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Women film directors and producers

Ann M. Savage

Butler University, asavage@butler.edu

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film directors and producers, women

Since the beginning of moving images, there have always been representations of gays and lesbians by mainstream moviemakers. Not surprisingly, however, gay and lesbian representation was limited both by the quantity of roles as well as by the ways such characters were portrayed. Oftentimes, although the roles were not clearly identified as gay or lesbian, the subtext (feminine men with a lisp or intimidating masculine women) was obvious. Commonly, the coded gay or lesbian character was a menace that the audience was encouraged to dislike or despise. If and when any sort of same-sex desire was depicted it was as the scourge of society. With the advent of the movements in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s for civil rights, and women's and gay rights, independent and political filmmaking emerged and made progress in creating more truthful, realistic, and diverse representations of gays and lesbians in motion pictures. Although gay (and particularly white) males were allowed more access and opportunity in producing and directing films, lesbian artists made some impressive gains as well. Even though lesbian-themed films have been and continue to be marginalized, lesbian filmmakers have made significant contributions to queer cinema as producers, directors, and writers. Offering a more balanced representation of lesbian life while at the same time challenging heteronormative, oppressive politics, lesbian contributions to filmmaking as an art have spanned from avant-garde, to shorts, to feature mainstream narratives and documentary production.

One of the pioneers, making her mark well before her time, and a groundbreaker for not only lesbians but for women in general, is Dorothy Arzner (1897–1979). In addition to being the only woman director of the 1930s, Arzner was one of Hollywood's top directors. She started as a script girl for renowned filmmaker Cecil B. DeMille at Paramount studios, eventually working her way up the ranks, until she made her directorial debut with *Fashions of Women* (1927). Directing as many as 20 films, Arzner brought a unique perspective to male-dominated filmmaking by seeking out scripts that broke down stereotypes of women and showed them as strong and rational. These characteristics showed themselves in such films as *Christopher Strong* (1933), starring Katherine Hepburn as an independent aviator, and Rosalind Russell in *Craig's Wife* (1936). Arzner challenged dominant classic Hollywood fare and portrayed independent women with interests in careers, even though those interests were in direct conflict with their husbands. Although never getting from her male peers the full accolades she deserved, eventually and just a few years before her death the Director's Guild of America paid her a long overdue tribute for her contributions to filmmaking. Although Arzner never publicly identified as lesbian, she shared her life with choreographer Marion Morgan for over 30 years and her "masculine" appearance made it difficult to think otherwise. In the 1970s, as feminism became an academic discipline, feminists in both the United States and United Kingdom rediscovered her work and theorized them through lesbian and queer readings. Other Arzner films include *Anybody's Woman* (1930), *Honor among*

Lovers (1931), *Working Girls* (1931), *The Bride Wore Red* (1937), and *Dance, Girl, Dance* (1940).

Barbara Hammer (1939–), a lesbian feminist filmmaker who is commonly referred to as the “mother of lesbian film,” is certainly one of those filmmakers who benefited from the strides made by Arner. Her award-winning work is unconventional and experimental, with a decidedly lesbian-themed content. Her four-minute erotic *Dyketactics* (1974) is considered the first lesbian lovemaking film made by a lesbian. Other 1970s cutting edge work by Hammer includes *Menses* (1974) and *Superdyke* (1975). Her work is often noted by her trademark technique in which the camera appears to actually caress the bodies of her subjects without objectifying them (as was/is common in Hollywood films). Hammer set out to tell stories that were not being told and was adamant to work outside of the Hollywood system. Her more than eighty films include her first features, *Nitrate Kisses* (1992), *Tender Fictions* (1995), and *History Lessons* (2000).

Other early pioneering work that challenged traditional film and narrative structure included the work of Yvonne Rainer (1934–), Su Friedrich (1954–), and Jan Oxenberg (1957–). Yvonne Rainer, attracted to movement at a young age, started her career in dance and choreography in the 1940s but soon found the genre too limited to effectively communicate emotion. When she moved to film, Rainer’s work was always influenced by the times in which she lived—beatniks, hippies, postmodernism, identity politics, and so on. She was most well-known in the avant-garde New York City art scene, where she produced one of her best-known works, *Journeys from Berlin/1971* (1980). Regarded as one of the masterpieces of experimental cinema, Rainer’s controversial film *Journeys* explored West German politics via a woman’s visit to her psychiatrist. Much of her work is a sort of filmic collage combining both image and text. Rainer’s other work includes *Kristina Talking Pictures* (1976), *The Man Who Envied Women* (1985), and *Murder and murder* (1996).

