

# Discrimination of Sexual and AIDS Minorities in Jonathan Demme's *Philadelphia* (1993)

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**Abstract** The article discusses the problem of discrimination of minorities, i.e. homosexuals and people suffering from AIDS in Jonathan Demme's *Philadelphia* (1993), illustrated by various instances from the film. The introduction presents a general cultural context and is followed by a detailed description of the characters and their attitudes towards the protagonist who is a homosexual dying of AIDS, suing his superiors for discrimination. What follows, are basic data concerning the disease, and the historical background. The conclusion confronts critical reviews and discusses the cultural impact of the film.

**Key words** homosexuals; AIDS; discrimination; minorities; Philadelphia

The problem of the discrimination of minorities is a current issue in social debates and modern media. Recent decades brought rapid development in gender studies, with special emphasis on the equality of sexes and social attitudes towards sexual minorities. Homosexuality has always been perceived as a taboo, and often as a deviation from a fixed and established social order. Homosexuals have been forced to hide their orientation, for fear of being persecuted and deposed from a society (Demers 2006). Certain occupations, entailing working with children or in exclusively male environments were, and I believe still are, illicit for people who divulge their orientation which varies from a fixed social order. Such a policy is unlikely to change, unless homosexuality ceases to be perceived as an aberration, or at least not taken into consideration in professional relations. In Jonathan Demme's *Philadelphia* (1993), sexual orientation proves to matter more than person's qualifications and professional experience. The director touches upon the problem of the discrimination of people infected with HIV, and refers to his work as "an analysis of prejudice" (qtd. in Jones 2002). The film discusses social unawareness towards homosexuality and AIDS in a poignant story of love, and presents the character's struggle against fatal disease and to defend his human dignity. In her essay entitled "The Crimes and Punishments

of Society: Jonathan Demme's *Philadelphia*," Catherine Marcks comments on these issues as follows:

We connect the themes of this illness to greater concepts of human nature. People have always investigated sin, crimes against society, and issues with identity. All of these concerns can be found in the ways society views and stigmatizes AIDS. The film *Philadelphia* uses a full spectrum of emotions, images, and metaphors to discuss homosexuality and AIDS during the nineties. (2012)

For a place of action Demme chose Philadelphia, from Greek "the city of brotherly love," which seems to be an obvious and symbolic choice. In his review, James Berardinelli argues that being a psychological and social drama, the movie is hardly a source of entertainment for the viewers. Instead it fulfills an important social mission. "For viewers of the movie, the question is not whether they sympathize with Tom Hanks' AIDS-afflicted, gay character, but whether that sympathy opens up a different perspective on the victims of the disease in the real world" (1994). Hanks gave an outstanding performance, which is one of the strongest elements of the film, on which Berardinelli comments thus:

Tom Hanks gives what has rightly been called "the performance of his career", lending humanity and vibrancy to the victim, and portraying him in a manner that eschews maudlin, obvious tactics to garner the audience's sympathy. We feel for Andrew Beckett because he seems to be a genuine human being, not because the script and production have twisted circumstances to manipulate our emotions. (1994)

Similar opinion was voiced by Luke Grundy: "Hanks, who so often plays the American everyman driven to extraordinary lengths, now portrays a brilliant man driven to extraordinary lengths just to be treated like everyone else. This inversion of Hanks' familiar role makes his performance all the more impressive" (2012). What is worth noting is that the film is not a campaign defending gay rights or contending for special treatment of minorities. On the contrary, the main figure struggles to be treated honestly and normally, regardless of his sexual orientation or state of health. The scene in which he denies being a gay-rights activist and his trial being used for their purposes is a perfect example.

The protagonist Andrew Beckett is a highly respected lawyer who becomes promoted because of his outstanding accomplishments, and is subsequently deposed for having an "attitude problem" and the negligence of his professional duties. A

