

transpires from such slang epithets as *dingle/chocolate queen*, *snow queen*, *rice queen*, and *taco queen*.

In the late 1970s the organization Black and White Men Together appeared in a number of American cities, attracting a good deal of support. In addition to offering social opportunities, the group has sought to explore the subtler aspects of the dynamics of such relationships, as well as to oppose racism. In some cities it is called Men of All Colors Together (MACT).

See also **Black Gay Americans; Working Class, Eroticization of.**

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## FILM

Movie making is both an art and an industry. It has drawn for inspiration on theatre, fiction, biography, history, current affairs, religion, folklore, and the visual and musical arts. Active in stimulating the fantasy lives of viewers, motion pictures also reflect, though in a highly selective and often distorted way, the texture of daily life.

*History of Motion Pictures.* Although the first crude efforts with a proto-movie camera were made in the 1880s, films did not begin to be shown in specially designed cinemas until the beginning of the present century. Widely regarded at the time as disreputable and not suitable for middle-class audiences, the silents were subject to pressure to make them more respectable.

By 1913 Hollywood had emerged as the center of America's film industry, and by the end of the decade it was the world's leader. This commercial success drew additional attention from the "guardians of morality" in the pulpits and the press. In 1922 Hollywood set up an office

of self-censorship, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (popularly known as the Hays Office), to head off efforts to install government censorship. However, the Motion Picture Production Code was not promulgated until 1930; four years later, at the behest of religious groups, it was strengthened. In 1927 sound dialogue was introduced (the "talkies"), making possible, inter alia, the inclusion of suggestive dialogue of the Mae West type, though a constant running battle with the guardians of the code was required to retain even the subtlest double entendres.

In its heyday (1930–60) the motion picture industry was dominated by a small number of powerful Hollywood studios cranking out seemingly endless cycles of films based on a few successful exemplars. The focus on the stars, which had begun in the silent era, was continued, some of them now becoming (for reasons that are not always clear) gay icons: Bette Davis, Judy Garland, and James Dean. Anything that did not conform to the code had to be shown in a few "art theatres" in the large cities or in semi-private film clubs such as Cinema 16 in New York; it could find no mass audience.

By the mid-sixties television had begun to call the tune, and some studio lots were given over to producing standard fare for the small screen. Yet motion pictures survived and the sixties saw the rise of independent producers, who broke the stranglehold of the big studios. The demographics of the motion picture audience also changed, becoming more segmented, younger and more sophisticated. In this new climate some offbeat themes became realizable, often in films for "special audiences" such as counterculture youth and blacks. Even the rise (in the eighties) of videos rented in stores and played on home VCRs did not kill the movie houses. Moreover, the videos proved a boon to film scholars, who were able to reexamine older statements and theories through minute study of the films themselves.

Although the naive observer regards movies as a direct transcription of reality, technical and aesthetic considerations require transformation of the basic material. Moreover, social pressures—and the basic need to make money that is affected by them—shape choices of what is to be excluded and included. Gay and lesbian scholars have argued that their communities have never been adequately represented in mainstream motion pictures, which have been content to serve up brief glimpses and easy stereotypes. Be this as it may, there is much to be learned from a careful study of filmic images—mainstream and experimental, amateur and pornographic—that relate to alternative sexuality.

*Beginnings.* The first serious homosexual film appears to be Mauritz Stiller's *The Wings* (1916), based on the novel *Mikaël* by the Danish gay author Herman Bang. This work is an early example of the perennial practice (not of course limited to homosexual movies) of basing the story line on a successful novel. In 1919 the German director Richard Oswald produced an educational film *Anders als die Andern* (Different from the Others) with the advice and participation of the great sex researcher Magnus Hirschfeld. The movie portrays the difficulty of establishing a homosexual identity in a hostile environment, the expectation of marriage imposed by relatives, coming out, the tensions within gay relationships, blackmail, and the tragedy of suicide. The stormy reception accorded public showings of *Anders als die Andern* tended to discourage the otherwise innovative film industry of Weimar Germany from venturing much further into the realm of homosexuality. Probably the first explicit lesbian in film, however, was featured in G. W. Pabst's *Pandora's Box* (1929), based on a play by Frank Wedekind. In 1931 Leontine Sagan's *Mädchen in Uniform* appeared, based on a play by lesbian writer Christa Winsloe. The story, which concerns the love of a sensitive student for

her teacher, serves a broader purpose of questioning social rigidity and authoritarianism. This film, whose intense performances held audiences from the beginning, is rightly designated a classic.

