

Rose Troche: I worked at a movie theater from the time I was 15, to 21, and in that time, Personal Best and Making Love were both playing at the theater. And I was just like, everybody's coming to this theater's gay, 'cause both of these movies are gay. I think everybody that I was serving popcorn to, was just very fascinated [00:00:30] by, you know, who are you, like what's your story? I decided to make Go Fish, about the lesbian identity. And it was around the same time, that I wanted to become a film maker, that I was discovering this alternate sexuality.

Speaker 2: What made you take the plunge when you first saw me?

Speaker 3: I was drunk.

Speaker 2: No, you were not.

Rose Troche: And they sort of went hand in hand. Their hands have never stopped handing and handing, which brings me to this documentary, [00:01:00] and being an old gay.

Speaker 4: Yeah, see you later.

Ally Sheedy: See you.

Speaker 6: When it's time for love making, Dan kisses Sue, and touches her breasts. Women often find this sensation ...

B. Ruby Rich: [00:01:30] When I was very young, I don't think I ever saw any lesbians in film, or popular culture, only in books. And even [00:02:00] coming of age later, in college, post college, the examples were really much more from literature, than they were from film. It was all about Gertrude Stein and Alice B Toklas, Djuna Barnes and Nightwood, Renee Vivian. It was this kind of world of Paris or London. It was Virginia Woolf, and Vita Sackville-West. It was all of these fancy ladies, really, but it was about freeing yourself in the world, through [00:02:30] literature. Film came much, much later.

Kay Turner: I think the thing about movies in that era, it was so much a part of teenage life. I did have my first girlfriend successfully, in high school. I was also dating a young man at the time. I would go to the movies with my boyfriend, but then there were movies that I wanted to go just with Carlene, because they would be the movies that would sort [00:03:00] of signal something about us.

Speaker 53: Look at yourself, you pathetic old bat. You don't seriously imagine that you're in a young girl's dream of bliss, do you?

Kay Turner: We did go to see the Killing of Sister George, and it was horrifying. That was certainly an experience of kind of coming into contact with an idea of lesbianism as being very foreboding, very disturbing, [00:03:30] very painful, full of

rejection, and agony, and ultimately of death, of death. And we got in her car, after going to The Killing of Sister George, and just freaked out.

Lesli K: In Hollywood movies, there was never a potential for a happy ending, there was always some tree that was gonna fall on some lesbian at the end of the movie, no matter what. That's kind of what [00:04:00] happens to lesbians in movies.

Sarah Shulman: There was this thing called Million Dollar Movie, that was on our black and white TV at 4:30. The fact that she killed herself was irrelevant to me, and the thing I remember is the confession scene, where Shirley McClain says to Audrey Hepburn, what they say is true, I do love you.

Shirley McClain: Listen [00:04:30] to me, I have loved you the way they said. There's always been something wrong.

Sarah Shulman: Because you learn how to pull the crumbs from these films.

Kay Turner: In a world where lesbianism is not part of the culture yet, this is right before Stonewall, the culture is shifting dramatically, toward these moments, when liberation is just gonna bust through.

Barbara Hammer: [00:05:00] I didn't know what the world "lesbian" meant, until I was 30. And a neighbor thought that I might be a lesbian. I went, well, what's that? She said, well you're always wearing jeans. I said, we live in the country. I ride a horse. I built my house, with my own hands, with my husband at the time. [00:05:30] Come on. It was really in the 50s, when I was in high school. I was very socially trained. And I think that's one of the reasons why it broke out. I was in a film history class, and no films directed by women were shown, and we were towards the end of the semester. Finally, [00:06:00] one short, 15 minute film, came on the screen, black and white. I knew it was made by a woman. It was Meshes of the Afternoon, by Maya Deren, who is bisexual, so Maya Deren changed my life, patriarchal control of film history changed my life, and my own energetic quest for what is my calling. I thought there is definitely a need for [00:06:30] my cinema, I am going forward with this.

