

The Evolution of New Queer Cinema and Lesbian Representation in Indie Film

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Abstract: Films like *Desert Hearts* (Deitch, 1985) and *The Watermelon Woman* (Dunye, 1996)—produced a decade apart but both labeled as essential New Queer films—take notably different approaches in terms of aesthetics, strategy, and concern, but each contain key traces of pastiche, appropriation, and social constructionism. *Desert Hearts* has the look of a mainstream film and plays off of various “traditional” romance tropes, while *The Watermelon Woman* is more stylistically complex with its utilization of intertextuality and its reflexive, realist aesthetic. Despite these differences, however, both of these films engage in striking reworkings of history. In *Desert Hearts*, Deitch literally creates a new piece of history (with the film being a period piece, taking place in 1959), reminding viewers that queer stories have always existed— they just haven’t always been seen or told. Similarly, *The Watermelon Woman* is all about responding to queer erasure and constructing a new history by posing questions about storytelling, memory, and archives. Accordingly, although New Queer films like *Desert Hearts* and *The Watermelon Woman* do take notably different stylistic and narrative approaches, they each provide necessary reworkings of history that subvert heterosexual traditions in both film and society, and present nuanced portrayals of queer female stories and intimacy without the sense of objectification, triviality, or disapproval that is often found in filmic representations of WLW relationships.

The prevailing ideology regarding sexual orientation in our society is, and long has been, heteronormative. Consequently, the idea of “straightness” has been ingrained into our language, structures, and industries as the default, the norm, or the preferred way of “being.” Since its inception, the film and entertainment industry has reflected this entrenched belief system, with an overwhelming focus on straight stories, characters, and audiences. As a result of the industry’s heteronormative nature, there tends to be an assumption that queer stories aren’t relatable or compelling to straight viewers, and therefore a conclusion that straight stories are what audiences want or prefer to see. Thus, gay and lesbian stories tend to be considered a niche, specifically created for gay and lesbian audiences. In other words, there is an assumed mutually exclusivity, or opposition between that which is “hetero” and that which is “homo.” A pioneer in queer studies, author and scholar Alexander Doty, challenges this approach, arguing that “basically heterocentrist texts can contain queer elements, and basically heterosexual, straight-identifying people can experience queer moments” (Doty, 1993, p. 3). To make his point, Doty elucidates that the term “queer” is not exclusively or explicitly about sexuality — rather, it marks a “flexible space for the expression of all aspects of non- (anti-, contra-) straight cultural production and reception” (Doty, 1993, p. 3). With this comes the idea that resisting the industry’s heteronormativity is not just about *whose* stories are being told, but it is also about *how* these stories are being created, presented, and consumed. As follows from Doty’s definition, then, “New Queer Cinema” (NQC) comes to represent a group of films which not only portray the historically underrepresented LGBTQIA+ community, but perhaps more importantly, which challenge the hegemonic heterosexuality pervasive in the film industry and society alike. In thinking about the inception and evolution of the NQC movement, American film scholar and critic B. Ruby Rich, known for coining the term “New Queer Cinema,” notes that “of course, the New Queer films and videos aren’t all the same and don’t share a single aesthetic vocabulary, strategy, or concern. Nonetheless they are united by a common style: call it ‘Homo Pomo.’ In all of them, there are traces of appropriation, pastiche, and irony, as well as a reworking of history with social constructionism very much in mind” (Rich, 2013, p. 18). To this end, films like *Desert Hearts* (Deitch, 1985) and *The Watermelon Woman* (Dunye, 1996) — produced a decade apart but both labeled as essential New Queer films — take notably different approaches in terms of aesthetics, strategy, and concern, but each contain the traces of pastiche, appropriation, and social constructionism that Rich discusses. *Desert Hearts* has the look of a mainstream film and plays off of various “traditional” romance tropes, while *The Watermelon Woman* is more stylistically complex with its utilization of intertextuality and its reflexive, realist aesthetic. Despite these differences, however, both of these films engage in a “reworking of history,” implementing representations of the past to reconstruct histories and portray queer female stories and intimacy without the sense of objectification, triviality, or disapproval that is often found in filmic representations of WLW (woman-loving-woman) relationships.

