

U-571: The gay film that wasn't

By Sean McLennan

It's dark and damp. Within the tin canister that you're confined to, all you can hear is the laboured breathing of your anxious shipmates and the "ping" of the sonar as it indicates the slowly sinking depth charges, the violent explosions of which echo outside. You wait as they draw closer, bringing destruction with them.

This description pretty much encapsulates the feel of *U-571*; it's your typical action film, set during WWII. It's all right if that's what you're looking for, if you can get past the patriotic American flag-waving, and if you like your boys in uniform. The plot (such as it is) centres around capturing the German "Enigma machine," a typewriter-like device that was used by the Nazis to encode and decode transmissions during the war.

In choosing the very worthy subject of the Enigma machine's critical role in WWII and the Battle of the Atlantic, it is unfortunate that writer and director Jonathan Mostow chose to usurp and obscure history. He could have used his film as a venue to exhume the near-forgotten role played by arguably the most influential person of this century: Alan Mathison Turing (1912-1954), who also happened to be gay.

U-571 gives one the strong impression that a) capturing the Enigma machine was the bulk of the task in decoding the German transmissions and b) that it was the Americans who played the crucial role. Both of these ideas presented are blatant misrepresentations of the truth. The structure of the machine itself was widely known and variations were in use throughout Europe long before the start of WWII. What made the Enigma so powerful was that it had several wheels that could be inserted in different orders and orientations, creating a huge number of possible encoding schemes. These settings were changed regularly by the Germans, which made developing a way to determine which scheme was being used an arduous task at any given time; the triumph over this belonged to the mathematicians and cryptanalysts, not the soldiers.

Work on decoding the Enigma machine began long before the Americans declared war, and even after their entry. The U.S. played no role in actually decoding it. Early work was done primarily by the Poles who, in 1939, passed their advances on to the British, including a brilliant young scientist, Alan Turing, who was responsible for their eventual success. It is often speculated that the Allies could not have won the war without the advantage of being able to read the Axis' transmissions. In that sense, if it wasn't for



Alan Turing, you might have been reading this article in German (in a different paper that didn't focus on about being gay!).

So, perhaps you're not convinced that Alan Turing has directly affected your everyday life. Let's then forget about his role in WWII and take a look at some of his other accomplishments, like, oh, modern computing. Turing laid the foundational theory behind the modern computer and is considered, if not the outright inventor of this device, then one of only a few founding fathers. Every one of those machines that now pack our homes, offices and pockets is an example of the infamous "Turing Machine," the original theoretical construct with which Turing proved his principles and invented concepts like "software" and "programming."

Moreover, he was the first to outline what it would be for something to be "artificially intelligent." Turing did this not by trying to define what constitutes intelligence (a definition still up for grabs), but by describing a clever imitation game that a machine would have to exhibit real intelligence to win. The "Turing Test" is still a hot topic (and, of course, controversial) in computer science, cognitive science, philosophy of the mind and the inspiration for programs and competitions world-wide—many fuelling / fuelled by research and development in the computer interfaces that we deal with on our own computers.

Alan Turing's influence doesn't stop at cryptography, computer science and math—it also extends through other natural sciences like biology and chemistry. But it does become less direct and more obscure, partly because we haven't really been in a position to appreciate some of what he has done until now. He was truly a future visionary ahead of his time. For example, Turing's papers on morphogenesis (essentially the growth and development of living things), are experiencing somewhat of a renaissance as the brilliance of his

insights are finally being realized. They have strongly influenced the relatively new studies of non-linear dynamics and complex systems which, in turn, are helping us to understand everything from weather patterns to fatal development, from social behaviour to the stock market. (Think of Jeff Goldblum's character in *Jurassic Park*—that's the kind of stuff he studied.)

Scientists tend not to be as well known as other celebrities because, well, they're rarely as beautiful, well-spoken or exciting, and it's often hard to understand what they do. But surely you've heard of Louis Pasteur, Albert Einstein and Steven Hawking. Thomas Edison? Alexander Graham Bell? Marie Curie? Chances are, unless you've studied computing theory or cryptography, you've never even heard of Alan Turing, even though he has had at least as dramatic a cultural impact as all the people mentioned above.

Some believe that Turing's lack of notoriety stems from the fact that much of what he did, certainly during the war, was classified top secret, and that air of secrecy kept him out of the public light. But none of it is classified now—and think about it:

top secret information going public, critical players in war, machines that think—this is stuff that the media goes nuts for!

I believe that Turing's name isn't as well known as some others simply because towards the end of his life, Alan Turing was very open about his sexuality. And most people in the '50s really didn't want to be forced to acknowledge that one of their greatest war heroes, one of the most brilliant scientists of our time, was a big fag.

"Coming out" had, for Alan Turing like for many of us, a catastrophic impact on his life. Same-sex relations in Britain remained illegal until quite recently and Turing was arrested in Manchester (ironically, considering it was the locale of the original *Queer as Folk*) in 1952 for a violation of that nature. Instead of denying the charges or making any sort of appeal, Turing not only admitted his guilt, but supplied a detailed account of his relationship with his partner, and courageously spoke out against the injustice of the law. The law was not swayed and, in lieu of a jail term, he was

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sentenced to a course of estrogen injections (of all things!) to "neutralize his libido." The treatments, which lasted a year, left him impotent and caused him to grow breasts. Much of Turing's academic work continued, but he was no longer able to work for the government—security clearance was not granted to "known homosexuals" because of the national security risk (?!). He remained quite open about his sexuality and his criticism of the government's policies among his peers; however, as one might imagine, the Manchester of 1950 wasn't quite as open as the Manchester of 2001.

On June 8, 1954, Alan Turing was found dead by his cleaning lady, a half-eaten apple dipped in cyanide by his side. There was no warning, he left no statement of intent and, despite his mother's belief that his death was accidental, the coroner felt it was an obvious case of suicide. Turing's intimates felt that he had overcome the turmoil of his conviction and subsequent treatment, and the reason why he took his own life is debated. Honestly, can there really be any doubt? Alan Turing was driven to his grave by the lack of acceptance of homosexuality—and the rest of us are the worse for it. As a scientist, he was just entering maturity—possibly to achieve his greatest work—and that will forever be denied us.

Tragically, the community who should

be lauding the name Turing, along with DaVinci, Michelangelo and Wilde, doesn't seem to know him at all. I've never seen a gay bookstore that carried his biography, *Alan Turing: The Enigma*, even though the author, Andrew Hodges, is equally out and gay and a scientist for whom Turing was a role model. This is a state of ignorance that we should remedy, not just to honour a man who has given our century so much, but for our own edification as a community, for our own public image and for our own sense of history.

So, try to spare a moment's thought for Alan Turing the next time you sit down to deal with your e-mail or hear mention of the Allied victory in WWII. And if, gods forbid, you do decide to rent *U-571*, the gay-film-that-should-have-been-but-

wasn't, at least be openly derisive and loudly point out that, as usual, Hollywood has distorted the truth.

For more info on this remarkable man, check out:

<http://www.turing.org.uk/turing/>

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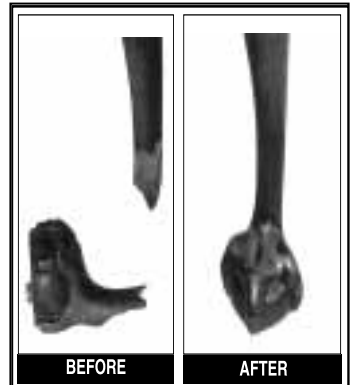
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