

FILM/VIDEO REVIEW

WHERE THE GIRLS ARE

RIDING THE NEW WAVE OF LESBIAN FEATURE FILMS

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Ten lesbian features. It's worth repeating, don't you think? Ten lesbian feature films were screened at film festivals and in theaters across the United States by summer's end in 1995.¹ Given the scarcity of lesbian features throughout gay and lesbian filmmaking history, it's a statistic worth celebrating. The sheer number of movies in 1995 not only widens and expands representations of dykes, it also opens up new possibilities for critical analysis and spectatorial enjoyment of those images. The diversity of films provides the critic with the rare opportunity to differentiate qualitatively among current movies—a heretofore impossible task. The numbers also allow spectators the freedom to pick and choose among films and to enjoy a variety of formats (comedy, drama, and period pieces), assuming, of course, that they have access to film festivals and local screenings. So here are the ten titles that were screened in 1995: *Bar Girls* (U.S., 1994), *Change the Frame* (U.S., 1994), *Costa Brava* (Spain, 1995), *Devotion* (Canada, 1994), *The Incredibly True Adventure of Two Girls in Love* (U.S., 1995), *The Midwife's Tale* (U.S., 1995), *Sister My Sister* (Great Britain, 1994), *Skin Deep* (Canada, 1995), *Thin Ice* (Great Britain, 1994), and *When Night Is Falling* (Canada, 1995).

Lesbians are not born, they're seduced. At least that's the impression I got from at least half of these titles. While I don't have any problems with seduction—it's a great narrative tool and a fun, bated-breath experience for the viewer—it is a noteworthy contrast to gay male movies (such as *Jeffrey* [U.S., 1995]), in which gay male sexuality is a given right from the start; gay men play out narrative twists and turns well out of the closet. Women, it seems, need to be coaxed into their lesbianism, usually by dykes who are more experienced and often darker in skin tone and hair color. Unlike older films, none of the recent features represents the "dark" lesbian's pursuit of a

"light" heterosexual woman in sinister terms, but it's worth taking note of the racial differences and seduction scenarios that structure these narratives.

In *Thin Ice*, directed by Fiona Cunningham Reid, Steffi is a lesbian who's very much out of the closet. So out, in fact, that she and her current lover plan to compete in pairs ice-skating at the 1994 Gay Games. Disaster strikes when their relationship falls apart, which leaves Steffi, a black British woman, in need of a new partner . . . fast! When she's rejected by an older lesbian who used to compete professionally (as the woman tells her, the Gay Games are for the younger generation), her remaining choice is a straight woman, Natalie, who's just begun to take figure-skating lessons. Despite these obstacles, Steffi is driven in her efforts to recruit Natalie (in more ways than one). Initially, she tells Natalie that she needs a practice partner. And when she finally reveals the truth—that she wants her to travel to New York to compete in a lesbian event—Natalie refuses. As luck, and conventional narrative style, would have it, everything works out in the end. The blonde, white, and ostensibly straight Natalie is drawn by her darker suitor into the mysteries of lesbian sex, not to mention the largest queer international event ever held.

While *The Midwife's Tale* is an exception to this conventional lesbian seduction scenario—a fair-haired and married noblewoman pursues her raven-haired love—the beloved nonetheless represents an alternative lifestyle (women's healing, midwifery, an all-female community, and female spirituality). Megan Siler's feature is a charming and impressive low-budget film set in the Middle Ages, in which a young, married noblewoman finds she is pregnant and decides, without her husband's knowledge, to abort the baby. Unfortunately, the potion she concocts makes her incredibly ill but does little to free her of the child. Enter Gwennyth, the beautiful dark-haired apprentice to the town's midwife. During the time that Gwennyth cares for the pale, blonde noblewoman, they have intimate chats and grow close. When the elderly midwife is apprehended and accused of witchcraft because of her use of talismans and herbs to heal women, Lady Eleanor urges Gwennyth to protect herself from similar accusations. Eleanor's efforts to convince her husband, Sir Giles, and the local priest to free the elderly woman fail (the woman is hanged), and the noblewoman is locked in her room by Giles until the birth of their child. Fret ye not, deare reader, for the pregnant Eleanor escapes and finds the love of her life, Gwennyth, hidden in the woods. Gwennyth embodies the independence and freedom from conventional ties that haunt the noblewoman in her everyday life. Thus, while the lady pursues the younger midwife, it is the midwife who invites her to do so, who offers her the dream of another reality, another life. In true romance and fairy-tale fashion, they ride off together into the sunset, destined for goddess worship and all-female child rearing in a lesbian fantasyland of their own making.²