Carrying on Rainer’s experimental tradition, Su Friedrich and Jan Oxenberg engage in avant-garde, collage-like filmmaking. Friedrich is known for very personal work exploring feminism, gender, identity, family, and sexual politics. She is best known for *Ties that Bind* (1984), which explores her relationship with her mother through home films and photographs, and footage of her then-recent trip to Germany. Friedrich’s other work includes *Gently Down the Stream* (1981), which grapples with her lesbianism and being raised Roman Catholic, and *Sink or Swim* (1990), which explores her relationship with her father. One of her most complex and controversial films is *Damned If You Don’t* (1987), combining traditional narrative with impressionistic camera work to tell the story of a nun who desires another woman. Friedrich’s personal stream-of-consciousness style was both creative and accessible, with material that resonated with her audience instead of alienating them. Some of her recent short form work includes *Lesbian Avengers Eat Fire Too* (1993), *Odds of Recovery* (2002), *The Head of a Pin* (2004), and *Seeing Red* (2005).

Jan Oxenberg’s experimental short *Home Movie* (1972), frequently regarded as one of the first lesbian feminist films, details the filmmaker’s life as a young girl encouraged to be feminine, contrasted with coming out as an adult. The film

juxtaposes home movies with footage of lesbian rights marches and women playing football. Other Oxenberg works include *Comedy in Six Unnatural Acts* (1975), *Thank You and Good Night* (1992), and television production and direction, including *Once and Again* (1999), *Chicago Hope* (1994), and *Cold Case* (2003–2004).

Other early filmmakers that are main contributors to the beginning of lesbian-influenced and lesbian-created celluloid include Sheila McLaughlin (1950–), Linda “Lizzie” Borden (1958–) (who uses the moniker Lizzie, after alleged nineteenth-century axe murderer Lizzie Borden in an effort to draw attention to her work), and Donna Deitch (1945–).

Experimental filmmaker and actress Sheila McLaughlin is most well known for *She Must Be Seeing Things* (1987), which explores and challenges various sexual stereotypes and butch–femme role playing. McLaughlin’s earlier film *Committed* (1984), codirected with Lynn Tillman, is an experimental narrative about the life of Frances Farmer. McLaughlin specifically set out to challenge heterosexual biases while also trying to avoid dogmatic feminist pronouncements about lesbian life and sexuality.

Feminist filmmaker Lizzie Borden is best known for the feature film *Working Girls* (1986), which focuses on a day of work for a lesbian prostitute, Molly. Borden spent hours interviewing prostitutes, and her film refrains either from glorifying or from criticizing the profession. It accurately shows it for what it is: a job that, like most, often entails boring and mundane activities. After earning an MFA and studying painting at New York City’s Queens College, Borden eventually became a filmmaker after both being bored by her own artwork and being inspired by experimental filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard. Her first film is *Born in Flames* (1983), a political, science fiction film set in a post-socialist-revolution United States that explores issues of race, class, and sexuality. Other works she also wrote and directed include *Love Crimes* (1992) and *Let’s Talk about Sex* (1994).

Donna Deitch is likely best known for her lesbian landmark film *Desert Hearts* (1986). Her first independent feature, *Hearts* received praise from feminist critics and remains a classic film among the lesbian community. Based on the novel *Desert of the Heart* by Jane Rule and set in 1959, the film tells the story of Columbia University English professor Vivian Bell, who sets off to Reno to get a divorce. Instead of spending her time writing and studying as she had planned, she gets caught up in a relationship with local lesbian Cay Rivers. Deitch’s next project was an Oprah Winfrey production, *The Women of Brewster Place* (1989), a four-hour television miniseries adapted from Gloria Naylor’s award-winning novel. More recently Deitch produced a documentary, *Angel on My Shoulder* (1997), which intimately and painfully follows Deitch’s friend and actress Gwen Welles as she fought and eventually lost her battle against cancer. Deitch’s early work includes the documentary *Woman to Woman* (1975), while her more recent work has been directing for television, including *Judging Amy* (2003), *NYPD Blue* (1995–2003), *Crossing Jordan* (2001–2006), and *Heroes* (2006).

