

## *Philadelphia* (1993): the keys of a cultural icon

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### Summary

*Philadelphia* answers to the fundamental reason of commercial cinema in the last years; that is, giving the audience what they expect to see. As new problems arise in society, the cinema business, which is getting interested in them, shows these themes on its films. At the beginning of the 1990's, more and more films dealing with AIDS were being made due to the increasing social alarm that AIDS caused to the population. *Philadelphia*, is the most famous as well as the most accessible film (and is probably of the best cinematographic quality). However, its approach may be misleading: this is not so much a film about AIDS but about the rejection against homosexuals. Nevertheless, it erases some aspects of AIDS and gives some answers which can be considered pedagogic.

A great director, a succeeded cast, an excellent screenplay (of a classic structure), a soundtrack which has been carefully chosen and some lights and camera games well cared are the ingredients that make of this film one of the icons of the 1990's popular culture.

*Palabras clave:* AIDS, homosexuality, judgements, discrimination.

### Technical details

**Original Title:** *Philadelphia*

**Country:** USA

**Year:** 1993

**Director:** Jonathan Demme

**Music:** Howard Shore

**Screenwriter:** Ron Nyswaner

**Cast:** Tom Hanks, Jason Robards, Denzel Washington, Roberta Maxwell, Buzz Kilman, Antonio Banderas, Karen Finley, Daniel Chapman, Mark Sorensen, Jeffrey Williamson, Mary Steenburgen, Ron Vawter, Robert Ridgely, Charles Napier and Lisa Summerour.

**Color:** color

**Runtime:** 119 minutes

**Genre:** drama

**Production Companies:** Clinica Estetico Ltd, TriStar Pictures

**Synopsis:** Andrew Beckett (Tom Hanks) is an intelligent young man with a brilliant professional future in a company where he works as a lawyer. He is homosexual, has a latin

lover and has developed AIDS. When the first symptoms of the disease begin (Kaposi's sarcoma) he is fired accused of professional negligence. He knows that the reason is another one and he demands the company. However there is only one lawyer in the city, called Joe Miller (Denzel Washington), who finally dares to accept the case.

**Awards and nominations:** Oscar 1993 to best actor in a Leading Role (Tom Hanks), and Best Song (Bruce Springsteen for *Streets of Philadelphia*). Nominated for Best Original Screenplay, Make-up and Song (Neil Young for *Philadelphia*).

*Philadelphia* is a very strange case inside the cinema business. This is an interesting film, (we may say a good one for strictly cinematographic reasons: it has a good screenplay, an interesting setting...), that almost everybody knows about, although not everybody has seen it...Why is it so strange? Because, although it has not received all the acknowledgements that it deserved, this is one of these films that impacts the spectator. Many details of the film might not be

remembered but everyone knows the song with which opens the film, everyone remembers the scene when the opera music is heard and the chimney in such an expressive way, visualizes Tom Hanks saying "I have AIDS" (in fact, this scene has become the icon of the 1990's popular culture, parodied even in cartoons), evokes the marines' dance....A series of elements that are inside the spectators' memory of the spectators, once again, without reaching the glory of other titles whose recording are minor...

Before commenting the film we should make clear that the approach of this tape is quite misleading. At first sight, it seems to be a film which deals with AIDS (at least what is made clear to the audience: "the film where Tom Hanks plays the role of a patient with AIDS), when in fact, the virus is a mere excuse for setting out the problem of discrimination against homosexuals in the United-States. As we will see later on, that is the driving force of the story, and many characters will make it clear through their interventions.

At last, before turning into a strict analysis, it is necessary to set the film both thematically and temporary. As far as the genre is concerned, this film is without doubt a drama, and if we go further into it we could define it as a judiciary drama, (according to Sánchez Noriega's generic classification)<sup>1</sup>. It is worth highlighting that *Philadelphia* is Jonathan Demme's first film (a director who began his career in 1970) after receiving the Oscar to the Best Director for *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), it means a total change of register which made the film a success. His professional future, nonetheless, will not have so much success, although this is another story. This film began to be conceived at the beginning of the 1990's, which was the time when people started to talk about AIDS on the streets (when the social alarm arose). As cinema is the industry which tells the audience stories that they want to hear, it seemed the right moment to release this type of films. There have been other films before, and after, *Philadelphia* this is the only one which has really got through, first because of its approach of the names, and secondly because of what has been mentioned before: this is not a film about AIDS but about rejection and social discrimination.

The film begins with the famous song *Street of Philadelphia* performed by Bruce Springsteen along with some titles credit really nice and expressive. Between the song and the images, appears a profile of the city, which is very useful for those who do not know the context of the action. It seems to be a friend-

ly place, where people smile even though they have problems, it seems to have so much light....all through the film, we can see this image of the city changing, and the landscape, becoming cloudier and darker.