Patricia Rozema's new feature, *When Night Is Falling*, is a whimsical and beautifully shot narrative of lesbian desire.³ As is true of *Thin Ice* and *The Midwife's Tale*, an alternate world—alternate, that is, to white heterosexual patriarchy—is embodied by a dark lesbian, in this case a black woman named Petra.⁴ The film opens on two instructors at a Christian college, Martin and his girlfriend, Camille. The camera dollies back and forth outside the classrooms in which Martin and Camille teach courses on theology and mythology, respectively. After lecturing, Camille returns to her office and finds her beloved dog, Bob, missing. She then locates him dead in an alleyway, and her existential angst ensues. Enter the lesbian. Camille meets Petra at the laundromat, where she has gone to do her laundry and drown her sorrows. Petra tries to console the weeping Camille and "helps" her with her wash (switching her bag with Camille's). Camille then begins her search for Petra and her lost clothing, but only after she and Martin have been asked to run the college on the condition that they marry.

The stage is thus set for tradition to be pitted against unconventional adventure. When Camille finds Petra rehearsing with a company of performers called "Sirkus of Sorts" on the outskirts of town, she leaves her familiar world of religious rules and enters a dreamlike space where the rules are made up as you go along. Wending her way through tattooed strongmen and trapeze artists, Camille watches Petra juggling balls of light behind a screen. Here, the lesbian is not only dark but also a master of light and illusion. Although Camille is initially mortified by Petra's advances, she eventually responds. Their love scene is sensuous, lengthy, and languid. Rozema cross-cuts the two lovers with a women's trapeze act that takes place high above their heads: as Petra and Camille move together in the rhythms of lovemaking, so too do the trapeze artists synchronize their dancelike movements in the air. This sequence is a stark contrast to Camille's earlier sex scene with Martin, which is fast, shrouded in shadows, and distracting to Camille who gazes at (fantasized?) balls of light moving behind Martin's head. In keeping with conventional narrative, the female lovers are torn apart. But eventually, Martin and Christian college life get dumped, and Camille embraces her lesbian lover and runs away with the Sirkus.

While in Rozema's *When Night Is Falling* the lesbian is cast as a performer who specializes in illusion, in Mindy Kaplan's *Devotion* she's a comic. Lesbian Sheila Caston is reunited with an old friend who broke off their relationship many years earlier because of Caston's unwanted advances. Alas, her object of desire was straight—*was* being the operative word. When Caston's lost love reappears with her husband in tow, straightness gives way to long-standing passion and Caston leaves her girlfriend to fulfill her dream. The twist here is that it is the straight friend who pursues Caston and admits that it was fear, not an immutable heterosexuality, that prevented her from re-

turning Caston's affections long ago. Once again, however, the lesbian is a dark-haired dyke, whereas her old friend and soon-to-be-lover is a blond white woman. It's as if darkness represents lesbianism, whereas the journey toward lesbianism is embodied by those who are white and light.

