

Films in Focus: *Desert Hearts*

The 1980s represent a watershed period for the portrayal of lesbianism in mainstream American cinema. Prior to this time, it was only in independent and avant-garde cinema that positive lesbian portrayals could be found in the work of Jan Oxenberg, Barbara Hammer, Lizzie Borden, Sheila McLaughlin, and Su Friedrich, for instance, but these films did not receive mainstream distribution. The 1982 release of Robert Towne's *Personal Best* marked a significant transformation in mainstream lesbian representations. *Personal Best* took the lesbian film in a new direction by offering at long last a positive mainstream portrayal of a lesbian romance, even if this portrayal was limited by the eventual failure of the film's lesbian relationship and its portrayal as merely a stage in the development of the protagonist, who moves on to what is presented as a more fulfilling heterosexual romance. This new more positive direction in lesbian portrayals was expanded considerably later in the decade as lesbian films in the late 1980s and early 1990s began to offer innovative portrayals of erotic female relationships that went well beyond earlier lesbian portrayals.

The most notable lesbian film of the 1980s was Donna Deitch's groundbreaking lesbian romance *Desert Hearts* (1985), the first mainstream lesbian film by a lesbian director and still by many accounts the most popular lesbian film ever made. *Desert Hearts'* success with both lesbian and heterosexual audiences might lead one to expect that it would initiate a long line of openly lesbian romance films with crossover appeal to both lesbian and heterosexual viewers, but this did not prove to be the case. After *Desert Hearts*, mainstream lesbian portrayals nearly disappeared, and when a major lesbian feature film was finally released in 1992, it cultivated a crossover audience by retreating into the less potentially controversial arena of ambiguous lesbian representation. *Fried Green Tomatoes* gained vastly expanded distribution and was much more popular at the box office than *Desert Hearts*, but it accomplished this success by closeting its lesbian content. It was not until 1994 that the openly lesbian film again reasserted itself, and *Go Fish*, a low-budget, independently made lesbian romance again directed by a lesbian director, Rose Troche, entered mainstream theaters with limited success. Since then, there have been sporadic examples of mainstream films with lesbian content, most made independently and then finding limited mainstream distribution. Examples include *High Art*

(Lisa Cholodenko, 1998), *But I'm a Cheerleader*, *Saving Face*, and *The Kids Are All Right*. In a significant development, Lisa Cholodenko has even emerged as a major mainstream lesbian director whose films have crossover appeal to both lesbian and heterosexual audiences.

While *Desert Hearts* is unquestionably the most popular mainstream lesbian film of the 1980s and represents a significant advance in lesbian representation,

138 Feminist Film Studies

it has received curiously negative critical attention from lesbian critics, who overwhelmingly condemn it. Teresa de Lauretis, for instance, insists the film casts its lesbian love story squarely in the tradition of Hollywood heterosexual romance. For her, the film's repackaging of heterosexual conventions "as a commodity purportedly produced for lesbians, does not seem ... sufficient to disrupt, subvert, or resist the straight representational and social norms by which 'homosexuality is nothing but heterosexuality,' nor a fortiori sufficient to shed light on the specific difference that constitutes a lesbian subjectivity" (de Lauretis 1991: 256). Jackie Stacey is almost alone among lesbian critics in recognizing *Desert Hearts*' importance not only as the most popular mainstream lesbian film in contemporary cinema, but also as "the first lesbian romance which offers its spectators an unapologetic celebration of lesbian love" and poses an open challenge to "the traditional definition of lesbianism as 'unnatural,' 'deviant,' 'predatory,' or 'depressing.'" Yet even Stacey sees the film as ultimately a failure. She believes that although *Desert Hearts* rejects older definitions of lesbianism it still "fails to introduce engaging new narrative formulae to replace these older unacceptable ones" and as a result lacks the emotional intensity viewers expect from screen romances (Stacey 1995: 111). Perhaps a close examination of *Desert Hearts* will tell us if these condemnations are justified or if they stem from a failure to investigate fully the attraction the film's story of lesbian love affords to lesbian and heterosexual viewers alike.

