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## *Making Gay Sense of the X-Men*

*William Earnest*

Midway through *X2: X-Men United*, young Bobby Drake and his fellow mutants pay a surprise visit to his conservative, upper middle-class family. The scene depicts a rite of passage for many teenagers living in the mutant-fearing America of the film, announcing to your family that you're one of "those" people—special, different, mutated. Because mutation is a pressing social issue in the X-Men's world, the disclosure of one's "mutancy" is not to be taken lightly. After all, it's a condition that is misunderstood and feared by the general population. Mutants who go public risk everything from being rejected by family to political and social marginalization to physical violence.

This scene will seem familiar to many audience members, particularly those who have been in such "guess-what?" meetings before. These moments happen all the time in our world and play out much like the Drake family's drama. Our pressing social issue isn't mutation, of course, but sexual difference. The rhetorical setting, however—the situation, the characters, and so on—is the same in the film as it is for us; it's the rhetorical equivalent of a gay, lesbian, or bisexual teenager's "coming out" ritual.<sup>1</sup>

Like most rhetorical genres, the coming out ritual tends to follow certain conventions, to look and to sound a certain way, and this one goes by the book (Hart 121–22). Bobby kicks things off with the standard opener, "There's something I need to tell you," and what follows is a volley of real-world coming out dialogue. In the family's exchange, the most predictable lines go to Bobby's mother, Madeline, including:

So, when did you first know you were a . . . a . . . ?

We still love you, Bobby. It's just . . . this mutant problem is a little . . . complicated.

Have you tried not being a mutant?

This is all my fault.

In response to this last line, a member of Bobby's entourage sardonically points out that the gene is inherited from males. "So it's *his* fault," he says with a glib nod of the head to Bobby's father.

As rhetorical disguises go, this scene is a bit of a Rorschach test for audiences. Some viewers will see the gay metaphor while others will not. In his NPR review of the film, for example, *Los Angeles Times* film critic Kenneth Turan plays excerpts from this very scene while observing, "One of the film's virtues is its matter-of-fact storytelling style. This film doesn't wink at us." Hence it seems that gay screenwriters Dan Harris and Michael Dougherty infused the scene with enough good-natured humor to prevent it from becoming maudlin, heavy handed, or over-obvious (Chaw; Vary 45).

Still, there may be just a little rhetorical winking going on, for director Bryan Singer has been forthright about touting the gay subtext of *X-Men* and *X2* in the press (Applebaum). And actor Ian McKellen told *The Advocate* that Singer *explicitly* invoked an analogy to gay rights issues when he first pitched the role of Magneto to him, suggesting that mutants were a perfect symbol for the social struggles of lesbians and gays (Vary 44). Despite (or perhaps because of) this intentional framing of the films as a metaphor for homosexuality and gay rights, Singer and his screenwriters equipped *X-Men* and *X2* with the rhetorical stealth needed to fly below the gaydar of many critics and audience members. Nevertheless, such external commentary by those involved with the films can serve as a "Pssst! Over here!" sign for anyone interested in sniffing out social issues in disguise. For the critic hunting rhetorical prey, it's a lucky break. Hidden rhetorics are usually not as intentional as they seem to be in this case. Besides, whether they're intentional or not, there is no guarantee that they will be easy to recognize. Indeed, some hidden rhetorics may remain hidden even from those who created them.

Although Bobby's coming out is the most apparent manifestation (at least for some) of Singer's metaphoric moral vision for the films, it is hardly the only one. Only a few scenes later in *X2*, Nightcrawler meets Mystique and is intrigued by the unique implications of her shape-shifting ability—implications that, from the perspective of our present analysis, represent the rhetorical strategy of "passing" (Blackmer; Shugart). "Why not stay in disguise all the time, you know—look like everyone else?" he inquires. "Because," she replies in sermoniacal deadpan, "we shouldn't have to."

Aside from these scenes in *X2*, the very premise of *The Last Stand*<sup>2</sup> seems to push the sexual difference metaphor even further (despite the departure of *X2*'s gay director and two gay screenwriters [Vary 45]). Though many mainstream moviegoers may not see the parallels, it seems hard to deny that the X-gene discovered in the third film is analogous to real-world speculation about the existence of a "gay" gene.<sup>3</sup> To be sure, *Variety*'s Justin Chang only slightly overstates the case when he says that this central conceit of *X3* makes *explicit* *X2*'s equating of mutation and homosexuality (41).

With vignettes and plotlines such as these thoroughly integrated into all three films, it seems unlikely that the hidden rhetoric at work here is primarily about, for example, class difference (though such a reading may be possible, as Wolf-Meyer has done with *Batman and Robin*).<sup>4</sup> In this chapter, I argue instead that, throughout all three films, the premise of "mutation" is *best* understood as a metaphor for non-mainstream sexualities, for doing so unlocks a wide variety of critical (and, one hopes, meaningful) observations. Indeed, the superhero genre itself seems particularly ready for such discursive mining these days. After all, 20th-century comic books are enjoying an unprecedented worldwide audience thanks to the technological advances that have made it possible to bring these stories to the big screen in believable ways that honor the spectacle of the original material (Coogan 2). Despite the fact that superheroes don't really exist (as far as we know), the remarkable popularity of the film versions of these stories suggests that *other factors* may be responsible for their deep resonance with audiences. Perhaps it's time to get out the rhetorical calculator and start punching in some equations.