In Maria Maggenti's *Incredibly True Adventure of Two Girls in Love*—a wonderful low-budget feature with a strong sense of fun—the racial tables are turned. White working-class lesbian teenager Randy falls in love with her upper middle-class, African-American straight classmate, Evie. As is true of the other films cited, a trauma throws the two women together.⁵ Evie's problems in *Two Girls* include car trouble, which forces her to bring her Range Rover to the garage at which Randy works, and an ongoing breakup with her boyfriend. The two young women become friends and eventually spend a passionate weekend together at Evie's house, where, among other things, they trash the kitchen, fool around on the dining room floor, and make love in Evie's mother's bed. When Evie's mother discovers them the next morning, all hell breaks loose. They lock themselves in a motel room and, finally, confront their adult guardians. Part of what's so charming about the film is Maggenti's reversal of the conventional class⁶ and racial identities of the pursuer and pursued—Randy is fair-haired and working-class, whereas Evie is black and wealthy. Although Randy appears to be the more experienced lesbian, she admits to Evie that she's never slept with a woman. Their sexual encounter is, then, a first for both of them.

Maggenti's film is loosely autobiographical—but given that the African-American Evie stands in for the white filmmaker, it is noteworthy that the issue of race is never once raised. Nor is it ever discussed in *Thin Ice* and *When Night is Falling*. As sometimes happens with minority filmmakers, the onus falls on lesbian directors to deal with *all* aspects of their communities, and frequently their approaches are critiqued for a lack of universality or narrow foci. (1993's *Go Fish* actually included a discussion of this very problematic.) By drawing attention to the issue of race in these films—or to the absence of its address—I run the risk of expecting these filmmakers to do more than represent (1) lesbians of color and (2) interracial relationships between lesbians. Furthermore, while racial meanings are implicit in the dark/light contrast in these films, the device is also a means of representing the belief that "opposites attract": without the contrasts implicit in male/female sexual difference, filmmakers appeal to other forms of physical variance.⁷ So on the one hand, the absence of a discussion of race in these movies is appealing—these are women who fall in love and cross racial borders without their differences creating a barrier. On the other, that very elision seems forced, since race is a central element of all three films in which interracial relationships occur. Having said that, however, the absence of models leaves me unclear as to how the filmmakers could have done things

differently. One idea that does spring to mind immediately, though, is the need for lesbian features that address relationships between women of color, i.e., films without white women as central protagonists.

But how does darkness fit here? For it isn't solely women of color who are often cast as lesbians, but also white women who are dark-haired, whose appearance contrasts with the (connotations of) innocence that inhere in their lighter paramours. Intentional or not, these casting choices infuse these films with racial and class connotations, even when all the players are white. And those connotations cast lesbians as creatures of darkness, seducers who draw the whitest of women away from the traditional ties of heterosexual matrimony and patriarchal power structures. Despite this potentially homophobic perspective, the darker lesbians of recent films possess knowledge that can release their straighter sisters from unwanted obligations and lives. That is: where the dykes are is where the straight girls want to be. Furthermore, lesbian features are increasingly using comedy as a central representational device, which casts the lesbian's dark identity in a lighter context and suggests that love relationships among women do not, as was once the case, insure cinematic suicide.⁸ The darker lesbian is being transformed. She's no longer the harbinger of death and illness, a figure around whom intimations of racial "inferiority" circulate. Instead, she promises alternative pleasures, new lives.

There are, I think, several issues that get played out in these scenarios of dark dykes and lesbian seduction. First, because lesbian films have been so few and far between, unlike those by and about gay men, recent features remain concerned with the act of *becoming* lesbian. While many of us may know that we're gay at a young age, others (and I think this is more true of lesbians than gay men) discover, change, or admit our sexualities later in life. Second, as noted earlier, the seduction plot is sexy—there's a built-in hermeneutic (will she or won't she) and a built-in narrative energy (moving toward a climax, so to speak) that aren't provided by other story devices. The seduction plot is, then, about sex in more ways than one: the promise of sex, the failure of sexual contact, the fulfillment of sexual desire. Given that until recently lesbians have not had a tradition of pornography, again unlike gay men, sex—or at least the promise of sex—has a central role in current films. Those lesbians who enjoyed multiple screenings of *Desert Hearts* (U.S.) ten years ago may have loved Patsy Cline's music on the soundtrack but, if my own experience is any indication, the real lure was the long, slow sex scene.