homosexual, living in a monogamous relationship with Miguel Alvarez (Antonio Banderas), Andrew conceals his sexual orientation and the fact of being infected with HIV from his superiors, so as not to bring his private life to work. Only when his health rapidly deteriorates and mysterious bruises begin to appear on his face, the bosses become suspicious. When Andrew's illness develops and becomes apparent, they find a pretext to dispense him, by means of hiding some important documents, to make him look incompetent. The film is a sharp criticism of relations between the management and the staff in a large corporation. During the trial, which Andy brings against his superiors for AIDS-based discrimination and humiliation, he is attacked for concealing not only his illness but also his sexual orientation, which is against constitution<sup>1</sup>. In the course of legal action, it becomes clear that the genuine reason for Andrew's dismissal is not related to his incompetence. "This case is not all about AIDS it's also about homosexuality and prejudice," professes Andy's attorney, and he adds that "his employers discovered his sickness and the sickness I am referring to is AIDS, and they panicked, and in their panic they did what most of us would like to do with it, get it and everyone who has it as far away from us as possible" (*Philadelphia*). Andrew's employers defend themselves arguing that "He was fired for incompetence, not AIDS," and claim to have been unaware of his sickness. Later, however, they admit Andrew's illness was not of no importance. "Andrew brought AIDS to our company," they profess (*Philadelphia*). Moreover, they describe his work as "merely satisfactory," despite having offered him a promotion, and attempt to present their once "golden boy" in an unfavourable light. "Andrew is dying and angry because his reckless behaviour cut short his life and he wants someone to pay" (*Philadelphia*). The concealment of Andrew's sexual orientation was for them tantamount to hiding his real identity. Andrew's attorney refrains from judging the actions of both his client and his former employers as ethical or unethical, but emphasizes the fact that law was broken, since discrimination is illegal. Moreover, he reminds the jury that sexual orientation has no connection whatsoever to a person's quality of work.

Andrew's case became a burning issue in the media. Pro-homosexual demonstrations are gathering outside the court during the trial, seeing in Andy the defender of their rights. He, however, refrained from engaging himself in any campaigns for special treatment of homosexuals. The avoidance to use Andrew's case in a general debate over homosexuality, prevents the film from becoming merely a political image. Instead, the emphasis is placed on a human tragedy—a dying man's struggle for justice and dignity.

Various instances of discrimination are further multiplied in the film. When Andrew visits the library to do some research on AIDS and legal acts against discrimination, a librarian suggests that he had better studied in a separate room. "We

have a private research room sir, wouldn't you be more comfortable in a research room?". When Andrew declines the suggestion, the man becomes insistent: "Wouldn't it make you more comfortable, sir?" (*Philadelphia*). On hearing the conversation, other people begin to move aside. Also the hospital, however unlikely it may seem, is not devoid of discrimination. When Miguel visits Andrew, a doctor treats him unsympathetically. "You're not a member of a family, I can have you removed," he says.

Joe Miller (Denzel Washington), Andy's solicitor, is reluctant to help him when informed about his illness. His initial reaction is wiping his hand shaken by Andrew, and careful observing each move of his prospective client. Unaware of possible ways of becoming infected, being both a homophobic and an AIDS-phobic, Joe was alarmed to see Andy touching various objects in his office. "How many lawyers have you consulted before me?," he asks, "Nine," replies Andrew. "It's because you don't have any case," Joe attempts to discourage him, not even investigating the issue carefully. His prejudice conquers his professionalism, and on returning from work he goes to the doctor for examination, and to obtain some knowledge concerning the possibilities of becoming infected. Joe's attitude reflects social fears connected with AIDS, on which Grundy comments as follows: "Demme's movie remains remarkably apposite, even 17 years after its release—although we know far more about AIDS now than we did in 1993, there still lingers a fear of the disease and swathes of general misconceptions about its sufferers" (2012). Back at home Joe converses with his wife about homosexuality, and realizes that they know more gays than he has ever suspected. "Aunt Teresa is gay? That beautiful, sensuous woman is a lesbian? Since when?," he inquires astonished, which proves his stereotypical thinking about homosexuals. Further, he plainly states his attitude thus: "I admit it. I'm prejudiced, I don't like homosexuals. You can call me old-fashioned, you can call me conservative. You can call me a man" (*Philadelphia*). Attempting to domesticate the issue, he derides homosexual behaviours, but to no avail. He ends up confessing to his wife: "Would you accept a client if you were constantly thinking: I don't want this person to touch me, I don't want him to breathe on me?". "Not if I was you honey," his wife replies (*Philadelphia*). Being an "everyman, the on-screen representation of those in the audience who harbor homophobic tendencies" (Berardinelli 2012), as Berardinelli calls him, Joe undergoes an outstanding transformation throughout the story, which manifests itself not only in a developing friendship between him and Andrew, but also in the fact that physical distance between them diminishes. Being a witness of the situation in the library Joe decides to represent Andrew as his attorney, which becomes a breaking point in their relations. "As the film progresses, they grow gradually closer, sitting across a table at a library, then side-by-side in court. Finally, past the moment

