susie, Susie throws the two of them out, which leads to them moving in with Neil. The two of them enter into an affair, which culminates in Susie catching them kissing as Kim gives birth in Neil’s flat. Kim briefly goes back to Susie, but Susie sees that Kim clearly doesn’t want to be with her and drops her off at Neil’s.

By the second series, Kim and Neil are living together, but Kim is depressed about her low sex drive. She initially attributes it to not having lost her baby weight, but when she discovers that Susie has a new girlfriend, she realises that she hasn’t wanted to have sex because she feels guilty for cheating. Once she admits that, her and Neil start banging again and the series ends with her making an absolute meal out of leaving her kid at nursery and deciding not to go back to work, pretty much unilaterally, after one shitty day.

There’s a lot going on in this plotline, but I’m going to try and cover as many points as possible. First off, it isn’t established as clearly as it could have, but Neil is not Susie’s ex-husband. They’re longtime besties who agreed to have a kid together. I liked this because it’s not a set-up you see very often, especially not years after the initial decision to co-parent. However, it doesn’t feel fleshed out
enough to make sense in light of their current dynamic. We don’t really get a sense of the history of their friendship. What we see of their relationship in the first series is pretty combative, which is understandable given that Jude is being a difficult wee shite, but it might have been cool to see how they interacted in peacetime. They’re not exes so there’s no reason for them to keep their distance. Do they share the allotment? Does Neil come round for Christmas dinner?

Jude’s behaviour in the first series was an element of the story that I appreciated. He’s rude and sullen and deliberately doesn’t tell Kim and Susie about his parents’ night because he doesn’t want anyone at school to find out that his mum has a girlfriend. This comes to a head when Susie and Kim get into an argument over Kim bringing Rosie to their house. Kim says that she’s fed up with Susie coddling Jude because she, Susie, is in a constant state of apology for being gay. This is not a problem that any of us likes to think about. When I think about having a wife and kids in the future, I daydream about the fun stuff like birthdays and going to Disneyworld, or even just mundane shit like childcare options and house prices in the best catchment areas. I don’t want to think about my children regarding me with the same derision and contempt as the kids who bullied me in high school. Since same-sex parenting is a relatively new facet of queer life, there’s a feeling that we ought to be putting our best foot forward at all times, for our own benefit as much as anyone else’s. It can be difficult, even shameful, for us to admit that there might be challenges along the way that more conventional families don’t have to deal with, but one of the great things about drama is that it can cut right to the heart of our greatest fears and helps us understand what drives them.

This subplot culminates when Kim goes into labour and asks Jude, almost as an afterthought, why he doesn’t like her. Jude tells that it’s not anything especially personal, he would just prefer to have “a mum and a dad or mum and a boyfriend” like all the other boys in his year. Unfortunately, this is where this particular storyline hits a bit of a bum note because Kim has the rather naive, even trite response that it’s okay to be different and that he has to stand up for himself and for the cause. Jude counters that that’s rich coming from a grown woman who isn’t out to her own parents and the conversation dies on its arse before it can go anywhere interesting.

This particular exchange didn’t really work for me because Kim does not seem to react like anyone who’s ever been a queer teenage. The first time I saw it, I thought Kim was going to draw on her own or even Susie’s experiences to point out that Jude is not the first kid who’s had to deal with homophobia at school. If I may indulge in a bit of blatant psychological projection, high school can be a brutal place. What’s even worse is that it poisons your view on humanity in general. You stop expecting anything better and assume that this is how people are going to treat you for the rest of your life. Hell, Kim works at his school, so she should know all this even if it wasn’t something she worried about as a teenager. Another way this conversation could have gone would have been for Kim to point out that yeah, school is pretty shit, but it’s not forever, and not all the people he meets in his life will be like that. What I loved about this series was that everyone in the group accepts Kim and Susie without so much as batting an eyelid. They don’t even call attention to the fact that they’re not calling attention to it. Neil does get asked by some of the other dads about his part in the baby’s conception, but it’s in the context of a conversation about pregnancy sex rather than one of them just randomly asking, “So, did you stick it in her?” When you’re young you like to think that your generation is at the peak of human development - if the today’s youth have a shitty attitude about something, then adults will surely be worse because they’re all inherently conservative by their fuddy-duddy nature. You don’t realise what a massive impact maturity and experience have on your worldview until you’re old enough to cringe in horror at your younger self for being such a clueless twunt.

Moreover, it feels a little late in the day for this conflict. Jude’s probably about 15, which means he’s been at secondary school for a good few years. Surely this is something that would have been more likely to be a problem when he was starting high school? On top of that, Neil offhandedly mentions in the first episode of the second series that Susie had a different girlfriend, Maria, when Jude was a
baby, so this isn’t exactly a new situation for him. Actually, that might have been an interesting road for this plot to go down. Susie could have noticed that Jude had been acting moody and furtive and started worrying that he’s joined a gang or doing drugs only to have it turn out that he’s been trying to reconnect with Maria. He wouldn’t resent Kim for not being a man but for trying to take the place of his actual Other Mum. That would have been a conflict that hasn’t been done before.

Speaking of things that have been done before, there were people out there who didn’t appreciate that this was yet another story about lesbian parenting that focused on the sperm donor’s role in the conception. I, however, am not one of those people. I’m the kind of person who prefers a cover to the original song, so seeing multiple variations on the same theme doesn’t bother me in the slightest. Moreover, while I recognise the advantages of anonymous donation, I don’t want the father of my children to be a stranger, so this is a subject that I’ve given a lot of thought to. *In the Club*’s take isn’t particularly interesting by itself, but it does act as a useful contrast with *Last Tango in Halifax* by displaying a best and worst case scenario for using a known donor. On the one hand you’ve got Greg, who, while he doesn’t make a great first impression on Caroline or the viewer, shows himself to be capable of handling the situation graciously and with a level head. He’s willing to adapt when circumstances change, but he’s also mindful of his boundaries. It’s implied that he has feelings for Kate, but it never gets any further than an implication because he respects that Kate is in a relationship with someone else and is happy to support both her and Caroline. Neil, on the other hand, lies about his level of involvement with Kim to the woman who’s supposed to be his best friend and insists after the fact that neither he nor Kim did anything wrong.

And with that, we come back to my opening salvo. Kim is one of the most loathsome characters I’ve encountered in recent memory. My followers on tumblr will be familiar with my enduring hate-on for Mary Morstan, but that gave way to eager but cautious anticipation with regards to the direction her villainy might have taken in *Sherlock*’s fourth series (a hope that was sadly disappointed, but all that’s still to come). Mary is a ruthless psychopath who kills people for money without a drop of remorse - she’s so evil that it’s hard to conceive of her existing outside the heightened reality of *Sherlock*. Kim is much more like an awful person that you know, although she is kind of similar to Mary in that she is self-centred and critically lacking in empathy. With Mary, this manifests in an absolute disregard for any and all human life besides her own, whereas with Kim it’s a tendency to jump into things cunt first without thinking about who she might hurt beforehand or even really caring about it after the fact. Particularly in the second series, her attempts to help others tend to warp back into actions that will serve her own needs. For example, when she announces at a party that Susie is selling up to go travelling with her new girlfriend without giving Jude, Rosie and the kids the chance to find somewhere else to live, it’s not because she’s concerned for the young ones’ welfare, she just wants an opportunity to embarrass Susie, as if copping off with her best mate wasn’t embarrassing enough. She also tears into Susie for even deigning to move on in the first place, which is pretty fucking gallus coming from the person who got caught playing away. Kim says later in the episode that she feels bad about what she did to Susie, but she doesn’t actually do anything to atone for it beyond the bare minimum required to assuage her guilt. If she truly cared about Susie’s feelings, she would have actually apologised and told Susie that she was happy for her that she had met someone new, regardless of whether or not that was how she actually felt.

So, yeah, Kim’s not a particularly nice person. What’s interesting about her as a character though is that she’s the closest thing the ensemble has to a lead. She writes a blog that functions as a narrative device throughout the series. It’s pretty unusual to have one of the least likeable characters in a group fulfil that role. (Maybe Kay Mellor wanted to avoid a situation similar to the one in *Call the Midwife* where Jenny felt like she was at a bit of a remove from the rest of the group because of her role as the lead.)

Kim is confirmed as being bisexual in her character bio on [the show’s BBC website](https://www.bbc.co.uk/), but she never says as much in the script. However, that doesn’t mean the matter doesn’t get some clarification.
Rosie asks Kim if she’s ever been with a guy and Kim says that she’s had a couple of relationships with men. Generally speaking, I think people who are looking to hear the actual word on television are in for a disappointment going forward, but that’s because we’re moving towards, if not a more realistic way of approaching this topic then certainly a more naturalistic one. Kim never says she’s bi, but she doesn’t have to. It comes up indirectly and organically, and we’re shown it rather than being told about it. Moreover, even though Kim goes on to say that she doesn’t think she was ever really in love with Susie, she never says that it was “just a phase” and she never claims to be straight.

This isn’t an isolated phenomenon. In The Fall, we never hear Stella say that she’s bi, but there never comes a time when she has to say it, all that matters is that she’s into the people she’s into. My guess is that writers are starting to credit their audience with enough intelligence that they don’t need to have a teachable moment if a character is shown to be interested in relationships with people of different genders.

This isn’t something that’s restricted to bi characters either. In the 2015 version of The Dresser, we’re never told that Norman is gay, but it never feels like the creative team is being coy or self-censoring. It’s perfectly clear in both the way we see him react to the news of a local cottaging arrest and in the way that he’s mirrored with another character. In Last Tango in Halifax, Caroline only ever directly states that she’s a lesbian to drive home the point to John that she is not going to get back together with him. Even though the entire show up to this point had been about her coming out and her relationship with Kate, she never had to say it because it was perfectly clear in context.

Redirecting, the closest we see Kim get to using a label is when she and Susie argue about Jude:

“He’s downright rude and obnoxious and it pisses me off that you pander to him all the time. It’s bloody obvious that you’re trying to make up for the fact that we’re gay and he doesn’t live with his dad.”

What’s important here is that Kim is talking about the two of them as a unit, not herself specifically. There are probably people out there who think she should have said “queer” instead, but that wouldn’t have felt right for a character in her demographic. Plus, people using language in a way that feels authentic to them does not automatically equate to them using the language others would have them use or using it in a way that provides maximum clarity for outsiders.

Kim is a bisexual character who is unfaithful to her partner. However, she doesn’t do this because she’s bi, but because she’s the sort of person who would cheat. She lacks concern for the feelings of others, and this is something that is present in her relationships with her friends as well as in her personal life. And honestly, I think there’s something to be said for having a queer character who is genuinely unpleasant. Characters like that can demystify us as a group. (Rantasmo said as much of Thomas Barrow in his Downton Abbey episode of Needs More Gay ) We’re not magic, we’re just people. And some people are just terrible. Kim and Susie are in a mediocre relationship to begin with and we see them learn a lesson that we’ve seen plenty of straight couples learn before - babies don’t make everything better.