What are the responsibilities, if any, of gay and lesbian filmmakers? I asked this question at a filmmaker's forum at the 1995 Gay and Lesbian Film Festival in Los Angeles. Greg Araki, whose directorial credits include *The Living End* (U.S., 1992), jumped at the question and rejected its validity altogether. But the women filmmakers who participated in the event were far

less certain that they didn't have some sort of representational responsibility to other lesbians. While Megan Siler, for example, wanted no part of any rigid political agenda for gay and lesbian filmmakers, she is committed to making films that can be enjoyed by lesbian audiences and talked about her concern for lesbian viewers while making *The Midwife's Tale*.

What, then, do lesbian spectators want? If my recent screening experiences are any indication, they want to see sex between women on-screen. This demonstrable desire may reinforce old stereotypes about queers as being obsessed with sex and sexuality. Or it may merely indicate how starved lesbian spectators are for representations of their lives, sexual and otherwise. In an article published a number of years ago, Cindy Patton begins by recounting her experience watching Lea Pool's *Anne Trister* (Canada, 1986) and her disappointment that, while the two heroines kiss, they don't do much more. As Patton writes: "It was like an old forties movie, except that the train didn't go through the tunnel. Nothing happened to give me a sign that, indeed, they had 'done it' offscreen. Should I care? Perhaps it's politically incorrect to want to see it, but I felt robbed" (74).

So did the lesbian viewers with whom I watched *Thin Ice*. In the middle of the film, Steffi and Natalie go away for the weekend with a mutual friend, a gay man, in order to get to know each other better, so that they will be able to feel more compatible while skating. The friends spend a lovely day exploring the countryside and drink merrily into the twilight hours. Steffi and Natalie begin gazing at each other amorously, and their friend leaves them alone. What happens next not only distresses spectators but disrupts narrative coherence. As Steffi and Natalie kiss and then stagger out of the room, there is a cutaway to a beautiful field of poppies, which signals the temporal transition from night to daytime. The dykes with whom I screened the movie went berserk. They may have seen the train go through the tunnel, to borrow Patton's phrase, but they wanted more. Not only were they cheated out of seeing the two women make love, they were treated to a visual cliché to boot. They wanted to see sex!

As Patton notes, "For many lesbians, these films function as a sort of pornography or ritualistic exercise that provokes desire distinct from pleasure produced by the visual beauty or cathartic effect of the film" (74). The removal of this effect, the stunting of spectatorial desire in *Thin Ice*, is then inevitably caused by the withholding of a crucial sex scene. Further, its compensatory elliptical sequence came far too early in the film; the poppies intrude *before* Steffi asks Natalie to go to New York to skate in the Gay Games, and hence *before* the natural tension-point of the movie. After they have sex in offscreen space, Steffi withdraws inexplicably from Natalie, they stop skating together, and then Steffi shows up to ask Natalie to go to New York. By this point the narrative pacing is so disrupted that not even

Natalie's last-minute appearance in New York, followed by their gold medal at the competition, could weave the threads of the story line back together. If spectatorial response is any prescription for filmmaking, the sex scene should have been shot and placed much later in the movie.

The delights of a specifically lesbian cinematic approach are one of Penny Florence's concerns in her piece on the Lesbian Filmmaking versus Queer Cinema Conference held in London in 1994. As Florence remarks, "I am amazed that queer lesbians will argue that it does not matter *who* makes films, and that to say that it *does* is 'essentialist.' . . . By all means let straight men deal seriously with lesbian subject matter; but what they produce has different meanings within cinema as a whole. . . . Lesbian filmmakers have deployed the varying perspectives of lesbian desire to explore the erotic outside the pornographic mode" (297-98; emphasis in original). While I don't want to enter into the pornography-erotica debate, I do believe that Florence makes a valid point that lesbian directors are sometimes more capable of portraying lesbian sex than, say, straight men and women.