The song is mixed with Andrew Beckett's voice off (Tom Hanks). He is before a judge and the opposite rival lawyer who is Miller (Denzel Washington). If we do not count the credits, fifteen seconds have not already passed that the two main characters find themselves facing each other. Indeed they do not get on well and the rivalry makes their differences insurmountable, however this will change through the film. From the beginning, we can notice a specific identity sign of Demme's cinema: when he highlights a character in short plans, the actor is always watching at the camera, so that the spectator feels he is inside the scene. For some people, one of the successes (and for others, a big mistake) of his film, is that in many occasions the director has used this film to throw political claims...For example, in the scene of the lift, the lawyers enter in it, the door closes and we can read "without justice, there is no peace". Shortly after, appears a light feature of humour appears which is insignificant.

Focusing on Andrew; he sees himself in a hospital for the first time. He intends to keep himself away of what is happening. He is concentrated and listening to the music while, next to him, a patient is playing jokes on the illness of AIDS; for a moment he is looking at another patient with apprehension ...it is an interesting contrast, which can be valued as the film moves forward and develops Andrew's arch of transformation.

In the following scenes, the spectator gets to know Andrew's character: he is a winner, everyone admires him, congratulates him, and even seems that they are nice to him...We discover the reason why he was at the clinic (some analysis that he states to be excellent). All this sequence is an exercise of planning and an incredible cinematographic rhythm. Then more features of his personality are shown: he is a hard worker, responsible, intelligent, brave...and in an interview with his bosses, he is charged with the most important task of his career, representing a computer company; apart from becoming an associate of the lawyers' office. Everything is fine at that moment, but the music lets us predict that something is going to change...and in fact that is what happens, because in this same scene Andrew's first stain (Kaposi's sarcoma) is shown for the first time in his front, which is the

trigger of the action. He claims that it has been caused by a hit during a party of squash, it is important the fact that for the time being it is not explained what it really is about (although this was seen in the hospital).

A curious detail shown of this film is temporal transitions. Instead of resorting to usual mixed changes, more “artistic” changes are made. For example, to symbolize that nine days have passed since the previous scene to the following image, the latter turns horizontally on its axis. In the last thirty years, only one director has resorted to these type of turns: George Lucas in his saga *Star Wars*.

The Andrew’s physical transformation has already started, and in some way, he also changes his mood, he is no longer that close to people and keeps himself rather distant. He goes to the office and leaves the work he did at home when there is no one there, and he tries some make-up to cover up his stains... his digestive alterations are shown (something so evident that everyone can notice the change) and we return to the subjective frame and the actors looking at the camera. At last Andrew admits that he needs to go to the hospital. At the hospital Miguel (Antonio Banderas) enters into action, Andrew’s boyfriend, (and so a secondary plot about love appears, however it will not advance) and we find an interesting role game between the characters: both of them alternates continuously their states of ego, when one acts as if he were the father of the child and vice versa. We can notice this all through the film. This scene is complicated for the non medical audience due to the complex terms: they talk of colonoscopy (something that is imagined to be horrible, but we do not know exactly what it refers to), AZT... and when he discovers that what he really has is AIDS, one can ask oneself why does he go around the problem? Why does he use so many strange names? Is it necessary? Probably not... of course this favours the process of denial of the character.

Afterwards, there is a first moment of tension: the losing of an important demand, along with the appearing of new stains...but scarcely focused on.

The action skips one month in time and turns back again on Miller (whose private life probably constitutes the most important secondary plot in the film), so that the spectator does not forget him, with scenes of family joys (figure 1).

Andrew contacts Miller. This is the most crucial cultural moment which has been mentioned

before. Andrew is telling the spectator his disease and his dismissal, through a beautiful flashback narrated at the first person. At the beginning of the scene the camera maintains the distance with the characters, but as the plans are getting closer showing how uncomfortable Miller is getting and making the spectator uncomfortable watching Andrew. In this scene the moment in which Miller uses the expression “tell me as if I were a child” should be highlighted, because in the end that is what the spectator needs, an easy explanation. This will happen again through the tape, in some specific moments during which the spectator, for ignorance, loses the identification with the characters. We also notice Miller’s change: he refuses the case because he rejects people infected with AIDS and homosexuals, a vision that will change little by little...his attitude will lead him to visit a doctor to check if he is infected. Afterwards, thanks to the doctor, the spectator receives a small class in which he is acknowledged of how the virus is transmitted, subduing many legends that at time, and still today, are circulating, due to ignorance. And thanks to the scene with his wife, his prejudices toward homosexuals are obvious (the film’s theme is being pointed out).



Figure 1: Andrew is looking for Miller’s help

A new proof of the discrimination towards a more and more haggard Andy, is shown in the library, where he convinces Miller to take the case. That is the first turn of the story. From that moment on, the tape focuses on the judicial process. The early stages of the judgement are useful to get to know details on the virus and the process of the dismissal, which has been mixed to make the process easier. The director goes on using first plans to reinforce the sensations of intimacy and loneliness, and the already mentioned identification.