And this thought leads me to conclude these opening paragraphs with a note about method. For the present analysis, metaphor is my critical tool of choice—the case for a couple of reasons. First, in my view, metaphor criticism is where all form criticism begins. If enough metaphors turn up in enough artifacts, then one is justified in suspecting that a full formal critique might be the way to go. But we are dealing here with only three texts, all of which derive from a single narrative. We may suspect that the *X-Men* films are *formally* about, for example, what it means to be different, but by concentrating on the simple critical equation of mutant = gay, we can pay homage to form while getting as much mileage as possible out of one particular metaphor—which segues to the second reason for choosing metaphor criticism as my basis: As metaphors go, we will see in the following pages that this one is *highly systematic*. In other words, our mutant = gay equation turns out to be the key that unlocks not only Bobby's coming out scene but also numerous other scenes, plotlines, and characters in each of the three films. Once transformed in this way, the films can be read productively as ways of thinking about (and making sense of) the social issues that alternative sexuality presents in early 21st-century America.

## **Background: Percival Pinkerton's Shadow**

As comic-book sagas created by Marvel's Stan Lee in the 1960s, *X-Men*, *Spider-Man*, *Fantastic Four*, and others often featured narratives that sought to defend the American way of life against fascist ideology (Schmitt 155; Trushell 151). A brief examination of Lee's background makes his motivation for writing the stories in this way even clearer.<sup>5</sup>

The son of Jewish immigrants,<sup>6</sup> Lee came of age during the Great Depression and in his late teens went to work for Marvel forerunner Timely Comics. There his writing skills were discovered accidentally but put to good use nonetheless. Among other things, he wrote two of the early *Captain America* stories. Then in 1942, Lee enlisted in the U.S. Army, serving 3 years in the Signal Corps as a writer for training films and instructional manuals. Hardworking and patriotic, Lee's post-army career kicked into high gear just as the nuclear age dawned and the Cold War turned hot in Korea—more fuel for the fires of imagination.

His career then took a most unexpected turn—it almost ended. The cause of this near-demise was a McCarthy-era moral crusade against comic books that severely depressed product sales and tarnished the industry's reputation (Brown 18). In 1954, U.S. Senators Estes Kefauver and Robert Hendrickson launched a formal committee investigation into organized crime. A sidelight of this highly publicized hearing process included looking at how comic books might be responsible for violent or criminal behavior among young people. To help “answer” these questions, a German-born psychiatrist named Frederic Wertham was invited to testify. He used the televised hearings to gain popular support for his ongoing crusade against the comic-book industry for, as fate would have it, the press coverage of his appearance coincided perfectly with the publication of his book *Seduction of the Innocent*. These efforts led to the subsequent creation of the Comics Magazine Association of America and the Comic Book Code—“voluntary” efforts by comic-book publishers that amounted to de facto censorship (Park 276).

Wertham charged that comic books were leading America's children astray, encouraging crime, licentiousness, and violent behavior. Of particular note was his conclusion that the standard-issue superhero-sidekick pairing (most notably Batman, Robin, and Robin's bare legs) represented a homosexual fantasy relationship (Lee and Mair 90–91; Terrill 493).<sup>7</sup> Brown summarizes it this way: “Wertham accused the most traditional of superhero comics of instigating . . . homosexuality. . . . [S]uperheroes, those handsome muscle-bound men running around in tights, were obviously gay” (20). Such pseudo-scientific charges today would likely draw as much fire as support, but they were utterly incendiary in the 1950s (homosexuality would not even be declassified as a mental illness until the 1970s [Thompson 85]). The effect of Wertham's “moral entrepreneurship” was singular—comic books, their publishers, and (presumably) their readers were henceforth framed as deviant (Beggan 810; Brown 28–29).

Emerging from and informed by this background of economic, technological, political, and cultural upheaval, Lee helped create *The Fantastic Four* in 1961, *Spider-Man* in 1962, and *X-Men* in 1963—superheroes all, a bunch of troubled, gifted outsiders “burdened with self-doubt and existential angst” (“Comic Book”). But it is important to note that 4 months before the first *X-Men* hit the stands, Lee took a chance (to win a bet) on a World War II story with a ridiculous title that featured human rather than superhuman heroes—*Sgt. Fury and His Howling Commandos* (Lee and Mair 161–62). He won his bet. The *Fury* stories sold well despite their World War II setting (considered hackneyed according to the conventional wisdom) and despite the fact that they featured a far more diverse cast than had ever been seen before in comic books, including Americans of African, Italian, Irish, and Jewish descent—not to mention a *gay* character. The latter was English rather than American (perhaps casting him as a foreigner made it easier to get away with) and went by the somewhat foppish—and quite possibly coded—name of Percival Pinkerton. According to Lee, Pinkerton’s sexual orientation was never explicitly revealed, only implied (it was 1963 after all). “I didn’t play up the gay part,” he told NPR, “but somehow you could assume he was gay in reading the stories. But he was brave and nice and friendly and everybody liked him and he was [just] one of the guys” (“Comic Book”).

As for the *X-Men*, whose initial publication followed quickly on *Fury*’s heels, Lee claims to have had no specific cultural group in mind other than teenagers, and that genetic mutation provided a much-needed new plot device for the conferring of superpowers (other than, for example, exposure to cosmic rays). “It dawned on me,” he writes, “that mutations often appear in nature, for no apparent reason. . . . Why couldn’t I create a group of teenagers who had simply mutated and therefore gained some varied and extraordinary powers?” (Lee and Mair 165). Yet he has also made clear that he intended for *X-Men* to be an indictment of discrimination generally, to “make it a story against bigotry of all sorts” (“Superheroes” para. 3).