I'm reminded here of the comments I heard from lesbian friends upon the release of Marita Giovanni's *Bar Girls*. *Bar Girls* follows the travails of Loretta, a witty and sarcastic lesbian who breaks off a dead-end relationship with Annie and falls hard for Rachel, a married woman who's already had a series of lesbian affairs. *Bar Girls* comes closest of the 1995 features to representing a preexisting lesbian world, one that consists of more than a single dyke recruiter (in this way, it has much in common with *Go Fish*, but little of that film's experimentation with form). When J.R., a butch lesbian with the hots for Rachel, makes a play for Loretta's gal, Loretta responds with macho chivalry (quite a feat for a femme who likes femmes) and treats Rachel like a piece of property over which she and J.R. must wage battle.

Whatever criticisms have been leveled at Giovanni's adaptation of Luran Hoffman's play and screenplay (such as the staginess of performances and camera work, and the wordiness of dialogue), one particular scene captured the attention of a variety of dykes (by "variety" I mean baby dykes, femmes, butches, femmes who like femmes, etc.). The sexiest sequence, at least according to my meager poll among friends, was a scene in which Loretta and J.R. find themselves alone after Rachel has stormed off in frustration. The two rivals spar verbally for a few minutes, at which point J.R. pins Loretta against the wall and kisses her. Their kisses turn into a lovemaking scene filled with the tensions sparked by hatred and desire; in short, it's rough and hot.

This scene from *Bar Girls* provides a welcome contrast (confirmed by spectators' responses to it) to conventional lesbian lovemaking sequences. The languid camera work in the sex scene in *Desert Hearts* and Catherine Deneuve's operatic seduction of Susan Sarandon in *The Hunger* are, for

example, erotic lesbian encounters, but their sexiness is produced in large part by their slow pacing, romantic lighting, and gentle gestures, even in the case of a vampire attack. The quick pace, stark lighting, and aggressive gestures of the *Bar Girls* sequence offers a new, rougher, and far less traditional cinematic rendition of lesbian sex, a rendition that adds variety to prior depictions.

This is not to say that sex guarantees a film's success or that it's always necessary to the story line. While many lesbians want to see sexy and sexual dykes on-screen, generic elements can preclude that depiction. In Siler's *The Midwife's Tale*, a sex scene would have limited the fairy-tale fantasy mood of the film. Unlike the audience of *Thin Ice*, many, if not all, spectators in Los Angeles left Siler's Middle Ages romance in a state of dreaminess, a state that was precipitated rather than frustrated by the intimate kiss between Lady Eleanor and Gwenyth near the conclusion. Siler ends her film with the innovative use of a framed tale structure, in which two lesbian mothers—who opened the movie by reading *The Midwife's Tale* as a bedtime story to their daughter—match their kiss to that of Eleanor and Gwenyth. It's a romantic and appropriate conclusion to this particular film.

Marta Balletbo-Coll acknowledges lesbian spectators' passion for on-screen sex and toys with it in *Costa Brava* (a.k.a. *Family Album*). Balletbo-Coll stars as Anna, a Catalan woman who earns a living working as a tour guide for Costa Brava Tours in Barcelona. Her real work, however, is as a performer of a comic monologue that is intercut throughout the movie. Anna meets Montserrat, an American engineer who teaches at a local university, on one of her tours. When Montserrat has a terrible headache, Anna lends her her supply bag, which not only contains aspirin but Anna's monologue as well. Montserrat reads the piece, in which Anna adopts the persona of a straight married woman who comments on and then falls in love with her lesbian neighbor. The monologue sparks Montserrat's interest in Anna.⁹

After a series of failed attempts to reach each other on the phone, Montserrat invites Anna to Costa Brava for the weekend. As Anna stares at Montserrat, who sits perched on a rock overlooking the ocean, her voice-over laments: "The cramps in my belly are killing me. I'm going to have to make the first move." And so she does. A moment later the slamming of their car doors punctuates the silence and signals that sex is about to begin. Music fills the sound track, and the camera teases the spectator by panning close to the car windows and then stopping abruptly. Balletbo-Coll intentionally draws the viewer toward offscreen space and frustrates the desire to see. Yet she does so with a keen sense of fun—she's a tease with the camera, a seductress who knows what lesbians want and toys with their urges.