Donna Deitch, a photographer as well as an avant-garde and documentary filmmaker, spent six years developing *Desert Hearts* from the time she initially conceived the project in 1979. Her struggle to get the film off the ground began with the task of convincing Jane Rule, the well-known lesbian author of *Desert of the Heart*, the novel on which the film is based, to grant her the rights to film the story. Before Rule would agree, she required

Deitch's assurances that she would not exploit the novel's lesbian content for pornographic purposes. Deitch then spent two and a half years raising money for the project and is reputed to have single-handedly raised, primarily from the gay and lesbian community, somewhere between US\$850,000 and US\$1.5 million (Stacey 1995: 94). In spite of Deitch's herculean efforts to obtain adequate financing, the film's limited budget clearly affected its production values. It was shot in 31 days with few retakes and little room for artistic flourish. Once the film was completed, however, Deitch managed to obtain mainstream distribution by Samuel Goldwyn Productions. Based on Natalie Cooper's screenplay adaptation of Rule's novel and set, like the novel, in 1950s Reno, Nevada, the film recounts the story of the love affair between an Eastern college professor Vivian Bell (Helen Shaver) and a Western casino change-girl Cay Rivvers (Patricia Charbonneau). Vivian comes to Reno in order to divorce her college professor husband, meets Cay at the ranch where they both are staying, and they fall in love. While their relationship is openly presented as lesbian, a comparison of *Desert Hearts* to Jane Rule's novel clarifies sharply the film's extensive adoption of heterosexual conventions. The great majority of the changes made from novel to film render the story considerably less challenging to heterosexual norms than was the novel.

First, the film encloses Cay and Vivian's relationship within an environment dominated by idyllic heterosexual romance. Silver (Andra Akers), Cay's co-worker and best friend, is involved in an intense heterosexual love relationship with her fiancé, Joe (Anthony Ponzini), and their romance serves to parallel and comment upon Cay and Vivian's. It is after Silver and Joe's engagement party that Cay and Vivian first kiss, and their love affair is interrupted by their attendance at the couple's wedding. The paralleling of the two relationships suggests that lesbian love is similar to, as intense as, and thus as natural and legitimate as heterosexual romance. Silver and Joe's passionate heterosexuality is also set up as the norm by which the intensity of Cay and Vivian's homosexual relationship is appraised. Although the novel, like the film, includes Silver and Joe's wedding, their relationship is much less idyllic than it is in the film. Rather than serving as a heterosexual parallel to the novel's lesbian romance, Silver and Joe's relationship compares much less favorably with it. In the novel, Silver even serves as a rival to Evelyn (renamed Vivian in the film) for the affections of Ann (Cay in the film). Whereas the film's Silver is a failed singer who feels she has finally found her long-awaited true love in Joe, her novelistic counterpart is an ex-prostitute who is involved with a news-paperman who wants to

become a pornographic author. During Joe's frequent absences, Silver invites Ann to spend the night with her, and the two engage in a clandestine lesbian affair. This affair continues throughout Silver's involvement with Joe, and she even invites Ann to stay with her on the night before her wedding. Unlike the film, which presents Silver and Joe's marriage as the culmination of their passionate love affair, in the novel their wedding is precipitated much less romantically by Silver's unintended pregnancy.

In the film, Cay and Vivian's relationship is also implicitly compared to the heterosexual love affair between Cay's surrogate mother, Frances (Audra Lindley), and her now deceased father, Glen. The character of Frances is greatly transformed from novel to film. In the novel, she is supportive of Ann and Evelyn's relationship, whereas in the film she is a controlling, destructive mother figure who is determined to do everything she can to destroy Cay and Vivian's love affair. Frances' opposition seems founded not only on her homophobia and possessiveness, but also on her own sexual attraction to Cay, an attraction that seems to stem from Cay's resemblance to her dead father,

Glen. Frances tells Vivian that Cay strongly resembles Glen in both looks and personality. She describes her relationship with him in terms that Cay will later repeat in describing her relationship with Vivian. Frances proposes that Glen "just reached in and put a string of lights around my heart." Later, after Silver's wedding when Frances tells Cay that she just cannot accept "two women together," Cay repeats Frances's earlier phrase, applying it to her feelings for Vivian and suggesting a parallel between Frances's heterosexual romance and her lesbian one.