Watching the show, I suspect Kay Mellor might not have been aware of the tensions that have historically existed between lesbians and bi women when she wrote the script. At the risk of a strawmanning accusation, I’d say that there are probably folk who would cite this lack of awareness as an example of why we shouldn't let Teh Str8s write about us. I completely disagree with that mindset. Outside perspectives are vital to bringing fresh ideas and insights to the table. These days there's a lot of talk about elevating voices. Maybe we could try listening to each other instead of deciding who has the innate right to dominate any given conversation before anyone's even opened their mouths.
Anyway, Kim and Susie are not the only same-sex couple on the show. In the second series, we meet Andrew and Nathan (Andrew Buckley and Paul Nicholls), a couple about to have their first child with the help of their surrogate, Shelly (Gemma Dobson). My favourite moment in their storyline is when Nathan, the more level-headed of the two, starts getting overwhelmed because him and Andrew have spent so much time planning and preparing and now that it’s finally happening he doesn’t quite know how to handle it. Vicky the midwife (Christine Bottomley) reassures him that’s okay to be scared but that it’ll all be worth it when he holds his son for the first time and that he’ll love being a dad. I’m not doing it much justice but it's so sweet - I’m getting all verklempt just typing this.

The series ends with them in a bit of a legal limbo because Shelly has yet to sign the form that will extinguish her parental rights, but this is probably down more to the interference of her mum, Maxine (Sandra Huggett), since she’s shown as being way more ambivalent about severing ties than Shelly because the baby is her first grandchild. Britain’s surrogacy laws are a bit of a minefield - the practice itself isn't illegal but surrogacy contracts aren't legally enforceable either. Being a gay couple doesn't put Andrew and Nathan at a significant disadvantage in this area. The problem is that if Shelly changed her mind, they wouldn’t have any legal recourse. The moral of this story is to talk to your solicitor before you crack out that turkey baster.
**Inside No. 9 (BBC Two, 2014 - Present)**

Anthology series from Steve Pemberton and Reece Shearsmith, with each episode taking place at different “9” address.

*Sardines* takes place at a tense family gathering where all the guests are packed into an antique wardrobe as part of the titular party game. Amongst the attendees are Carl and Stuart (Pemberton and Shearsmith, pictured above), a middle-aged couple who are having problems with their relationship, the ultimate root of which is revealed to be Carl having been molested by his father at a young age. The story ends with the wardrobe about to be torched with everyone inside by one of Carl’s father’s other victims.

*A Quiet Night In* is a silent episode that follows two thieves’ attempt to steal a painting from a modernist house, occupied by Gerald (Denis Lawson) and trophy wife, Sabrina (Oona Chaplin). Halfway through the episode, we find out the Sabrina is trans, but it doesn’t have any material effect on the plot and the impact of her death is rather muted by the fact that this episode also has a *Kill ‘Em All* ending, albeit a slightly more protracted one than *Sardines*.

Queer characters feature in background roles in other episodes as well. *Tom and Gerri* and *The Twelve Days of Christine* both have gay friends, one coded and one confirmed, offering moral support to the leads. *The Understudy* has Felicity (Julia Davis), a stage manager who makes a pass at one of the actors and is subsequently fired due to allegations of sexual misconduct. Although it’s clear that trying to flirt with someone on the clock was probably not the most professional idea she had ever had, it’s later revealed that she lost her job as a result of a false accusation made by the antagonist, who also ruined the lives of other actors in the company.
Adaptation of Laura Wade’s *Posh*, a play about a thinly-veiled version of the Bullingdon Club. Our Not-Too-Posh hero Miles (Max Irons) is identified as a candidate for membership Hugo Fraser-Tyrwhitt (Sam Reid), an unambitious postgrad in a cravat. Miles gets very huffy when he thinks Hugo is hitting on him, but after that the subject gets dropped and doesn’t come up again.

Hugo is the club’s only openly gay member, although others admit to having partaken in some pretty standard boarding school shenanigans without much in the way of embarrassment. When Miles asks who jizzed all over his laptop when the club trashed his room as part of his initiation, he’s told that it was a team effort. Being openly gay doesn’t appear to represent a serious hurdle to acceptance within the club. The English aristocracy has a long history of tolerating and even celebrating all kinds of eccentricities, so historically being gay would have been regarded as a peccadillo rather than a serious character flaw, provided you still married and sired an heir and a few spares. The real outsider in the club is Dmitri (Ben Schnetzer), by far the richest member, but not considered a viable candidate for the club presidency by his chum, Bellend (Matthew Beard), because he’s Greek (even though he’s also a British citizen), suggesting that the club still ranks breeding above all else.
ATTRACTIVE WOMAN KILLED! LOCAL WEIRDO BLAMED!

I have watched far more Law and Order: SVU than is good for me, or indeed for anyone, so this a plot I know like the back of my hand:

“He lived alone. He wore an anorak. He had hobbies that weren’t sports. He looked at me funny that one time I tripped over my own handbag while I was trying to unlock my front door after my work’s night out. Of course he’s the murderer!”

With his snow-white seventies spray-over and bewildered, ottery eyes, “worldly” is not the word that springs to mind upon the sight of Christopher Jefferies (played by Jason Watkins in a BAFTA-winning performance). Having retired at 55 (jammy bastard) from his job as an English teacher, he spends his days studying for a French degree, marking exams, playing the harpsichord and being teased by his friends because he’s never heard of Strictly Come Dancing.

When Joanna Yeates, one of Christopher’s tenants, goes missing, he cooperates with the police to the best of his ability. Unfortunately, his overbearing nature doesn’t do much to endear him to the constabulary, and he soon finds himself arrested for Joanna’s murder. Having been hauled out of his bed and down to the police station in the middle of the night, the police interview eventually strays from the rather flimsy circumstantial evidence to his character. The coppers grill him about his relationship with Joanna and her boyfriend, Greg, of which there was none beyond him being their landlord.

Things get even more personal when the interrogation turns to the subject of his sexual history, but
they don’t just open straight up with, “Do you have a girlfriend?” They’re a lot vaguer in the way they go about it: “Are you in a relationship?” “When did you last have sex?” They’re pronoun-dancing, and Christopher realises this:

   DC Connor: What interests you sexually?
   Paul Okebo [Christopher’s solicitor]: Is that relevant to this inquiry?
   DC Connor: I’d like to know. When your client looks at Joanna Yeates, what does he see?
   Christopher: I saw a young woman. I certainly had no sexual interest in her. No sexual feeling for her whatsoever. Or, indeed, for Greg, for that matter.

Without wishing to speculate on the personal life of the actual Christopher Jefferies and thus miss the entire point of the story, there is something queer about his character as rendered in this film. I don’t mean so much in terms of his affect, but in that there is something queer about the figure of the British eccentric, an archetype that the film uses specifically for Christopher to reclaim his good name. It encompasses many shades of the unusual and offbeat, from the likes of famed Edwardian dandy Bunny Rogers and Turner-prizewinning artist Grayson Perry to more mainstream figures such as Keith Moon and Kate Bush.
Coming Oot! A Fabulous History of Gay Scotland (BBC One Scotland, 2015)

“Scotland has always been a romantic country. A sentimental country. A place many gay people have a great love for and a sense of belonging to.”

Finally, a documentary after my own heart! It does exactly what it says on the tin, going from around about the Wolfenden Report right up to marriage equality in 2014. It incorporates some input from historians as well as personal testimonials, so it’s got a bit more rigour to it than God Save the Queens.
**Doctor Foster (BBC One, 2015 - Present)**

The perfect life of Dr Gemma Foster (Suranne Jones) begins to crumble before her eyes when she discovers a long blonde hair on her husband Simon’s (Bertie Carvel) scarf. The hair belongs to Kate (Jodie Comer), the 23-year-old who Simon has been sleeping with for the past two years.

Soon after learning about the affair, Gemma turns to Jack (Robert Pugh) her former colleague, for advice. Gemma’s only just recently given him the sack for being drunk on the job, the ultimate cause for his erratic behaviour being the recent death of his husband, David. Gemma asks if either of them ever slept around during the thirty years that they were together. Jack tells her that neither of them did without really elaborating on it. While I appreciate that the show chooses to uphold a gay relationship as the one shining example that proves that mutual fidelity is not a lost cause, I feel like Jack’s response to Gemma’s question might have benefitted from a little texture. He and David presumably met around 1985, so it’s not hard to imagine why monogamy would have appeared a more prudent course of action than it might have done had they met five years prior.

There is, however, a later scene that demonstrates a bit more savvy. Gemma meets up with Jack and Mary (Elizabeth Rider), the woman who looked after following the death of her parents, to try and work out what to do now that her whole world has imploded. At one point she tries to argue that what she’s going through is worse than Jack grief’s over being left alone after watching David die in pain. It’s not hard to see where she’s coming from - in spite of everything Jack gets to keep his memories of his husband, whereas Gemma has realised that the man she thought her husband was never really existed. Jack’s not an especially sensitive guy, but this really hits a nerve with him. It’s a dick move to play the my-pain-is-worse-than-your-pain game at the best of times, but I don’t think Gemma consciously realised the insensitivity in insisting that her anguish over the loss of her relationship with her spouse is inherently more valid than that of a gay man.

The second series opens two years later and introduces Siân (Siân Brookes), Jack’s frighteningly efficient and officious replacement. She doesn’t hold back from passive-aggressively dragging Gemma to her face about her personal life interfering with her work when Simon and Kate return from their exile in London, but the two of them do manage to find some common ground. When Siân invites Gemma over for dinner, she reveals that she is also divorced and has a teenage son, something Gemma hadn’t envisaged given her seemingly unsympathetic attitude to Gemma’s current situation with Simon and their son, Tom (Tom Taylor). Siân also tells Gemma that she hasn’t slept with a man since she dispensed with her deadbeat babydaddy, preferring instead to stick to women. I was momentarily hopeful that this might lead somewhere promising, but instead Gemma continues in her quest to find out Tom made an appointment with Siân that he didn’t tell Gemma about now that he’s living with his dad and stopped speaking to her. A few glasses later, Siân admits that Tom is suffering from symptoms of anxiety, although she’s no clearer than Gemma as to why. Her objective achieved but dazed but what she's learned, Gemma drunkenly wanders off into the night before Siân gets the chance to serve dessert.

On this evening stroll, Gemma finds herself in the back garden of outside Tom's best friend, Max (Tom Kauer), who she then probes for information in the hopes of finding out what's been going on with Tom. She asks Max if Tom likes girls, presumably because it's just occurred to her that a possible cause for Tom's distress might that he's started to realise that he likes boys but all the drama with his parents has left him feeling like can't talk to either of them about it, but this turns out not to be the case. If anything, Gemma probably wishes that that was what had been up with Tom when she eventually does discover the reason for his sudden personality change.
The Dresser (BBC Four, 2015)

Promo shots are God’s gift to this project. At the end of 2015, as I was flicking through my Christmas *Radio Times*, I caught sight of this production still from BBC Four’s production of Ronald Harwood’s play, of which at this point I knew nothing.