On balance, it seems unlikely that Lee created his mutation saga without at least a subconscious appreciation of the potential for reading it through the lens of alternative sexuality. After all, here was a man: (1) who was a patriotic, Jewish World War II veteran, (2) whose professional livelihood had been demonized by cultural conservatives, and (3) who had only months earlier created a hidden gay character in another comic-book series. In other words, he may have had a few cultural scores to settle. And as Schmitt has noted, Marvel and other 1960s-era comics publishers were characterized by their radical willingness to engage social issues that were often seen as unacceptable in the eyes of older generations (155).

Or maybe it was only about acne and angst after all. “It’s funny how people will always read more into what you write than you ever put in there,” Lee told NPR (“Comic Book”). Either way, he had developed an almost ideal cultural metaphor for gay experience and the persecution of sexual difference. And

though it was apt in the 1960s, the metaphor has truly come into its own today, nearly four decades after the dawn of the gay liberation movement. As metaphors go, this one has aged well.

## The Films

Whether consciously working with a gay subtext or not when he was writing the comic books in the 1960s, as executive producer of all three of the films, Lee had the benefit of 40 years of hindsight to guide him. As he himself said in an October 2006 newswire release (the telling title of which was “Superheroes Born Out of Discrimination”), “as so often happens in real life, if you have a different religion, a different country, a different sexual orientation, whatever the difference is, people—not all people, but it happens—are going to dislike you, distrust you, fear you.” Director Bryan Singer, moreover, told PBS interviewer Charlie Rose<sup>8</sup> that he frequently sought Lee’s input on the project. And in a special “making of” segment on the *X-Men* DVD, he further observed that the original story “was sort of Stan Lee’s and Jack Kirby’s way of commenting on prejudice.”

So what was originally a general metaphor for civil rights appears to have evolved into a very specific, 21st-century incarnation of the issue. Cultural artifacts like *Crash* (2005) notwithstanding, the difference *du jour* in Hollywood seems to be focused as much or more on sexuality as ethnicity. In an interview with Filmfreakcentral.net critic Walter Chaw, *X2* screenwriter Dan Harris explained this cultural shift vis-à-vis the *X-Men* saga:

[A] lot of it in the books started out as a race issue, in the last fifteen or twenty years—not only in the movies but in the books, as well, it’s become more a metaphor for sexual identity and orientation because it’s more appropriate to look at a person and have to say, “Are you a mutant?” It’s the best metaphor for a hidden minority, you know, you can’t always look at a person and know that they’re a mutant just like you can’t look at a person and know that they’re gay. (Chaw)

A hidden rhetoric for a hidden minority—indeed, as Professor Xavier tells Logan shortly after meeting him, “anonymity is a mutant’s first defense against the world’s hostility.”

I turn now to a brief analysis of the three feature films, discussing them in the order of their release: *X-Men* (2000), *X2: X-Men United* (2003), and *X-Men: The Last Stand* (2006). Though each film is rich enough to merit its own analysis, I recognize that there is a dearth of scholarly research to date in this area and invite others to investigate in more detail the initial survey offered here. As with previous high-profile cultural phenomena (*The X-Files*, for example), the *X-Men* films may merit “a thorough rhetorical investigation” solely on the basis of their enormous popularity and potential for widespread influence (Bellon 136).<sup>9</sup> But

the prospect of unpacking discourse about significant and timely social issues from such popular culture artifacts is justification enough to proceed. And in the case of the present study, the rhetorical “backstory” we have sketched to this point suggests that our journey will be rife with useful discoveries. In the end, if franchises like the *X-Men* are in fact doing important social and political work on contemporary controversies such as the treatment of gay and lesbian Americans, a little scholarly attention can help provide a fitting forum for discussion and debate.

### *X-MEN*

From the outset of the first film, mutation is framed as a social issue—and a particularly controversial one at that (Smith and Windes). “Are mutants dangerous?” is the shrill, staccato refrain of McCarthy-esque Senator Robert Kelly at a hearing to determine if mutants should be required to register with the government. Both the premise and the lines in the scene recall statements made by former U.S. Senator Jesse Helms, who in 1987 advocated not only mandatory HIV testing but also the quarantining of AIDS patients (“Senator Helms”).

The congressional hearing is an extended scene, and one in which the rhetoric clearly mirrors that of other “family values” debates (Blain). Substitute the word “homosexual” or its equivalents for “mutant” in this scene—as in virtually every scene wherein the merits of mutancy are being debated—and the lines work just as well (a telltale sign that a metaphor is nearby). For example, making the substitution in the following observation by Jean Grey produces a seamless result for modeling the plight of gays and lesbians who face discrimination: “Mutants who have come forward and revealed themselves publicly have been met with fear, hostility, even violence.”

“What is it the mutant community has to *hide* I wonder that makes them so afraid to identify themselves?” retorts Kelly. “There are even rumors,” he continues, “. . . of mutants so powerful that they can enter our minds and control our thoughts, taking away our God-given free will.” He then concludes to thunderous applause and a standing ovation as he shouts, “I think the American people deserve the right to decide whether they want their children to be in school with mutants—to be *taught by* mutants!”

At that line, diligent students of 20th-century American history ought to prick up their ears, for it evokes the rhetoric of anti-gay crusader Anita Bryant and others (Blain 34; Brummett 260; Medhurst 4). Bryant’s “Save Our Children” campaign was inspired by a Baptist minister who declared that he would burn down his church before letting a homosexual teach there. The Bryant campaign was successful in getting the gay rights ordinance in Dade County, Florida, overturned and went on to help other cities do the same (Moser).