In her book *New Queer Cinema: The Director’s Cut*, B. Ruby Rich recognizes the year 1985 as a “defining moment” in the evolution of New Queer Cinema and its emergence out of American independent cinema (Rich, 2013, p. 6). Before delving into those works that were produced in 1985 and beyond, however, it is important to consider how (if at all) “indie” film was representing queerness leading up to this — before the NQC label and before queer cinema

became an identifiable niche market. *Girlfriends* (1978), directed by Claudia Weill, is one such American independent film which, while not explicitly “queer,” both broaches the topic of homosexuality *and* begins to challenge the industry’s heterocentrist traditions and dominant ideological norms. The film follows a young photographer, Susan, as she experiences the realities of adulthood — struggling to get work, venturing into the dating world, and dealing with the fact that her best friend and roommate, Anne, has gotten married (to her boyfriend, Martin) and moved out. Notably, the film’s only explicit portrayal of queer female interest occurs about halfway through the film, when Susan’s new roommate, Ceil, makes a pass at Susan. Ceil’s pursuit is quickly thwarted, however, as an uncomfortable Susan explains: “Ceil, you know that woman I told you I lived with? Well, she was my roommate, not my lover” (Weill, 1978, 43:50). Here, there is no suggestion of mutual interest, so Ceil’s expression of attraction amounts to little more than an awkward encounter, and the film proceeds largely unaffected by this interaction. In other words, although there *is* an acknowledgement of homosexuality, this “queerness” is still taking place in proximity to the main narrative, thus reinforcing the idea that queer stories are inherently peripheral.

Notably, however, *Girlfriends* does seem to embody queerness in a more conceptual sense, pushing back against the industry’s historical focus on the male perspective and portrayals of traditional gender roles by focusing on female gaze (a notable role reversal) and playing with power dynamics as they relate to gender. As Jane Wilson put it, there is a “difference between movies which are about the life of women, and those which simply use women to flesh out the imaginings of men” (Wilson, 1977, para. 15). Here, Susan’s role as a photographer is incredibly intentional — it places her in a position of power and invites viewers to examine the world through her lens. During a scene in which Susan, Anne, and Martin sit down to eat dinner together, Martin begins to sneeze uncontrollably, upon which Susan whips out her camera to capture him in a moment of vulnerability. As she snaps away, Martin tries to mask his discomfort and regain some level of control by suggesting she “get one of [his] right profile.” The shot then cuts to a close-up of Susan laughing, followed by a close-up of Anne smirking, her eyes glued on Martin as she observes the interaction. Here, Weill paints a striking image of two women finding great amusement in “objectifying” a man. Moreover, throughout the film, Weill portrays male characters in non-traditional male roles (or traditionally “feminine” roles): We see Martin caring for the baby while Anne works, we see both Eric and Martin cooking, etc. Accordingly, in *Girlfriends*, the emphasis on the female experience and gaze, combined with the relative emasculation of male characters, subverts traditional portrayals of gender and instills in the film a sense of ambiguity that could very well be read as queerness. To this end, *Girlfriends* is a film which, though not explicitly queer, helped to lay the groundwork for filmmakers who wanted to challenge the established representational norms. Further, in recognizing the film as one of the first independent fiction features detailing women’s lives, B. Ruby Rich also credits Weill with paving the way for future female-centered films (Rich, 2017, para. 15).

We now transition into a discussion of the New Queer Cinema movement as it emerged and evolved through the mid-1980s and into the 90s. Here, it is important to remember Rich’s observation that, despite their comparable subject matter and shared categorization under the NQC label, the New Queer films “aren’t all the same and don’t share a single aesthetic vocabulary, strategy, or concern” (Rich, 2013, p. 18). To elucidate this point, an analysis of

Donna Deitch's *Desert Hearts* and Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman* comes into play. *Desert Hearts* takes place in the year 1959 and tells the story of Vivian, an uptight city-living professor who is in the process of finalizing a divorce from her husband. As part of the divorce process she must travel to Reno, where she stays at a ranch owned by a woman named Frances. There, she meets Cay, a free-spirited artist with a marked openness about her attraction to women. The film then follows Vivian and Cay as they develop a relationship with one another, experiencing both liberating self-discovery and crushing judgment in the process. Notably, throughout *Desert Hearts*, the issue of homosexuality is foregrounded as the film's most consequential topic. One of the most pivotal moments comes in the latter half of the film when Frances kicks Vivian out of the house, angrily growling: "I can't claim angel's wings, but I *am* normal. To think I was proud to call you [Vivian] a friend" (Deitch, 1985, 56:29). Such an interaction reiterates that one of the primary points of tension in *Desert Hearts* is queerness, and reconciling that identity with the one society expects. In other words, the battles Vivian and Cay face, whether internally or relationally, ultimately boil down to their love for each other — we watch Vivian struggle to come to terms with her sexual identity and see how Cay's relationship with Frances is severely impacted by her relationships with women (and with Vivian in particular).