My first reaction upon seeing this photo was, “This looks pretty gay. I’d better check it out.”

It’s good to be right.

The BBC adaptation is more claustrophobic than the 1983 film. The entire drama is shot on location, without exteriors. The theatre is dingier, the dressing rooms smaller and the company is visibly wearied by their seemingly futile efforts. Much of the cut dialogue belonging to Her Ladyship (Emily Watson), is restored, making her a more prominent character and exposing the fissures in her and Sir’s relationship. Norman and Sir (Ian McKellan and Anthony Hopkins) are significantly older than their Tom Courtenay and Albert Finney iterations (Hopkins’ performance, in particular, appears to be the product of a more dementia-conscious age), rendering Norman’s desire for validation all the more acute. Madge (Sarah Lancashire) is much more obviously positioned as the straight foil to Norman. The parallel is explicit in the text (“You think you loved him. What about me?”), but it gets a stronger visual reinforcement in this version with a sequence where they both watch Sir rally and recover a little of his past fire from opposite wings adjoining the stage.

McKellan is more subdued in his performance than Courtenay or Shearsmith, or to be more specific, less camp. Presumably, this is at least in part a concession to the more clued-up sensibilities of a 2015 audience. That said, I can’t help but think that the Norman of 1983 would induce bouts of handwringing amongst that particular contingent of well-meaning viewers who operate on the

(Source)
rationale that Stereotype = Bad, regardless of any nuance, context or even testimony from actual members of the group in question that therein lies some measure of authenticity.
The Danish Girl (2015)

Y’all don’t need me to tell you about this one. It’s ambiguous in terms of its nationality, but I decided to include it since had a British director, and honestly because I wanted an excuse to talk about it.

Carol and The Danish Girl were regarded as spiritual stablemates in the 2015/16 awards season. Even though they deal with very different subjects, having two major LGBT-themed Oscar contenders in one year was unusual enough to see them being mentioned in the same breath more often than not. I saw Carol first, and having previously seen Far From Heaven, I had a good idea of what the movie would be like. Sublime though it was, there were no great surprises. The Danish Girl, on the other hand, hit me way harder than I had ever expected.

I have a body image issue that, whilst it is very common, is rarely discussed openly. Ever since puberty had its wicked way with me, I don’t think I’ve ever felt as if my body is as feminine on the outside as I feel on the inside. There are lots of shows and films out there that feature men exploring and wrestling with their sense of masculinity, and it’s a recurring theme throughout gay male fiction. In Angels in America, for example, Prior admits to feeling inadequate when he sees that his ex’s new boyfriend is far more conventionally masculine than him:

“He’s the Malboro Man...Mega-Butch! He made me feel beyond nelly, like I’ve got wispy daisies sprouting out my ears.”

There aren’t many works out there at all that show women dealing with insecurities about their femininity (at least not in ways that don’t directly relate to weight), let alone the lesbian corollary to Prior’s situation. Neither is The Danish Girl a perfect analogue, but it did inadvertently dredge up the not-too-long-buried memories of an adolescence blighted by body woes and crushingly low self-esteem.
Scandinoiresque spy thriller starring Ben Whishaw, Edward Holcroft, Jim Broadbent and Charlotte Rampling. Danny is a jaded scenester who finds love with Alex, a gifted but solitary intelligence agent. For the five weeks that it was on the air, this show was the talk of the tumblr steamie, although a lot of people soured on it rather quickly once the plot began intruding on the whole porn-with-feels vibe the first episode had going for it. I’ve written about why I liked this series as a whole in detail here and here if you want to find out more. There are a couple of points that I want to highlight here though. The series does a lot to show how AIDS has changed and how it's changed the community over the years. Danny's friend and mentor, Scotty, saw his boyfriend die a horrible death, whereas Danny can expect to live just as long and as healthily as anyone else with the help of medication. The last AIDS-related image we see in the show is of Danny attending an HIV support group and watching the youngest member, a boy of about 18 or 19, being picked up by his parents from what is presumably his first meeting. The three of them are a little stiff and unsure of how to act in this situation, but all that matters is that this kid's mum and dad are there supporting and loving their son in the way that Danny's parents never did.

Outwith the subject of AIDS, the series is enriched by weaving in other threads from gay history. Scotty's partner was a painter who had a fixation on the colour blue, which is a nod to gay artist and filmmaker Derek Jarman. The show is also conscious of London's role in Britain's queer past. Scotty explains that he made his life there because it's the place where no one cares, for better or worse. The city's shiny artifice masks a flagrant indifference to anything and everything it touches. It makes quite a contrast to the neon fly-killer glow of the Pic in Johnny Go Home. The London of today may be far cleaner and more polished, but it's certainly not overflowing with the milk of human kindness. As the show makes clear, the dangers posed to vulnerable young men by prostitution have not been eradicated but merely driven out of sight. Watching this show made me realise the THT weren't half right when they decided to name their hospice "The Lighthouse", because that's what the whole of London has been, and still is to a certain extent, to the queer people of Britain. The light calls out to you in your little boat on the empty ocean, keeping you safe with the promise of the shore, but when you finally reach it, it completely dwarfs you. Instead of feeling a sense of triumph that you made it,
you end up being reminded of just how insignificant you are. Somehow, it's more alienating up close than it ever was from a distance.
A series of short films from actor Ashley Walters, himself a father of seven, meeting various unconventional dads in search of parenting advice. In the second episode, he meets Kelly Maloney, a transgender boxing promoter whose children still refer to her as “Dad.” She talks a bit about how her relationship with her daughters improved after her transition and how she felt it was better to support them in their choices and let them make their own mistakes rather than trying to steer them directly towards the path she wanted them to take. She didn’t consider herself particularly different to any other parent. As she says to Ashley, “You’re Dad in a Tracksuit and I’m Dad in a Dress.”
The Pass (2016)

Adaptation of John Donnelly’s play about Jason (Russell Tovey) a professional footballer, which poses the question, “What does it profit a man if he gains the world but stays in the closet?”

The film opens with Jason and his best mate, Ade (Arinzé Kene) in a Romanian hotel room on the eve of a match that has two of them competing for a spot on the first team after years of training together at the club’s Football Academy. They banter and horse around, but when it results in a kiss, everything changes. On the day of the match, Jason seizes his shot at glory and leaves Ade in the dust. In the years that follow, we see Jason going to extremes to protect his scrupulously heterosexual reputation, even going so far as to engineer his own tabloid sex scandal, all at the cost of his own happiness. Ade becomes a plumber and finds moderate contentment in his relationship with his boyfriend and playing down at Hackney Marshes with his mates on Sundays. Nevertheless, ten years after the fact, Ade still finds himself wondering if everything that happened that night was just a ploy to mess with his head so he would screw up the game that would have otherwise changed his life forever. When he meets up with Jason ten years later, he finds a man who has lost everything that might have been of value to him except his wealth and his reputation, and even that is on the wane as injury and poor behaviour mar the inevitable twilight of his career.

It’s no secret that the beautiful game has played host to and continues to shelter a lot of ugly prejudices. There’s a moment where Lyndsey (Lisa McGrillis) the escort Jason has roped in for his manufactured sexposé asks him why he’s acting as if he can’t just come out:

“What year do you think this is?”

“It’s still 1966 out there.”

Given the continued mediocrity of the England squad, English football has a preoccupation with its
past and God forbid you forgot the only year they won the World Cup. As a result, football culture comes off as being far more resistant to change than other areas of British life, with the possible exception of religious organisations. Racism has been and continues to be a serious problem, but these days management will come down pretty hard on poor fan behaviour if nothing else and want to be seen to do so. While there have been some attempts at tackling homophobic behaviour, such as the Kick It Out campaign, the enthusiasm doesn't seem to run as high as it does for racism.

I was surprised that the film didn’t mention or even make any allusion to Justin Fashanu, the UK’s first openly gay professional football player. There have been a smattering of other players who’ve come out following their retirement from professional football, but Fashanu remains the only one to have done so while playing in the Premier League. He had a very successful career, but it stalled after he came out in 1990. He later found work in the States, but fled back to the UK after he was accused of sexually assaulting a 17-year-old boy in Maryland (where even consensual sex between men was still illegal in 1997). He hanged himself a few weeks later, saying in his suicide note that the sex was consensual and that he feared that he wouldn’t get a fair trial as a gay man.
Deepcut: The Army’s Shame (BBC Two, 2016)

Investigative documentary detailing the toxic culture of abuse at the RLC Deepcut barracks, which the programme alleges contributed to the deaths of four recruits between 1995 and 2002. Some of the incidents of rape and sexual assault recounted by interviewees demonstrate how the military ban on gay and lesbian soldiers, still in force until the year 2000, aggravated the abuse by providing perpetrators with opportunities for blackmail which they could work to their own advantage.
Childhood besties Holly and Georgia (Synnøve Karlsen and Aisling Franciosi) are a few weeks into their first year of their unspecified business course at the University of Edinburgh. They sign up for a class ran by Jude McDermid (Louise Brealey), an iconoclastic economics professor who has rejected third-wave feminism’s victimisation fetish and teamed up with her investment manager brother, Alistair (Emun Elliott) to create an intensive internship programme aimed at her female students. When Georgia gets taken under the wing of Jude’s star pupils, a quartet of dizzyingly beautiful and impossibly accomplished young women - Rachel, Fay, Phoebe and Louise (Rachel Hurd-Wood, Emma Appleton, Ella-Rae Smith and Sophia Brown) - she is soon borged into the McDermid set, leaving Holly to wonder about the worrying changes in Georgia’s behaviour that follow.

BBC Three went real hard on marketing *Clique*. I went to the shops at Stratford one weekend and they were playing the trailer on the JumboTron outside the tube station. While I managed to be aware of its existence without watching any live television, what really piqued my interest in the show was a GIF post I saw doing the rounds when the show was first being promoted:
At first, I thought that their decision to use this image as part of a more-or-less official ad campaign I was guaranteed queer content of some sort. I looked at the notes...
It’s established early on that Holly and Georgia’s relationship is an unusually close one. Holly doesn’t appear to have other friends, nor does she have much interest in making any new ones. She’s also uncomfortable with the idea of sharing Georgia with any prospective boyfriend, although she doesn’t say as much out loud. When Holly doesn’t leap at the chance to help Georgia chase after some douchebag in a band (Harris Dickinson) who most likely isn’t interested in her, Georgia retaliates with a homophobic joke, ostensibly at the expense of their awkward neighbour, Elizabeth (Sorcha Groundsell), but nevertheless is also a jab at Holly.
Holly tags along to the gig and tries to rein an already-blootered Georgia from going too hard on Band Douche before she can get her feelings hurt. However, she gets distracted when she spots a group of girls who are clearly a cut above the surrounding clientele. Georgia drunkenly falling over herself and onto one of their number proves to be enough of an icebreaker to get her and Holly invited over to their table. Georgia’s too wasted to adequately express her gratitude and Holly tries to hustle her out of there before she can puke all over them, but is uneasy when Rachel, the group’s de-facto leader, offers them the use of their private car service. Holly accepts, but when she probes Mo (Peter Bankole), the driver, about who he works for and his connection to the girls, he doesn't give anything away.

