On November 18, 1977, Harvey Milk, who ten days earlier had been elected as the first openly gay member of San Francisco's Board of Supervisors, tape-recorded a will that included: "This is to be played only in the event of my death by assassination. I fully realize that a person who stands for what I stand for, a gay activist, becomes a target for somebody who is insecure, terrified, afraid, or very disturbed themselves.... If I am assassinated, I ask for the movement to continue, for the movement to grow." A year later, on November 27, 1978, Milk and Mayor George Moscone were shot to death by Dan White, a disgruntled fellow city supervisor. As Milk had hoped, the movement continued, and grew. And Milk became a legend. In 2009, President Obama awarded him a posthumous Presidential Medal of Freedom; in 2014 the U.S. Postal Service issued a Harvey Milk "Forever" stamp; and in 2016 the U.S. Navy named a ship in his honor.

Milk's life and legacy were detailed first in Randy Shilts's book The Mayor of Castro Street (1982), and then in Robert Epstein's Academy Award-winning documentary THE TIMES OF HARVEY MILK (1985). Director Gus Van Sant planned a dramatic film as early as 1991 (starring Robin Williams). The project moved to other directors and actors (Richard Gere, James Woods) until it returned to Van Sant, via Dustin Lance Black's script. The director had been adept at both small, edgy, gay-themed productions (DRUGSTORE COWBOY, MY OWN PRIVATE IDAHO) and large, mainstream crowd-pleasers (GOOD WILL HUNTING, FINDING FORRESTER). With MILK he managed an artful combination: it is a provocative, unblinking advocacy of gay activism and rights, and yet is solidly in the tradition of grand Hollywood biopics, especially those about martyrs to a significant cause (GANDHI, MALCOLM X). MILK was made on a relatively modest $20 million budget, and on just a two-month shooting schedule, yet it feels like an epic.

The filmmakers strived for authenticity, cleverly integrating archival footage and shooting as much as possible on San Francisco locations, including City Hall and Castro Street. The headquarters for Milk’s activism and political campaigns—his Castro Street camera store—had become a gift shop, but it was refurbished, like the street itself, to look as it had in the 1970s. Two of Milk’s closest associates worked as advisors to their actor counterparts: activist Cleve Jones with Emile Hirsch, and campaign manager Anne Kronenberg with Alison Pill.

Film critics were almost universally enthusiastic. The New York Times’s A.O. Scott wrote, “MILK is accessible and instructive, an astute chronicle of big-city politics and the portrait of a warrior whose passion was equaled by his generosity and good humor. ... (The film’s) power lies in its uncanny balancing of nuance and scale, its ability to be about nearly everything—love, death, politics, sex, modernity—without losing sight of the intimate particulars of its story. Harvey Milk was an intriguing, inspiring figure. MILK is a marvel." MILK received eight Academy Award nominations, including Picture and Director, and won two: Original Screenplay and Actor (Sean Penn, who also won the Golden Globe and numerous prizes from critics’ associations).

Harvey Milk’s most momentous battles were with the anti-gay forces led nationally by singer Anita Bryant and in California by State Senator John Briggs, whose Proposition 6—permitting the firing of all gay and lesbian school teachers—was decided in a statewide election on November 7, 1978, just three weeks before Milk’s death. Coincidentally, as MILK was in post-production, Californians were debating another anti-gay initiative: Proposition 8, to ban gay marriages through a revision in the state constitution. The film’s premiere was strategically scheduled (appropriately, at the Castro Theatre) on October 28, 2008, one week before the vote.

Our sincere gratitude to Bruce Cohen (Yale College ‘83), who generously donated the 35mm print to the Yale Film Archive. In 2012, he established the Bruce L. Cohen Fund, which supports undergraduate scholarship and undergraduate scholarly programming in LGBTQ Studies at Yale.

**Next Up:** JAFAR PANAH WEAVES TOGETHER TALES OF WOMEN’S DAILY STRUGGLES IN THE CIRCLE (2000), WHICH, IN THE WORDS OF LISA SCHWARZBAUM, “CIRCLES THE HEART OF NOISY, MODERN TEHRAN WITH AN INFORMAL, DOCUMENTARY-LIKE FREEDOM THAT IS THRILLING IN ITS NATURALISM; BANNED IN IRAN, THE FILM WON THE GOLDEN LION AT THE VENICE FILM FESTIVAL IN 2000. THE FILM SCREENS IN 35MM, WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY FARKHONDEH SHAYESTEH. SUNDAY, MARCH 3 AT 2:00 PM.