The strides made by these earlier filmmakers have certainly benefited contemporary lesbian artists. In part because of these advances as well as changes in the political and cultural climate of the United States, lesbian- or queer-themed

films have been able to cross over to mainstream success (and budgets). Christine Vachon, Lisa Cholodenko, and Kimberly Pierce are good examples of these late twentieth-century filmmakers.

Christine Vachon (1962–) is probably the most well-known and successful lesbian filmmaker living today. Although she is often considered the top producer of queer films, what most attracts Vachon to a project are challenging or difficult topics that mainstream studios may avoid. After working as a production assistant and an assistant editor on various independent and low-budget films in New York, Vachon joined with filmmakers Todd Haynes and Barry Ellsworth to create Apparatus Productions, a nonprofit grant-awarding organization that funds independent filmmakers. Vachon produced all of Haynes's films, including *Poison* (1991), *Dottie Gets Spanked* (1993), and *Safe* (1995). In the mid-1990s, she formed Killer Films with Pamela Koffler and Katie Roumel and produced a number of high-profile films, including Rose Troche's *Go Fish* (1994) and *The Safety of Objects* (2001), Mary Harron's *I Shot Andy Warhol* (1996) and *The Notorious Bettie Page* (2006), Todd Solondz's *Happiness* (1998), Todd Haynes's *Velvet Goldmine* (1998) and *Far From Heaven* (2002), Kimberly Peirce's *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), John Cameron Mitchell's *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2001), John Waters's *A Dirty Shame* (2004), and Robert Altman's *The Company* (2004). As one of the premiere contributors to queer cinema, Killer Films even enjoyed a film retrospective in 2005 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City.

Lesbian filmmaker Lisa Cholodenko (1964–) has also had crossover mainstream success, most notably for her critically acclaimed debut film *High Art* (1998). Ally Sheedy, successfully shedding her 1980s "brat pack" reputation, stars as a once highly acclaimed photographer, Lucy, who shares a heroin addiction with lover Greta (played by Patricia Clarkson). The film chronicles the unexpected love affair struck up between the couple's neighbor Syd (played by Radha Mitchell) and Sheedy's character. Cholodenko's less-acclaimed work includes comic drama *Laurel Canyon* (2002), starring Frances McDormand, and *Cavedweller* (2004) with Kyra Sedgewick.

Kimberly Peirce (1967–) is another lesbian filmmaker whose independent Killer Films' *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), achieved mainstream accolades and top box office dollars. *Boys*, which won Hilary Swank an Oscar, follows the real life story of transgendered Brandon Teena through his initial transformation until his brutal murder by hate-filled locals. Peirce has since done some directing work for Showtime's lesbian-themed *The L-Word* (2006), the first dramatic television series with all lesbian storylines. Peirce's next feature tells the story of an Iraq war veteran who refuses to return to battle.

Lesbian filmmaker Rose Troche (1964–) has also been involved in the production of Showtime's pioneering *The L-Word* (2004–), directing and cowriting the first two episodes. Troche got her start directing *Go Fish*, which she co-wrote with then-partner, Guinevere Turner (1968–). The low-budget, black-and-white film introduces the audience to two young lesbians as they approach their first date. The film became known through film festivals and, particularly, the Sundance Film Institute (which has been supportive of gay-themed films throughout its history). Troche's

other directing projects include an adaptation of A. M. Holmes's book of short stories, *The Safety of Objects* (2001), and *Bedrooms and Hallways* (1998). Turner has turned much of her attention to writing, including scripts for *The Notorious Bettie Page* (2006) and *BloodRayne* (2005), and acting in small parts in films such as *Dogma* (1999), *The L Word* (2004–2005) and *Itty Bitty Titty Committee* (2007).

Another lesbian-themed romantic comedy that had notable success in the mid-1990s is Maria Maggenti's (1962–) *The Incredibly True Adventures of Two Girls in Love* (1995). Developed out of a New York University screenwriting class, the film was based on Maggenti's first relationship. Maggenti's other work includes directing and writing the bisexual romantic comedy *Puccini for Beginners* (2006) and writing for television (*Without a Trace*, 2003–2004).

