

BI FILM-VIDEO REVIEW

Appropriate Behavior (2014)

In many ways Desiree Akhavan's 2014 festival hit *Appropriate Behavior* is familiar. Its temporal play strikes parallels with Woody Allen's (1977) *Annie Hall*, whereas its wry wit and frankness evoke aspects of Lena Dunham's HBO series (2012 – present) *Girls*. Despite these influences, ultimately Akhavan's film is sharply unique. The film's originality is particularly evident in its portrayal of bisexuality, which diverges from the ambiguity characteristic of most bisexual images on screen. In a refreshing change, *Appropriate Behavior* brings salience and legitimacy to bisexual identities, presenting its protagonist Shirin as a self-assured bisexual woman. Shirin's characterization and the film's structure and dialogue are crucial to its clear articulation of bisexuality, as well as its disruption of bisexual stereotypes and its challenges to monosexism.

Appropriate Behavior centers on Shirin, a bisexual Brooklynite, who has recently broken up with her girlfriend, Maxine. In the opening scene a dejected Shirin wanders around Maxine's apartment gathering her belongings into a small cardboard box. Sombre music underscores Shirin's dejection as she plucks a photograph of the happy couple off the fridge and dislodges a clump of her dark hair from the shower drain. Upon Maxine's insistence, Shirin reluctantly agrees to take a shoebox that holds a gift she had given Maxine during their relationship, before leaving their apartment for the final time. Disrupting chronology, the remainder of the film presents a series of flashbacks that depict the beginning of Maxine and Shirin's relationship, including their first kiss and the tumult of their time together. The film contrasts these early days with the aftermath of the couple's breakup and Shirin's attempts at navigating life as a single, unemployed Iranian American woman in Brooklyn.

The juxtaposition of Maxine and Shirin's budding romance and its ultimate cessation brings a degree of tragedy and heart to the film. However, Akhavan's intelligent writing imbues the script with a playfulness that ultimately renders *Appropriate Behavior* a comedy. The opening of the film establishes this tone with dexterity. The film's opening sequence offers a sombre display of postbreakup formalities. As Shirin wanders out of Maxine's apartment with her belongings, she tosses the box of collected items into a dumpster— a stirring image of the few tangible effects left in the wake of their breakup. However, as Shirin turns to walk away the soundtrack becomes more upbeat. With this, Shirin turns back and swoops the gift she had given Maxine from the shoebox—a large gold strap-on. Brandishing it at her side absurdly, Shirin trudges down the sidewalk as the film's title appears in a looped font.

In ironic contrast to its title, much of the film's comedy stems from Shirin's social awkwardness and candor, her inability to behave appropriately. Shopping

for lingerie she informs the shop assistant, “I’m looking for the grown-up underwear of a woman in charge of her sexuality and not afraid of change.” Acting flirtatious on a date she spills a cocktail down her chin and must see out the night with a lap full of napkins. These awkward moments are as uncomfortable as they are endearing. In her quest to secure a new job, apartment, and romantic connection, Shirin encounters a host of eccentric figures who lend the film further laughs. Her new roommates, Felicia and Jacques, “may or may not be practicing witchcraft” when they get a chance between laboring on their experimental art installations and sand castle work. Scott Adsit of *30 Rock* stars as the affable stoner Ken who offers Shirin a job teaching a children’s filmmaking class. When Ken first meets Shirin in a café to discuss the job, he excitedly tells her that he recently read a *Vice* article on the underground hip-hop scene in Tehran and queries her involvement. A bemused Shirin explains, “No. Unfortunately, I spend most of my time in Iran watching Disney videos with my grandmother while she untangles jewellery.”

Maxine fulfills a more earnest role in the film, though she too fetishizes Shirin’s background and fails to grasp the complexity of reconciling one’s queer and cultural identities. When Shirin takes Maxine to a Persian New Years celebration as her “white friend,” Maxine is enchanted by the evening’s customs. But Shirin quickly calls out Maxine’s fascination: “Ew, you are totally having one of those ‘I’m dating an immigrant’ moments.” Maxine also demonstrates unease with Shirin’s sexual politics, particularly her inability to come out to her parents and her reluctance to engage more enthusiastically with queer culture. Although the film treats these complicated issues with humor and maintains a light tone, it also provides timely commentary on the challenges of intersectional identity politics within queer communities. Striking a number of parallels with Akhavan’s (2014) earlier web series *The Slope*, *Appropriate Behavior* is slick, hilarious, and refreshingly frank in its presentation of “appropriate” queer and racial identity politics, shifting between the emotional, the erotic, and the inappropriate with ease and hilarity.

