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Women film directors and producers

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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, the roles were not clearly identified as gay or lesbian, the subtext (feminine men with a limp 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, 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 not so much to queer cinema as 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 horror, to character, to mainstream narratives and documentary production.

One of the pioneers, making her mark well before her time, and a groundbreaking 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 Katharine 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 (1940).

Barbara Hammer (1936–) is best known for Tie that Binder (1974) and Superdyke (1976), in which the camera acts as a lover objectifying them as well as stories that were not being told. Her more than 110 feature films include Tender Pictions (1995), a collection of shorts in which she explores queerness.

Other early pioneers included the women Jan Oxenberg (1957–) and umps. Both started their careers in dangerous too limited to even hammer’s work was always the hippies, postmodernism, and the avant-garde New6 known works. Journey pieces of experimental cine- German politics via a way of filmmaking combining films like Rape Tying Picturings (1970), and Murder (1996).

Carrying on Rainer’s engagement in avant-garde, personal work exploring female identity is best known for Tie that Binder, mother through home film to Germany. friedelich’s autobiographies with her lesbian (1990), which explores her personal and controversial films is ret- with impressionistic experiences, woman. Friedelich’s persona accessible, with material that they have never done before. Some of her recent films include Odds of Recovery (1993), and My Friend (1995), which screened at the first lesbian film festival in 1995.

Jan Oxenberg’s experimental work includes The First Lesbian (1973), a collection of shorts that explores queerness, and as one of the first lesbian filmmakers, encouraged others to be female.
Despite the existence of queer representations on screen, surprisingly, however, gay and lesbian women have rarely been central to narrative filmmaking, and even when queer characters do appear, they are generally not allowed to be complex or fully realized. This is especially true in Hollywood, where the stars were regarded more as commodities to be exploited for profit, and the roles assigned to queer women were often stereotypical and demeaning.

In the 1970s and 1980s, with the rise of feminist and queer activism, filmmakers began to challenge traditional perceptions of gender and sexuality. One of the most notable figures in this movement was Barbara Hammer, a lesbian feminist filmmaker who is commonly referred to as the “mother of lesbian film.” Hammer’s work, which included groundbreaking documentaries and experimental films, demonstrated the power of cinema to represent queer experiences in a way that was both authentic and bold.

Another important figure was Su Friedrich, whose experimental work explored themes of gender, sexuality, and identity. Her films, such as " damn you, you bloody maniac" (1974), "sweet valley" (1975), and "the bride wore red" (1976), were celebrated for their innovative narrative structures and their willingness to challenge conventional representations of queerness.

Other filmmakers of this era, such as Jan Oxenberg, Yvonne Rainer, and Su Hecht, also made significant contributions to the field of experimental film.

These early pioneers laid the groundwork for a new generation of filmmakers who continued to push the boundaries of what was considered acceptable on screen. With the rise of the LGBTQ+ rights movement in the 1970s and 1980s, filmmakers began to explore the lives of queer individuals in a way that was previously unseen, and the stories of queer women began to be told with greater nuance and complexity.

Today, queer women continue to make significant contributions to the world of cinema, with filmmakers such as Patty Jenkins, Patty Donahue, and Jessica Swale making waves in the industry with their bold and innovative work.

Despite the progress that has been made, there is still a long way to go in terms of equitable representation of queer women on the screen. As the movement for LGBTQ+ rights continues to grow, it is hoped that filmmakers will continue to push the boundaries of what is considered acceptable, and that queer women will be given the same opportunities to tell their stories as their heterosexual counterparts.
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 (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 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 Cary Rivers. Deitch’s next project was an Oprah Winfrey production, The Women of Brixton Place (1989), a four-hour television mini-series adapted from Gloria Naylor’s award-winning novel. More recently Deitch produced a documentary, Angel on My Shoulder (1997), which intimately and painf ully 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 culminate in a veritable rash of queer films, what most critics would like to see mainstream studios join. What is needed is a group of films and filmmakers that can serve as a model for future filmmakers. Experimental filmmaker and actress Sheila McLaughlin is most well known for She Must Be Seeing Things (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 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).

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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 (1990), Dotto 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 (2005), 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 Boys Don’t Cry (1999), achieving mainstream accolades and top box office dollars. Boys, which won Hilary Swank an Oscar, follows the real life story of trans-gendered 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

Another lesbian-themed 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 Psicom 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 Selene (1999), and Sonora Exterminada, Missing Young Woman (2001).


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, of the Stein community on the Left Bank in Paris. Weiss and Schiller have also codirected Sweethearts of Rhythm (1997) of the same name. This film, an International Sweethearts of Rhythm, which centered on two black women and their music, includes Escape to Life: Zero (2002), and Recall Me.

Many gay and lesbian filmmakers, upon the support of the independent film festivals, Experimental Film Festivals, and other events, have made notable contributions to the making of a gay and lesbian film community.

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Further Reading


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A history of contemporary lesbian filmmaking is found in the work of filmmakers such as Gertrude Stein, of the Stein community on the Left Bank in Paris. Weiss and Schiller have also codirected Sweethearts of Rhythm (1997) of the same name. This film, an International Sweethearts of Rhythm, which centered on two black women and their music, includes Escape to Life: Zero (2002), and Recall Me.

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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 *Tory and Ruby: Hell Doin' Women* (1988), which centered on two black lesbian members of the International Sweethearts of Rhythm and their musical life together. More recent work from Jezehel 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 Frilot was co-founder and programmer for MIX Brasil and MIX Mexico, the first gay film festivals for both countries. Frilot 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_


Ann M. Savage

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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