After the girls decide to befriend Georgia and encourage her to put herself forward for the internship, she gets into an argument with Holly about it. Holly wants to know why Georgia is suddenly so enthusiastic when she had originally only signed up for the macroeconomics course because Holly was taking it. Holly is obviously upset that Georgia is taking her suggestion that she maybe slow her roll a little as an insult to her intelligence, but she doesn’t actually get riled up until Georgia accuses her of being jealous.

Even before the plot’s main conflict brings the issue to the fore, the level of intimacy in their relationship is rapidly becoming a source of tension. Georgia either has to turn it into a joke or make it seem like Holly is the one with the problem. After Mo drops them off at their halls, Holly helps Georgia into bed and is about to go to her own when she hears Georgia stir, turns back and joins her. The next morning, we find out that Georgia bolted (from her own room, no less) before Holly woke up, and tries her best to frame events in a way that makes her less uncomfortable.

Apologies if it seems like I’m infodumping to no discernible end, but I want to give you some idea of the dynamic between our leads before the plot takes hold. While these details in their interactions are naturally of interest to my pedantic ass, I can’t get into what really struck me about this show without divulging the events of entire series.
When Holly was eleven years old, she accidentally killed Lisa (Daisy Littlefield), the younger sister of one of her friends. She had dared Lisa to jump from a pier into the sea, thinking that she would hesitate and thus give Holly a reason not to let Lisa join her gang. It’s after this, when Holly is overwhelmed with guilt, that she meets Georgia. Like everyone else in town, she knows Holly did, but chooses to be her friend in spite of that. The significance of this has not been lost on Holly. She knows that Georgia’s love is what saved her from herself. Right out the gate, there’s a fundamental imbalance in the relationship, Holly worries about Georgia not just because she loves and cares for her, but because she has to redress that balance should the need arise.

And the need does indeed arise, albeit after taking a while to fully reveal itself. Georgia gets drawn further into the clique, even going so far as to move out of halls and into the girls’ swanky New Town pad. She falls completely off the radar, only for Holly to get a panicked phone call in the middle of the night from Georgia. Holly takes a cab to the house, but when arrives she doesn’t find Georgia but Mo, who reveals that Fay has slit her wrists in the bath. Holly rings an ambulance and Mo freaks out because he’s an illegal immigrant, so Holly tells him to leave before anyone arrives. The next morning, once Fay’s condition has been stabilised, Jude and Holly chat in the hospital forecourt when they’re interrupted by Fay plummeting from the roof and onto a Merc parked outside.

As the Solasta wagons circle in the wake of Fay’s suicide, Holly starts receiving texts with information that suggests Fay’s death wasn’t just down to the stress of her internship from someone who may or may not be James, Fay’s colleague and occasional shag. She also starts seeing ghostly apparitions of Fay entreating her to find out the truth. Holly follows Georgia into the internship programme and attempts to investigate Fay’s death. Holly’s mystery source leads her first to evidence of what would appear to be a financial fraud perpetrated by Alistair and with Fay and James as the patsies. Holly takes her suspicions to Jude, who all but frogmarches her to Alistair. Far from being surprised, he tells them that Fay and James were the ones with their fingers in the till, but that he had covered it up because he hadn’t wanted to see Fay’s memory tarnished in the press, and James’ body turning up in the Firth of Forth appears to corroborate this version of events.

However, it doesn’t do anything to put Holly’s mind at rest as regards Georgia. Jude tries to tell Holly that’s she worrying over nothing and that Georgia is doing well at work. She’s been allocated to Lukas Steiner (Kåre Conradi), a prize client originally poached by Fay. On the evening that Georgia finds this out, she comes home to Jude giving the rest of the girls a pep talk about not carrying on as if every man they work with is a potential predator and suffers a panic attack at the dinner table. Holly helps her fight it off in the bathroom, but the walls go back up as soon as she tries to get Georgia to talk about what’s upset her.

As Georgia pulls further away, Rachel moves in and tries to encourage Holly to start putting her own needs ahead of Georgia’s. When the informant sends Holly a video of Fay explaining that she and James had been investigating Steiner, who is in fact the international criminal kingpin Florian Helmlinger. He’s been using Solasta to launder his profits from his many and varied operations with Alistair’s full awareness and endorsement, as well as graphic footage of exactly what Fay was subjected to in order to seal the deal.

With her worst fear confirmed that Georgia has taken Fay's place, Holly, with Rachel and Elizabeth’s help, leaks the video of Helmlinger and Alistair raping Fay to Solasta and the university. Georgia goes into full-on denial about being raped, publically defending Alistair on television and exploiting the memory of Lisa's death to push back against Holly's desperate attempts to reach out to her. On top of that, making the video public doesn’t actually result in any charges being brought against either man by the police. (I’d say that this is a plot contrivance that puts undue strain on my willing suspension of disbelief, but since “Grab ‘em by the pussy!” failed to end the Republican presidential campaign in an instant, I don’t know what to believe anymore.) Nevertheless, releasing the video does trigger a series of events that result in Rachel revealing her true identity as Milly,
Holly’s childhood best friend before Georgia. While Holly is still sickened by what she did to Lisa, Milly enjoyed the rush she got from watching her leap to her death and has been longing to recapture that thrill ever since. Her chance reunion with Holly at the start of the year is what galvanised her into pushing Fay off the hospital roof, as she had hoped that this would remind Holly of their shared past. When that didn't pan out, she realised that she had to eliminate that which prevents Holly from accepting her “true nature”. She drugs and kidnaps Georgia, and then forces Holly to reenact Lisa’s murder on a cliff with Georgia as their victim. Faced with the choice of either pushing Georgia off or the two of them being stabbed to death by Milly, Holly takes a run at the cliff and grabs Georgia on her way down, giving them enough momentum to clear the shoreline below and land in the sea.

When they make it to the beach, Holly and Milly have a final fight to the death as Georgia drifts in and out of consciousness. Holly finally wrests the knife from Milly’s grasp and, just as she proves she’s nothing like Milly when she doesn’t kill her when she has the chance, Jude finally arrives with cavalry and I collapse in a heap in front of my television.

So, the first question I asked myself once the ride finally over was why, when Holly and Georgia’s relationship is so fundamental to the plot, does Holly need a love interest?

See, I didn’t mention Rory (Mark Strepan) in my synopsis screed because I wanted to demonstrate how little he actually matters. That’s not to say he’s at all superfluous to the plot; he initially acts as Holly’s confidant once he reveals to her that he’s been using his position at Solasta to act as a snout for the police, only for him to withhold evidence Holly has entrusted to him because he’s tipped Alistair off about the ongoing investigation in exchange for money. What he is truly superfluous to is Holly’s central conflict. He never finds out about Holly’s past, he doesn’t have any grasp of the nature of Holly and Georgia’s relationship and his betrayal is the means that facilitates Milly’s reveal rather than being an end in and of itself.

Georgia is a good example of a Not-Love Interest, which is a character that serves all the narrative functions of a love interest, usually by being endangered and/or the driving force behind the protagonist’s character arc. This can apply to parent/child dynamics, such as Joel and Ellie in the The Last of Us, but when it’s between two exceptionally close friends of the same gender, it comes with a whole host of Unfortunate Implications, the principal one being that your leads can love and cherish and even die for each other, but as long as it remains within the sanctioned bounds of friendship, where the “purity” of their bond can’t be tainted by gay sex. It’s particularly egregious when one of or both of them have love interests who clearly aren’t as important as the protagonists are to each other, so even if, like Rory, they ultimately help to move the plot forward, it’s difficult to dismiss claims that the real reason for their inclusion is to shore up the heterosexuality of the leads.

It seems there’s a fair bit of shoring up going on where Holly’s concerned, as we’re treated to multiple scenes of her having sex with men. At first glance, it would appear that the apple hasn’t fallen far from the tree; show creator Jess Brittain’s father and brother had a whole thing about teen sex scenes in Skins. This was a convention that translated disastrously to the American market, but, as far as I recall, did not significantly ruffle any feathers when the original series aired in the UK, so if there was anything novel or daring about showing teenagers having sex in a show actually targeted at that demographic, the same can’t be said of Clique. If anything, combined with all the slow-motion bacchanalian party scenes, it feels a little derivative.

You could argue that we needed the scenes to contrast with the rape. Overall, I’d say the series does a good job of balancing its depiction of young women exercising autonomy in their sex lives against how they react when that autonomy is violated. However, the scenes themselves are nothing revolutionary. They’re shot in muted soft-focus montage and the camera doesn’t do much to dissuade the audience that the purpose of these scenes isn’t so the audience can gawk at Synnøve Karlsen, with the presumed bonus of quashing any questions that might have started to form in the audience’s mind about the exact nature of Holly’s feelings for Georgia.
As scenes go, they’re pretty hollow. I suspect they were trying to convey a deepening emotional bond between Holly and Rory so as to give more weight to the eventual revelation of Rory’s betrayal, but it ultimately falls flat for the reasons I outlined above. That said, the scene where Holly has (unpremeditated) sex with Band Douche after getting into an argument with Georgia works a little better, because we see how quickly she shifts from being into it to regretting it. It’s also the only point when the possibility of a sexual dimension to Holly and Georgia’s relationship is ever discussed. When they’re done, Band Douche starts to suspect that Holly’s reasons for shagging him aren’t entirely about him:

“You fucked me to fuck her.”

Note the absence of a "with" in that sentence. The idea of using a straight pairing as a buffer or sexual intermediary in a queer relationship is nothing new. It can be seen in older movies like The Servant where censorship prevented filmmakers from being less equivocal than they might have liked, but this trope hasn’t exactly receded as from pop culture since then.

If anything, it’s shifted from film to television. You might have seen this post floating around a while back:

*With a honey in the middle there’s some leeway.*

*The area’s gray in a one-two-threeway.*

If anything, it’s shifted from film to television. You might have seen this post floating around a while back:
It’s not something you often see playing out between female characters, but I attribute that to the dearth of shows with two female co-protagonists above all else.

There’s another supposedly outdated trope that comes into play, this time with Milly. Her enjoyment of killing is framed in explicitly sexual terms, and since murdering Fay she’s discovered that a solo outing isn’t nearly as satisfying as a team effort, hence her desire to reestablish her relationship with Holly. This calls to mind gay killers of old, particularly Brandon and Phillip from Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rope*.

So Milly’s a Psycho Lesbian. Except she’s not because, as is the case with Holly and Georgia, the show doesn’t seem to have any interest in interrogating whether or not Milly’s driving obsession with Holly is a romantic or sexual one. Instead of a Psycho Lesbian, we have a Psycho Gal Pal.