Constricted by the Hays office, America produced little that was comparable. An exception is the experimental *Lot in Sodom* (1933) of James Watson and Melville Webber, which however played upon lingering fin-de-siècle ideas of decadence. In France Jean Vigo's *Zéro de Conduite* (1933), set in a boy's school, has homoerotic overtones, but these are not explicit.

*Drag Films and Scenes.* From the nineteenth-century tradition of theatrical transvestism—male and female impersonation—the movies inherited a minor but surprisingly persistent motif. Julian Eltinge, a renowned female impersonator from the vaudeville circuit, was brought to films by Adolph Zukor in 1917. The plots of his popular films generally offered some pretext for his making a transition from male to female attire. Brandon Thomas's theatre staple *Charley's Aunt* was first filmed as a silent in 1925, to be followed eventually by four sound versions. The plot concerns a young aristocrat at Oxford who comes to the rescue of two fellow students by disguising himself as the Brazilian aunt of one of them. In the German musical comedy *Viktor und Viktoria* (1933; remade in England in 1935), an aspiring actress gets her chance to replace a major male star by doing his role first as a man and then as a woman—a double disguise. In 1982 Blake Edwards remade this comedy to great effect starring Julie Andrews. Beginning with *Morocco* in 1930 Marlene Dietrich essayed a series of male impersonations—a device which became virtually her trademark. In the historical drama *Queen Christina* (1933), rich in homosexual and lesbian innuendo, Greta Garbo made a stunning appearance as the monarch disguised as a boy. Billy Wilder's *Some Like It Hot* (1959) featured Jack Lemmon and Tony Curtis as musicians compelled

to disguise themselves as women because they inadvertently witnessed a gangster shootout. Although this film has remained a great favorite among gay men, only the last scene, in which Joe E. Brown insists that he still wants to marry Lemmon even though he is a man, is truly homosexual. The grossly obese transvestite Divine (who died in 1988) appeared in a number of deliberately tacky John Waters films in the 1970s and 80s. After an initially tepid audience response, the musical *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1976) became the focus of a cult of remarkable longevity in which members of the audience dress up as the characters, doubling the action as the film unfolds. Tim Curry plays a "sweet transvestite," Dr. Frank-N-Furter, who creates a muscle-bound monster for his own delectation. Then the French weighed in with *La Cage aux Folles* (1979), about two older gay men on the Riviera. This list could be extended for many pages. The point of the drag films is not so much whether they are explicitly homosexual, but their capacity to challenge gender role conventions. Yet the genre is so well entrenched that, unless specially charged, it has lost most of its power to shock, and thus change thinking.

*The Sissy Motif.* While contempt for effeminacy is deeply rooted in Western culture (it is already found among the ancient Greeks), the motif took on special coloration in America, where the sissy was identified with effete European culture as contrasted with the frontier-bred he-man. Thus in the film *Mollycoddle* Douglas Fairbanks is a foppish expatriate living in Europe who must win his way back to his rugged, masculine American heritage. In the comedies of Harold Lloyd, the bespectacled weakling is made to prove his masculinity over and over again.

In the 1930s, as the Hays Office code tightened its stifling hold, the sissy became a camouflage for the male homosexual, who could not be presented directly. In Lewis Milestone's 1931 version of *The Front Page*, a milktoast

poet-reporter, played by Edward Everett Horton, is a foil for the tough-guy reporters. During the 1930s Ernest Truex and Franklin Pangborn made the character virtually their own. With the collapse of censorship in the late 1960s, this subterfuge became less common, but it is still resorted to occasionally when the filmmakers wish to blur the image of a homosexual character.

*Buddy Films.* The drag and sissy films featured individuals who were generally isolated and risible, and hence could scarcely be regarded as role models by the general public. It was quite different with the buddy films—a classic example is *Beau Geste* (1926)—which generally presented dashing specimens of manhood who bonded with others of their ilk. For this reason homoerotic overtones generally had to be more subtle than in the other two genres. Many of these films raise problems of interpretation, in that the homoerotic elements that are detected by gay viewers (and a few homophobes) are often ignored by general audiences. Is it a case of projection (on the one hand) or obtuseness (on the other)? Recent literary criticism has emphasized that each work lends itself to a multiplicity of interpretations as the reader recreates the work. Regardless of whether this principle applies to films in general, it does seem helpful in understanding the divergent interpretations of buddy films.