When the office of the attorneys receives the summon, a new “artistic transition” is seen and the chiefs’ personalities. They intend to break him down using his private life, and they let us know even more clearly that their war is against homosexuality. Although the four of them disagree in the strategy, the negative arguments are heavier, and in some way the only one who was supporting his former attorney is discriminated. At the same time, a scene of Andrew’s family shows the other side of the story: tolerance. The use of the video camera (black and white, a ratio of different aspect) is inappropriate but as they are only happy moments it is justified with a visual differentiation of the rest of the tape.

With the longest skipping in time (seven months) we enter in the process, where the director tells the action from the jury perspective, as if he wanted to make the spectator into another member of it (by any reckoning and due to a controverted theme, a very wise decision (figure 2).



Figure 2: Miller, looking at a camera, presents the case to the jury

Apart from this detail, all that has to do with the process does not contribute to anything new compared to other films of this kind: personal accusations, ascents and descents, good, very good, bad, very bad...and the public opinion which is split between partisans and detractors. As the film gets into Miller’ life, there are two scenes which clearly show that his hate towards homosexuals still exists, and that he is handing the case only for professional ethic.

As we have said before, this is not a film about AIDS, and Miller points it out during the

process: “This is not about AIDS. Lets talk of what this case really deals with scorn, hate and scare of the public towards homosexuals...” this point constitutes the midpoint of the film and the questions of the process will be basically focused on Andrew’s sexual inclination, on the infection and the consequent rejection.

In one of the breaks of the process, the Andrew and Miguel secondary plot resumes after having been totally abandoned for a while. Miguel, who looks after Andrew, reproaches him not to devote him enough time, and Andrew proposes him to plan his funeral...but he prefers to give a fancy-dress ball. The marines’ dance will take place (it has been talked of “playing at the marines’ game” twice before with sexual connotations), and this results even charming. This moment is the most similar to a sexual contact between a couple of homosexuals and shows the director’s elegance.

Just afterwards comes the scene in which we can hear Maria Callas singing the aria *La Mamma Morta* of Andrea Chenier’s opera by Umberto Giordano; it is an extremely intensive and dramatic scene that hits directly the spectator. In its prelude, we notice that the secondary plot, which is Miller and Andrew’s friendship has reached its climax and that, in some way, Miller is able to “bear” homosexuals (although, not to accept them). Then, a duel of dialogs starts and the metaphor of the opera is used to tell Andrew’s uneasiness and sadness. The game of the camera’s movements and the light makes the scene more intense and assimilates the situation of the protagonist to a kind of descent to hell. When the song ends, everything becomes normal again as none of the characters dare to comment a moment so intense and scary (figure 3).



Figure 3: Andrew’s passion as he hears the sound of *Andrea Chenier’s* opera

This situation completes Miller’s arch of transformations and leads him to think about the fleetingness of life and about the need to show his love to his family. From then on, he will not be the same again.

Andrew’s testimony fulfils all the budgets of judicial dramas as to the arguments. It is the visual approach that makes it so special: the camera gets closer to the characters at first, as Andrew’s forces start weakening. The director resorts to the subjective frame, with more and more aberrant plans as he feels ill. Finally, it is very original that the Kaposi’s sarcoma in Andrew’s thorax is shown through a mirror and not in front of the camera: it gains elegance and dramatic quality although the visual impact is left to a second plan. It is also interesting to highlight that the rhythm of this scene is slower than the rest of the film. This gives more intensity to the action and allows recreating oneself more in the details and it contributes to the elaboration of the feeling of anxiety (figure 4).



Figure 4: Kaposi’s sarcoma in Andrew’s thorax through the mirror

Andrew ends suffering a worsening in the process and will not be able to attend to the final of the process, which is expected to be successful. This constitutes the second turning point of the story, that leads to the fatal outcome of the main character.

Once the process has ended the action leads to the hospital, where the intense climax will take place: Andrew is totally deprived and Miller is no longer an attorney but more than ever, a friend.

Andrew’s arch of transformation is also completed, because on the edge of death, he starts telling jokes, when until then, he had had a very serious and dramatic attitude. The opera (aria *O nume tutelar* from

opera *La Vestale* by Gasparo Spontini) at the back reinforces the action, evoking the previous scene that we have already mentioned. (figure 5).



Figure 5: Andrew’s last words

The farewell of both characters is significant: “I’ll see you later” although both of them know that this will not be the case; an interesting wink of the screenplay through the subtext. It is the same when



Andrew and Miguel stay on their own: Miguel only says “I’m ready”.

A temporal ellipsis leads to the funeral of Andrew, where we listen to Neil Young’s song *Philadelphia* that was nominated to the Oscars. It is curious that the characters are not sad but are instead laughing and joking...this is linked to Andrew’s video as a child, which is very touching chant to life to close the film.

To sum up, a great film, very touching (indeed, but not sentimental). It makes use of almost all the resources that the cinema offers to tell a sad

story, although that is what is necessary and what the audience needs. A very esteemed film from the cinematographic point of view as much as “educationally”, as an instrument of social accusation.

### References

- 1.- Sánchez Noriega JL. Historia del cine. Teoría y géneros cinematográficos, fotografía y televisión. Madrid: Alianza Editorial; 2002.

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