When I started 16mm film, I was coming out. And it seemed like, if we're experimenting with our lives, and the way we're gonna live, that our film or art form should also be experimental. Dyketactics, 1974, was my third experimental [00:07:00] 16mm film. I made this film all by myself, staying up one night, editing. Nobody had seen it. And I was so afraid to show that at film finals. And it came on the screen, it looked great. A, B, C, D roll, so many multiple layers of images. So I was way at the back of the auditorium, and then the professors, which were all men, came running up the aisle. I go, oh my god, I'm gonna get kicked out of school, [00:07:30] and they congratulated me.

Sarah Shulman: She's the first person to do this. I mean, there's earlier cinema, if you are generous with your definitions, but Barbara Hammer is the real pioneer. She was making films in a time where lesbians were defined in a relationship to men, so either you hated men, or you wanted to be a man. But without men, you couldn't exist. [00:08:00] And Barbara insisted on lesbian existence.

Barbara Hammer: I was experiencing the world in a different way. Touching a woman, making love with a woman, had to be shown on screen. If it changed my life, it might change other's lives, and this hadn't been show.

Rachel Reichman: I think, before the word "queer" was even in the vernacular, the idea of outsidersness had a huge resonance for me.

Kay Turner: Normalization really needs marginalization, in order to progress.

Rachel Reichman: [00:08:30] It really had to do with identifying with the counter-voice.

Kay Turner: Queerness is always trying to cross over. One of the old English verbs associated with queerness is quar, to cross the bow, to draw water on the opposite side.

Sarah Shulman: Lesbian culture of the 70s comes out of the simultaneous explosions of feminism, and gay liberation. It's extremely [00:09:00] underground, because the dominant culture has no interest in it, so it's actually allowed to thrive, in enormous diversity. It had to do with way of life, how you were gonna live your life, who you were gonna live it with, how you understood yourself, and really overcoming the negative category imposed on my generation, and the generation before me.

B. Ruby Rich: I think that, for a lot of years, filmmaking went hand in hand with activism. There [00:09:30] really was a sense in which we're all trying to make a new world, and the start of the 80s, Lizzie Borden makes Born in Flames.

Carrie Moyer: Love Born in Flames. Born in Flames was one of the movies that made me want to be an activist. It's like, this is what having a sort of utopian idea about the world is.

Speaker 16: [inaudible 00:10:01] [00:10:00] Norris, 24. She seems to be the founder of the woman's army.

Speaker 17: Homosexual?

Speaker 16: Yes. Women's army appears to be dominated by blacks and lesbians.

Honey: Good evening, this is Honey, coming directly to you from Phoenix Radio.

Sarah Shulman: I know probably everyone who was in that film.

Honey: The station dedicated not only for the liberation of women, but a station dedicated to sound off and defend all women.

Sarah Shulman: All these films are made by community.

Rachel Reichman: I really liked the work that was about [00:10:30] the intersection of gender. I was really keen on femi boys, and butch girls, much more of interest to me. And I think that was because of my own identity. I really knew that power lay, in some kind of mix of masculine and feminine. European cinema was much more inclined to delve into complex relationship between individuals, and sexuality. The work of Chantal Akerman was [00:11:00] extremely interesting, and Je, Tu, Il, Elle, which was from the 70s, the protagonist never explains herself, never stakes out and identity, and her relationships are complicated, both with men and with women. And it has that extraordinarily long sex scene between these two women. It's just really foundational, I think, in lesbian cinema, in all cinema really.

I don't find it hyper erotic. It takes [00:11:30] you into what real sexuality is, I think, and that's, as a rule, not what movies are for. Movies are for condensing and economizing and wowing you, with the kind of peak moments, so to speak, and that is a scene which doesn't do that. It lets life unfold, certainly sex unfold, which allowed you to contemplate your own feelings, while you're witnessing the feelings of your characters.

