

## *Lesbians (On Screen) Were not Meant to Survive*

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### **Abstract**

My paper focuses on the evolution of the image of the lesbian on the screen. We all well know what can be the role of cinema in the structuring of the personal and collective imaginary and hence the importance of visual communication tools to share and spread lesbian stories "even" with a happy ending. If, in the first filmic productions, lesbians inevitably made a bad end, lately they are also able to live 'happily ever after'. I do too believe that "cinema is the ultimate pervert art. It doesn't give you what you desire - it tells you how to desire" (Slavoy Žižek, 2006), that is to say that the lesbian spectator had for too long to operate a semantic reversal to overcome a performance deficit and to desire in the first instance only to be someone else, normal and normalized. And here it comes during the 2000s a commercial lesbian cinematography, addressed at a wider audience, which well interpret the actual trend, that most pleases the young audience (considering reliable likes and tweets on social networks) towards normality. It is still difficult to define precisely these trends: what would queer scholars say about this linear path toward a way of life that dares only to return to normality? No more eccentric, not abject, perhaps not even more lesbians, but 'only' women. Is this pseudo-normality (with fewer rights, protections, privileges) the new invisibility?

Keywords: Lesbianism, Lesbian cinema, Queer cinema, LGBT, Lesbian

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## Introduction

I would try to trace how the representation of lesbians on screen has developed over time. We all know – and know all too well – just how cinema can structure both personal and collective consciousness, and so it becomes quite evident the vital importance of visual communication in sharing and distributing stories about lesbians. Even those with a happy ending. While lesbians in the early movies inevitably met a bad end (the grave or the hospital bed), they have recently been allowed to live happily ever after. As Slavoy Žižek (2006) justly observes, “cinema is the ultimate pervert art. It doesn’t give you what you desire. It tells you how to desire”, that is to say, for too long the lesbian viewer had to affect a kind of semantic reversal to overcome a performance deficit, just hoping, first and foremost, to be someone else, to be normal and normalized.

Clearly, a personal viewpoint emerges when any history of lesbian representation on film is given. To keep track of a lesbian themed filmography, in 2009 I made a website – *Leztrailer.it* – whose visual archive provide a useful indication of the changes that have occurred in the representation of lesbians on film from 1931 to the present day. *LezTrailer* accounts for this desirable feminine subjectivity by showing trailer and publishing synopses of films, documentaries, short films, TV series, yuri, web series: more than 400 titles to underline the richness of lesbian cinema. Search options (by title, gender, category, year or country of production, recurring keywords, etc) are multiple to allow nonlinear personal paths to add to the pleasure of unexpected and random discovery. From the website to a digital publication: at the beginning of 2017, I published also the e-book *Lesbian Visions* (Amazon, 2017), an original itinerary to understanding an unusual and profound imagination from the point of view of lesbian movie theory.

My own point of view has been shaped and informed by the growing number of lesbian movies, above all North American productions, which range from the tragic invert of the early years to the beautiful desirable woman of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The latter represents a commercial lesbian cinema, aimed at an increasingly wide audience that is popular with younger audiences and reflects the current trend towards normalization. It is still difficult, however, to define such trends precisely: what would queer theorists say about this well-marked route towards a way of life that seems based on recouping a certain normality? No longer eccentric, no longer abject, and perhaps no longer lesbian, but simply a *woman*. Is this pseudo-normality (though with fewer rights, protection and privileges) a new invisibility?

The representation of ‘winning’ contemporary lesbian characters have emerged from a long history of negative ‘malestream’ lesbian portrayals. Until a few decades ago, lesbianism was either banned from the general film production/distribution or it was portrayed as a deplorable behavior out of pathological and mental disorder. Framed in this kind of unseemly setting, lesbianism, and homosexuality in general, was used as a way to strengthen the supremacy of heterosexuality, which, consequently, was not even challenged.