In contrast, while *The Watermelon Woman* is a film about lesbians, it is perhaps more prominently about Blackness and intersectionality. *The Watermelon Woman* takes place in the 1990s, documenting the life of Cheryl, a Black lesbian filmmaker, as she gathers information and archives for a film she is working on — a documentary investigating the identity of a Black actress known for playing the stereotypical "mammy" role in a number of 1930s films, credited in each of these films not by name, but instead as "The Watermelon Woman." Through this process, Cheryl not only discovers that the actress was a woman known as Fae Richards, but further that Richards had romantic relationships with women, thus bringing sexuality into a conversation that had previously been focused on race. Outside of the project, Cheryl is forced to face challenges to both her Blackness and queerness as she deals with changes in her own friendships and romantic relationships. During a conversation about their love lives, Tamara, Cheryl's (Black) best friend, brings Cheryl's relationship with Diana, Cheryl's (white) girlfriend, into question, stating: "All I see is that once again you're going out with a white girl acting like she wants to be Black, and you're being a Black girl acting like she wanna be white. I mean what's up with you Cheryl? You don't like the color of your skin nowadays?" (Dunye, 1996, 54:51). Notably, this observation has nothing to do with Cheryl's identity as a lesbian and everything to do with Cheryl's identity as a Black person. Moreover, Cheryl's investment in Fae Richards ("The Watermelon Woman") is driven by her interest in this Black actress and in Black (film) history more generally, and it is only by coincidence that she discovers that Fae was also a lesbian. To this end, the principal relationships and plot points in *The Watermelon Woman* seem to be primarily informed by race, with the queer experience and the female experience serving as secondary points of intersection that contribute to the development of complex identities. Now, this is not to say that queerness is unimportant or even less important than race in *The Watermelon Woman*, but rather to suggest that, as human beings, different aspects of our identity will be more or less salient depending upon context, and that the topics addressed in this film happen to bring race to the fore.

In addition to differences in content and thematic focus, *Desert Hearts* and *The Watermelon Woman* are also very visually, stylistically, and structurally distinct. *Desert Hearts*' vivid cinematography, "jukebox score," and use of traditional romance clichés makes for a film that feels rather familiar, almost Hollywood-esque. As B. Ruby Rich puts it, "[Deitch] wanted the look of a mainstream film to sugarcoat a nonmainstream narrative. And she got it" (Rich, 2017, para. 8). Aside from visual aesthetics, though, Deitch's use of romance tropes also helped her to create a film that was, perhaps, a bit more palatable for everyday (heterosexual) viewers. The film's love interests inevitably come from "different worlds" and must reconcile their apparently incompatible lifestyles/personalities; the sense of a "forbidden love" is unmistakably present throughout the film; and the long-awaited kiss in the rain is something we have all seen countless times. By creating a film with such immersive and idyllic visuals, and such recognizable moments and tropes, Deitch turns an arguably unrelatable WLW narrative into something that could "play in movie theaters and show lesbian romance to the world" (Rich, 2017, para. 14).

Quite oppositely, *The Watermelon Woman* takes a much more complex visual and stylistic approach, incorporating an impressive assortment of media and swinging between fictional and "documentary" formats throughout the film. Though the variety of film formats (i.e., 16mm, Hi8 video, Super 8) were (apparently) as much of a budgetary and resource-related limitation as a stylistic choice, the varying visual quality significantly contributes to the film's sense of reflexivity, making viewers aware of the many levels at which stories are being both told and consumed (Derk, 2018, p. 296). Here, the use of different cameras helps to distinguish and follow the jumps being made between the film's fictional world (level 1), the interviews and video diaries (level 2), and the archival footage (level 3). More specifically, "the 16mm sections contain the main narrative, and show Cheryl working in a number of jobs... Cheryl's direct address to the camera and her interviews with people regarding Fae are shot in Hi8 video, while Super 8 is used for the footage of Fae that Cheryl discovers and includes in her documentary" (Derk, 2018, p. 296). To this point, Dunye doesn't seem to make any particular effort to keep audiences confined to one immersive story-world (like Deitch does in *Desert Hearts*); rather, she actively provokes thoughts and questions about film as an archive and a mode of communication by throwing viewers back and forth between these multiple lenses. Notably, this more experimental and reflexive visual strategy certainly supplements the exploratory nature of the film's narrative content; however, as opposed to *Desert Hearts*, this complexity may make the film *less* consumable for the average viewer.