This is where the show suffers on a more macro level because by failing to canonise Holly and Georgia’s relationship. It misses a great opportunity to subvert the Psycho Lesbian trope by decoupling the two from each other, with Holly actively rejecting the toxic influence from her past who has metastasized into a full-blown psychopath since they parted in favour of the somewhat codependent but ultimately healing and positive relationship she has with Georgia. While this does happen in the series as is, it doesn’t have the same power it might have done had the queerness of these relationships had been text rather subtext.

We do have one textually queer character in the form of Louise, the group’s resident maths wizard. She expresses some frustration at Georgia getting Fay’s spot on the Steiner account, the implication being that she was never considered because Helmlinger and Alistair understood that a gay woman would be much harder to manipulate into thinking that she was “asking for it” in any way. While that line of thought makes sense in the context of this particular story, the suggestion that being a lesbian exempts you from sexual harassment and abuse, be it in the workplace or elsewhere, is naive at best and utterly ignorant at worst. Louise mentions in passing an unnamed girlfriend who we never, so at the end of the day her orientation isn’t so much incidental as it is perfunctory. Like, if we’ve got a “real” gay somewhere in the mix of secondary characters, that somehow negates any possibility that the protagonists might not be entirely straight.

I should stress that I don’t believe the failure to fully address the question of Holly and Georgia is rooted in distaste at the idea of them being in a relationship, but rather than an unchallenged assumption that’s common to a lot of writers.
And yet, for all my griping, *Clique* honestly turned out to be one of the most surprising shows of 2017. I went in expecting a feeble *Gossip Girl* knock-off with a few shallow buzzwords scattered throughout the script, not a serious examination of rape and sexual harassment in the context of third-wave feminism.

Jude opens her course with her assessment of the current position of Britain’s female population:

> “Women are 51% of the population in this country. Bitches got the majority. Say hello to that majority, and then wave it goodbye, because it’s the only one you’ve got. You are 29% of MPs. You are 22% of university professors. You are 10% of FTSE 100 directors. We’re not there. So, what’s the problem?...Sexism is the problem in the developing world. The problem here, ladies, is you. You are the ones moaning on Tumblr. You are the ones who made yourselves a victim in every office. You are the ones banging on about the pay gap, when you should be getting on with your career. You are the problem.

> “Feminism in this country has been infected with misinformation and an obsession with being offended. I am here to help you reclaim it. I am not here to help you joyride because you happen to possess a vagina. And I’m not going to sit and cry with you when you graduate and realise that the system isn’t fair. Of course it’s not. Get over it. Take action. And get off Twitter.”

This speech was what really got me on board for the rest of the show. I cannot tell you how refreshing it is to hear a critique of the third wave that doesn’t come from a place of contempt for the concept of feminism in general or from some clapped-out TERF whose worldview hasn’t evolved one jot since 1973. I don’t necessarily agree with it in its entirety. In reality, I suspect that someone like Jude would probably be opposed to a positive-discrimination, jobs-for-the-girls scheme like the one at Solasta, given her aforementioned opposition to vagina-joyriding, but this particular instance of hypocrisy is necessary to get the plot moving, so I can let it slide. Much as I appreciated this scene, I had my suspicions that it was a plant and that Jude was going to have her perspective challenged over the course of the series. I was not disappointed.
I'm not only who noticed a resemblance between Jude and another famous fictional Edinburgh pedagogue. While *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* is about a delusional egomaniac whose open support for fascism ultimately results in the death of one of her pupils, Jude sees her conviction that the magnitude of the threat of rape has been exaggerated to the point that it has become more political hot air than a tangible fear utterly destroyed by the end of the series. Not only did that confidence blind her to the fact that her own brother is a serial rapist who preyed upon her students and God knows who else, it actively contributed to the psychological trauma inflicted on Georgia.

Unfortunately, we only get to see Jude being broken by what’s happened. During the little coda that takes place a few months after the fight at the beach, we see Holly encouraging her to come back to work (presumably oblivious to the fact that Jude was sacked after the video leak), but we don’t get any sense of exactly how her perspective has been altered by the events of the past few months. Still, there’s time yet for a second series to be commissioned, so for now I’m hopeful that neither hers nor Holly and Georgia’s stories end here.
If I seemed unimpressed by *A Very British Sex Scandal*, it’s because I saw this first, and there was no contest. While *Against the Law* could also be described as a docudrama in that it combines the dramatisation of Wildeblood’s trial and imprisonment with testimony from gay men of the time, its approach to the subject is otherwise entirely different.

*Against the Law* is a drama rather than a dramatic reconstruction. Here, Peter (Daniel Mays) has a much more clearly defined character arc. We see him go from taking his first, tentative steps into organised gay life and his unexpected joy at finding and falling in love with Eddie to the utter devastation of his seemingly inexplicable betrayal and the ordeal of his trial and imprisonment and his decision to fight back upon his release. But rather than making his testimony at the Wolfenden Committee into a simplistic, feel-good ending, the film ultimately complicates his legacy as a champion for gay rights.

We open on Peter making what we are led to believe is his first ever visit to a gay bar. He tries to chat up a sailor but is interrupted by Fanny (Paul Keating), who gently explains that there are rules of engagement that have to be observed. His advice proves to be wasted on Peter, who ends up meeting cute with Eddie (Richard Gadd) on his way home. At first, it seems like a bit of a wasted scene, but Peter and Fanny do meet again, this time in prison. Fanny tries to establish some common ground by chatting about an article on the Wolfenden Committee, and whereas Peter was only slightly uncomfortable when they first met, this time he has a much more pronounced spasm of internalised homophobia.

This subplot culminates in Peter giving evidence at the Wolfenden Committee, but instead of busting
out a speech that’s been parachuted in straight from 2017, he tells the panel that he’s here to stick up for the “good” gays who are suitably apologetic about their terrible affliction, rather than all those obnoxious queens who refuse to behave in a manner that lets straight people ignore the fact that they’re gay:

“They’re known as “pansies.” People of that kind are born like that. To that extent, I suppose they’re not responsible. What they are responsible for is their nuisance value. They cause a lot of bad public feeling towards the other, more discreet homosexuals. When I ask for tolerance, it is for men like us, not the corrupters of youth, not the effeminate creatures making an exhibition of themselves. I speak for the men who, despite their tragic disability, try to lead their lives as decent citizens.”

Even though Wolfenden and Co don’t really probe Peter on his testimony, it doesn’t pass without comment. The scene is intercut with Fanny leaving a bar for a potential hookup, only for the man in question to beat the shit out of him while yelling homophobic abuse at him.

Having read the book, it appears as though the character of Fanny of was completely fictional. However, this speech is lifted almost directly from the text. In an article in the Radio Times, screenwriter Brian Fillis points out that, even as we feel for Peter and see ourselves in his struggles, it can be all too easy to ignore that he was as much a product of the times as those who were persecuting him. But rather than just letting him speechify and leaving the audience to think, “ooh, isn’t he morally ambiguous,” Fanny is used to illustrate precisely why this kind of rhetoric is so damaging. When we divide against each other, it leaves an open goal for bigots to feel justified in their abuse.

There’s also a really cruel irony in that ending. When Peter is first arrested, he refuses to dob on his friends not just out of loyalty to them but to gay men in general.

“Sops of a feather flock together. Hadn’t you heard?”

However, when he finally gets the chance to influence public opinion and policy on his own terms rather than as a victim of the state, that loyalty does not extend to gay men whose affect he finds personally distasteful. Men who, for all the ire they might have attracted from both inside the community and out, made their own positive impact simply by carving out a way to be themselves. As viewers pointed out in the programme’s review in The Guardian, this is something that tends to be overlooked in our understanding of recent queer history.

“We often forget that without the past excesses of effeminate, flamboyant pansies and the “stately homos of England,” the cause of present-day gay men (and women) who just want to live simply, quietly and unnoticed with their partners would be stuck in the dark ages of the 1950s.”

Moreover, trying to be one of the “good” ones is not guarantee of security when the society you live in is fundamentally unjust. It’s no defence against your entire life being rendered collateral damage in a state-sponsored witch hunt made possible by legislation against your very being and a flagrantly corrupt police force ready to steamroll over what rights you do have.

The intra-community prejudice subplot renders the conclusion of Peter’s story more ambivalent than the book, where he reflects on the fact that his ordeal, though by turns farcical and degrading, allowed him to find genuine self-acceptance for the first time in his life. The adaptation saves the happy ending for the interviewees, who close out the programme by celebrating the progress that’s been made since the Montagu scandal.
Archive documentary directed by Daisy Asquith with collaborative assistance from the likes of Mike Nicholls and Campbell X. If you are unfamiliar with the format, I can offer you the description of the film I gave my mother over the phone after I saw it for the first time:

“You know that programme with all those old home movies playing over King Creosote? It’s like that, but gay.”

Of course, that’s not the whole story. The film uses a collage of footage from cinema, television, documentaries, home movies and news reports to revisit a century or so of British queer history. Rather than have a perfectly linear narrative, the film is broken down into sections, examining the media from events such decriminalisation and the AIDS crisis as well as more abstract themes like sex, love and shame.

The documentary was made under the auspices of BFI and most of the footage was sourced from its Beautiful Things collection, which allows for many overlooked treasures like Priest and the Consenting Adults documentaries to garner some long-overdue recognition. It also includes moments from a lot of ostensibly straight films, highlighting their queer subtext by divorcing them from their original context.

Unfortunately, due to the budgetary constraints of having to negotiate with so many rightsholders, there are some absences that are keenly felt. There’s nothing from the likes of Brideshead Revisited or Tipping the Velvet. Not even Queer as Folk manages to put in an appearance. Footage from the last decade or so is also very thin on the ground. I don’t doubt that this was also down to the budget, but the editorial standpoint might have had something to do with it. The film wraps up with an interview from Quentin Crisp warning us against being too quick to embrace the mainstream. Asquith herself at the film’s BFI screening described the project as “a very angry film.” I don’t entirely agree with that assessment. There were certainly things I saw in the film that made me
angry, like the age of consent debates in the House of Commons, but the film as a whole runs a
dreamy gamut of emotions. Just as Asquith also said she didn’t want the film to be merely a list of
dates, neither is it solely a laundry list of the various indignities that have been visited upon us over
the years. The film does acknowledge the arrival of marriage equality in 2014, but I felt it was
somewhat glossed over. I gather Asquith wanted to end with a warning against complacency, which
is a sentiment I wholeheartedly support, particularly in light of the world we’re living in now where
so much is no longer as certain as it once seemed, but I can’t help but wonder if the incorporation of
more current material like Last Tango in Halifax, Broadchurch, Boy Meets Girl or even London Spy
might have altered the film's perspective on our more recent achievements.
Queers (BBC Four, 2017)

Queers (BBC Four, 2017)

A series of monologues charting the last hundred years of gay life in Britain, all set within the same anonymous pub. The budget doesn’t seem to have allowed for an episode for every decade, so we have eight episodes in the following order:

The Man on the Platform - 1917

Percy has managed to return from the battlefields of France in one piece, having served as hospital orderly rather than in the infantry. However, he has not been left unscarred. He fell in love with a beautiful young officer only for them to be discovered by another soldier and forced apart by the army brass. They are reunited for an instant in England in a darkened railway station, only to be separated once more, forever. Percy also recounts an incident from a childhood visit to Reading where he witnessed a man he later learned was Oscar Wilde being taken to gaol and how this awakened him to his own identity.