More specifically, Kelly’s attack on mutant educators recalls the debate over California’s Proposition 6—better known as the Briggs Initiative—which

voters defeated in 1978. Had it passed, the initiative would have permitted local school districts to dismiss or deny employment to gay teachers. The film's parallels to Proposition 6 and similar historical proposals shows up again, but this time near the end—suggesting that its creators thought the point important enough to use as rhetorical bookends. As Senator Kelly's doppelgänger (Mystique in drag) appears on television to announce that he's dropping his support for the Mutant Registration Act, the announcer's voiceover—shown in subtitles on the television the X-Men are watching at the mansion—reports that the legislation “continues to draw support from many parents' rights groups who feel threatened by unidentified mutants in their school systems.”

The character of Senator Kelly figures prominently in *X-Men*, and given what we know of Stan Lee's past, it is not hard to recognize Kelly as an amalgam of the various moral crusaders that Lee has come up against or observed over the years. Kelly is certainly equal parts Estes Kefauver and Frederic Wertham of the 1950s witch-hunts, with dashes of Anita Bryant and Jesse Helms thrown in to round out the specific demands of the gay subtext (and its accompanying rhetoric of “moral panic”). What we have in this scene is, in fact, a condensed re-creation of the Senate's Kefauver hearings, featuring a kind of discourse that researcher David Park, like his colleague Cindy Griffin, describes in highly rhetorical terms when he notes that the senator's 1954 subcommittee “was primarily a symbolic display, a show trial, where the questions asked were prompted more by the practical concerns of the Senators . . . than by the analyses of the scientists involved” (261).

This description exactly matches the Kelly Senate hearing in the film. It's clear in the scene that, even though he is supposed to be questioning Dr. Grey, the senator is doing little more than grandstanding. Rather than use the forum for true dialogue, Kelly speaks in a one-sided way and frequently turns to address the chamber's standing-room-only audience rather than his supposed interlocutor. In Griffin's view, these are the rhetorical fingerprints of ideology—dialogue that is little more than monologue and the creation of one view of reality at the expense of another (308).

In private, Robert Kelly's rhetoric is even more vitriolic. “If it were up to me, I'd lock 'em all away. It's a war. It's the reason people like me exist,” he confides to an aide—an aide, it turns out, who was killed by Magneto's forces and replaced by a perfect replica (a la Mystique) to effect Kelly's kidnapping. At this point, Mystique reveals her true identity to a very surprised senator and, turning his own words against him, issues a rebuke that every sexually “different” child and teen who has ever experienced harassment knows by heart: “*People like you* were the reason I was afraid to go to school as a child!” She then proceeds to karate-kick the horrified man into unconsciousness, but even as she does so, it is hard to feel anything but empathy toward her and to smile at the senator's comeuppance.



Robert Kelly's next scene is one of the most remarkable in the film, but this time the dialogue is not the rhetorical artifact of interest; that honor goes instead to the scene's staging, which is set in Magneto's cliff-top headquarters. As the scene opens, we find Kelly bound to a chair. What he doesn't know is that he's about to become the test subject for Magneto's energy device, a mutation accelerator to be unleashed on world leaders at the upcoming UN summit on Ellis Island.

After some chit-chat and the ominous line, "God works too slowly," we watch Magneto ascend a tall, narrow, metal shaft that has rounded, circular shapes at the top. He clamps down on the controls and begins to use his own magnetic power to activate the device. As he does so, the circular head begins to spin faster and faster. As it builds toward its climax, we see Magneto nearly faint in what looks like a combination of ecstasy and pain. At the point where his eyes roll into the back of his head, a shower of wavelike white energy erupts from the very top of the platform and cascades out and down until it washes over the senator. The gay (and in this case homoerotic) subtext seems hard to ignore on a close visual inspection of the scene—a tall shaft with a round head, a massive buildup of energy, and an explosion of white, liquid-like "essence."

Cigarette, anyone?

At all events, it turns out that this "exposure" to Magneto's energy wave does *not* accelerate the evolutionary process and realize his dream of turning the world's leaders into fellow *Homo superiors*. Instead, it's fatal to humans. Kelly temporarily gains a great deal of plasticity, but it's simply a side effect of his degenerating cellular structure (which makes him literally what he no doubt considered all mutants to be figuratively—a degenerate). On the examination table at Xavier's school, he deteriorates into a mound (and then puddle) of water (a veiled reference, perhaps, to the Wicked Witch of the West; after all, the senator was from Kansas).

Unintended allusions to Judy Garland films notwithstanding, the hidden rhetoric here is rich in possibility. Senator Kelly experiences the mutant/homo-phobe's worst nightmare, which reads like a Who's Who of gay stereotypes: He is abducted by mentally unstable criminals and then forced into a sex act that exposes him to an infectious, deadly substance—normally a life-giving force of nature that, with a handful of people, has not only gone wrong but is being misused (after all, to be a "practicing" mutant is a choice).

This rhetorical emphasis on the unnatural, unhealthy aspects of mutancy is echoed elsewhere. "We should love the mutant but hate the mutation," Kelly tells his fellow senators, not in the film itself but in a 30-minute mockumentary called the "Mutant Watch," aired by the FOX network to promote the film's release.<sup>10</sup> This reimagining of the familiar evangelical Christian trope "love the sinner, hate the sin"—so frequently applied to alternative sexualities (Blain 44; Lynch 383)—seems a clear and obvious choice by the film's promoters to analogize mutancy and homosexuality.