“While male homosexuality has been used in movies from the very beginning to elicit the spectators’ hilarity, the celluloid lesbian has been designed to cause revulsion and contempt, with a clear intent to keep women in their place” (Massa, 2007, 217). The

issue at stake is defining what is 'masculine' and what is not. For men, the 'sissy' has that characteristic weakness that belittles the traditional dominant male role and is the essence of a deviant sexuality; likewise, the 'butch' woman also reinforces the myth of male superiority, albeit in a gross way, as a poor imitation. The heterosexual matrix remains dominant and, as such, coercive, even though this can be presented in an indirect way, above all at the cinema: traditional power lines are drawn by pathologizing the deviant through an unequivocal process of reducing any possibility of otherness.

And it is this witch-hunt-type atmosphere that can be perceived when watching the first lesbian movie, *Girls in Uniform*, directed by Leontine Sagan in 1931. Adapted from the play *Yesterday and Today* by Christa Winsloe, who also wrote the screenplay, the movie tells of a girl who falls in love with her teacher at a German all-girls boarding school in Potsdam in the 1930s. Written, directed, produced and performed by women, the film attracted controversy both in Germany, where the Nazis tried to burn all copies, and in the USA, where it was heavily censored until Eleanor Roosevelt herself intervened. Although totally ignored by mainstream cinema audiences, Sagan's film enjoyed a greater success than many later, equally worthy, films, winning a prize at the 1932 Venice Film Festival. However, it then disappeared into the Nazi darkness, until Géza I. von Radanyi's 1958 remake starring Romy Schneider and Lilli Palmer. It was then freely adapted by Katherine Brooks in her 2006 movie *Annabelle*. In contrast to what happens in Winsloe's play (written during the Weimar Republic when Winsloe herself had left her husband and was living openly as a lesbian), the Manuela of *Girls in Uniform* does not commit suicide. In fact she manages to avoid that particular death sentence – the traditional fate of the lesbian in the early years of cinema. At least this is true as far as the German version is concerned, before all copies of the movie were burnt and its Jewish director Leontine Sagan was forced to escape Nazi Germany along with Erika Mann and others in the same group of artists. In contrast, the two distributors in the United States that had bought the film, changed the ending for American audiences in accordance with the Hays Office. Following the Hays Code, the well-known moral guidelines set down for American movies, it was forbidden to mention homosexuality, whether male or female. And thus Manuela in the American version is made to commit suicide, just to make sure that a more acceptable political message is proffered.

Indeed, love between women could not be depicted as a conscious choice as far as sex and sentiment were concerned. It was an aberration, and therefore required a sacrifice, the two ultimate options being to kill oneself or kill the desire (which, after all, is another, no less grievous, form of suicide). *Olivia*, by Jacqueline Audry, is a 1952 French melodrama that deals openly with lesbianism. Also known as *The Pit of Loneliness*, this title was chosen by American distributors as it echoed the name of Radclyffe Hall's depressing novel, *The Well of Loneliness*, which equated homosexuality with having a miserable lonely life. As Vito Russo (1987, p. 75-67) vividly describes, *Olivia*, "scripted by Colette, [...] offered hothouse lesbian passion in an upper class French girls' school [...] The end of the film finds the older teacher renouncing her love for her student in order to save the girl from the disgrace of abnormal love. 'All my life,' she says, 'I have had to fight these feelings within me.' Her noble sacrifice on behalf of Olivia is seen as an act of civilized behavior, lesbian longings being freakish by any standards".

The grave also provides a fitting end for Shirley MacLaine, another suicide motivated by lesbian ignominy, in *The Children's Hour*, a 1961 American movie directed by William Wyler and interpreted by MacLaine and Audrey Hepburn. Based on Lillian Hellman's play, Wyler had already adapted a version of it for the screen in 1936 as *These Three*, although, given the aforementioned Hays Code restrictions, the plot was changed considerably to make it a story based on a more conventional love triangle. By 1961, however, the grip of the Hays Code was weakening, allowing a hint of lesbianism, although it could not yet be stated explicitly. The film tells the story of two women teachers at a private girls' school, unjustly accused by a pupil of having a lesbian relationship. The thing is that the accusation is unfounded; the girl is simply being vindictive, but the seeds of suspicion have been sown and so the fear of that unacceptable shame is allowed to flourish. Although the accusation is false, one of the teacher (Shirley MacLaine) actually discovers that she is a lesbian. And this is a fault that needs to be emended.