She also plays with our desire and ability to hear. The film is filled with voice-over meditations by Anna and Montserrat, a device that both saved

money in on-location sound recording and reinforces this film's attempts to offer a conventional narrative with a twist. That twist is as much a function of Balletbo-Coll's use of the sound track (for example, the music stops as abruptly as the camera as it makes its way toward the car in the lovemaking scene) as of her own compelling and hilariously funny persona. While this is by no means a one-woman show, since Desi del Valle holds her own as Montserrat, Anna is a truly compelling figure, a woman who manages to paint her character's insecurities with a brush dipped in wit.

Of the ten features listed at the beginning of this review, *Costa Brava* is the most innovative cinematically and the most infused with a sense of fun. In fact, my three favorite films each possessed qualities that differentiated them from the run-of-the-mill narrative and incited laughter among spectators. Like *Costa Brava*, *The Midwife's Tale* is infused with humor; and Siler breaks up narrative continuity by inserting beautiful illuminations from the Middle Ages in order to divide her story into individual sections. Rozema's camera work, mise-en-scène, humorous dialogue, and circus space combine to make *When Night is Falling* a lesbian love story that not only includes one of the most erotic love scenes I've seen but frames the growing passion between the women in a beautiful and fanciful setting.

These three films share a cultivation of spectatorial pleasure (or, at least, this spectator's pleasure) through the visual pleasures of production design, the aural pleasures of music and voice, the emotional pleasures of sexual desire and laughter, and the narrative pleasures of a well-structured, well-acted, and well-executed story.¹⁰ What, then, is pleasure's relationship to lesbian spectatorship and filmmaking? Nonnarrative formats found favor among "pioneer" lesbian filmmakers coming from feminist backgrounds, such as Barbara Hammer, not only because they offered an artistic and innovative forum for political expression but also because narratives had come to be associated with patriarchal oppression. Laura Mulvey's now-classic 1975 article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" helped usher in a generation of feminist filmmakers and academics intent on valorizing avant-garde and documentary forms and critiquing narratives for their uses and abuses of women. This attraction to "unpleasure," to disrupting the conventional lures of narrative movement and pat endings, also had an impact on lesbian filmmaking, and we are only now finding our way out of that approach and into a new, more flexible, and, I'd venture, more pleasurable one.

In 1993 Alisa Lebow wrote a review of the then-current state of lesbian filmmaking and, by necessity, focused on documentary, short-format, and experimental filmmakers. As she noted of the diverse works and women (such as Cheryl Dunye, Su Friedrich, and Ellen Spiro) addressed, "Aside from being out lesbians, even these lesbian film/videomakers have very little in common. For the most part, they are not making feature films, and do not

necessarily share a single esthetic, cultural history, or political agenda." Lebow contrasts this vision of dyke directors with gay men who have "made feature length films which reflect a certain defiance of narrative conventions mixed with varying degrees of highly stylized camp—which is admittedly not a lesbian specialty, as B. Ruby Rich has pointed out" (18).¹¹ Two years after Lebow's comments, ten lesbian features have found some form of exhibition in the United States, yet all ten are fairly conventional feature-length films. Only Rose Troche's *Go Fish* comes to mind as a recent lesbian feature that is stylized and also defies conventional narrative.

Why, finally, are most lesbian features conventional, while their gay counterparts are less so? The answer to this question brings us back to the issue of the quantity of representations of lesbians in mainstream and independent filmmaking. Whereas gay men have seen themselves on-screen in a variety of movies, lesbians have primarily had to search for dykes in films not necessarily about them (witness the lesbian versus straight readings of *Fried Green Tomatoes* or the lesbian appropriations of the female friendship in *Thelma and Louise*). As Patton remarks: "This difference in spectatorship and in the way these films are absorbed into our cultures [and, I would add, the ways they are made] is related to the greater availability of images of gay men and their sexual practices than of lesbians and theirs" (72).