Elsewhere in the “Mutant Watch,” when asked to explain his view that mutation doesn’t represent a perfectly natural phenomenon, Kelly responds Socratically by positing “Evolution? Or *Aberration?*” In this way, mutancy represents a real threat to the survival of *Homo sapiens* as a species. But even if Magneto’s acceleration device had worked as planned and advanced the species, no doubt detractors would still manage to accuse mutantkind of engaging in forced “recruitment,” an idea that Anita Bryant helped to popularize (Moser).

Robert Kelly’s nightmare represents a subtext that runs throughout all three films, namely, that mutancy represents unrestrained, undisciplined, unhealthy sexuality. He sees mutancy as many see AIDS—as a threat to the survival of the human species—a view that makes it possible to declare war against mutantkind.<sup>11</sup> But whereas mutantphobes like Kelly do not distinguish “good” mutants from “bad,” Xavier’s X-Men do. The mutant community is thus divided about what is and is not proper behavior; some mutants, explains Xavier, have gifts “so extreme that they’ve become a danger to themselves and those around them.” It is also possible that these “dangerous” mutants are a separate metaphor for HIV/AIDS. To be sure, the question of a “cure” (and the rhetorical choice to label it as such) drives the plot of *X3*. After all, if someone has AIDS, why wouldn’t they choose to be cured?

We find licentiousness coded into many of the trilogy’s characters, but most often in the female characters and particularly in Jean Grey, Rogue, and Mystique. When Wolverine asks Jean if she’s ever used Cerebro, for example, her reply is telling: “It takes a degree of control, and, uh, for someone like me. . . .” She trails off, but Cyclops finishes the sentence for her: “. . . it’s dangerous.” Indeed, Cyclops himself will learn this truth the hard way in *X3* when Jean’s lack of self-control hands her over to the ultimate metaphor for sexual addiction and depravity—the Phoenix Force.

Then there’s Rogue, who is essentially a black widow in waiting. “The first boy I ever kissed ended up in a coma for three weeks,” she tells Logan. As with most mutants, her power first manifested itself in adolescence during a stolen kiss—drawing a parallel between the awakening of sexual desire (and, in general, the discovery of one’s orientation) and the emergence of mutant powers, since both occur during puberty. As a sexual being, Rogue’s very touch can be deadly, which makes her doubly useful as a gay metaphor. First, she represents “strange flesh”—part of a biblical injunction against same-sex relations still used in some circles.<sup>12</sup> Reinforcing the idea of aberration over evolution (an argument levied against mutation in the films and homosexuality in real life), and not unlike bygone warnings against interracial marriage, the central transgression that drives these prohibitions is the idea of a perversion of the natural order or divine law.

A second interpretation of Rogue’s condition is more straightforward. Because physical contact with her can kill, she is the single best metaphor for

*disease* of any character in the films. If we accept this premise, then it is easy to draw parallels to HIV/AIDS. Not all mutants are “infectious” in this way, but as one of the characters whose sexual side is presented more often than most, the conclusion is hard to miss: Not all mutants/gays are deadly, but just one exposure to someone who is “infected” is enough to seal your doom.

For her part, Mystique is a rhetorical analysis unto herself. She is portrayed as overtly sexual and exhibitionist (hence the lack of clothes), and her ability to shape-shift could be read as a metaphor for bisexuality. But for our purposes, what’s just as interesting is that she appears to represent sadomasochism, deriving pleasure from giving and receiving physical pain. The best example of this is a deliberate visual aside during her fight scene with Wolverine at the Statue of Liberty. In the middle of an extended volley of kicks, head butts, and body slams, she gets knocked to the floor in a move that catches her off guard. As the camera zooms in and the action catches its breath, she flashes an “I like it” expression of surprised pleasure followed by a quick and suggestive licking of her lips. If Wolverine is any indication, Mystique seems to like her men rough and her sex rougher. More to the point, her predilection for non-vanilla sex recalls anti-gay stereotypes about sadomasochism, leather, orgies, and other “unusual” or “unhealthy” sex acts that are supposedly common among homosexuals.

## *X2: X-MEN UNITED*

At the beginning of this chapter, Bobby’s coming out scene was offered as the primary example of *X2*’s gay subtext. Picking up where we left off, it’s worth revisiting the Drake home to examine the second half of the scene, in which things go from bad to worse for everyone. The tongue-in-cheek, almost playful dialogue between the X-Men and the Drakes is quickly replaced by a violent confrontation with a battalion of police. In a way, the scene in its entirety represents the hypocrisy of American “tolerance”—guarded rhetorical acceptance contradicted by material discrimination; to be sure, this is the very critique commonly levied at U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney, who publicly declares his love for and acceptance of his lesbian daughter Mary while simultaneously endorsing the Bush administration’s push for a constitutional amendment banning gay marriage.

The more or less civil debate of the scene’s first part quickly escalates into a material threat to life, limb, and property. Bobby’s younger brother storms out of the family meeting and places a call to 911 to tell the police that the family is being held hostage in their own home (a formal metaphor for homosexuality’s perceived threat to the nuclear family). As the X-Men attempt to take their leave, the police surround the house. When a trigger-happy officer tells Wolverine to put his “knives” away, he misinterprets the superhero’s attempt to explain why he can’t and fires a slug squarely into his forehead, dropping him on the spot.

As X-Man apprentice Pyro looks around at the persecution they're being unfairly subjected to, he has what can best be described as a Rosa Parks moment. The officers ask the X-Men to lie down, and he alone refuses to comply. "We don't wanna hurt ya, kid," pleads one of the officers.