These three films are situated in a context typical of lesbian movies: girls' school and prisons are environment where there is no male presence, almost as if there is a need to eradicate an otherwise impossible competition. In a certain sense, however, lesbians in these early films had not yet assumed those features that would characterize them both on and off screen for many years to come: the lesbian who is not a woman (Wittig, 1992) and the 'abject' lesbian with her subversive potential to question the dominant heterosexual paradigm (Butler, 2006). The figure that I am referring to here is that creation of American cinema, the very masculine butch woman (in contrast to the feminine lesbian or 'femme'), a stereotype that had currency for a long time.

This is the case with June Buckridge (Beryl Reid), the openly lesbian central character in Robert Aldrich's 1968 film, *The Killing of Sister George*. The film was criticized on its release, being considered "vicious, petty, repugnant". It is a film that has always divided the lesbian community into fans and detractors: it marks a point of no return in the representation of a lesbian character and confronts us with the abnormal Sister George. June Buckridge has been playing the nurse, Sister George, in a BBC soap opera for many years, but her character's fate is sealed: television executives have decided to axe her character because of June's off-screen behavior. As Vito Russo (1987, p. 120) writes, the inner conflict in *The Killing of Sister George* is between acceptable and offending gay lifestyles. The "killing" of Sister George is the process by which George's overt lesbianism is punished, forcing her into invisibility. George is a loud aggressive dyke, and the "killing" in the film is not the death of the homosexual or homosexuality but the death of its visibility. Although lesbianism has become a way of living one's life, stating it publicly remains a serious infringement of the social code.

By the end of the 1960s, concurrent with the Stonewall riots and the birth of the gay liberation movement, the film industry tried to go beyond the excessively stereotyped representation of gay men and lesbians. It only partially succeeded, but after years of repression cinema began to take account of a gay identity that had led to a growing LGBT community intent on fighting for its rights. As we learn from Michel Foucault (1976), the criminalization and pathologizing of the homosexual constructs his/her identity, while his/her existence is given legitimization through discourse, albeit negative, regarding him/herself. And it was from a negative image that an awareness

emerged which would eventually lead to affirming the dignity of homosexual desire and demanding social acceptance. These were years of struggles (of students, workers, women and ethnic minorities) and the LGBT movement played its part in liberating people from a coercive, gender-based symbolic order which forced them into mutually exclusive/excluding roles: homosexual/heterosexual, female/male. It became important to stand up, to come out of the closet, and to affect a real social transformation by claiming one's right to exist.

These were also the years when feminist film critic Laura Mulvey (1975) condemned the dominance of the male look in the cinema, which relegated women to passive roles as mere objects of desire. During the early 1970s, the feminist director Chantal Akerman fostered the creation of a female look, intended to dismantle established male codes of voyeurism and heteronormative dominance. In her first feature film, *Je, tu, il, elle* (1974), the protagonist Julie, played by the director herself, shuts herself away in a room; forced to go out for an unexpected reason, she meets a truck driver, with whom she stays until she gets to meet up with her old friend. It is in the final scene of lesbian sex that Akerman's 'other' look emerges. The scene is clearly erotic and potentially voyeuristic, but it never veers towards the pornographic: it is almost as if the representation of sex does not actually need to evoke it in reality.

This overturning has also been made by Ulrike Ottinger, director and iconic figure in German counterculture, who appropriated a typically male genre – movies about pirates – to create a lesbian-feminist allegory: *Madame X - An Absolute Ruler*. This was in 1978, and the director brings androgynes and other strange creatures to the screen in order to tell the story of the cruel and sadistic captain of the ship Orlando, who promises 'gold, love and adventure' to all women willing to abandon their boring lives. A large and varied group of women – an insignificant housewife, a glamorous diva, a psychologist, an artist and a pilot – yield to the temptation, but their hopes for transformation are dashed. *Madame X* is a film directed, produced and performed only by women, where the journey undertaken becomes a powerful means to destroy bourgeois values and discard all sexual and binary limitations in an extraordinary quest for emotion.