Had the name of Oscar Wilde been invoked in this way by any other writer in the world, I would have swooned. Although the programme’s remit is to cover the hundred-year period between 1917 and 2017, it provides a vital link to the Victorian era, whose moralistic viewpoint was the foundation of 20th-century homophobia. However, the revelation that Mark Gatiss is capable of being a good writer when he actually makes an effort induced in me a moment of blinding, white-hot rage, upon which I will elaborate on my Sherlock chapter, which promises to be an absolute behemoth. That said, it was only one moment in what was a very strong opening episode.

A Grand Day Out - 1994

Seventeen-year-old Andrew bunks off from college in Nottingham and travels down to London to join the crowd gathered outside the House of Commons on the evening of the age of consent ruling. (For the unaware, the title is cribbed from the first Wallace and Gromit short, which also features a somewhat unworldly Northerner temporarily leaving his home for an adventure.) He and the rest of the crowd gathered there are furious when the age is only lowered to 18, but after a brief non-scuffle with the police they soon disperse, leaving Andrew to cop off with an older man for want of accommodation for the night.

A Grand Day Out is probably the least interesting episode in the series if you’re already familiar with the history. That’s not to say that I think it’s bad at all, it’s just that the other episodes left me with more to think about and, as you’ll see, more to write about for this project.

More Anger - 1987

Phil is a jobbing actor who’s found regular work playing gay men dying of AIDS. Although he’s glad to be in gainful employment, he feels like he’s starting to get typecast and that he isn’t moving forward in his career. He then lands a regular role in a soap as a gay character who is so perfectly bland and pointedly healthy that he soon finds himself growing bored. Off-screen, however, he is in
the first flush of a new relationship with Simon, a dancer. It’s only when it starts to go from sex to love that Simon reveals that he’s positive and the relationship founders almost instantly. Although they had been safe, Phil can’t forgive the trust violation and they split up.

Rather than merely rehashing old talking points about depictions of AIDS and homosexuality in general, More Anger gives us in twenty minutes what I’ve been trying to do with these tens of thousands of words: a nuanced discussion. Phil talks about how he plays the same scenes over and over with the implication that aren’t entirely honest about the day-to-day reality of many gay relationships:

“The scene I’m really good at is the deathbed scene where the boyfriend shows up...He’s sometimes older - not always - cute, obviously, but there’s an awkwardness between us. It’s not actually said but you get the vague sense that he’s been messing about in saunas and toilets and not taking precautions, while I, of course, have been faithful as a puppy.”

Compare this to the scene in Angels in America where Louis points out the injustice of his boyfriend Prior getting infected when Louis was the one who had been the bigger risk-taker when it came to the two of them supplementing their relationship with casual sex.

At the beginning, Phil isn’t at all ignorant of what’s going on around him. He hasn’t resigned himself to celibacy and so takes the necessary precautions, but it’s his experience with Simon that opens his eyes to the bigger picture. It uncorks the anger inside him at the fact that he sees death and suffering everywhere he looks and that the people who have the power to change that don’t even see him as human. He also wonders how future gay generations will view the crisis once the worst of it has passed:

“And I’ll bet you, years from now, if you want to get anywhere near this stuff on stage, you’ll have to do it tangentially, use some clever trick to keep things light, because hey, being gay in the eighties was more than just AIDS, wasn’t it?”

This is a tune I’ve been singing for a while, but that last line still caught me off-guard because I have seen people from my own generation take part in this kind of revisionism. Phil’s talking specifically about young queer men, for whom being too mindful of the past might kill their buzz by making them question if they’re being responsible enough. But it’s not just the guys who are at it. If audience reactions to *London Spy* are anything to go by, there are some young queer women out there for whom acknowledging the true horror of the AIDS crisis in film or television doesn’t jive with their idea of how best to represent queer people in television. (I don’t want to pick on any particular blog, but you can do a timestamped tumblr search in the London Spy tag for the airdates after each episode and judge for yourself.)

Regardless of the gender of the people in question, these kinds of reactions aren’t actually all that surprising. The reason that last line hit me so hard was because it inadvertently made me realise how I might react to someone balking at the production of any given Holocaust drama on the basis that “being Jewish in the 1940s wasn’t just about the Holocaust.”

While there were certainly Jewish people in the 1940s whose day-to-day lives didn’t change because of the Holocaust, such as those from countries which were not invaded by the Nazis, that doesn’t mean that it didn’t have an impact. Collective trauma is an incredibly complicated issue. If you look at documentaries like *Hollywood and the Holocaust*, *Volvo City* and the *Next Generation* episode of Vanessa Engle’s *Jews* series, you get a glimpse of how the Holocaust has and continues to elicit many varied and complex emotional responses not just from the people who survived it, but from subsequent generations and the communities that surround them. So, if someone, perhaps a young
person, were to respond all this by brushing it off in favour of a more “positive” view, we would be having words.

When the scale and depth of a trauma overwhelms our understanding of it, the response can be to carry on as if it never happened, although this usually stops short at outright denial of the event itself. Usually some time has to pass before these defences start to thaw and a more complex understanding can take root. Now that we have the benefit of 30+ years of hindsight, it’s becoming clearer, especially to people like me who didn’t live through it, how the AIDS shaped public attitudes towards queer people and how its after-effects have shaped the movement since.

*More Anger* makes the supposition that the passage of time has led to the crisis being downplayed or even outright whitewashed. As yet, I haven’t covered enough AIDS-related material to weigh in on this theory. In fact this was an avenue of exploration I had not yet considered. Even though they can have wildly different approaches to the same subject, I hadn’t really thought about comparing AIDS films and shows of the period to the period pieces, so I will have to report back on this one at a later date.

**Missing Alice** - 1957

Having had a child out of wedlock as a teenager, Alice (Rebecca Front) hadn’t expected to marry well. But when she meets Michael in the shame pew at church, she finds a kindred spirit. They soon marry but Michael keeps finding ways to avoid sex. Alice blames herself, but when Michael caves and confesses to what’s he’s been up to on all his late nights out, the news comes with some measure of relief. Nevertheless, Alice does feel wounded at having been used. Her mother-in-law, Helen, who knew that Michael was gay long before Alice did, tries to smooth things over and make sure doesn’t consider outing Michael of spite. Alice doesn’t entirely appreciate Helen citing Alice’s “mishap” in her own personal life as part of her appeal for compassion, but it does the trick. In fact, rather than taking the standard approach of I-don’t-care-what-you-do-as-long-you-keep-it-out-of-the-house, Alice suggests that he brings his pickups round to the flat so that she doesn’t have to be alone. Things are understandably awkward when they first try it out but it ends up working quite well for them since none of Michael's flings ever become things. It isn’t until the publication of the Wolfenden Report and the possibility of legalisation enters her head that she begins to doubt the long-term viability of her marriage. The episode ends with Alice relating how Michael assuaged her concerns by telling her that he’d miss her, so I think we can assume that they stuck together, at least for the time being.

I must confess that I was disappointed that a series called *Queers* saw fit to devote an episode to a straight character, but I know in my heart that this is utterly unfair. There have been so many straight people past and present who’ve been out there on the front lines with us as well as those like Alice who made significant private sacrifices that ought to be recognised. I’m not usually like this - I didn’t have any qualms about the Luke episode of *The Handmaid’s Tale*. I am not someone who believes that sealing the community off from outsiders is in the best interests of its members. I think my issue was that I thought this was going to be the lesbian episode. I was surprised they didn’t go down the road of having them both be gay and have the marriage be a mutually bearded one, which is a setup I have found to be surprisingly underexploited in fiction. Having said that, I can see the benefit of a straight perspective on the Wolfenden Report in this series. It would have been difficult to cover this event with a male character and not then retread much of the same ground in next episode.

**I Miss the War** - 1967
While all the youngsters in the bar are celebrating their newly legal status, for Jackie, a middle-aged tailor, the occasion is more bittersweet. He has happy memories of his days as a rent boy and of the sexual liberation brought about by the war, the entirety of which he spent in good old Blighty serving as a batman. Once he left the army, he invested his rental income in a shop, where he intends to spend the rest of his life cheerfully feeling up the dedicated followers of fashion who pass through his doors and enjoying a bit of sport at the pub or in Trafalgar Square after closing. He doesn’t expect that decriminalisation will do anything to change his life, or even that it will improve anyone else’s:

“Trust me, homosexuals will be no better off than they are now...We will be forced to swallow the great lie that romance happens only once and that love is forever. That’s just not true. Why do you think normal people are so unhappy? Because they have unrealistic expectations.”

Jackie presents himself as the antithesis of what some would deem today as the “assimilated” gay male. Any aspirations towards monogamy or even expectations of a long-term relationship have long been discarded. In theory, this is supposed to be a liberation from all those unrealistic expectations thrust upon the straight majority, but even the most dedicated hold-out against the mainstream might find themselves at least considering other options if those options are rendered genuinely viable. Jackie doesn’t dismiss the idea of love, just of lasting love, but forsaking long-term attachments is only a free choice when you’re equally free to fully embrace them. Maybe if Jackie hadn’t had the spectre of Lily Law lingering over him for most of his life, happiness in a committed relationship might not have seemed such a remote possibility.

The Safest Spot in Town - 1941

Having failed to follow in his father’s footsteps as a professional cricketer, Fredrick (Kadiff Kirwan) leaves Jamaica and arrives in Southampton in 1938. Rather than continuing with his studies as he had originally planned, he drifts from place to place before winding up in London, where he falls in with an arty crowd in Bloomsbury. As well as working his way through most of the set, he finds himself playing the muse to Andrew, a much older painter. The attraction is by no means one-sided, but Fredrick soon finds himself growing restless and the affair peters out.

Of all the pub patrons in this series, Fredrick was the most difficult for me to get a handle on. I’m not going to take advantage of the anonymity of AO3 to disguise the fact that I’m white. That said, I do have some experience of being the stranger in a strange land who for the first time in their life finds themselves being treated as an object of curiosity, so honestly I was a little surprised I had such a hard time plugging into this one. Like Fredrick, I got asked the same questions over and over. However, that curiosity never extended to my physical being, so perhaps that’s why I found Fredrick so hard to figure out. I don’t know how I would have handled any of that. Fredrick’s response seems to be to not let himself get to close to anything. His relationship with Andrew founders because, even though Andrew views him with the eye of a lover, he still sees him as an other.