Despite mainstream success by some, independent films are still the primary avenue in which most lesbian or feminist filmmakers work. This is particularly true for women of color, including Cheryl Dunye (1966–) and Lourdes Portillo. Dunye's prison drama *Stranger Inside* (2001) tells a disconcerting story of a young African American woman who purposely misbehaves in juvenile detention to get transferred to the women's prison in an effort to reunite with her imprisoned mother. Dunye's earlier work, *Watermelon Woman* (1996), focuses on the life of a young African American lesbian fascinated by the life of fictional 1930s movie star Fae Richards—an actress of color who was relegated to roles as a housemaid. Dunye's more recent work includes *My Baby's Daddy* (2004).

Well-known Chicana filmmaker Lourdes Portillo has devoted her career to Latin American issues and identity—including the struggles of women and children. Her body of work includes many shorts, such as *Columbus on Trial* (1992), *The Devil Never Sleeps* (1994), *Corpus: A Home Movie for Selena* (1999), and *Senorita Extraviada, Missing Young Woman* (2001).

Three of the highest-profile documentary lesbian filmmakers are Janet Baus and the team of Andrea Weiss (1956–) and Greta Schiller (1954–) of Jezebel Productions. Most notably, Baus coproduced (with John Scagliotti and Dan Hunt) *Before Stonewall: The Making of a Gay and Lesbian Community* (1984), an extremely important film that chronicles gay and lesbian life before the 1969 Stonewall Riot in New York City following a police raid. The film was the first gay-themed documentary funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. Baus's work has continued to document the oppressed lives of the queer community with *After Stonewall* (1999) and *Dangerous Living: Coming Out in the Developing World* (2003), narrated by Janeane Garofalo. More recently Baus codirected *Cruel and Unusual* (2006) with Dan Hunt, which documents the lives of male-to-female transgendered women incarcerated in men's prisons. Baus's earlier work includes codirecting *The Lesbian Avengers Eat Fire Too* (1993) with Su Friedrich.

Andrea Weiss and Greta Schiller have been both life and creative partners, representing an impressive body of work. Weiss, a research director on *Before Stonewall* (1984), is both a filmmaker and an author, penning *Paris Was a Woman: Portraits from the Left Bank* (1995) and *Vampires and Violets: Lesbians in Film* (1993). Together Weiss and Schiller went on to produce a 1995 documentary based on *Paris Was a Woman* (1995), which offered a glimpse into the lives of the creative women,

such as Gertrude Stein, Sylvia Beach, and Janet Flanner, who created an intellectual community on the Left Bank of Paris in the first part of the twentieth century. Weiss and Schiller have collaborated on a variety of projects including *International Sweethearts of Rhythm* (1986), a documentary of an all-female band of mixed races of the same name. This film later led to the work often considered the sequel to *International Sweethearts of Rhythm*, titled *Tiny and Ruby: Hell Divin' Women* (1988), which centered on two black lesbian members of the International Sweethearts of Rhythm and their musical life together. More recent work from Jezebel Productions includes *Escape to Life: The Erika and Klaus Mann Story* (2002), *I Live at Ground Zero* (2002), and *Recall Florida* (2003).

Many gay and lesbian independent filmmakers have enjoyed, and in fact relied upon, the support of the Sundance Film Institute and Festival as well as other independent film festival circuits including New York City's MIX Lesbian and Gay Experimental Film Festival. A Sundance programmer since 1998, Shari Fritlot was cofounder and programmer for MIX Brazil and MIX Mexico, the first gay film festivals for both countries. Fritlot has also served as director of Outfest: The Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Film Festival.

Although still largely marginalized by the mainstream film industry (with lesbians of color suffering even worse ghettoization), feminist and lesbian filmmakers have made notable contributions to not only queer cinema—but the art of filmmaking in general. No doubt the groundwork laid by these historical and contemporary artists bodes well for the future of lesbian and feminist-influenced film.

Further Reading

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Ann M. Savage

film, American and non-American influences

A history of contemporary LGBTQ film in America in the light of its influences coming from outside the United States may be approached by tracking down the two separate paths: the mainstream/Hollywood movies and the films produced independently of the “dream factory.” In the last 50 years these two strands of LGBTQ filmmaking existed apart, although the initial and timid dialogue between the two seems to have started some twenty years ago and to have continued on and off ever since. The contemporary LGBTQ filmmaking and portrayal in the United States is conceptualized in this entry as either around the films that depict characters and