An early landmark of the genre is William Wellman's *Wings* (1928), not to be confused with Stiller's earlier work. As one of the two flyer heroes is dying in the arms of the other, the survivor epitomizes: "There is nothing in the world that means more to me than your friendship." A sinister example is Alfred Hitchcock's *Strangers on a Train* (1951), based on a novel by Patricia Highsmith, where two men make a double murder pact. Adolescent alienation was the theme of *Rebel without a Cause* (1955), in which, however, the delicate Sal Mineo character dies so that James Dean can be united with Natalie Wood. In

1964 *Becket* provided a medieval setting, while the popular *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1974) updated the long tradition of Westerns featuring male heroes and their "sidekicks" by making Paul Newman and Robert Redford equal partners.

The seventies provided a few opportunities for a franker divulgence of the subtext. In the French *Going Places* (*Les valseuses*, 1974) Gérard Depardieu and Patrick Dewaere even have sex in one scene; the next day Dewaere is remorseful and ashamed, but Depardieu tells him to forget it: it's OK among friends.

*Transfers*. Novels having gay and lesbian characters have received a variety of treatments. Early on, the gay character is either written out or made straight (*Young Man with a Horn*, 1950) or the gender is changed (as in *Serenade* [1956], after James M. Cain's novel, the gay-male impresario is turned into a femme fatale agent, played by Joan Fontaine). *Cabaret* (1972) made the Isherwood character bisexual, but the earlier *I am a Camera* passed him off as straight. *Inside Daisy Clover* made the gay movie star (Robert Redford) only bisexual, and then only through the dialogue of other people. In the book *Midnight Express* the hero admitted to a gay love affair in prison, but in the movie version (1978) he rejects a handsome fellow inmate's advances. Although William Hurt received an Academy Award in 1986 for his portrayal of a fem prisoner in *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, many gay viewers—including the book's author, Manuel Puig—found him unconvincing.

In screened plays, especially those of Tennessee Williams, the crucial bits of dialogue are omitted, so that one wonders what the fuss is about with Blanche and her dead friend in *Streetcar Named Desire* (1951) or the problem that keeps Brick and Maggie apart in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1958). Yet the English *Taste of Honey* (1961) retained the honesty of Shelagh Delaney's play, providing a rare instance of a sympathetic effeminate gay man.

Screen biographies of gay people have had similar fates. Michelangelo and Cole Porter appear as joyful heterosexuals; Oscar Wilde could not be sanitized, to be sure, but he was presented in a "tasteful" manner (three British versions, two in 1960, one in 1984). Recent screen biographies have been better; the documentary on the painter Paul Cadmus (1980) is open without being sensational; *Prick Up Your Ears*, on the life of Joe Orton, is as frank as one can wish, though it somehow misses the core of his personality. *Nik and Murray*, while not properly speaking a biography, told the story of dance-world luminaries Alwin Nikolais and Murray Louis, treating their long-term relationship simply as a matter of fact. *Unanswered Prayers: The Life and Times of Truman Capote* (1987) pulled few punches, and *Gian-Carlo Menotti: The Musical Magician* (1986), though it provided no intimate details, did not gloss over the relationship with Samuel Barber.

*The European "Art Film."* After World War II, as Europe emerged from the stultifying restraints of the Occupation, a greater freedom was sought in many areas, including the erotic. Moral guardians were still very much on the scene, however, and homosexuality had to be presented in aestheticized, "tasteful" guise. Clearly ahead of its time was Jean Genet's *Un Chant d'Amour*, about prison homoeroticism and its repression. In *The Third Sex* (West Germany, 1959) a sophisticated older man has an entourage of teen-aged boys. Although this film purveys dated ideas of homosexuality, it went farther in explicitness than anything that Hollywood was able to do for over a decade. Federico Fellini's celebrated *La Dolce Vita* (1960) is a multifaceted portrait of eternal decadence in chic circles in Rome. The English *Victim* (1961), which concerns the blackmailing of a young homosexual, is clearly a plea for law reform in the wake of the 1957 Wolfenden Report. Sidney J. Furie's *The Leather Boys* (1964) portrays a buddy relationship between two motorcyclists,

one gay, one straight. In the same year a French director Jean Delannoy even showed (though in highly aestheticized form) love between two schoolboys in *Les Amitiés particulières*, based on the 1945 novel of Roger Peyrefitte.