But Pyro will have none of it. "You know all those 'dangerous' mutants you hear about on the news?" he taunts. "I'm the worst one." He then proceeds to shoot fireballs at the nice suburban police officers and torch their cars. As more police units arrive, Pyro takes them out one by one, evincing as he does so an expression that is part surprise, part joy, and part rapturous rage. Rogue manages to disrupt him by temporarily draining his life force, which she does by grabbing his ankle. At the same time, she uses her other hand to wave out the burning fires. This internal conflict among the X-Men is part of the ongoing game of "good mutant/bad mutant" that will erupt into outright mutant-on-mutant violence in *X3*.

It's probably a stretch to suggest that Pyro's great balls of fire make him a flamer of sorts, but it's too tempting an interpretation not to at least mention. A more productive reading, however, is derived from the scene's formal elements—white, heterosexual, suburban sensibilities are threatened by mutancy/homosexuality. This perfectly manicured house and its beautiful nuclear family are torn apart, both figuratively vis-à-vis Bobby's prodigal choices and literally thanks to Pyro (at the very least, the house will need a facelift and a new lawn). It would seem that mutancy and humanity are fundamentally incompatible—mix the two, and the best you can hope for is debris.

The mutant lifestyle presents still other dilemmas for the Drakes. From their perspective, mutants seem to live communally, generally eschew the heterosexual institution of marriage, and subvert middle-class values by relabeling complicated moral "problems" like mutation as *gifts* ("You have to understand," says Mr. Drake in defense of his family's disappointed reaction, "we thought Bobby was going to a school for the gifted." "He *is* gifted," counters Rogue).

Thanks to his own gift of self-healing, meanwhile, Wolverine's bullet extracts itself from his forehead, and the X-Jet arrives, Harrier-style, to ferry the team away. As they make their way to the plane, the camera goes to great lengths to show that none of the humans involved in the melee was killed or even seriously injured (which has to be seen to be believed). As they hurry across the wrecked lawn, Bobby stops and glances longingly back at his family, who are looking down upon the whole scene from an upstairs window. Madeline Drake's arms are wrapped tightly around her "good" son's shoulders. She means well, this suburban mom. As she said, this whole mutant problem is complicated. After all, Bobby and his kind have "forced" the Drakes into making this difficult choice.

Someone in the film who clearly does not mean well, however, is Colonel William Stryker. In symbolic terms, Stryker is a perfect Nazi, an amoral scientist and military officer bent on genocide. In true Mengele style, he had previously

taken advantage of Logan's natural gift of rapid healing and grafted the indestructible metal adamantium onto the mutant's skeleton. And at the Alkali Lake facility, he has a holding cell full of mutant children that he tortures and, we learn, plans to exterminate as test subjects when his genocide device is ready for trial runs. "I'm a scientist," he explains when one of his lieutenants questions the ethics of this aspect of his operation.

The character of Stryker is worth mentioning for at least two reasons. First, coded as a Nazi, it's not unreasonable to link him to the Third Reich's use of pink triangles and criminalization of homosexuals under the German statute known as Paragraph 175. Second, like the elder Warren Worthington in *X3*, Stryker is deeply ashamed and resentful of his own mutant son. Years earlier, Stryker had brought his son Jason to Xavier's school, but he did so for correction rather than development. "You wanted me to cure your son, but mutation is not a disease," Xavier reminds him at Alkali Lake—a line that foreshadows the plot of the third film.

It is Stryker, moreover, the genocidal, mutant-killing Nazi, who brings Xavier's and Magneto's factions together. To him, as with Senator Kelly, mutation represents a genetic aberration rather than a natural function of evolution. To counter such anti-mutant rhetoric, as well as Magneto's equally genocidal anti-human rhetoric, the film goes out of its way to advocate a Rodney King "can't we all just get along" discourse, and it does so in two ways. It grounds itself, first, in a normalizing scientific discourse, and second, in the rationalist discourse of American liberalism. In fact, the film wastes no time in making these points, for they are literally the first words to fall on the ears of audience members and are intended to frame everything that follows. As the opening-sequence animation and main title fade, we see star fields and hear Patrick Stewart's soothing, paternal voice engaging us in an internal monologue (in which, once again, terms denoting sexual difference can be readily substituted):

Mutants. Since the discovery of their existence they have been regarded with fear, suspicion, often hatred. Across the planet, debate rages: Are mutants the next link in the evolutionary chain or simply a new species of humanity fighting for their share of the world?

As this prologue concludes, the first scene begins with a close-up of a familiar sign with three words: *THE WHITE HOUSE*. While the imagery of the very epicenter of American liberal power is suggestive enough, lest anyone miss the point we immediately hear a White House tour guide reciting the following excerpt from Lincoln's first inaugural address: "We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break, the bonds of our affection." In these general discourses about science, tolerance, and understanding, it is hard not to think of any repressed group in American society, past

or present, and hear in particular the echoes of contemporary political, religious, and cultural debates over the proper status of gays and lesbians, even the nature of homosexuality. The message is clear: Whether we be *Homo sapiens* or *Homo superior*, at the end of the day, we're all *Homos* together.

Finally, another clue to the gay subtext at work—not just in *X2* but all three films—is the fact that almost every mutant has two names, their human birth name and their mutant “code” name. It is this exchange of both sets of names that helps Logan/Wolverine and Marie/Rogue identify (literally “come out”) to each other as mutants during their first meeting. This convention is reminiscent of the stage names taken by drag queens and code names (such as “Mary”) commonly used by gay men to label each other, often in jest.

In *X2* specifically there is another variation on this name game that's worth noting, a scene in which using his code name literally helps John/Pyro come to terms with both his mutant identity and his apparent destiny. On the X-Jet when they first meet, Magneto and John speak slowly and quietly in a scene that director Singer shoots in close-up, as if to highlight its emotional and psychological importance:

“What's your name?” asks Magneto.