Despite these numerous differences, though, *Desert Hearts* and *The Watermelon Woman* find common ground in the way that they each engage in reworkings of history which challenge the hegemonic heterosexuality found in both the film industry and in society at large, and portray queer female/lesbian stories without the sense of objectification, triviality, or disapproval that is often seen in filmic representations of WLW romances. In *Desert Hearts*, Deitch literally creates a new piece of history (with the film being a period piece, taking place in 1959), reminding viewers that queer stories have always existed—they just haven't always been seen or told. She takes the romance tropes that we have seen time and again throughout history and recontextualizes them to fit the story of Vivian and Cay, reflecting the appropriation and social constructionism discussed by Rich. To this end, their kiss in the rain is not just passionate

payoff— it’s a rewriting of history that gives queer relationships the opportunity to experience the moments that only straight relationships have historically been afforded. Moreover, Deitch’s construction of the sex scene between Vivian and Cay beautifully portrayed something which has, throughout history, been either exploited for male pleasure or been seen as distasteful. As Rich puts it: “To understand the power of this scene, when it finally arrives after an eternity of waiting, you have to understand that most serious films by or about lesbians at the time did not even have sex scenes: they were tasteful, indirect, with French on the soundtrack, maybe a cutaway to morning... Explicit sex between women was still considered by some feminist viewers to be the domain of pornography, something to be protected from instead of shown” (Rich, 2017, para. 17). Accordingly, in *Desert Hearts*, Deitch represents a story and an experience that has been intentionally buried throughout history, playing with (and subverting) the film industry’s heterocentrist conventions to create a document that explicitly highlights queer narratives.

Similarly, *The Watermelon Woman* is all about responding to queer erasure and constructing a new history by posing questions about storytelling, memory, and archives. This idea is elucidated by Dunye, who explains that NQC “was, above all, a call to transform the heterosexual structures of cinema... It was about ‘playing with form, ... changing not only the stories that are being told and filling the void, but ... push[ing] how narrativity works, how stories are told’” (Oloukoï, 2021, para. 5). To this end, Dunye creates a character who is interested in uncovering Black history, seeking to document her quest to learn more about the Black actress known as The Watermelon Woman (Fae Richards). As she justifies her interest in this enigmatic figure, Cheryl watches a clip from one of Richards’s films and expresses her admiration, exclaiming, “girlfriend has it going on” (Dunye, 1996, 6:57). Notably, in the scene we are shown, Richards’ character embodies the traditionally desexualized mammy stereotype found in many racist classical Hollywood movies (Koresky, 2020, para. 4). Accordingly, with such a complementary exclamation, Cheryl reverses this stereotype and establishes a world where Black women are allowed to be appreciated and admired. As noted above, viewers also come to learn that Richards had romantic relationships with women, thus responding to erasure at two levels: Blackness and queerness. As formal archives (e.g., books from the library) intersect and conflict with personal ones (e.g., interviews of family members), we begin to recognize the subjectivity of history — how stories are told, and what stories are chosen to be remembered in the first place. To this end, it is important to note that the archival footage uncovered throughout Cheryl’s investigation is undeniably intended to make viewers believe that Richards was a real actress. Only at the end of the film do we find out that Fae’s identity is fictional, and merely representative of the many Black actresses omitted from film history. Thus, through its pastiche and irony *The Watermelon Woman* recognizes the malleability of meaning, demonstrating how an understanding of social constructionism can function in film. Left with questions of truth and representation, viewers are forced to confront the reality that history is *constructed* (and with *The Watermelon Woman*, Dunye proves it can be *reconstructed* to incorporate Black stories, queer stories, and any other stories which have been historically underrepresented and ignored).

Accordingly, although New Queer films like *Desert Hearts* and *The Watermelon Woman* take notably different approaches to aesthetics, strategy, and concern, they each provide

necessary reworkings of history that subvert heterosexual traditions in both film and society, and present nuanced portrayals of queer female stories that we don't often see. Returning back to Doty's definition of the term "queer," it is clear that such a label— at least in the context of NQC— transcends sexuality, with filmmakers like Dietch and Dunye implementing pastiche, appropriation, and social constructionism to present "queerness" as something which encapsulates an artistic approach as much as it does an individual's sexual orientation. To this end, as she discusses the NQC movement, B. Ruby Rich explains that "from the beginning, New Queer Cinema was a term more successful for a moment than a movement. It was meant to catch the beat of a new kind of film- and video-making that was fresh, edgy, low-budget, inventive, unapologetic, sexy, and stylistically daring" (Rich, 2013, p. 131). Here, Rich strikes at the idea that above all, NQC stood as a challenge to the mainstream — perhaps more of an ideological categorization than one based upon form, aesthetic, or narrative content alone.

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