*The Sixties Thaw in America.*

The early years of the sixties saw the start of the civil rights movement in the United States, while at the same time a series of court decisions struck down literary censorship, signaling that restriction on films would be relaxed as well. Otto Preminger's *Advise and Consent* (1962) even brought homosexuality to the hallowed halls of the United States Senate, but presented it as a seamy reality far from the conventional life of an upright American politician, even though it was based on the suicide of Senator Lester Hunt of Wyoming in 1954. This film presented audiences with their first glimpse of a gay bar. One breakthrough came in 1967 when the legendary Marlon Brando portrayed a closeted homosexual army officer in John Huston's *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, a film which drew a "Condemned" rating from the Catholic Church. In *The Sergeant* (1968) and *Suddenly Last Summer* (1969) both protagonists meet death as the wages of their perversion. The lesbian relationship in 1968's *The Fox* is also ended through the death of Sandy Dennis. Although it was essentially a buddy movie, *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), with Jon Voight and Dustin Hoffman, offered some revealing glimpses of the Times Square hustling scene, with Voight sympathetically playing a "straight trade" type; one scene has him experiencing oral sex in an all-night movie theater.

*The Underground Cinema.*

In 1947 Kenneth Anger, then still a southern California high school student, made *Fireworks*, a symbol-laden, quasi-surrealist portrayal of a gay sex encounter. Although his career never really took off in the commercial sense, Anger made another innovative film *Scorpio Rising* in 1963, which foretold Counterculture sexual freedom and the interest in the occult. Some-

what similar was Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures* (1963), while Gregory Markopoulos achieved a more aestheticized and abstract version of the mode. These developments have been termed the "Baudelairean cinema," since they depend on some aspects of the French nineteenth-century decadent sensibility. Their immediate heir, however, was Andy Warhol, who branched out from painting in such deliberately crude films as *Blow Job* (1963) and *My Hustler* (1965). Neither was really pornographic but their acceptance helped speed the fall of censorship barriers.

*Breakthrough.* Only with William Friedkin's *Boys in the Band* (1970) were audiences confronted with a Hollywood film in which all the characters are stereotypical homosexuals. The tone remained mocking and hostile, reassuring straight audiences that such people were doomed to unhappiness in "the wasteland of homosexual existence."

Also in 1970 came Michael York's portrayal of a scheming, murderous bisexual in *Something for Everyone*. York again played a bisexual as the male lead Brian in the film version of *Cabaret* (1972), based on Christopher Isherwood's *Berlin Stories*. The early seventies were also notable for two films which dealt with male rape, in each case of a heterosexual by a heterosexual. The 1971 Canadian film version of John Herbert's play *Fortune and Men's Eyes* dealt with a prison setting, and included some rather explicit footage as well as a drag-queen who turns out to be the strongest of the main characters. Burt Reynolds starred in *Deliverance* (1972), in which a white-water macho buddy trip is disrupted by some hillbillies who take advantage of an opportunity to sodomize one of the buddies at gunpoint.

Against this background, Christopher Larkin's *A Very Natural Thing* (1973) came as a wholly positive portrait of gay relationships. Sidney Lumet's *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975) followed with the real story of a bisexual bankrobber, played by

Al Pacino, and his would-be transsexual lover, sympathetically told.

