

# Lesbians in film often ignored, dismissed

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Lesbians have not fared well when viewed through the lens of film-makers.

The bulk of Hollywood screen lesbians have conformed with existing stereotypes of lesbians and of strong women in general. These screen stereotypes have served to make all lesbians invisible. It's easy to dismiss lesbians when you can't see them. When they are visible, screen lesbians are often evil characters, quickly disposed of, and punished for their sins.

Directors have lesbian characters commit suicide, murder other characters or die violent deaths in accidents. Some are pushed out by more developed characters and thus relegated to minor roles with minimal status. In many American films, lesbian eroticism is gratuitously denied as is the case with *The Color Purple*, the latest Hollywood film with lesbian characters.

In *The Color Purple*, Hollywood has given us, for the first time, a film about a Black lesbian. It is based on the book by Alice Walker, and the film succeeds most in the scenes pulled word for word from it. Of course this makes sense: something written by a Black lesbian speaks more realistically to that experience than do Steven Spielberg's Disneyland-meets-social-realism techniques. (The music virtually screams at you: "Emote!")

Celie is a Black woman living at the turn of the century in the deep south. She is oppressed by her colour, her class and her sex. It is not just white people who oppose her: it is the self-hatred that has been absorbed into the Black experience. Her husband abuses her, partly on the basis of her dark skin. When she voices her plans for independence, he yells, "You poor. You Black. You a woman. You ain't nothin'."

Juxtaposed against this is Celie's relationship with Shug, a blues singer.

Early in the film, Celie's sister urges her not to simply accept her situation. Celie responds that she doesn't know how to fight back, only how to survive.

Through Shug's example, Celie learns how to fight back. For the first time, Celie enjoys sex. She begins to value herself. In one scene, Shug sings a song to Celie in a crowded bar: "Sister, you been on my mind..."

It is through this relationship that Celie gains the strength to leave her husband and start life again.

The movie sometimes pulls back from its subject matter, as if Spielberg is afraid of too much female independence. The lesbianism is downplayed. Shug is given a longing to be accepted by her father: this places her happiness in the hands of a man. In the book, Shug was entirely independent, even from Celie.

Nonetheless, the movie presents lesbian-

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ism as a potentially strength-giving force.

Another stereotype is that of the predatory lesbian, found in extreme form in such B-grade horror flicks as *Vampyres* and *Dracula's Daughter*. In these, the lesbians are literally blood-sucking monsters.

More recently, *Windows* gave us a lesbian who hires a man to rape her best friend in order to push her (the friend) into the lesbian's arms. The device fails, but the lesbian has a tape recording of the assault, which she plays repeatedly to become sexually aroused. The film thus brings into question the Hollywood notion of female friendship.

Although *Julia* attempted to explore a female friendship with obvious lesbian overtones, the obligatory anti-gay scene is so self-righteous as to be offensive. In it, an unpleasant young man accuses Lillian (Hellman, played by Jane Fonda) of having an affair with her friend Julia. Lillian punches the man and storms out in disgust.

Lillian does not question his equation of lesbianism with unnatural and sinful sexuality. She accepts the equation, as we are expected to. Her actions deny lesbianism without acknowledging the homoeroticism we have witnessed and which Hellman openly discussed in the memoirs on which the movie is based.

In *Girlfriends*, a lesbian character exists solely for the purpose of allowing the main character to turn her down. The movie discusses Susan's relationship with her former roommate, and the filmmakers obviously felt it necessary to deny any sexual involvement between those two women, by having Susan tell the lesbian, "That woman I used to live with... she was my roommate, not my lover."

This lesbian represents a new stereotype — the confused, childlike lesbian. She is utterly dismissable, certainly not to be taken seriously.

Another technique for dismissing lesbianism is to introduce it in a trivial form intended to be funny. For example, in *Klute*, the only intimation of lesbianism is in the form of a neurotic hooker, who says of an ex-lover, "That little bitch stole my fur coat." This character is placed in the milieu of pimps, drug dealers, sado-masochists and other 'deviants.' The film is entirely dismissive of independence, friendship between women, and any non-nuclear-family lifestyle.

A combination of several lesbian stereo-

types is found in the Italian film *Rome: Open City*. This woman is stereotyped as a lesbian by her aggressive manner, severe appearance and tailored suits. (This is a code commonly used in American film noir, with such characters as Mrs. Danvers in *Rebecca*.) As the film progresses, she is shown to have a sadistic streak, not unlike the lesbian in *Windows*. She is also a predator, seducing a young, innocent heterosexual.

The main reason for this character's homosexuality lies in her political immorality — she is a Nazi. Historical accuracy is thrown to the wind in order to make apparent this woman's total evilness — political, personal, and sexual. (Her male Nazi cohort is also portrayed as stereotypically gay.) It is interesting to note the similarities between this character and another screen lesbian, Rosa Klebb in *From Russia With Love*. Rosa literally attempts to castrate James Bond. The Nazi watches torture with enjoyment.

