

Loni Shibuyama  
Curating Prospectus  
Spring 2007

## **BREAKING THE SILENCE**

### **Queer Identity and the Rhetoric of Silence in American Cinema**

In the first half of the 20th century, when the word “homosexual” was a word that few ever spoke out loud, men would display pink handkerchiefs in their lapel pockets as a visual cue indicating their sexual preference. The gay and lesbian community has also relied on coded language for similar purposes. In the 1980s, when thousands of gay men were dying of AIDS and the government was not responding quickly enough to the epidemic, gay and lesbian activists adopted the slogan, “Silence = Death.” The gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and queer (GLBTQ) community has always had an identity built on a culture of silence. Despite the progress that has been made in terms of visibility and acceptance, that culture of silence—and inequality—is still present today when the U.S. Military’s “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy continues to be debated.

To illustrate this silence, the Cinema Studies department at New York University, in collaboration with The Center for the Study of Gender and Sexuality (CSGS), proposes a film series in five parts entitled, *BREAKING THE SILENCE: Queer Identity and the Rhetoric of Silence in American Cinema*. This series will be made up of four feature films and one made-for-TV movie, all of which reveal how Silence is manifested in different aspects of the GLBTQ experience. In addition, 35mm or 16mm print projection will be screened, when available, for highest film experience.

In *Suddenly, Last Summer* (1959), adapted from the Tennessee Williams play, we look at the speechless and faceless queer character, Sebastian. In *The Children’s Hour* (1961), we examine how the story of a lesbian relationship is constructed—from rumor to truth—without ever being explicitly stated. In *Cruising* (1980), we are taken to New York City’s gay S&M underground culture and learn the visual cues and coded language that continues even today. In *Longtime Companion* (1990), we discuss the devastating effects of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s and the impact of the “Silence = Death” campaigns. And in *Serving in Silence* (1995), we learn about the implications of the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy of the U.S. Military and what that means in our present time of war. Four of the five films will also include an introduction or discussion.

This month-long film series, to be screened at NYU’s Cantor Film Center, will be free and open to the public as part of CSGS’s on-going efforts to “facilitate a broad interdisciplinary investigation of gender and sexuality as keys to understanding human experience.”

## SUDDENLY, LAST SUMMER (1959)

introduction by Carolyn Dinshaw  
*English, Gender & Sexuality Studies, NYU*

starring Elizabeth Taylor, Katharine  
Hepburn and Montgomery Clift  
directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz  
adapted screenplay by Gore Vidal

Based on the play by  
Tennessee Williams



### Session One — Outspoken

Tennessee Williams' *Suddenly, Last Summer* tells the story of Catherine (Elizabeth Taylor) who is institutionalized and threatened with a possible lobotomy for speaking the truth about her cousin, Sebastian. The truth, as it is later revealed, is that Sebastian used the women in his life—his mother and his cousin—to attract men for his own gratification. His homosexuality leads to his violent death when a mob of young men attack and cannibalize him.

Similarly to some of Williams' other queer characters—Skipper in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and Blanche's first husband in *A Streetcar Named Desire*—the faceless Sebastian is critical to the story, but not present within the story to speak for himself. In each of these cases, the homosexual is dead and only discussed but not heard. The inability for queer characters to speak for themselves is also often manifested when original works with queer characters or queer historical figures are adapted for the screen, leaving out the GLBT subject matter.

This film will be introduced by Carolyn Dinshaw, Professor of Social and Cultural Analysis, English at New York University. In addition to teaching courses such as Queer Literature, and she has written articles in Medieval literature, feminist theories, GLBT studies and history of sexuality.



## THE CHILDREN'S HOUR (1961)

introduction by Chris Straayer  
*Cinema Studies, NYU*

starring Audrey Hepburn, Shirley  
MacLaine and James Garner  
directed by William Wyler  
adapted screenplay by John Michael  
Hayes

*Based on the play by Lillian Hellman*

### Session Two — The Rhetoric of Silence

A young girl's vicious accusation turns into one woman's fateful revelation in William Wyler's *The Children's Hour*. Based on the play by Lillian Hellman, the film tells the story of two female schoolteachers whose reputations are ruined when a young girl spreads the false rumor that they are lovers. The women's lives are further unraveled when one of them, Martha (Shirley MacLaine), reveals to the other that her affections for her are, in fact, real.

The words "homosexual," "lesbian," "queer," or "gay" are never spoken in the film. However, through direction, editing, acting and carefully chosen words, the audience is left with no doubt that the rumor the girl tells is about a presumed lesbian relationship. The appalling nature of such a relationship is conveyed to the audience not by what is said, but by what is not said.

The film will begin with an introduction from Chris Straayer, Associate Professor of Cinema Studies at New York University. Professor Straayer has taught courses in Queer Media, and she is the author of *Deviant Eyes, Deviant Bodies* (1996), an investigation in queer feminist film theory.

## CRUISING (1980)

*starring Al Pacino, Paul Sorvino,  
Karen Allen and Richard Cox  
directed by William Friedkin  
adapted screenplay by William  
Friedkin*

*Based on the novel by Gerald Walker*



### Day Three — Pink Handkerchiefs

William Friedkin's dark thriller, *Cruising*, was met with a great deal of controversy when it was first released in 1980. Gay and lesbian activists protested the film's perceived negative portrayal of gay men's S&M subculture in New York City and the associated violence toward that community. The film follows a young cop, Steve Burns (Al Pacino), who goes undercover in this leather district in order to catch a serial killer who has been murdering several gay men. Not only does Burns put himself in harm's way. He also begins to question his own sexuality, which takes a violent turn.