In addition to shaping its quirkiness and humor, the film’s narrative structure and form are also crucial to its navigation of bisexual identity. The importance of these formal elements to bisexual cinema is being acknowledged increasingly in scholarship, and *Appropriate Behavior* provides an important example for pursuing these ideas further. Beth Roberts (2013) argued that the order and frequency in which a film presents sexual encounters and desires will affect the ways that they are interpreted. She explains that “the portrayal of bisexuality in films depends not only on the arrangement of sexual events [...] but also on their duration and frequency,” with their relevance ultimately “weighted according to how long and how often they are shown” (p. 74). This is not to suggest that some form of authentic bisexuality exists but to indicate how pertinent a film’s structure and form are to fostering the reception of bisexual representations in the cinema (Roberts, 2013). Because monosexual reading practices remain dominant and tend to prioritize synchronic assessments of sexual encounters, depictions of sequential bisexuality are less likely to be decoded than concurrent or simultaneous representations (Roberts,

2013). In simple terms, then, a film's structure will have substantial bearing upon whether bisexual behavior is decoded as indicative of a bisexual identity or interpreted as a moment of transition between monosexual identities.

The narrative underpinning *Appropriate Behavior* describes sequential bisexuality: Shirin has a relationship with Maxine, the pair break up, and Shirin dates a series of men and women. The film also presents a moment of simultaneous bisexuality, with Shirin partaking in a ménage a trois with a man and a woman. However, structurally the film depicts Shirin's relationships and attractions, her sexual past and present, as unfolding concurrently. The action cuts between flashbacks depicting Shirin's relationship with Maxine and sequences that depict her various dates and sexual encounters with men and women postbreakup. Juxtaposing Shirin's sexual encounters in this way enhances the legibility of her bisexuality because it presents her attractions as concurrent and simultaneous in visual terms—making them appear to overlap. To some extent this may be understood as reductive, as it can be seen to reify the notion that bisexuality is defined by concurrent sexual encounters. Yet, at the same time, these formal decisions can also be understood to challenge the relegation of either the past or the future of the bisexual individual's experience to reify monosexist ideology. By formally uniting Shirin's sexual past and her sexual present through editing, *Appropriate Behavior* highlights the inseparability of past, present, and future to an individual's sexuality.

The film's exploration of bisexual experience is lent further complexity by the fact that many of these juxtapositions serve to establish that Shirin's attractions and encounters vary depending on the individual she is with. *Appropriate Behavior* refuses to characterize its bisexual protagonist as sexually indiscriminate. Instead, it destabilizes damaging stereotypes by presenting Shirin's desires as nuanced and complex. Once again, the film's editing is crucial to this effect. When Shirin sleeps with Henry, a man she has met on OkCupid, the camera lingers over the pair passionately kissing and embracing. The camera moves in on Shirin's hand clutching his back and then slowly moves out in a seamless transition that relocates the action in Maxine and Shirin's bedroom, before their breakup. Maxine and Shirin embrace and kiss; they stop to get high, to chatter and laugh; they trade their first "I love you." Shot from above and bathed in natural light, the couple's intimacy is emphasized. But with a hard cut the viewer is returned to Shirin's present moment. The camera maintains a similar angle, though this shot presents an uncomfortable looking Shirin, shrouded in shadow, as Henry sleeps on her shoulder. The juxtaposition of these scenes—and their visual likeness—serves to exacerbate Shirin's divergent experiences.

In a less complex film this type of contrast might undermine bisexual legibility by seeming to undermine Shirin's attraction to men. Notably, there are a number of other sequences that might be construed to perpetuate such a reading, including an incredibly awkward threesome scene in which the tension between Shirin and the man involved is palpably uncomfortable. These types of encounters, combined with the fact that Shirin demonstrates strong chemistry with a number of women,

could prove problematic to a bisexual reading in another context because they destabilize the cinematic trope of the bisexual as being sexually voracious or embodying equal parts of homosexual and heterosexual desire. However, in *Appropriate Behavior*, the nuances of Shirin's attractions and connections serve to explore issues of intimacy and connection rather than to challenge the authenticity of her self-identification. Because the film's structure unites Shirin's various sexual encounters in a way that deprioritizes chronology and presents spatiotemporal relations in nonlinear ways, it manages to strike an impressive balance between bisexual legibility and bisexual complexity hitherto uncommon on screen.