Europe continued to be important with the emergence of openly gay directors. As early as 1968 Pier Paolo Pasolini had made *Teorema*, about the visit of a pansexual angel to the household of a Milan industrialist. Not to be outdone, his older colleague Luchino Visconti made *The Damned* (1969), a somewhat fanciful recreation of the massacre of Captain Röhm and his Nazi storm trooper comrades in the 1934 "night of the long knives," depicted as a wild orgy of blond German youths suddenly interrupted by sub-machine guns from the rival Nazis of the S.S. Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Conformist* (1970) made a questionable equation between childhood homosexual experience and Italian fascism. A year later Visconti brought out a more lyrical and successful film, a rendering of Thomas Mann's novella *Death in Venice*. Britain's John Schlesinger depicted a triad of two men and a woman in which one of the men was involved with the other two in 1971's *Sunday Bloody Sunday*; this film was notable for the shock experienced by straight audiences at a kissing scene between Peter Finch and Murray Head. Perhaps the most notorious of the gay directors was Rainer Werner Fassbinder, whose *Fox and His Friends* (1975) deals with homosexuality and class struggle. Fassbinder's last film was his controversial version of a Genet novel, *Querelle* (1982). The death of Franco created the possibility of a new openness in Spanish culture, including a number of gay films. Influenced by Luis Buñuel, *Law of Desire* (1986) by Pedro Almodóvar is surely a masterpiece of comic surrealism.

*The Positive Eighties.* Homophobia in movie-making became a major issue in 1980, when street demonstrations called to protest and disrupt the filming of *Cruising* proved effective and the movie's showings were often targeted for further protests. As the controversial film failed to score big at the box office, Hollywood

drew the lesson that blatant homophobia was no longer good business.

In 1982 Hollywood came back with *Making Love*, a high budget soap opera about two yuppie lovers, in an attempt to lure a new market; as the attempt failed, no further such excursions appeared. Also in 1982 came *Personal Best*, with Mariel Hemingway as a lesbian athlete, and in 1986, the independently produced *Desert Hearts*, after the novel *Desert of the Heart* by Jane Rule, but both films showed disappointing box-office receipts. Bill Sherwood's *Parting Glances* (1986), a sensitive story of two men, one with AIDS, the other not, was not intended to make money. Modest expectations also attended the British *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985), featuring an unselfconscious love affair between two teenage boys, one white, the other Pakistani; yet it enjoyed surprisingly long runs. In 1987, however, *Maurice*, a beautifully detailed recreation of the E. M. Forster novel by the Merchant-Ivory team, showed that excellence, high budget commercial standards, and honesty about homosexuality could be successfully combined.

#### *Gay and Lesbian Personalities.*

While actors are often thought of as homosexual or bisexual—and many are—the real gay side of Hollywood is probably to be found in those who do not appear on the screen—agents, costume designers, choreographers, and makeup artists. Already in the 1920s some major directors were known to be gay, including the German Friedrich W. Murnau and the Russian Sergei Eisenstein. Dorothy Arzner certainly projected a mannish appearance, whatever her sex life was. The English James Whale went to Hollywood, where he achieved success in directing horror movies. Pasolini, Visconti, and Fassbinder have been mentioned above; the multitalented Franco Zeffirelli (also active in the field of opera) should also be noted.

From an early date Hollywood had promoted the cult of the stars, with their images carefully shaped by studio

public relations departments. A curious aspect of star adulation is the preoccupation, amounting almost to identification, of gay men with such heterosexual divas as Joan Crawford and Judy Garland. Of course the gossip mills turned endlessly. While Rudolph Valentino had to undergo (still unsubstantiated) gossip about his homosexuality, his successor Ramon Novarro really did it, as his tragic murder by two hustlers in 1968 finally attested. The screenwriter Mercedes de Acosta claimed to have had affairs with both Garbo and Dietrich. During their lifetimes Charles Laughton and Montgomery Clift had to suffer fag-baiting taunts from colleagues, while Rock Hudson remained largely untouched by public scandal until his death from AIDS in 1985. Tyrone Power and Cary Grant were decloseted after their deaths. The sexuality of others, such as Errol Flynn and James Dean, remains the subject of argument. In Germany the stage actor and film director Gustav Gründgens managed to work through the Nazi period, even though his homosexuality was known to the regime. In the 1970s, the English actor Dirk Bogarde, in a rare and courageous act of candor, went public about his homosexuality.

*Gay-Male Porno Films.* The origins of this genre are obscure, but one source is the "blue movies" made for stag parties and sold under the counter even before World War II. Another source is the nonexplicit genre of "muscle films" showing buddy relationships and wrestling, which were purchased by gay men. In the late 1960s Pat Rocco produced a series of romantic soft-core (not showing acts of sexual penetration) films of virile men in love with one another. In 1969, however, hard-core porno arrived, apparently to stay. Some fifty theatres across the United States specialized in the genre, and where the authorities were willing to turn a blind eye, sexual acts took place there, stimulated by the films.