of Miller's crisis of conscience, he drops all barriers by lifting an oxygen mask to Andrew's face, momentarily touching flesh to flesh," observes Berardinelli (2012). Joe's main motive to change his initial decision stems from his sense of justice and a firm belief in the legal system. "What I love about law is that every now and then you are a part of justice being done," he later claims. When Andrew quotes legal acts concerning discrimination, he realizes that Andrew's dismissal was against the law and agrees to represent the man in a legal case against his former employers. After engaging himself in the case, Joe becomes an object of derision himself. "Are you becoming you know...?," asks one of his friends, and Joe replies, "Those people make me sick but law has been broken," which makes the character more complex—instead of a sudden transformation from a homophobic into a tolerant liberal man, the viewers may observe a cautious gradual change. Strangers suspect Joe to be a homosexual himself, which incites his angry reaction. "Do i look like gay? Do i? It's exactly this kind of bullshit that makes people sick of you guys," he replies and further proves his not being devoid of prejudices indeed. To avert his thoughts of imminent death, Andrew takes Miguel to a fancy dress gay party, to which he invites Joe and his wife. Surprising as it may seem, the solicitor agrees to come and, what is more, spends an exceptionally enjoyable evening in a good company. Seeing Andrew and Miguel dancing together with tenderness, he fathoms they truly love each other, which is a shocking revelation. It is worth noting that there is no explicit sexuality between either Andy and Miguel or any other homosexuals presented in the film, which diverts attention from a physical to an emotional sphere, and deprives the film of unnecessary controversial content.

As has been noted, gradually relations between two lawyers tighten and become rather friendly, since Joe commences to look beyond Andrew's sexuality and illness, and notices a kind, funny, sensitive man and not only a gay with AIDS. "You survived your first gay party intact," remarks amused Andrew, which makes Joe look at his inhibitions more distantly and less seriously. The film reaches its climax when, during the most poignant scene in the movie, masterfully performed by Tom Hanks, Andrew passionately narrates for Joe Maria Callas' aria while listening to it. He does so with such a passion, pain, and dejection in his voice, that Joe leaves his apartment disconcerted. The incident makes him realize how precious his own life—health, family, and children—is. At the end of the film Joe is eventually able to overcome his prejudices and comfort Andy on his deathbed and hug Miguel, an incident unthinkable of before he engaged himself in Andrew's case. The emotional side of the film manifests itself further in the scenes with Andrew's parents who support and love him unconditionally, even when truly embarrassing facts from their son's past become revealed. Andrew's employers try to question his truthfulness referring

to his fortuitous sexual contacts with strangers in the past. "I didn't raise my kids to sit at the back of the bus. Go there and fight," says Andy's mother, heartbroken to see her son being humiliated in public. During the trial, however, it is not only Andy, whose shameful secrets become divulged. Mr. Wheeler, one of his superiors, would discriminate the employees of his company in the past on racial and sexual grounds. Jokes concerning homosexuals or "too ethnic a jewelery" of one of his Afro-American employees, were a common practice. In his final speech for the prosecution in court, Joe begs the jury to overcome their inhibitions and prejudices. "Ladies and gentlemen. Forget everything you've seen or heard on the television," he pleads them, and convinces that the behaviour of Andrew's employers was utterly reprehensible. As a result Andrew wins the case and is given over 4 million of dollars remuneration for his humiliation. "Excellent work counselor," Andy thanks him on his deathbed. "It was great working with you counselor," Joe replies, which are the last words the men exchange before Andrew dies (*Philadelphia*).

When analyzing the problem of discrimination in Demme's film one ought to become acquainted with basic facts concerning the disease, to thoroughly comprehend the sources of characters' prejudices. AIDS is a fairly new medical condition, which became known to the Western world no more than forty years ago. According to American Department of Health and Human Services, in the early 1980s: "rare types of pneumonia, cancer, and other illnesses were being reported by doctors in Los Angeles and New York among a number of male patients who had sex with other men. These were conditions not usually found in people with healthy immune systems" ("AIDS"). However, initial instances of the infection, were recorded as early as in 1959 in Kinshasa, Congo. In 1980s and 1990s, the knowledge about HIV and AIDS was still rather low and insufficient. The protagonist of Demme's film refers to it as "a gay cancer," which was a popular notion used to describe the mysterious new disease, spreading mostly through sexual contacts. The term AIDS—"Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome", was first used in 1982 by public health officials in the USA to signify "the occurrences of opportunistic infections, Kaposi's sarcoma (a kind of cancer), and *Pneumocystis jirovecii* pneumonia in previously healthy people" ("AIDS"). A year later a notion HIV—"Human Immunodeficiency Virus" was coined to define the source of the disease ("AIDS"). Modern medicine is still unable to cure it. The only possible way to suppress the dispersion is increasing a social awareness concerning possible ways of contamination. Those who are ill, are treated for the diseases which are an outcome of AIDS—cancer or pneumonia, but a complete recovery is impossible. The statistics are thrilling. According to the American Health Organization around 33, 4 million people worldwide are currently infected, with 2,7 million new infections each year, and more than 25 million