Not only does *Desert Hearts* place Cay and Vivian's affair within an exclusively heterosexual context, but it also presents the women's relationship as a matter of exclusionary sexual preference, never as a threat to the heterosexual relationships that surround it. In contrast, Rule's novel suggests that both Ann and Silver are bisexual, rather than exclusively homosexual or heterosexual. In the novel, Ann is said to have ended a long affair with her male employer, Bill (Darrell in the film), not because she realized that she was really attracted to women, as is the case in the film, but because she feared the exclusivity of marriage. Similarly, her clandestine lesbian relationship with Silver in the novel calls into question the exclusive and passionate nature of Silver's heterosexual union with Joe in a way that is completely absent from the film. Deitch's recasting of the sexual

relationship between Ann and Silver into a platonic friendship further indicates her determination to make the film less threatening to heterosexual norms. The film contains only vague suggestions of Silver's possible attraction to Cay. In one scene, the two women take a bubble bath together, and Silver gazes at Cay with obvious desire, but Cay does not return the look, as she will later with Vivian. The scene culminates in the two women discussing Cay's attraction, not to Silver, but to Vivian. Joe enters, and Silver turns her attention entirely to him, leaving Cay to look on with embarrassment as they proclaim their undying devotion to one another.

The film replaces Silver as Ann's bisexual lover with Gwen (Gwen Welles), a lesbian one-night stand. Teresa de Lauretis suggests that Gwen serves as a "stock character whore" adapted from the conventions of the Hollywood western. She is coded by looks, pose, makeup, and speech as the "slut" in contrast to Vivian's role as Cay's real love interest. As de Lauretis points out, "Desert Hearts does not distance this image and role or reframe them in a lesbian camp tradition or in the lesbian history of the forties and fifties, as it might have done, but only invokes a general fifties mood typical of many films of the eighties" (1991: 256). As a result, Gwen, a conventional Hollywood stereotype with whom a heterosexual audience could feel comfortable, replaces Silver, an unconventional bi-sexual character who might be potentially alienating to heterosexual viewers. The novel's presentation of

Ann's relationship with Silver posits lesbianism as existing within as well as next to heterosexual relationships, a much more subversive statement than the film's contention that the two sexual orientations co-exist harmoniously in non-threatening, mutually exclusive proximity.

The novel and film also differ in their presentation of the relationship between their lesbian lovers. In the novel, Evelyn and Ann's attraction is based primarily on their similarities rather than their differences. While there is a substantial age difference between them, they still resemble each other enough that they are sometimes mistaken for mother and daughter. They are not only remarked upon as mirror images of each other, but they also share similar literary interests. Ann is a cartoonist, not a sculptor as Cay is in the film, she has an extensive library filled with literary classics, and she writes poetry. Evelyn, the college literature professor, represents a potential intellectual mentor to Ann, whom she initially says is "as young as a student" (Rule 1985: 9). While the novel places the women's relationship in what can be described as the "transgressive space" of lesbian sameness

(Farwell 1990: 102), the film returns it to the more conventional heterosexual dimension of difference by accentuating the things that divide rather than unite the two lovers. Cay is from the west, and Vivian from the east. Cay is given to wild spontaneous physicality, while Vivian represents the sexually repressed intellectual. Cay advocates risk, luck, and adventure, and Vivian wants order, safety, and respectability. Cay is more aggressive sexually, while Vivian embodies more traditional passive femininity. These personality contrasts are not as evident in the novel as they are in the film. As Mandy Merck suggests, they represent “symbolic dichotomies” written into the film to make the lesbian relationship conform to heterosexual romantic norms by accentuating differences between the lovers rather than sameness (1993: 379).

Given Deitch’s watering down of the subversive qualities of Rule’s novel to gain crossover audience appeal and lesbian critics foregrounding of the film’s limitations, what are the attributes of the film that have for so long attracted female viewers, both lesbian and heterosexual? First, *Desert Hearts*’ positive portrayal of lesbian romance succeeds as no film had before it in reversing the overt homophobia that previously characterized representations of lesbianism in mainstream cinema. It was the first mainstream film to present a lesbian romance as sincere and loving and to refuse to use lesbianism merely as a way to show the superiority of heterosexual attachment, nor did it follow earlier films in depicting lesbianism as a regression to a childhood attachment to the mother or as merely a developmental stage leading to a more mature heterosexuality. In *Desert Hearts*, the lesbian love affair ends happily with both women transformed in positive ways by their attachment, rather than following older traditions in which lesbian lovers are ultimately punished or their love relationship is destroyed. These aspects render the film strongly affirmative of lesbianism and would seem alone to be enough to explain its popularity with lesbian viewers.