In a similar spirit of liberation, 1983 saw the release of *Lianna*, a film that is not quite as bold in its representation of lesbians. Married with children, Lianna falls head over heels in love with her psychologist, Ruth, who is openly lesbian. Abandoned first by her husband, who kicks her out of the house when he discovers the relationship, and later by Ruth, who is attracted to another woman, Lianna begins a difficult path towards emancipation and self-awareness. This is undoubtedly sad and painful, and it is difficult to see Lianna as a model for a young lesbian seeking affirmation and/or acceptance. However, this was one of the first attempts to show coming out in a mainstream movie. While the spectator can have no illusions that being a lesbian is fun and joyful, the movie does at least show that life as a lesbian is possible. It is still a burden, but it is becoming a sustainable burden: shoulders will be weighed down and tears will be shed, but it *can* be done.

The real breakthrough occurred in 1985 with *Desert Hearts*, a movie directed by a lesbian director (Donna Deitch) and made entirely by women. This was a real anthropological revolution, since for the first time a lesbian couple was 'authorized' to have a relationship. It affirmed, albeit with various ups and downs, that the lesbian

'menace' could potentially call into question the sexual values of the majority. Obviously, as Vito Russo (1987, p. 203) says, this "would not 'create' more gay people: it would simply allow that portion of the population that is gay to live life more openly." *Desert Hearts*, based on Jane Rule's novel of the same name, tells the story of Vivien Bell, a university professor getting a divorce, and the young Cay Riwers, a dowdy lesbian awaiting a great life-changing moment (perhaps love?). The catalyst for this change appears to be the beautiful mature Vivien, who first resists, then gives in to her passion for Cay. Almost the entire world of *Desert Hearts* is female, a place where men and their respective 'heterosexual' look are irrelevant. A purely lesbian look of desire prevails and the love scenes are explicit and evocative. Such scenes invite the spectator to discover unexpected visions of the desiring/desirable self, the deconstruction and substitution of the male look creating space for a possible utopia. Indeed, hitherto unexplored rituals and opportunities for visibility and recognition, set alongside new expressive and aesthetic codes, are able to grow through the cracks that open up in dominant thought. We have still not arrived at multi-faceted ways of being and thinking, but the paths towards an exhilarating otherness have begun to emerge. And after all the suicides and other tragedies, we finally have a story with a happy ending.

So is everyone happy with this evolution of the representation of the lesbian on screen? Can we really talk about an emerging cinema where the lesbian is finally meant to survive? Well, no, not everyone is happy if we take into consideration Barbara Hammer, whose films discuss lesbian sexuality, feminism and the pursuit of freedom. Hammer is a director and a lesbian feminist theorist, and what I want to underline is her idea of the lesbian spectator. The latter, she argues, never finds herself on the screen, not even in lesbian movies: "It is my belief that a conventional cinema, such as classical narrative, is unable to address the experiences or issues of lesbian and gay perceptions, concerns and concepts ... Even if the characters are lesbian, the script projects lesbian characters within a heterosexual world of role-playing, lovemaking and professional and domestic life. The numerous films that purport to be 'lesbian films' have failed to address me as a lesbian spectator ... How could this be, in an age where we have films like *Desert Hearts*, *Lianna* and *Personal Best*? These are films where the on-screen space is filled with seeming 'lesbian representation'. But my reading of these films is that there is no lesbian to deconstruct, as the discourse of the gendered subject is within a heterosexist authority system. The lesbians act out heterosexual gender roles and positions rather than claiming any difference, and even sexual practices are situated within heterosexuality ..." (Hammer, 1993, p. 70). The imperative is thus to make the invisible visible, aware that there is not one lesbian cinema, but various lesbian cinemas, i.e., multiple visions of a multiple reality.