The film's ability to deliver this complexity while maintaining bisexual legibility is also largely indebted to the role of dialogue. *Appropriate Behavior* does not rely entirely upon its form and structure to make bisexual identity intelligible. Instead, in an important stride forward for bisexual cinema, Shirin actually utters the term 'bisexual' on more than one occasion. Although she struggles to come out to her Iranian family, she boldly proclaims her bisexuality to friends and acquaintances. Attending a discussion group at her local queer bookstore, she introduces herself to the woman facilitating the group brazenly: "My name is Shirin. I'm an Iranian bisexual teacher, and I would like to take you out for a drink." When characters misidentify her, she politely corrects them. When Shirin explains to her brother, Ali, that she was in a relationship with Maxine, for instance, he observes, "ah, so you're a lesbian," to which Shirin replies that she thinks she is bisexual. When he queries "and that's a thing?" she drolly answers, "I'm afraid so." These verbal exchanges are significant because they make Shirin's bisexual identity explicit, which in turn facilitates the film's ability to explore the nuances and complexities of bisexual attraction without the constraint of cinematic tropes or stereotypes to convey bisexual legibility.

The dialogue used throughout *Appropriate Behavior* signals an important albeit simple way to increase the legibility of bisexuality on screen. The significance of this legibility is twofold. In addition to providing images of bisexuality for audiences who encounter the film, *Appropriate Behavior* marks an important moment for bisexual visibility beyond the cinema, in the realm of film criticism, reviews, and marketing. This matters because the discourse that surrounds films can play a meaningful role in how they are received, as well as the wider cultural visibility of particular groups. In his book *Bisexual Characters in Film: from Anaïs to Zee*, Wayne Bryant (1997) identifies and examines instances of bisexuality in "more than two hundred films made in twenty-five countries over a period of eighty years" (p. 153). As he argues, bisexual characters have not necessarily been absent from the screen, but they have been invisible. This problem is compounded by a "dearth of writing" on bisexual cinema, which Bryant argues is the consequence of a range of factors, including writers misappropriating bisexual characters as gay or lesbian (p. ix). Notably, Bryant's observation that on-screen bisexuality is invisible, as opposed to absent, foreshadows Maria San Filippo's (2013) more recent concept of "bisexual (in)visibility" (p. 4). In *The B Word: Bisexuality in Contemporary Film and Television* (2013), San Filippo uses this bracketed term "to signal the spectral

presence that bisexuality occupies, both on screen and within the broader landscape of sexual identity” (p. 4). This spectral quality is “due to the slippage between [bisexuality’s] representational pervasiveness and the altering measures of tacit acceptance, disidentification, or disavowal that render bisexuality discursively un(der)spoken” (2013, p. 4). This parallel between the work of Bryant and San Filippo emphasizes the enduring issues of bisexual invisibility and monosexist reading practices, as well as the importance of reception to bisexual cinema studies. It also highlights the inimitable salience of bisexuality in Akhavan’s film, its marketing, and the press that has surrounded its release.

The explicit portrayal of bisexuality that *Appropriate Behavior* offers helps to challenge bisexual erasure off screen and asserts greater bisexual visibility and acknowledgment in the wider mediascape. Reviews of the film and interviews with Akhavan openly acknowledge the film’s exploration of bisexuality, alerting readers to its bisexual subject matter and enhancing bisexual visibility in discourse more broadly. Although examples of more ambiguous representations of sexual fluidity and nonmonosexual identities on screen are also important, the current political status of bisexuals and their erasure makes the unambiguous representation of bisexuality presented by *Appropriate Behavior* crucial to bisexual visibility on screen and to the wider cultural challenge of curbing monosexism. The implications of this visibility are amplified by the fact that the film challenges a number of tropes and stereotypes common to bisexual cinema: Shirin is not confused about her sexuality, indiscriminate in her attractions, incapable of monogamy, or dangerous to those around her; nor is she perfect. Her bisexuality is discussed explicitly on screen and off but merely as one of the many facets of her identity.

Appropriate Behavior resists the cinema’s propensity for bisexual invisibility and explores the complex intersections of race and sexuality, as well as the complicated dynamics that exist within the queer community. Moreover, it manages to address these ideas with a wry wit that makes it politically significant and a politically incorrect gambol simultaneously. All in all, *Appropriate Behavior* is as momentous to bisexual cinema and visibility as it is entertaining.

Notes on contributor

Chloe Benson recently completed her PhD at Federation University. Her doctoral dissertation, *Bi What Means: Paratextual and Filmic Representations of Bisexuality in Contemporary Cinema*, examines the complex interplay between sites of exhibition, official entryway paratexts and contemporary representations of bisexuality.

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