“I remember seeing myself in one of his watercolours on a wall in a gallery in Belgravia, and I couldn’t help thinking to myself, “Why he paint me so dark, eh?”...He had me down just right. He had me down so right he could paint me without me being there, and after a while I was there not so much. Some part of me will always remain on that wall, I imagine, in a gold leaf frame. The other part of me needs to move on. Could never really stick itself to a white canvas.”

Obviously, this isn’t something I’ve had any experience with, but I can see why Fredrick wouldn’t
want to stick around long enough to let people box him in. Regardless, he has little interest in settling down. He spends a lot of time trolling the bars and nightclubs, finally getting to go out and enjoy himself in a way he never could at home. However, he soon finds himself butting up against the racism of the era which, while not as overt as the Jim Crow laws in the US or indeed similar restrictions operated in countries under British colonial rule, was still present. When the economic conditions brought about by the war force Soho’s Café de Paris to end their ban on Black patrons, Fredrick had planned to spend his first evening there sheltering from raids on its subterranean dance floor while eying up Snake Hips, the leader of the new West Indian band in residence at the club. But instead of finally taking his place at the hottest spot in the scene when the sirens sound, he ducks into a bathroom with an air raid warden, only to realise when he emerges from his impulse shag that the Café has been blasted to buggery after bomb fell down a ventilation shaft, killing Snake Hips in the process. After spending all his time not letting himself get too attached to anyone or anything, it’s this incident that motivates him to join up before he’s called up to fight, this being the first thing he’s done since he arrived in England that isn’t motivated purely by his own self-interest. He wants to make a stand for the community he found in London, which is certainly admirable, but I wasn’t feeling it. Old Compton Street’s alright, I guess. I just wouldn’t risk my arms and legs for it.

The Perfect Gentlemen - 1929

Bobby Page doesn’t waste time letting the audience in on the big secret:

“I am not what I seem. I am not a man. That is to say, I was not born a man, but I do not wish to be a man. I like the costume, I like the ease, I like the way I’m able to be in the world, but I am very much female...She is not what he seems, and she, as he, can rattle around as he pleases, and if he so pleases to indulge in a bout of beard-splitting, then so be it.”

After losing her first love to a flash git, Ellen Page (didn’t even notice that until I typed it out), leaves home to work in service, where she inadvertently discovers her love of top-of-the-line menswear after rescuing some of her boss’ old clothes from the rubbish heap. She gradually progresses from wearing her top hat and tails in the privacy of her room to chatting up unhappy wives in the pub and copping off with them in back alleys. The word gets around about the “Doctor of Southwark” and Bobby rarely has to want for company on a Saturday night. This is all well and good until she meets and falls in love with Sally, a shop assistant who is absolutely mad for her. Bobby even asks Sally to marry her, but panics when Sally wants to celebrate their engagement by going all the way. Bobby manages to put her off, but only long enough for Bobby to have a very bad idea involving a wax candle. When Sally does inevitably discover the truth, she bails, but the ending leaves us with a Hope Spot that she might return.

The reason I was so salty about Alice not being gay is that I thought that her episode was going to be the lesbian episode and that this would be the transgender episode. Instead, we end up with one lesbian episode and no transgender episode whatsoever. Obviously, no one series can hope to represent the entire breadth and depth of queer life, but surely some insight into the trans experience would not have gone amiss? Curation complaints aside, I liked this episode well enough, though, given the choice, I’d rather carve out a few hours to watch the whole of Tipping the Velvet than have it squashed into a twenty-minute monologue.

Something Borrowed - 2016
Steve (Alan Cumming) is getting married and doing some last-minute speech practice (unlike the other monologues, this one is fairly plot-light). My feelings about the other episodes have ranged from slightly lukewarm to mostly positive, but this was the one that had me pointing at the screen and yelling “IT ME!” Part of that is cultural commonality - I too had a particularly wretched experience of secondary school in Scotland - but it’s also because this is the only time anyone has been able to articulate how I feel about marriage and what it has to offer the queer community. Like Jackie, Steve understands that there is something lost when you no longer find yourself cast in the role of the rebel. Unlike Jackie, however, Steve doesn’t see this as little more than a display of conformity that can only end in unhappiness, but instead as an opportunity to for queer people to make their own mark on the institution. He’s also found a way to reconcile his romantic idealism with the vagaries of the real world - just because no marriage is perfect doesn’t mean it can’t be wonderful.

Steve’s episode is the natural choice to close out the series, even with the not entirely anachronic order in effect. It’s the only episode that feels like part of a larger whole, even if this is only because it hints that Steve met an elderly Percy when he was working in a care home as a teenager. The strength of the ending doesn’t lie in its continuity nods but in its conviction in the value of marriage both for individual queer couples but for society as a whole. We’ve all heard from that one person who believes marriage is nothing more than an inherently misogynistic holdover from a time when women were little more than chattel, or an unjustifiable intrusion of the state into the realm of the individual, or maybe even an act of assimilation and therefore a fundamental betrayal of the radical roots of the queer community. While Something Borrowed doesn’t seek to address these issues, in the face of ever-mounting cynicism, it’s refreshing and even uplifting to hear someone say that, yes, marriage, like everything else created by human hand, is flawed, but that it is still relevant and worthwhile in spite of that. It’s nothing short of transformative for the queer community, even for those who don’t who participate in it. Equal marriage was the last step in the legislative integration of at least the gay community into mainstream society. It does represent the end of a particular chapter in the queer history of Britain, but it’s by no means the end of the story. It’s the beginning of whatever comes next.
The best stories are simple. And where better to go for a simple story than the county famed for its natural beauty and its no-nonsense approach to life, the universe and everything?

Johnny Saxby (Josh O’Connor) is stuck. While his friends have moved on to university and away from their tiny North Yorkshire village, his dad’s recent stroke has seen him tethered to the family farm, escaping only for nights on the lash and hookups at the livestock auction.

Johnny’s nan, mindful of the workload ahead with the impending lambing season, recruits Romanian migrant worker Gheorghe (Alec Secareanu), to help out. At first, Johnny treats him with suspicion and hostility, but as they are forced to live and work together out on the moor, the initial froideur between starts to thaw and honestly I don’t even really need to tell you anything else. They get together, have a second-act breakup once the summer’s over, Gheorghe leaves for a job in Scotland, Johnny realises he’s made a mistake and goes after him, they get back together and live happily ever after. Lad meets lad, lad loses lad, lad gets lad back.

The inevitable comparisons to Brokeback Mountain weren’t long in coming along with the widespread critical acclaim. While its influence is obvious, my feeling is that God’s Own Country comes off the back of a different but related trend in queer cinema described by Infamous Sphere as “The Corrupting Drifter.”

“A corrupting drifter is someone who moves into the main character’s hometown or place of employment or whatever else. He or she is the new guy who awakens our character’s sexuality. Usually, the corrupting drifter is more self-assured and more
knowledgeable about their own sexuality and the film often ends with them leaving the town. If it’s a happy ending, the main character will either persuade them to stay or go with them.”

This is a very basic story structure, hence my argument that the plot is the least important aspect of this movie. *God Own Country*’s success lies how all the other elements of the film come together. Not only is there great chemistry between the leads, the performances from Ian Hart and Gemma Jones as Johnny’s dad and nan convey so much about the history of their family with very little in the way of exposition or even much dialogue. The setting is also a driving influence on the characters, this being the other major similarity with *Brokeback Mountain*. The moor is rich with unvarnished beauty, but the life it demands of the people who live and work on it can result in a great deal of isolation.

However, completely contrary to what I had expected, homophobia need not be a component of that isolation. This is where the movie reveals itself as something other than a mere replanting of *Brokeback Mountain* into a different time and place. In *BBM* it’s not just the rural setting exerting its influence on the protagonists but the homophobia baked into the culture that surrounds it. *God’s Own Country* also digs deep into a rural culture but instead comes to an entirely different conclusion of how queer people can fit into that culture.

Yorkshire and to a certain extent the North as a whole does have a certain brand of regionalised machismo that derides anything “soft” or drawing attention to one’s self by being different, yet virtually none of the homophobia that you would expect from that perspective is present in the film, but this never feels inauthentic to the setting. The element of the Yorkshire psyche that really gets examined in this film is that sort of tight-lipped stoicism that leaves little scope for the expression of any emotion let alone emotional vulnerability. Over the course the movie we find out that Johnny’s mum left the family to become a hairdresser at some unspecified point in the past and that his dad has never really been able to talk about it, much less get over it. At the beginning of the movie, we see that Johnny has no means of dealing with his feelings about his dad’s stroke and the ensuing fallout besides booze and casual sex.

Johnny’s character growth doesn’t come so much from learning to better articulate his feelings (although that is a positive side effect) but simply from finding and learning how to be part of a loving relationship. That’s really what makes this film revolutionary. It’s not that it has a happy ending - which itself is not unheard of in corrupting drifter plots - it’s that Gheorghe, rather than being some sort of reforming outsider who shakes up a backward microculture, is instead the piece that Johnny was missing all along. He doesn’t find happiness by finding some with whom to merely escape or endure the farm, but someone who helps him become the man he needs to be in order to embrace it.
Kiri (Channel 4, 2018)

Drama by Jack Thorne about the abduction of the title character (played by Felicia Mukasa) from an unsupervised visit with her birth grandparents that sparks off an intense debate, both publicly and within the care sector, on transracial adoption. After Miriam (Sarah Lancashire), Kiri’s social worker, is suspended pending an investigation, she goes to see Lucy (Cara Theobold), one of the junior social workers in her office, in A&E after she’s been assaulted by a teenage client. Lucy called Miriam because she was upset but didn't want to report the incident to Julie (Claire Rushbrook), their boss. This isn't because she’s afraid of the kid who blacked her eye, but because she's worried about how the incident will reflect on her professionally. Thanks to the heavy-duty painkillers she’s on, she also accidentally blurts out her crush on Miriam. Miriam brushes this off in her characteristically blunt manner, but manages to do so without coming off as affronted or unkind.
Adaptation of China Miéville’s *New Weird* detective novel set in the overlapping but self-segregating cities of Besźel and Ul Qoma. Inspector Tyador Borlú (David Morrissey) of the Besźel Extreme Crime Squad finds himself tasked with solving the murder of an American student in a disputed area that is suspiciously similar to the disappearance of his wife, Katrynia Perla (Lara Pulver). When the murder inquiry leads him to Ul Qoma, he’s paired up with Senior Detective Quissima Dhatt (Angela Schrader).

This team-up sees some *Wunza* elements being added to the mix, with Borlú clashing with Dhatt’s by-the-book approach to policing as well as her unsentimental attitude towards the Ul Qoman authorities’ well-documented human rights abuses and even her own racist attitudes towards Besźelians. She does of course soften a little as she and Borlú discover that they’re *Not So Different* after all. Not only do they happen to live on opposite sides of the same square, they both managed to bag wives who are way out of their respective leagues.

The series makes a few significant changes from the novel. Katrynia was introduced, with China Mieville’s approval, to give the concept of “breaching” (crossing between the cities illegally) some visual focus as well as to give Borlú a stronger motivation to pursue the case to its conclusion. The changes to Dhatt’s character, however, ultimately create more problems than they do solutions.