Much of the early production was forgettable, but in 1971, in *Boys in the*

*Sand* starring Casey Donovan (Cal Culver), the director—producer Wakefield Poole achieved a rare blend of sexual explicitness and cinematographic values. For a while New York and Los Angeles vied for supremacy, the eastern city specializing in the seamy side of gay life, whereas the California city featured wholesome west coast boys. Among those who achieved some distinction (or at least commercial success) as directors in Los Angeles are J. Brian, Fred Halsted (1940–1989), and William Higgins. Other notable American directors include Arch Brown, Jack Deveau, Francis Ellie, Joe Gage, Dave Nesor, and Christopher Rage. The French Jean-Daniel Cadinot showed that one could combine porno with convincing setting and characterization. Although they are not strictly porno, much the same can be said for the films of the late Arthur J. Bresson, who even dared to deal with boy love.

In the later eighties AIDS began to devastate porno-industry workers, gay and straight, and safe sex procedures became more rigorous on the set (it should be noted, however, that long before AIDS, by strict convention pornographic film ejaculations were always conducted outside the body, so as to be graphically visible; hence film sex was always basically "safe sex"). Video rentals for home use competed with cinema showings, and some of the sleazier houses closed.

Lesbian porno exists only as scenes within films addressed to heterosexual males, their being, thus far, no market for full-length lesbian films of this nature. A number of independent lesbian filmmakers have made candid motion pictures about lesbian life, but they are not pornographic.

*Documentaries.* Perhaps the first is a chapter in the life of openly gay artist David Hockney, *A Bigger Splash* (1974). *Word is Out* was a 1977 composite set of interviews providing a remarkable panorama of gay and lesbian reality. In 1978 Rosa von Praunheim, a militant German

gay director, brought out *An Army of Lovers*, a record of his visits to American gay liberation leaders. *Improper Conduct* (1984) by Néstor Almendros and Orlando Jiménez featured interviews with gay exiles from Castro's Cuba. *The Times of Harvey Milk* (1985), concerning San Francisco's slain political leader, received an Academy Award in 1986. The availability of cheaper equipment has made documentaries of important events, such as the 1987 march on Washington, easier, and the video rental system has made them available to those who cannot attend the often brief theatrical engagements. Major cities, such as Amsterdam, Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York, now have annual film festivals in which gay and lesbian motion pictures of all sorts are showcased.

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### FIRBANK, RONALD (1886-1926)

English novelist and playwright.

Firbank, an aesthete and a dandy, was the grandson of a Durham miner, whose Vic-

torian rags-to-riches ascent provided the income for his grandson to live independently and to publish most of his books privately. A delicate child, he was educated mainly by private tutors. He attended Trinity College, Cambridge, during the height of the university's homoerotic period, but never took a degree. In 1907 he was converted to the Roman Catholic church by R. H. Benson, a closeted homosexual who had been a patron of Frederick Rolfe ("Baron Corvo"). Shy and retiring, Firbank spent much of his life traveling, writing his novels on the backs of large postcards. He seems to have had no long-term homosexual affairs, as he remarked with resignation, "I can buy companionship."

Characteristically, the plot of his first novel, *Vainglory* (1915), which concerns the quest of a society woman to have herself memorialized in a stained-glass window, is a slight affair. The interest lies in the social color as expressed in the dialogue, where Firbank leaves out many of the usual narrative markers, including the identity of the speakers, so that the reader is left to construct much of the background for himself. *Valmouth* (1919) concerns a nursing home for centenarians, while *Prancing Nigger* (1919) is set on a Caribbean island. In the latter novel, he introduces his own name as that of an orchid: "a dingy lilac blossom of rarity untold." His last novel, *Concerning the Eccentricities of Cardinal Pirelli*, in which the eponymous cleric chases but never quite succeeds in catching choir boys, was published just after his death in Rome from a pulmonary infection (1926).

Seemingly spun from the stuff of trivial social comedy, Firbank's novels made a significant contribution to literary modernism through their original use of the device of the "reader's share," whereby he left unstated the details of plot and characterization. Firbank's popularity waxes and wanes, but he had a major influence on such younger contemporaries as Evelyn Waugh and Muriel Spark.