“John,” he replies.

“What's your *real* name?” purrs the elder mutant.

After a knowing pause, John replies in a voice that is equal parts defiance and resignation: “Pyro.” As Kachgal pointed out in her analysis of MTV's *The Real World*, this represents a kind of “confessional” rhetoric in the Foucauldian sense, whereby John is claiming his true identity and ridding himself of shame and guilt (over the fiasco chez Drake, perhaps) (363). But such confession can come at a price, depending on who actually benefits from it. In this case, Magneto self-servingly manufactures the confession to seduce John into joining the Brotherhood. “You're a god among insects,” exhorts Magneto. “Never let anyone tell you different,” he adds, the irony of which seems lost on the conflicted teenager. By film's end, Magneto's recruitment effort is successful, and a disciple is born.

#### *X-MEN: THE LAST STAND*

The genocidal threat posed by Colonel Stryker having been safely abated in *X2*, by the time of *X3*, mutants have become more mainstream than ever. There's even a cabinet-level Department of Mutant Affairs run by none other than Dr. Hank McCoy, the once and future X-Man known as Beast. Mutants now seem fully integrated into the dream of American liberalism, with all the rights and privileges pertaining thereto.<sup>13</sup>

But all hell breaks loose when pharmaceutical company Worthington Labs discovers a young mutant named Leech who produces an antibody that can permanently suppress the X-gene (the factor responsible for the mutation phenomenon). The company's obsessed founder goes all out to develop and promote the antibody as a "cure"—for his own son, future X-Man Angel, as much as for anyone else.

Worthington, like Colonel Stryker before him, regards mutancy as abnormal—something to be dreaded and an evolutionary threat to be avoided. Confirming one of Kenneth Burke's great fears, this Man of Science is presumed to be acting in the best interests of liberal society but, in fact, is engaging in nothing less than Hitlerism. In developing the cure, apparently neither he nor the administration in Washington thinks to question the morality (or even the meaning) of their actions. Burke describes how these missteps can occur, even accurately predicting the film's climactic showdown between Magneto's Brotherhood and the U.S. military:

If the technical expert, as such, is assigned the task of perfecting new powers of chemical, bacteriological, or atomic destruction, his morality *as technical expert* requires only that he apply himself to his task as effectively as possible. The question of what the new force might mean, as released into a social texture emotionally and intellectually unfit to control it, or as surrendered to men whose *specialty* is *professional killing*—well, that is simply "none of his business." (30, italics in original)

And so goes the plot of the third film. The cure is a "new force" that is released into a society, mutant and nonmutant alike, that does not know what to do with it—other than to load it into Magneto-proof plastic guns and give it to the army.

How did it come to this? The genesis of the cure is revealed in the film's second scene, another "coming out" moment the dialogue of which could be lifted verbatim and applied to any young gay son who gets "caught in the act" by his disapproving, disappointed straight father. In this case, the act is self-mutilation. A distraught Warren Worthington III tries desperately to hide his "thorn in the flesh"—a lovely pair of mutant wings—by sawing them off. Standing in the bathroom and covered in blood and feathers, the boy sobs "I'm sorry" after his suspicious father bursts in on him. "Oh, God!" recoils the dad in horror and disgust. "Not you." Fast-forward 10 years and we find that Worthington Labs has perfected a cure for young Warren's condition—at a now-converted prison complex on Alcatraz Island. But once a prison, always a prison, at least metaphorically—or so the filmmakers seem to be suggesting based on their choices. That's no cure, boys and girls. *Caveat mutantus*—let the mutant beware.

And let the viewer beware of some very telling formal elements in the composition of *The Last Stand*. There's Alcatraz, of course, but that's just for starters.

There's also the small matter of where Alcatraz happens to be located—in San Francisco, America's unofficial gay capital. When juxtaposed with the story's other major city, Washington DC, the true nature of the film's hidden rhetoric becomes clearer; like Martin Luther King, Jr., in the "I Have a Dream" speech, mutants/gays are staking a claim on their piece of the American Dream (Vail 58–59). It is a piece long denied them, and when it is almost within reach, the majority suddenly changes the rules of the game. In King's time, it would have been paramount to the Johnson administration announcing a "cure" for being black. The assumption of course is that it's for the recipients' own good, that is, that they're better off being white/nonmutant/straight.

"It's a better life. It's what we all want," explains the elder Worthington as Angel, realizing what he's being forced to give up to acquire mainstream status, begins to resist the assimilation procedure he "volunteered" for.

"No," counters his son. "It's what *you* want."

At that, Angel hurtles himself through the plateglass window of his father's high-rise office, spreads his wings (both literally and figuratively), and begins to soar triumphantly across the city. After a moment, he is directly over the bay and in full view of the Alcatraz facility, where the very source of the mutation cure, Leech himself, gazes up at him in envious wonder. For the first time, we see Leech's otherwise spacious quarters as a prison cell (it *is* Alcatraz), trapping him behind a window barely larger than his face. The composition of Angel's escape scene is no accident. After all, he could have just flapped away down a side street. Instead, the filmmakers seem to have carefully constructed a visual tableau rife with symbols of oppression and liberation. As an anti-cure protestor's placard declares elsewhere in the film, *ONLY GOD CAN CHANGE DNA*.