Time constraints currently prevent me from confirming this for myself, but my research tells me that in the book, Dhatt is a dude. Rather than being a stickler for the rules, he’s a *Cowboy Cop* who revels in any opportunity to throw his weight around in pursuit of a result, in contrast to Borlú’s rather more ineffectual style of policing. Going to opposite extreme with the female Dhatt was absolutely the right decision, because it is nigh-on impossible to translate the *Cowboy Cop* archetype to a female character. However, the way the audience is introduced to her partner raises a whole slew of worldbuilding questions that go unanswered.
As the investigation wears on and Dhatt comes round to Borlú’s theory that there’s a larger conspiracy at work, she invites him back to her place to “see the dogs,” and just as I’m asking myself whether or not having these two sleep together is going to add anything to the story, she clarifies that she wants Borlú to come round for dinner so he can meet her “significant euphemism.” This implies that she isn’t out at work, and I have to ask myself why that’s the case.

Ul Qoma is presented as an authoritarian city-state whose economy has undergone a stratospheric growth spurt thanks to its mineral reserves. Combined with a name with a vowel-L prefix and a Q substituting for a K without a U, the most obvious source of inspiration is from the states of the Arabian peninsula such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Unlike these countries, however, Ul Qoma does not appear to be a theocracy, so there isn’t an obvious explanation for why Dhatt would feel the need to keep her relationship a secret in present-day 2018. Even somewhere like Singapore, another country with an economy that underwent recent rapid development and westernisation, can partially attribute its poor LGBT rights record to religious influences. Perhaps we’re meant to assume that since Ul Qoma isn’t above mistreating its immigrant population, any vulnerable minority is fair game, but in order for that exploitation to have a tangible effect, the state would have to be playing to a prejudice that already existed within the populace.

Still, for all the structural quandaries it throws up, the scene where Borlú has dinner with Dhatt and her partner, Yallya (Kasia Koloeczek), is a welcome reprieve from what is otherwise a very downbeat story. This is clearly the first nice thing that has happened to him since his wife disappeared. Seeing these two being happy together gives him a chance to remember how happy he was with Katrynia without immediately being set upon by his regrets. On top of that, this might just be the only time I’ve come across a scene where a straight guy interacts with a lesbian couple in a situation that has nothing to do with a spermquest and no weird prurient curiosity influencing his behaviour or attempting to influence the response of the audience.
Adaptation of Ian McEwan’s novel about Fiona Maye (Emma Thompson), a High Court judge who becomes involved in a case of seventeen-year-old Jehovah’s Witness refusing a life-saving blood transfusion.

When we first see Fiona roll up to her chambers on a Monday morning, Nigel (Jason Watkins), her clerk, mentions that he and his husband Dominic spent their weekend fishing. I was briefly tempted to revisit the book to check that Dominic was indeed his significant other but then I thought, “Fuck it!” If he had said a woman’s name, I would have automatically assumed he was referring to his wife and not a sister or friend.
Still to Come:

- Absolute Hell - 1991
- Absolutely
- Absolutely Fabulous
- The Accused
- Age of Dissent - 1994
- Agony - 1980
- Alfalfa - 1987
- All Out! Dancing in Dulais
- All the Small Things
- 'Allo 'Allo
- Andy the Furniture Maker - 1986
- The Angelic Conversation - 1985
- Anita and Me
- Annie's Bar
- Armstrong and Miller
- As If
- At Home with the Braithwaites
- At Home with Larry Grayson
- Attachments -2000
- The Attendant - 1993
- Baby - 2001
- Bad Girls
- Battling Bruisers: Some Boxing Buffoonery - 1925
- BBC Trailer - All the World's a Stage
- BBC Trailer - Oneness
- Beautiful Thing - 1996
- Being Human
- The Alan Bennett Diaries
- Alan Bennett's Talking Heads
- Bernard Braden Collection: Quentin Crisp - 1968
- Between the Lines
- Big Brother
- A Bigger Splash - 1974
- A Bit of Fry and Laurie
- A Bit of Scarlet - 1996
- The Black Lesbian Handbook
- Black Sails - 2014
- Blackpool
- Blasphemy at the Old Bailey - 1977
- The Book Group
- Boy Meets Girl - 2015
- Boyfriends - 1996
- Breaking the Code
- Brideshead Revisited - 2008
- Britain's Got the Pop Factor... and Possibly a New Celebrity Jesus Christ Soapstar Superstar
- Strictly on Ice
• Calvary
• Captives - 1993
• Carry On Constable - 1960
• Caught Looking - 1991
• Casualty - 1986
• Casualty 1900s - 2006
• The Catherine Tate Show
• The Cazalets
• A Change of Sex - 1979
• Clocking Off - 2001
• The Comedian
• Coming Out (Inside Story) - 1980
• Coming Out to Class
• The Commonwealth Games - 2014
• Connie - 1979
• Coronation Street
• Cow and Gate Advert - Happy and You Know It
• Cracker
• The Crow Road - 1996
• Cucumber-Banana-Tofu
• Cuffs - 2015
• The Connoisseur - 1966
• The Crying Game - 1992
• Dafydd - 1995
• Dancing in the Dark - 1988
• Dates
• Deepcut: The Army's Shame - 2016
• Delphinium: A Childhood Portrait of Derek Jarman - 2010
• Departure - 2015
• The Division - 1967
• Doctor Who
• Don't Tell the Bride
• Double the Trouble, Twice the Fun - 1992
• Downton Abbey
• Dr Terrible's House of Horrible - 2001
• Dream A40 - 1964
• The Dumping Ground - 2013
• Edward II - 1971
• An Englishman Abroad
• An Englishman in New York - 2013
• Enigma - 2001
• Entertaining Mr Sloane - 1968
• Even Solomon - 1979
• Extreme UK
• Face to Face: Derek Jarman - 1993
• Facing the Sun - 1980
• Fantabulosa
• Father Ray Comes Out
• Father Ted
• Fireworks - 1947
• Fireworks Revisited - 1994
• First a Girl - 1935
• Fleabag - 2016
• Flowers
• Four in a Bed
• Framed Youth: Revenge of the Teenage Perverts - 1983
• From High Heels to Sensible Shoes - 1997
• The Fruit Machine - 1988
• Gay Life - 1981
• Gay Mountain - 2014
• Gay Rights Demonstration - 1976
• Gay to Z
• Gaytime TV - 1995
• Gimme Gimme Gimme
• Glue
• Gok's Teens: The Naked Truth
• Grange Hill
• Groove on a Stanley Knife - 1997
• Guinness Advert
• The Happy Prince - 2018
• Henry V
• High Treason - 1951
• HIV and Me
• Home Fires
• Horror of Darkness - 1965
• The Houseboy - 1982
• How Percy Won the Beauty Competition
• The Hunger
• A Hymn from Jim - 1977
• The Imitation Game
• The Important Thing is Love - 1971
• I Belong to Glasgow - 2014
• In a Dark Place
• In the Flesh - 2013
• It's Not Unusual: A Lesbian and Gay History - 1997
• A Jihad for Love
• The Joy of Disco
• Judge John Deed
• Peter Kay's Car Share
• Khush - 1991
• Kick-off
• Last Tango in Halifax - 2013
• The League of Gentlemen - 1999 - 2005
• Lefties - 2006
• Lesbian Vampire Killers
• Life in Squares
• Lip Service - 2010
• Little Britain
• Lol - A Bona Queen of Fabularity - 1991
• Lola - Crown Court - 1976
• The Long Firm - 2004
• The Lost Language of Cranes - 1992
• Louis Theroux's Transgender Kids
• Love is the Devil - 1998
- Love Soup
- Lust for a Vampire - 1970
- Make Me a Man
- Man in an Orange Shirt - 2017
- Marple
- Mary’s Wife - 1980
- Manifesto for Love - 2003
- Meat - 1994
- Metrosexuality - 2001
- Michael and Liam - 1979
- A Midsummer Night's Dream
- Misfits
- Miss Transgender: Britain's New Beauty Queens
- Mistresses
- Mrs Brown's Boys
- Mum's Gone Gay
- Muslim Drag Queens
- My Beautiful Launderette
- My Dad Diane - 2002
- My Night with Reg - 1997
- Newsbeat
- The Nightwatch
- The Night Manager
- 9 Dead Gay Guys - 2002
- Notes on a Scandal
- Now That It's Morning - 1992
- The Obelisk - 1977
- The Olympics
- On Trial - 1959
- One in Five - 1983
- Only Connect - 1979
- Orlando
- Othello - 2001
- Out on Tuesday - 1989
- Out There
- Over Our Dead Bodies - 1991
- Paddington Green - 1998
- The Paralympics - 2012
- The Party - 2017
- Peep Show
- The Pleasure Girls - 1965
- The Politician's Husband
- The Politician's Wife
- Porridge
- Preaching to the Perverted
- Press Gang
- Prick Up Your Ears - 1987
- Prime Suspect - 1991
- The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes - 1970
- PROBE
- Queer as Folk - 1999
- A Question of Attribution
• Rachel and the Roarettes - 1985
• RBS/Natwest Twins Advert
• The Red Shoes
• Relax - 1991
• The Revolution Will Be Televised
• A Rod of Iron - 1980
• Roll on Four O'Clock - 1970
• Rosebud - 1991
• Round the Horne...Revisited - 2004
• The Runaway - 2011
• Sainsbury's Advert - Christmas 2016
• Salmon Fishing in the Yemen
• School of Comedy
• Scotch and Wry
• Scrubbers - 1982
• Seafood - 2004
• The Servant - 1963
• Sherlock - 2010
• Sherlock Holmes and the Case of the Silk Stocking
• The Singer, Not the Song - 1961
• A Single Man - 2009
• Six of Hearts
• Skins
• Smack the Pony
• Small Town Boy
• The Smoking Room
• Spindrift - 1996
• Spooks
• Steptoe and Son
• Straight and Narrow-Minded - 1988
• The Street - 2007
• Strictly Courtroom
• Sugar Rush
• Sunday Bloody Sunday - 1971
• A Superstition - 1977
• Swansea Sparkle: A Transgender Story
• Sweet as You Are - 1988
• The Syndicate
• Tango Adverts
• Teachers - 2001
• The Terence Davies Trilogy - 1976
• There's Something About Miriam
• The Thick of It
• The Thin Blue Line
• This Life
• This Week: Homosexuals - 1964
• This Week: Lesbians - 1964
• Threesome
• Three Fat Women of Antibes - 1969
• Tick Tock Lullaby - 2007
• Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy - 1979 and 2011
• Tinsel Town
End Notes

Feel free to hit me up with suggestions or recommendations. Don't be afraid to let me know if you spot a typo or a factual error anywhere. Also, I want to give a shoutout to the BFI Mediatheque initiative, which has made it possible for me to source and view some of the less well-known entries on this list.

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