While there is much about *Cruising* that can be discussed—the related controversy concerning the film's perceived homophobic undertones—one aspect that may be noted is the socializing that occurs in that underground subculture. Steve Burns must pass as a gay man, and in order to do so, he must learn the visual cues and vernacular that is part of that community. For instance, colored bandannas indicate what sexual acts one is willing to do—a tradition that goes back to the days when gay men wore pink handkerchiefs in their pockets as an unspoken signal for other gay men. Coded vernacular, or "gayspeak," is also still very present in the GLBT community.



## LONGTIME COMPANION (1990)

introduction with Jim Hubbard  
*ACT-UP Oral History Project*

starring Campbell Scott, Patrick  
Cassidy, John Dossett, Mary-  
Louise Parker and Stephen  
Caffrey

directed by Norman Rene  
written by Craig Lucas

### Day Four — Silence = Death

The association between silence and death is a recurring theme in each of the previous screenings for this film series, *Breaking the Silence*. This theme is culminated here in *Longtime Companion*, a series of vignettes each showing the devastating affects of the AIDS epidemic. The film's title refers the term used in the *New York Times* obituary—when thousands of gay men were dying in the 1980s and 1990s, their partners or husbands were referred as “longtime companion.”

In response to the government's—in particular, the Reagan Administration's—lack of initiative in responding to the AIDS crisis, the AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power (ACT-UP) was formed. The organization began a series of sometimes aggressive protests under the slogan, “Silence = Death” demanding attention from the government and the media, which had previously kept quiet about the epidemic.

The screening will begin with a half-hour introduction and discussion with filmmaker, archivist and activist, Jim Hubbard, of the ACT-UP Oral History Project. Mr. Hubbard will discuss ACT-UP's efforts, including the “Silence=Death” campaign and the lasting impact it has had on the GLBT community.

## **SERVING IN SILENCE: COLONEL MARGARETHE CAMMERMEYER (1995)**

**discussion with Jon W. Davidson**  
*Legal Director, Lambda Legal*

*starring Glenn Close & Judy Davis*  
*directed by Jeff Bleckner*  
*teleplay by Alison Cross*

*Based on the true story of*  
*Margarethe Cammermeyer*



### *Day Five — Don't Ask, Don't Tell*

Our film series concludes with *Serving in Silence: Colonel Margarethe Cammermeyer*. The culture of silence continues to live on today with the ongoing debate over the U.S. Military's "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy, in which "open" homosexuals are not allowed to serve in the military. *Serving in Silence* is a made-for-TV movie based on the true story of Margarethe Cammermeyer who was involuntarily discharged from the army after she stated to an army investigator that she is a lesbian. The court battle that ensued ultimately upheld the blatant discriminatory policy.

Following the screening will be an hour-long talk and Q&A with Jon W. Davidson. Currently based in New York City, he is Legal Director at Lambda Legal, a national organization working for the civil rights of the GLBT community. Mr. Davidson also worked as counsel for Col. Cammermeyer in the case *Cammermeyer v. Perry*. His discussion will include his experience on that pioneering case and the current efforts to fight the Military's discriminatory policies.

## FILMOGRAPHY

***Suddenly, Last Summer*** (1959, sound, 114 mins., b&w/color, 35mm)

Producers: Sam Spiegel; Columbia Pictures Industries

Starring: Elizabeth Taylor, Katharine Hepburn, Montgomery Clift, Albert Dekker,  
Mercedes McCambridge

Director: Joseph L. Mankiewicz

Writers: Gore Vidal and Tennessee Williams

35mm print from Swank Motion Pictures, Inc.

Based on the play, *Suddenly, Last Summer*, by Tennessee Williams.

***The Children's Hour*** (1961, sound, 108 mins., b&w, 35mm)

Producers: William Wyler; United Artists; The Mirisch Company

Starring: Audrey Hepburn, Shirley MacLaine, James Garner, Miriam Hopkins,  
Fay Bainter

Director: William Wyler

Writer: John Michael Hayes

35mm print from Swank Motion Pictures, Inc.

Based on the play, *The Children's Hour*, by Lillian Hellman.

***Cruising*** (1980, sound, 102 mins., color, 35mm)

Producers: Jerry Weintraub; Lorimar Distribution International

Starring: Al Pacino, Paul Sorvino, Karen Allen, Richard Cox, Don Scardino

Director: William Friedkin

Writer: William Friedkin

35mm print from Swank Motion Pictures, Inc.

Based on the novel by Gerald Walker.

***Longtime Companion*** (1990, sound, 100 mins., color, 35mm)

Producers: Stan Wlodkowski; Companion Productions, Inc.; Metro-Goldwyn-  
Mayer

Starring: Campbell Scott, Patrick Cassidy, John Dossett, Mary-Louise Parker,  
Stephen Caffrey

Director: Norman Rene

Writer: Craig Lucas

35mm print from Swank Motion Pictures, Inc.

***Serving in Silence: Colonel Margarethe Cammermeyer*** (1995, sound, 92 mins., color, DVD)

Producers: Richard Heus; Barwood Films Ltd., Inc., Storyline Productions, Inc.  
and Trillium Productions, Inc.

Starring: Glenn Close, Judy Davis, Jan Rubes, Wendy Makkena, Susan Barnes

Director: Jeff Bleckner

Writer: Alison Cross

DVD from Amazon.com

Based on the true story of Margarethe Cammermeyer.

## BUDGET

<i>Suddenly, Last Summer</i>	\$521	(\$375 rental fee + \$146 shipping)
<i>The Children's Hour</i>	\$521	
<i>Cruising</i>	\$521	
<i>Longtime Companion</i>	\$521	
<i>Serving in Silence</i>	\$14.99	(DVD from Amazon.com)
Jim Hubbard (honoraria)	\$1000	
Jon Davidson (honoraria)	\$1000	
	<hr/>	
Total:	\$4098.99	