But not every mutant is convinced that the mainstream American Dream, a house with a white picket fence, and 2.5 mixed-mutant kids, is the way to go. Malcolm X to Charles Xavier's Martin Luther King, Magneto advocates reversal rather than reconciliation. "We are the cure, the cure for their infirm, imperfect condition called *Homo sapiens!*" he shouts to the delight of his gathered minions. After a terrorist-style attack on a government-run cure distribution center, Magneto broadcasts a taped ultimatum to the human population. "Your streets are not safe," he warns them. "*You* are not safe." It is every suburban soccer mom's nightmare, the mutant version of the "homosexual agenda" writ large (Lens 327).

In the end, American liberal democracy prevails by extending full citizenship to its mutant population. Along the way, high-profile nonmutants like the president and Warren Worthington learn a thing or two, as much about themselves as about mutants (the latter when his son swoops in to save him from execution at the hands of the Brotherhood). And with Dr. McCoy's help, the president's chief political conundrum is resolved (at least for now), namely, "how democracy survives when one man can move cities with his mind." As a reward for his service, the president appoints Dr. McCoy the nation's ambassador to the United Nations. It all makes for a tidy little civics lesson.



Speaking of tidy, the most dangerous mutants in the film—metaphors for HIV/AIDS brought on by “promiscuity” among some homosexuals—are effectively neutralized. Magneto, Mystique, and Rogue all receive the cure, though only Rogue does so willingly. Sadly, Jean Grey has to be sacrificed lest the world be destroyed by the Phoenix Force’s uncontrolled surges of power (which, it should be noted, appear to be entwined with sexual desire, first for Cyclops and then for Wolverine). Depicted as a mutant with unlimited power, unlimited sexual energy, yet very limited self-discipline, she represents the ultimate virus.

On the other hand, perhaps Jean Grey represents American patriarchy’s continuing struggle to come to terms with strong women—as do Rogue and Mystique in this regard (Johnston 382). All are depicted as “too” sexual, and therefore all must be made to “behave” if society is to go on. Equal rights for mutants/gays in the eyes of the law is one thing, but redefining the standards of what it means to be (homo)sexual is one bridge the hetero-normative mainstream just isn’t willing to build (Lucaites and Condit 19–20). At this point, at least, it remains a bridge too far.

## Conclusion

The method used here to unpack the hidden rhetoric of these three films is easily applied to other science fiction and/or fantasy artifacts. As I said in the introduction, such genres, particularly as they are brought to life on the big screen, may be especially ripe for rhetorical picking given that they ostensibly feature people, plots, and processes that do not exist in our world.

Or do they? After all, *we* wrote them. *We* filmed them. At some level, therefore, they will always be *about us*. The job of the popular culture critic is to find the rhetorical equation that unlocks the code. Cracking that code will always be more art than science, but sometimes a good place to start is by looking and listening for the “surprise of the familiar”—that is, spotting something that is *almost* (but not quite) the same as something we recognize. In the case of the present critique, the original clue was the composition and dialogue of the Drake family meeting. It caught my attention because it looked and sounded so familiar. My curiosity thus piqued, I made a quick inventory of the scene’s elements:

A tension-filled family meeting? *Check.*

A prodigal teenaged son? *Check.*

Guilty, disappointed parents? *Check.*

Making an announcement about one’s sexuality? *Nope.*

Bingo. There it was, the only thing absent from an otherwise well-known, predictable list. At this point, the critic's next move is to assign a variable to the missing piece ( $x$  has always been a favorite) and try to solve for it, starting with the very thing thought to be missing (sexuality in this case). Sometimes one's initial hunch will be confirmed, sometimes not. If not, keep going. Try more values for  $x$ , or try different methods (such as the ones described in the other chapters of this book). In the end, no matter the approach taken, keep an eye on the prize—there is important work to be done when it comes to social issues. Because they can be sensitive, complex subjects, often the best way—sometimes the *only* way—for them to enter the public's imagination is to do so in disguise, where they wait patiently for discerning, imaginative critics to properly introduce them.

## Notes

1. A similar moment occurs in the third *X-Men* film when Warren Worthington discovers that his young son is a mutant. This scene is discussed in detail later in this chapter.

2. For simplicity's sake, the second and third films will frequently be referred to as *X2* and *X3* rather than their longer, formal titles of *X2: X-Men United* and *X-Men: The Last Stand*.

3. A scientific thesis that remains unproven despite the preliminary findings of some studies reported in the mid-1990s (Hamer et al.; Toufexis 95).

4. Note the word *primarily*. It is possible to interpret the films through the lens of class difference, especially if one uses species as the metaphor. In *X-Men*, we see this when Magneto mocks the capabilities of the merely human police force arrayed before him. "You *Homo sapiens* and your *guns*," he scoffs.

5. The background narrative summarized here is drawn from *Excelsior! The Amazing Life of Stan Lee* by Stan Lee and George Mair.

6. Erik Lehnsherr/Magneto was a Jewish immigrant to America.

7. And let's not forget that Robin's name was "Dick" Grayson.

8. The Charlie Rose interview is included as a special feature on the DVD release of *X-Men*.

9. And as Stanley has pointed out, far more people consume their comic-book rhetoric from movie adaptations than from the printed versions of the stories (143).

10. Both the "Mutant Watch" special and the Web site of the same name were clearly intended by the studio as an unflattering send-up of Kelly's McCarthy-esque rhetoric. The former was reissued as part of the DVD release of the film.

11. Alex de Waal (2004) uses such metaphors when describing the status of AIDS in Africa.

12. The terminology appears in some translations of Jude 1:6–7.

13. Urban has astutely pointed out that, as secretary of mutant affairs, Dr. Hank McCoy is the film's equivalent of Barney Frank, calling him "a politician who looks out for his mutant brethren" (para. 5).