In addition, *Desert Hearts*’ gaze structure and representation of lesbian sexuality are decidedly progressive. The exchange of erotic, desiring looks between Cay and Vivian is so prominent throughout the film that it presents a distinct challenge to mainstream cinema’s dominant male gaze. The looks exchanged between the two women are never activated, complemented, and legitimized by the gaze of male characters; instead, they create an active, desiring female subjectivity independent of male control. Vivian and Cay engage in homoerotic visual interchanges that involve mutuality and

reciprocity rather than dominance and submission. Their evocation of the lesbian gaze can be said to open up to the female spectator the coupled lesbian subject position theorized by Teresa de Lauretis as characteristic of truly radical lesbian representations. Like more avant-garde lesbian films, *Desert Hearts* creates a lesbian subject position that in de Lauretis's words offers "a place from where the equivalence of look and desire – which sustains spectatorial pleasure and the very power of cinema in constructing and orienting the viewer's identification – appears invested in two women, each of whom is both the subject and object of that look/desire" (1994: 88). Rejecting mainstream norms, the film refuses to recuperate this evocation of an active, desiring female subjectivity by punishing its female characters with death or the destruction of their relationship; instead, they are rewarded with a happy ending. Cay and Vivian not only end up together, but their relationship empowers them to take the necessary risks to find new directions in their lives. Vivian accepts her love for Cay and sets out to persuade her to accompany her back East. Similarly, at the film's conclusion Cay seems about to overcome her fears and embark on a new life with Vivian that will allow her to develop her creative talents fully.

The film's presentation of lesbian sexuality is more problematic than its evocation of the lesbian look. Much of its narrative tension is sustained by the anticipation created by its long-delayed love scene. Unlike Rule's novel which contains several sexual encounters between Ann and Evelyn, the film creates emotional intensity by slowly building up to one climactic sex scene. While this strategy works effectively to involve the audience in the women's desire for one another, the centrality of the love scene seems to define lesbianism primarily by its sexual dimension. The fact that Cay, coded as the more butch character, initiates their sexual relationship by actively pursuing the reluctant, more femininely passive Vivian also preserves norms of masculine dominance and feminine submission associated with heterosexual sexuality. As Jackie Stacey describes the film's presentation of lesbian seduction, it is "painfully reminiscent of pressure or coercion," a "battle of wills" with Cay representing confidence and spontaneity and Vivian repression and denial (1995: 107). The shooting style of the scene also presents a complex mixture of progressive and regressive elements, and critics have diverged sharply in their reactions to it. The scene has been described as portraying hygienic, painfully naive, sentimental, and even reactionary lesbian sex. As Christine Holmlund points out, "it is restrained by the conventions of love scenes in the heterosexual woman's film. Lighting is never harsh. The use of close-ups and medium shots shows a

distinct preference for the caress, the kiss and the gaze over anything else. Cunnilingus is, of course, out of the question. Sex, when shown at all, is never rough, and always takes place in relatively tame and traditional places ... ” (1991: 153).

In spite of these qualities, other lesbian critics have labeled the scene “one of the hottest bed romps in recent memory” (Holmlund 1991: 160). While it begins with a pursuer/pursued situation reminiscent of representations of heterosexual sexuality, this encounter can be read as “a classic butch/femme, active/passive scenario which contemporary lesbians have come to associate with romance and sexuality between women in the 1950s” (Stacey 1995: 107). As the scene progresses, it breaks down this active/passive dichotomy and conveys the mutuality of the women’s attraction to each other. As Holmlund indicates, during its long, almost five-minute evocation of lesbian sexuality “a space for homosexual desires for and identification with characters who openly acknowledge and live their homosexuality emerges in a way that it does not in most Hollywood films” (1991: 153). It is not only as a reworking of traditional portrayals of lesbianism that *Desert Hearts* can be regarded as innovative. As noted above, it presents a lesbian relationship that leads both women to change their unsatisfactory life situations. While the empowerment resulting from the relationship remains primarily personal with the woman remaining isolated from the larger community, it does extend in significant ways out into the public sphere. Vivian not only overcomes her internalized homophobia, but also in attempting to persuade Cay to accompany her back East, she seems to have decided to fight openly against homophobic public opinion. Cay’s decision to get on the train with Vivian, at least until the next stop, suggests that their relationship will lead her to take action to alter her life as well. In any event, she seems to be beginning to understand that, as Vivian tells her, she needs “to be with someone who realizes just how wonderful you are.” It is on this note of lesbian triumph and self-affirmation that the film ends. Its conclusion is a victory for its lesbian characters not only because it is implied that they choose to be with each other, but also because their relationship seems to be leading them to greater personal development and self-fulfillment.