But this isn't only a matter of numbers. It's also a function of the diminished funding venues available to independent filmmakers, especially lesbians who have the "double trouble" of being queer and women. While gay men's features have found some audiences among straights and have, therefore, opened up new funding venues, the few lesbian features that made it to the screen in the past (such as Nicole Conn's *Claire of the Moon*) had problems cultivating not only heterosexual spectators but lesbians as well. Thus the question of pleasure intersects with the issue of marketability. Perhaps lesbian filmmakers—even experimental ones like **Midi Onodera**, director of *Ten Cents a Dance* and, now, *Skin Deep*—are cultivating narratives because (1) lesbian spectators are, on the whole, used to that format; (2) narratives offer a satisfying forum for romantic story lines and on-screen sex; and (3) narratives, if they're done well, have more chances of finding distributors and drawing larger numbers of viewers.

So while the New Wave of lesbian features may not be marked by "appropriation and pastiche, irony, as well as a reworking of history with social constructionism very much in mind," as B. Ruby Rich wrote of the gay men's films she dubbed the New Queer Cinema a few years ago (32), they are exploring new venues of pleasure for lesbians. They're transforming the dark and sinister identity of previous lesbian portrayals into a fun and desirable identity, they're offering images of lesbian sex and desire, and they're making spectators laugh.

Only the future can tell whether lesbian features will expand their representational vocabularies and experiment more with the forms they now embrace. My wish list for films in forthcoming years includes: a continuing commitment to diverse representations, especially features in which lesbians of color live and love without the interventions of white dykes; more story lines in which being lesbian is taken for granted and seduction is not the primary narrative motor (although I'd hate to do away with the delights of seduction altogether); and greater experimentation with narrative forms and cinematic language. But that's a vision of the future, and this is the here and now. Given the wealth of recent works, it's important to remain in the present at this historic moment and to enjoy riding the wave of new lesbian feature films.

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NOTES

1. I screened most of the films addressed in this review in July 1995 at OUTFEST '95, the Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Film Festival.
2. *The Midwife's Tale* is a framed narrative in which childrearing by lesbians takes center stage. The movie opens in the present-day household of two women who are raising their daughter. The young girl wants a bedtime story, and one of her mothers agrees to read *The Midwife's Tale*. The framing of the story at the start and finish—plus a brief return to the present mid-narrative—is a clever device that contextualizes the main body of the film. The fantasy is a present-day reality in which the two women from the Middle Ages are "reincarnated" as the young girl's parents. Siler keeps the mothers out of sight until the conclusion, when they're shown kissing, as their daughter lies asleep nearby.
3. Rozema's earlier, innovative lesbian narrative, *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* (Canada, 1989), though shot on a tighter budget, was similarly concerned with whimsy and fantasy.
4. While this is a Canadian feature, in which case Petra might be played by a Caribbean-Canadian actress, the actress's accent indicates that she's American.
5. Natalie's trauma is suggested in brief flashbacks in *Thin Ice*, in which a man is shown in shadows with a gun. A shot is heard, liquid covers the frame, and the viewer learns later that Natalie's father recently committed suicide. Eleanor's pregnancy and confinement precipitate her efforts to pursue Gwenyth in *The Midwife's Tale*. When Bob, Camille's dog, dies in *When Night Is Falling*, she meets Petra and their relationship begins. And *Devotion* portrays the dissatisfaction endured by Sheila's married friend, who arrives at her door in search of happiness with another woman.
6. Although recent films do not depict the lesbian as a wealthy dark creature, a heritage of lesbian vampires in American cinema—such as Countess Marya Zaleska in *Dracula's Daughter* (1936) and Catherine Deneuve's character in *The Hunger* (1983)—have set the stage for lesbian seduction's being conjoined with aristocratic, and excessive, wealth.
7. For a discussion of the racial implications of a white lesbian film, see Mandy Merck's "Dessert Hearts."