deaths since 1981. The majority of infections was reported in Africa where sanitary awareness and the availability of medical care are still very low. In 1993 in the USA White House Office the National AIDS Policy (ONAP) was established by president Clinton, which suggests the problem received proper attention of the government (“AIDS Timeline”). The number of the infected in the USA only, was estimated to exceed one million people in 1993, with over fourteen million worldwide. The same year, Diana, Princess of Wales, who was an anti-HIV activist, delivered a speech in which she predicted a rapid spread of the infection thus: “By the year two thousand, only seven years from now - even the most conservative estimates predict there will be more than thirty million people worldwide with HIV-equivalent to more than half the population of the United Kingdom” (qtd. in “The History of AIDS”), which illustrates the spectrum of the problem and the level of awareness around the time when *Philadelphia* was shot. The announcements that the infection was spreading mostly through homosexual contacts caused not only social unease towards the illness itself, but also towards homosexuals in general, which is greatly portrayed in Demme’s film. The infected were often perceived as guilty of their tragedy, since their illness was claimed to be caused by recklessness and negligence—a main objection raised against Andrew Beckett in the film. One might be inclined to observe that it is not indulgence in professional matters that Andrew’s superiors truly mean, but rather carelessness in his sexual activity, which ultimately leads to his infection and fatal disease. In her book *AIDS and its Metaphors*, Susan Sontag discusses the condition in context of guilt and crime, using military notions such as an “invasion against the body” or “pollution” (105). Considering main demeanours conducive to proliferation of the disease, i.e. sexual contacts and illegal drugs consumption, Sontag describes AIDS as an “indulgence, delinquency,” a result of “addictions to chemicals that are illegal and to sex regarded as deviant” (113), which reflects social attitudes at that time. Catherine Marcks, in addition, suggests moral and religious implications of both AIDS and homosexuality: “During the initial outbreak of AIDS, society was not only dreadfully afraid of contracting the disease itself, but worried about the possible transmission of sins attached to the illness” (2012). She later develops the thought adding that “The majority of people viewed homosexuality as a crime against what nature intended. Many religions believe that homosexuality is to be regarded as an act of sin, deserving of punishment. Consequently, AIDS was viewed as punishment for the immoral conduct that an individual chooses to pursue” (2012). The categories of “guilty” or “victim” are employed by Demme by showing a striking divergence between social attitudes towards Andrew, who became infected during an unsecured sexual intercourse, and a woman who was tainted during blood transfusion. Andrew was presented as guilty of his own reckless actions, with no empathy presented by

his superiors whatsoever, whereas the woman as a victim who was unable to avoid contamination. She, however, plainly and decidedly demurs at such a distinction. "I'm not guilty, I'm not innocent, I'm just trying to survive," she professes (*Philadelphia*). Marcks notes that "The stigmas and actions attached to AIDS often engross people to the point where they forget to empathize with those who are ill. These actions were frequently viewed as criminal injustices against the norms and values of society," which is exactly what one might observe during Andrew's trial (2012). Sontag, complements her discussion defining a link between homosexuality and AIDS thus: "The illness flushes out an identity that might have remained hidden" (113). Indeed, one of the main accusations towards Andrew is not that of being a negligent worker but of obscuring his real identity of a homosexual, a matter completely unrelated to his professional life. Such an intervention into human being's private matters is absolutely reprehensible not only in professional relations.

Therese Jones criticizes the film rather severely, enumerating its distortions of facts thus: "Presentation of Andrew's legal dilemma is both outdated and incredulous. Ten years before the release of the film, AIDS-based discrimination was a new field of law, and are there are no gay lawyers in the City of Brotherly Love willing to take on such a case?," she asks (2002). According to Jones the film conveys a message that the disease spreads only through homosexual contacts, which is obviously not true: "Even more disturbing are the misleading and mysterious medical facts presented in the film such as the message that heterosexuals do not have to worry about contracting AIDS because it is a gay disease and that a single, unsafe sexual encounter can more readily infect someone when that encounter happens to be anonymous and homosexual" (2002). However, she observes one crucial merit, i.e. the film publicized the problem of sexual and disease-based discrimination and made it a widely discussed issue. Definitely, among pictures presenting this problem, *Philadelphia* appears to be one of the most influential. The film remains fairly objective and not pro- or ante- homosexual, however, it severely castigates discrimination in all possible manifestations of the phenomenon.

## Note

1. See Civil Rights Act of 1991, which was signed into law by President George H.W. Bush on November 21, 1991.

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