While this strategy of spectatorial engagement may fail, as de Lauretis suggests, to cast light on the specific differences that constitute lesbianism, it may make it more likely that the film’s image of a desiring female subjectivity will be taken up not just by lesbian, but by all female viewers. Homosexual and heterosexual female spectators alike are offered the

“coupled lesbian subject position” that the film creates, and they are granted the “discursive consent” to adopt it. They can identify with the film’s female characters as both desiring subjects and desirable objects of the female gaze that is so openly portrayed. Then, they can retreat, if they wish, to seeing the film, as Deitch describes it, as “just a love story, like any love story between a man and a woman” (“Desert Hearts Production Notes” 1985: 1). The film also offers its lesbian spectators identification through the character of Cay with a primal scene of lesbian desire. As Teresa de Lauretis describes this scenario, it presents a restaging of the lesbian original fantasy, the “mise-en-scene of lesbian desire” as a drama of “the loss and recovery of a fantasmatic female body” – not the mother’s body but the subject’s herself (de Lauretis 1994: 265). Lesbian psycho-sexual development for de Lauretis is distinctly different from hetero- sexual female development in that the loss of the pre-Oedipal mother is redoubled by the loss of the female body, a narcissistic wound that acts as a fantasy of castration threatening the subject with a loss of body-ego, a lack of being itself. As a result of a maternal failure to validate the subject’s body- image, the lesbian subject through disavowal displaces the wish for the missing female body into a yearning toward other women (de Lauretis 1994: 263). Unlike traditional psychoanalytic accounts which associate lesbianism with an enduring, active phallic attachment to the mother, de Lauretis’s theory of the original lesbian fantasy has less to do with the recovery of the lost mother than with the loss and recovery of the female body, of the subject’s own body image.

Through Cay’s relationship with Frances, *Desert Hearts* enacts just such a scenario. Frances tells Vivian that Cay was rejected by her real mother and that she took her in, acting as a mother substitute. As we have seen, however, Frances’s strong attachment to Cay stems not so much from her affection for Cay herself, but from Cay’s resemblance to her dead father. Thus, Frances’s surrogate mothering redoubles Cay’s loss of her real mother. Like the mother who rejected her, Frances rejects Cay’s female body image and replaces it with Cay’s father. By loving Cay for herself, Vivian recovers for her, not her lost mother, but her own body-ego, her sense of self. Indeed, the nurturing aspects of their relationship, with Vivian both desiring Cay physically and offering her the intellectual companionship she needs to develop her talents, completes this “mise-en-scène of lesbian desire.” As a result, the film is able to offer its lesbian spectator a means of engaging with the text through this restaging of a lesbian primal scene as well as through the formation of a nurturing lesbian relationship. As Vivian and Cay are shown to experience rebirth through their attachment to each

other, the lesbian viewer is encouraged to aspire to the same therapeutic sense of self-discovery. The love relationship between the two women is not a refuge from the world, but a way into it. Vivian finds herself sexually, and Cay artistically. The viewer, nurtured by the film, as the women are by each other, is encouraged to do the same, to take the risk to find her real identity, to express her desiring subjectivity, to achieve a sense of positive self-esteem, and to reach her goals and ambitions, whatever they may be.

The intended effect is perhaps best summed up by Deitch, who inserts herself in the film for a brief, but important, cameo as an anonymous woman identified in the credits only as the “Hungarian gambler.” Having won a jackpot at one of the casino slot machines, she is asked by Cay if she wants to play it off. She then announces the film’s central theme: “If you don’t play, you can’t win.” It is this risk-taking subject position that the film offers to its female spectators, irrespective of their sexual orientation. The popularity of *Desert Hearts* in spite of its reduction of the subversive potential found in Rule’s novel may rest ultimately on its strong sense of female affirmation. In spite of its flaws, it offers its viewers, both lesbian and heterosexual alike, through its representation of female connection as a means of personal development, much to attract them, and as such its popularity is not so difficult to understand.