Su Friedrich: There's [00:12:00] some sort of festival of short films. I don't this it was called Lesbian Films. This was like, would have been 1972, so who knows what it was, but I went, and there was film by Coni Beeson, I think, called Holding, or Touching, or something, and it was like a lesbian short, that was kind of erotic. And that was like ... that was an intense first experience for me. And then, when I came to New York, [00:12:30] and there was the Bleecker Street Cinema, and the Thalia, and all the great reparatory cinema houses, and the Millennium, and the Collective, I started seeing the kinds of films that I would say were the ones that made me want to be a film maker.

When people ask me about my films, I've often talked about making films as a way of confronting fear. I always felt like, you know, I need to talk about the things that I know about, that I haven't quite heard being spoken about, and [00:13:00] for me, a lot of them were things that were scary, and so I needed to talk about the fear that one feels, not only in the experience, but also in articulating the experience.

After college, I moved back to New York, and I joined a collective that did political posters, and most of the women in the collective were lesbians. And one day, this woman said, are you a lesbian? And I got really freaked out and said, I [00:13:30] didn't know, but in the mean time, I was falling in love with Amy, this first girlfriend of mine, who was in the collective also. I was very much

in the experimental film world. I was seeing lots of films that were very challenging intellectually, and aesthetically. And I was very excited by that.

I started recording my dreams, and I think I wanted to get at some [00:14:00] things that were strange in dreams, or surprising, but also very much to play around with this formal question, about what happens if I put the text on the screen, what happens for the viewer, if they have to read it, instead of hearing it.

I made a film that [00:14:30] I thought was completely weird, and that only a few lesbians, white american lesbians, who dream like this, would identify with. The first time I showed it was at the Millennium, and afterwards, this man came up to me, he's Scottish, and he's straight, and he said, I loved that film, because I totally identified with it. I have the exact same dreams. It was [00:15:00] just this understanding, that you can never know who your audience is, you can never know what kind of response you're going to get, and you can not make work based on some notion of who that is. You just have to speak in your own voice, and let the chips fall where they may.

In 1984, I was living in Berlin, really drunk one night, and I said, I'm gonna make a film about a girl who falls in love with a [00:15:30] woman, and I started laughing hysterically. And I woke up the next morning, and I thought, I am actually. There I was in Germany, filled with Catholic imagery, so I started thinking about this lesbian nun movie. I didn't want it to be a sad ending. I didn't want it to be that she pines after this gorgeous woman, and then the woman laughs in her face, and then she jumps off the bell tower of the church. No, I want her to come to terms [00:16:00] with her feelings, and jump into bed with this woman.

And one of the first places it showed, was at the Flaherty Film Seminar, and a woman raised her hand and said, it's not yet the time when we can show women on [00:16:30] screen in this way, like there will be a time when somebody can get naked and roll around with somebody, but not yet. This was the years of the male gaze, and so there was great discussion about, well when, how are women going to show women?

Rachel Reichman: Laura Mulvey is a fantastic film scholar, and what I always understood the male gaze to be, was we're all looking through the eyes of men, because men dominated the film psychologically, [00:17:00] what we were all embracing, or all perceiving, was something from a male ideology, a male status, and a male perspective, in every way, sexuality.

Speaker 20: You know you'll always be safe, as long as you're with me.

B. Ruby Rich: Lesbians and vampires, that was the one place where you could find lesbian pleasure on screen. I really [00:17:30] wonder where this association with

lesbian and the vampire came from. I know that the vampire itself dates back to anxieties about blood, as in bloodlines. It actually has roots in anti-Semitism, and is kind of a pre-Nazi formulation of the danger of Jewish blood, so I would guess that the lesbian vampire has a similar kind of connotation, that that's a different version of vagina dentata, but that, once again, it's around masculine [00:18:00] fears of the female, and of female desire, and of harm of being consumed by the female.

But, of course, for women were not necessarily worried about being consumed by the female, so it became this wonderfully available, tantalizing myth. I think that once we had films like *The Hunger*, that really was allowed to develop. I mean, that was [00:18:30] on a loop in every lesbian bar, in the 1980s. You knew that those selected scenes from *The Hunger* were going to be playing over and over and over.