And it is in the '90's that something really changes. These were years of positive change for gay and lesbian cinema: new figures emerged who were no longer, or at least not only, flat characters based on parody or, even worse, offhand medical classification. These characters reflected a growing tendency to re-appropriate and to subvert cultural and artistic norms, and they ushered in a multilayered scenario. In 1992 critic and feminist journalist B. Ruby Rich wrote about Queer Cinema, an expression she coined in an article for *The Village Voice*. In the piece, Rich analyzed the movies that had come out in that period and which included a particularly large number of high quality films on homosexual themes. And this is what characterizes

New Queer Cinema: it does not have set stylistic features and does not identify with a specific genre, but experiments with new languages, and reevaluates traditional genres in order to represent homosexuality, eschew taboos and project a positive image of gays and lesbians. The LGBT community can thus declare its existence on the big screen, while distancing itself from the slick, rigidly classified Hollywood product. The aim of such movies, as James J. Dean (2007, p. 374) explains, is to develop a critical awareness of identity politics and of everything that a heteronormative society considers standard ... these films call into question the flat one-dimensional images of the 'homosexual subject', replacing them with more complex, fluid and dynamic representations. New Queer Cinema thus deals with anti-essentialist approaches, for which homosexuality is not, and cannot be, a single, social identity in the same way as heterosexuality.

From a lesbian perspective, typical films of New Queer Cinema, also known as New Dyke Cinema (from the name of a lesbian community in Chicago) include *Go Fish*, *The Incredible true adventures of two girls in love* and *The Watermelon Woman*. *Go Fish* is (the film dates from 1994) the manifesto of the new lesbian cinema. It is the story of a group of lesbians and we just watch an amusing romantic comedy where being a lesbian is natural. No drama is linked to diversity: there is simply a sexuality that is lived out joyously and freely.

A fundamental concept linked to the queer identity is that homosexuality, like other markings of identity, is not something that is uniform, and is always in a state of flux. It is an identity without essence and is impossible to define; indeed, any attempt to define it becomes instrumental to a certain ideology and therefore potentially reactionary. This opens up possibilities for producing movies as a response to exceptional requirements that arise from the common need to try out unexplored routes, and to look at, and interpret, reality from different viewpoints. What changes is the *look*, imbuing new perceptions of sexuality with a different sensitivity, creating a space for physicality and real, physical bodies. This is a 'cinema of desire', which, with its lesbian look and lesbian drive, puts forward a new erotic language.

*The Incredibly True Adventure of Two Girls in Love* (1995) was director Maria Maggenti's debut film, and it tells the story of two girls who, first friends then lovers, soon have to face up to opposition from their families. The film marks a period when young girls start to have a preeminent role in lesbian cinema, a trend that gained strength in the following years, with the depiction of teenagers whose heartstrings are regularly tugged by their female friends. By the early years of the present century, these films were thus exploring issues of internalized lesbophobia and family conflicts. Maggenti, however, uses a delicate touch, while not shying away from tackling the rampant hypocrisy of the world at large. This all falls within the queer agenda of representing a confused sexuality, perhaps due to the young age of the characters, but also thanks to Maggenti's agility in sidestepping the various dichotomies and binary traps – lesbian/straight, rich/poor, white/black – which the film touches upon. As there is no ultimate fixed identity, all limitations fade away and disappear.

*The Watermelon Woman* (1996) is by director Cheryl Dunye, who in the film also plays Cheryl, a young black lesbian who is making a documentary about Fae Richards, a 1930s black actress known as 'The Watermelon Woman', who had a

white lesbian lover. Cheryl is also in a loving relationship with a white girl, and for this reason is on the receiving end of the irony and sarcasm of her best friend, who does not miss a chance of criticizing Cheryl's rapport with the black lesbian community. Many axes of identity therefore overlap and intersect: each of them counts and has its own particular importance, and this is what makes the film very different to *The Incredibly True Adventure of Two Girls in Love*. Dunye's film questions the centrality and intransigence of white people, albeit in a joyful, comic and satirical way. As Dunye states, to a large extent her character is autobiographical, though all the historical references in the film are invented: "The Watermelon Woman came from the real lack of any information about the lesbian and film history of African-American women. Since it wasn't happening, I invented it." (Downing, 2016)