8. In *Devotion*, Mindy Kaplan attempts to counterpose the film's intense emotional theme (the expression of unrequited love) with Sheila's role as a stand-up comic. As a result, Sheila's routines are intercut with more dramatic scenes throughout the movie. While Kaplan's impulse to intercut the sequences was good, the final effect is somewhat disappointing.
9. Montserrat, like Rachel in *Bar Girls*, is a variation on the straight woman of other lesbian narratives. First, she's dark-haired like Anna, and second, while she's dated men most recently, she had a two-year relationship with a woman several years earlier.
10. One of the other films that I found extremely engaging, although in a very disturbing context, is *Sister My Sister*, a film that raises the question of whether incest between two sisters is or is not lesbian sex.
11. Actually, what Rich said was that "where the boys are archaeologists, the girls have to be alchemists. Their style is unlike almost anything that's come before. I would call it lesbian camp, but the [male] species is, after all, better known for camping. And historical revisionism is not a catchy term. So just borrow from Hollywood and think of it as the Great Dyke Rewrite" (Rich [33]). The works to which Rich refers, and which she contrasts with gay male features, include Cecilia Barriga's *The Meeting of Two Queens* and Kaucylia Brooke and Jane Cottis's *Dry Kisses Only*, both of which are witty and entertaining nonnarrative videos.

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- Anne Trister* (L. Pool, Canada, 1986). Distributor: Canadian Film Distribution Center, SUNY at Plattsburgh, Feinberg Library Rooms 124-128, Plattsburgh, NY 12901-2697; (800) 388-6784. VHS rental only (no 16mm or 35mm rental available).
- Bar Girls* (M. Giovanni, U.S., 1994). Distributor: New Line Cinema, (818) 995-5757.
- Change the Frame* (C. Rey, U.S., 1994). Distributor: Unknown. Contact: Fearless Productions Inc., P.O. Box 8928, Atlanta, GA 30306-9998; FAX (404) 897-5218.
- Costa Brava* (M. Balletbo-Coll, Spain, 1995). Distributor: Unknown. Contact: Marta Balletbo-Coll, Trebol 2, Barcelona, Spain 08032; FAX 34-3-4561076.
- Devotion* (M. Kaplan, Canada, 1994). Distributor: David Mazon, Northern Arts Entertainment, P.O. Box 201, Williamsburg, MA 01096; FAX (413) 268-9309.
- Fried Green Tomatoes* (J. Avnet, U.S., 1991). Distributor: Video purchase from FACETS, 1-800-331-6197 or FAX (312) 929-5437. Video # S17015.
- The Hunger* (T. Scott, U.S., 1983). Distributor: MGM/UA; FAX (310) 449-3002.

- The Incredibly True Adventure of Two Girls in Love* (M. Maggenti, U.S., 1995). Distributor: New Line Cinema, (818) 995-5757.
- I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* (P. Rozema, Canada, 1987). Distributor: Video purchase from FACETS, 1-800-331-6197 or FAX (312) 929-5437. Video # S06046.
- The Meeting of Two Queens* (C. Barriga, Spain, 1991). Distributor: Women Make Movies, 462 Broadway, Suite 500C, New York, NY 10013; FAX (212) 925-2052.
- The Midwife's Tale* (M. Siler, U.S., 1995). Distributor: Unknown. Contact: Heresy Productions, 2021 Essex St., Berkeley, CA 94703; FAX (510) 548-2086.
- Sister My Sister* (N. Meckler, Great Britain, 1994). Distributor: Seventh Art Releasing, 7551 Sunset Blvd., Suite 104, Los Angeles, CA 90046; FAX (213) 845-1455.
- Skin Deep* (M. Onodera, Canada, 1995). Distributor: Unknown. Contact: Merernaz Lentin, FAX (416) 973-2344.
- Ten Cents a Dance* (a.k.a. Parallax View. M. Onodera, Canada, 1986). Distributor: Women Make Movies, (212) 925-0606; FAX (212) 925-2052.
- Thin Ice* (F. Cunningham Reid, Great Britain, 1994). Distributor: Stranger Than Fiction, London House, 68 Upper Richmond Rd., London, England SW15 2RP; FAX 01-81-877-0090.
- When Night Is Falling* (P. Rozema, Canada, 1995). Distributor: October Films, 65 Bleeker St., New York, NY 10012; FAX (212) 539-4099.