In fact, [00:19:00] Rose Troche used to talk about being driven to make *Go Fish*, because she and Guin couldn't stand watching *The Hunger* one more time at their local bar.

Speaker 21: Don't say so much, you ruin everything. The girl you're gonna meet doesn't look like anyone you know, and when you meet her, your toes might tingle, or you might suppress a yawn. It's hard to say.

Rose Troche: It's about two women who want girlfriends, and the friends who see the possibility of the two of them getting together.

Guinevere T: Primarily, we want a film that is happy. We're sick of being depressed when we [00:19:30] see gay films, and lesbian films, so we want a film that ... the kind of film that we would want to go and see.

Rose Troche: Guinevere and I met in ACT UP. We were in ACT UP and Queer Nation together, 'cause a lot of the people who worked on *Go Fish* are all people that I met through activism. *Go Fish* had to do with a moment in time. We're looking at the gay community being decimated by AIDs, so there's a bunch of anger, and the anger turned into a beautiful engine, and the engine just got us. We wanted to be ourselves, our lives, we want something authentic, we don't want someone to die, [00:20:00] was really about making something that was sweet, and like a love story. We really were making the film for lesbian visibility, and I was like, it'll do the gay circuit, and then it got into Sundance.

Speaker 23: When Lana Redford started the Sundance Film Institute back in 1981, the objective was to encourage variety in American cinema. And over the years, queer films have played a big role in the festival. 1994 is no exception, in terms of queer representation. We talked to a number of film makers who are doing premieres here [00:20:30] this week, as well as organizers, about where they feel queer cinema fits in the independent film movement.

- Speaker 24: Go Fish, definitely, which is a lesbian film, which has created the biggest buzz from almost any film so far, in competition, and it actually got picked up for distribution by the Samuel Goldwyn Company.
- Rose Troche: Being gay at that time meant having to fight, and I had a lot of fight in me, because of the way I had grown up, of already being Puerto Rican, and already being treated like an outsider. [00:21:00] My parents are both Puerto Rican from the island, and I think that they were really looking at homosexuality as impeding upon a larger plan of success in your life. And this is gonna really get in the way of that. My brother's coming out was very fraught. He got kicked out when he was 17. The whole family was there, and it was like an exorcism. He just like, got a suitcase and left. I moved out. Within six months I was coming out. I met my first girlfriend, and we would go to [00:21:30] the gay bars. I would go to this club called Club LaRay, like really grew up in church, and it really became kind of a church. It was almost all people of color, being men, women, everybody in between. It was so dark on the dance floor. The music is pumping through you. That was really my entry point, and then activism, very quickly, came in. Everything was about us being out on the street, [00:22:00] and marching, trying to get the needle to move just a little bit, for changed in health care, and we were all very, very involved in that. And that's where I found my righteous and hardcore community.
- Janet Baus: I was always very drawn towards political activism, and I just loved the community. I went to all the lesbian music festivals, I went to all the lesbian bars, I had a motor cycle, but I was still dating men. And then finally, I turned 30, and I met this woman, and it was everything. I was in love, it was sexual, it [00:22:30] was everything. I was video taping, and she thought that was really hot, so ... video works that way. So then I was like an evangelist, and so, when The Lesbian Avengers came along, it really sparked something in me. First we made a short film, called Lesbian Avengers Eat Fire, that was specifically to go around the world, just for people to start their own groups, and that was actually when we got the idea to do the full length, that's why we called it Lesbian Avengers Eat Fire Too, because even though that has a double entendre, it was the second [00:23:00] one, and that one wasn't really a documentary in a traditional sense, it was more of a political manifesto.
- Su Friedrich: Suddenly, there was this group, that was so out there. The first action was mind blowing.
- Sarah Shulman: The public school system was trying to update the curriculum to include gay content, so there was a very conservative district in Queens, where they were banning the rainbow curriculum from school.
- Carrie Moyer: And the thing that people for crazy [00:23:30] and stuck on, was this book called Heather Has Two Mommies, which is about a child who has lesbian parents.