One of the myths most graphically shown in dominant cinema is the reformable lesbian theory, which holds that 'all she needs is a good fuck.' One of these is found in another James Bond film, *Goldfinger*. The fact that the lesbian's name is Pussy Galore adds the insult of defining this woman entirely by her body parts and her sexuality. It is also a prophecy of what she will become to Bond. She is a device for Bond to prove his virility.

*Personal Best* uses many of the techniques already describe. In attempting to make lesbianism more acceptable, the film sets up a dependency relationship, in which Tory mothers Chris. This allows for Chris' later conversion to heterosexuality, by turning the lesbian affair into a young woman's experiment. It also betrays a Freudian simplicity.

Chris and Tory never name their relationship a lesbian one, nor do they define its challenge to patriarchy. Chris actively denies that their relationship has any more implications than those of friendship, to which Tory replies, "We may be friends, but every once in a while we fuck each other."

This reduction of lesbianism to sex is juxtaposed with all-powerful heterosexuality. There is even a hokey scene in which Chris, not doing so well in a few of her races, gets a you-can-do-it speech from her male lover: subsequently, she does well enough to pull up to second place overall, and even give

emotional support to Tory who, significantly, ends up in third place.

Even in alternative cinema, lesbians have not always fared better.

John Sayles' *Lianna* presents some positive imagery, but ultimately falls into voyeurism and political naivete.

*Lianna* affirms the strength of women's friendships, when Lianna's best friend overcomes her homophobia to accept Lianna's new life. Lianna also receives support from newly-found women friends. When Ruth leaves Lianna, it is for an established lesbian relationship, in contrast to the *Personal Best* conversion to heterosexuality.

The film also shows lesbians as well-adjusted, normally happy people. In doing so, it presents a naively positive view. The film reduced Lianna's lesbianism to a purely personal decision, ignoring social and political context. The film promotes tolerance, but does not question the institution of compulsory heterosexuality itself.

Another problem with *Lianna* is the depiction of lesbian sexuality. The sex itself is muted and oddly lacking in passion. The scenes in a women's bar encourage the disturbing stereotypes that lesbians act in sexual situations exactly as heterosexual men do.

Another independent film which touches on lesbianism is *Liquid Sky*. The film is set in the new wave/drug subculture of the ultrachic in New York. The main character's anger at sexual abuse (by men) and sexual betrayal (by women) is admirable. However, the setting is used as simply another subculture in which to stereotype lesbians as abusive to each other.

The news is not all this bad. It is possible to find some more realistic presentations of lesbians.

The independent film *Born in Flames* shows a group of women fighting an oppressive regime. The lesbianism of many of these women stems from their political and emotional commitments to women, and is an integral part of their political motivation. It is no coincidence that most of these women are Black. Their political awareness is more acute, because so is their oppression.

In the German film *Lulu*, or *Pandora's Box*, a lesbian character is sympathetically portrayed. She is vainly in love with Lulu, willing to risk her life for her. While the film seems to be urging tolerance, it is otherwise so jumbled and confused that no clear statement is made about society's repression of lesbians. Still, the film is remarkable considering it was made in 1929.

Another German film, made in 1931, shows lesbianism as the complete opposite of patriarchy. *Madchen in Uniform* deals with a girl's boarding school in which one young woman falls in love with her teacher. The teacher obviously returns the sentiment, but her sexuality is also repressed by the system. The teacher uses semi-sexual gestures in her relationship with Manuela. In one scene, Manuela demands a bedtime kiss on the lips; another one involves the teacher giving Manuela a slip, since the young woman has none.

The patriarchy is represented by the headmistress who defines women by their relationships to men. "You are all soldiers' daughters and, God willing, you will all be soldiers' mothers," she says. Eventually the headmistress 'finds out' about the growing love between Manuela and her teacher, and banishes the teacher from the school. ("ein Scandale!" she shouts.)

The film was shot with two possible endings. In one, Manuela jumps from the roof of the school killing herself. In the other, the students (who also adored the teacher) save Manuela. Other than during its initial release in Germany, the film has always been shown with the happier ending.

Perhaps the fact that *Madchen in Uniform* was written by a lesbian feminist and anti-fascist, Christa Winsloe, and directed by a socialist feminist, Leontine Sagan, goes a long way in explaining the film's positive aspects. It was produced within one of the most tolerant 20th century societies: the Weimar Republic.

This example of a positive, socially-rooted (ie. anti-militarist) view of lesbianism explains the whole problem of lesbian representation: the representation is being done by a dominant ideology which holds lesbianism to be deviant sexuality and fears any power women might gain from lesbianism. The sadistic, neurotic, butch, predatory, confused, naive, or reformable lesbian characters are misrepresentations based in our culture's standards.



Hopefully Donna Deitch's *Desert Hearts* (above), adapted from Jane Rule's first novel, *Desert of the Heart*, will avoid the Freudian simplicity of films like *Personal Best* (right).