Overall, however, making movies on lesbian themes in the early 21st century now seems conditioned by "the tyranny of the happy ending". Just think at *The L Word*, broadcasted in the United States between 2004 and 2009: the series tells of the events, and the loves in the lives of a group of lesbians: all beautiful and desirable, always fashionable, always well dressed, and all with interesting jobs and no real money problems. However, perhaps the problem is thinking that this type of cinema always has to have some social or political use, or contain some kind of practical or therapeutic subtext. It is true, in fact, that lesbian cinema has become extremely rich and varied. And even if the image that Hollywood presents is that of a sweetened, normalized lesbian, the fact is that now she is visible, unsilenced and positive. No longer limited to negative stereotypes, there are varied portrayals of lesbians seen on screens throughout the world. Today it would be difficult for an adolescent lesbian to feel that she was destined for a life of solitude and misery. Although some representations of lesbians can be criticized because they give the idea of some kind of oversexed, artificial woman, it is also true that she is seen to love, to give birth and to get old just like anyone else. And everyone is un/happy in their own way, whatever their sexual orientation. Therefore, the question remains: is 'normality' a worthwhile goal?

And this trend to normality comes out also from two movies that deals with gay parenting (*The Kids Are Alright*, 2010) and civil rights (*Freeheld*, 2015). For what it regards *The Kids Are Alright* directed by Lisa Cholodenko, there have been mixed reviews from queer and lesbian critics. For the queer theorist Jack Halberstam (2012), the problem is not with the two children of the lesbian couple who are doing fine (and why shouldn't they be?), but with the two lesbians. They are stuck in a tired stale relationship that is showing all the signs of a falling off of sexual desire. Indeed, it now seems based on a kind of bourgeois self-satisfaction in which family stability has become the main goal. According to Halberstam, the family might be 'alright', or rather, its idiosyncrasies and dysfunctional aspects make it absolutely normal; it is the couple that has broken down and which is probably destined to fall into the various traps that marriage, whether straight or gay, involves.

And about *Freeheld*, instead, I'd like to remember that the screenwriter, Ron Nyswaner, the Oscar-nominated screenwriter of *Philadelphia*, denounced that the film was "degayed" by producers against his wishes. We must be careful, he said, as we become mainstream – that we don't forget we're the descendants of outlaws and rebels. *Freeheld* had a lot of potential. But the producers became fearful. The lesbian characters were idealized and turned into lesbians with a lower case 'l'. Because God



forbid someone might think we were making a movie about a couple of dykes. Out of fear, they were normalised. We must remember our history. We are the inheritors of a culture that was created from pain and invisibility. From being different” (Child, 2015).

## **Conclusion**

So advocating a simplistic “positive images approach” to lesbian and gay representation which suppresses contradiction and results in unrealistic, static, one-dimensional portrayals seems might not be the answer for a more complex representation of the lesbian on screen.

I just want to conclude my short essay in a positive way comparing two way of looking at each other of the main characters and at the same time the way the spectator might look at this two different couples of women. These two movie are *The Children’s Hours*, which I already mentioned, and *Carol*, a 2015 British-American romantic drama film directed by Todd Haynes. The screenplay, written by Phyllis Nagy, is based on the 1952 romance novel *The Price of Salt* (also known as *Carol*) by Patricia Highsmith. Set in New York City during the early 1950s, *Carol* tells the story of a forbidden affair between an aspiring female photographer and an older woman going through a difficult divorce.

The two movies show a radical shift that has occurred from 1961 to 2015 and that is well represented by the difference in the look. As Teresa de Lauretis (1994) has well analysed the subversive potential of the lesbian couple on screen resides in its evocation of the lesbian look and in the investment of this look in two desiring women, the coupled lesbian protagonists of the film, each of whom is simultaneously both subject and object of the look and consequently of female desire. And this lesbian look involves also the film’s female spectator, who is thereby offered empowerment as an active desiring female subject.

All in all, it is a fitting way to project this kind of cinema towards an expressive maturity with renewed vigor, embarking on new paths, perhaps occasionally unmarked or unclear, but always interesting.

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