Every time women or lesbians try to be visible, there was some crazy brew ha ha about it.

Sarah Shulman: Our first action was on the first day of school. We had an all women's marching band, and we marched up to the gate of the school in Middle Village, Queens, [00:24:00] and we handed out balloons to the kids, as they went to the school, and each of the balloons said, ask about lesbians.

Janet Baus: The group was so creative, and the idea to put Gertrude Stein's lover, Alice B Toklas, with her, at her statue, I just thought was brilliant.

Carrie Moyer: Many of the people in the group were artists, so there was a lot of invention going on, in terms of how activism was done, what it would look [00:24:30] like. It wasn't just a march with some signs or a banner, it was an intervention, it was a shrine.

Su Friedrich: There was a lot of debate about the first dyke march. Many of us in the group had been at the earliest gay pride marches, back in the mid-70s, so there was this loyalty, and this love of what that represented, but there was a feeling [00:25:00] that we needed to make ourselves utterly visible. And so, there needed to be a dyke march, so there was debate, it was agreed on, and then it happened, and it was fantastic.

Speaker 26: I'm Dita Berry, from Tampa, Florida, with Tampa Bay ACT UP. I'm a lesbian with HIV, and I'm a pissed off dyke, and I want my rights back.

Speaker 27: We're moving up, quickly, fastly, and in a hurry, so get out our way.

Speaker 26: We [00:25:30] had bustiers and capes, and everybody just did it up. It did grab something so immediate, at the time. [00:26:00] People seen that [inaudible 00:26:02] all over the world, and that's one thing that's great, if it lives on in film, it can live forever.

B. Ruby Rich: The nature of the AIDs epidemic changes in the 90s, because AIDs switches from being fatal to being chronic, and that's an enormous, enormous change. Clinton/Gore elected, this is after 12 years of Reagan and Bush, so there was definitely less of a sense of hopelessness. There's beginning [00:26:30] to be a right to pleasure again, after a long time of just suffering. And I think that, in a way, the New Queer Cinema came along in the 90s, because people could finally take a breath, and being to make sense of a decade of panic and emergency and suffering. And people needed sustenance. We needed culture. We needed cultural expressions of grieving and of beauty, to get us through, and to get us help, in figuring out how to remake our lives.

[00:27:00] I was writing one last time for The Village Voice, about what I saw happening in 1991, 1992. In 1991, at Sundance, the two grand prizes went to



Poison and Paris is Burning. Well, the next year, I was at Toronto, came out of seeing Edward II, came out of seeing Isaac Julien's Young Soul Rebels. The article appeared [00:27:30] in the Village Voice, announcing a new moment in film, and I think it was called something like, A Queer Sensation, and then it was republished in Sight and Sound, and we were looking for a snappier heading, and we came up with New Queer Cinema. The problem, though, was there weren't lesbian films. The very first year of what became New Queer Cinema, was all men, but those films did come.

Jenni Olson: When Go Fish premiered [00:28:00] at Sundance, seeing that film was like, oh, these are my people. This isn't lesbians in the 1950s, in Reno. In terms of contemporary lesbian film, it was the sense of we have arrived.

B. Ruby Rich: Two Girls in Love really took on the sort of earlier James Dean kind of fantasy, about the rugged woman down at the gas station, who is just irresistible, and it does a whole [00:28:30] cross class thing, cross race thing. It's almost like an after school special. It's a very wholesome falling in love movie. What's the saying? Love wins? It's very much an early version of that, and quite delightful, and I think, also, goes down easy, and if I'd been a teenage girl, I would have loved to have seen that film.

Lesli K: I love High Art.

Carrie Moyer: Love High Art.

Desiree Akhavan: I love High Art.

Carrie Moyer: It's fucking brilliant.

Vicky Du: Yeah, High [00:29:00] Art is really good.

B. Ruby Rich: It was a film that captured a certain version of New York, that never gets shown, the disillusionment, the cynicism, the shredded careers, the scheming woman who is gonna steal someone else's girlfriend away, for her own career advancement. I love that it was this kind of unvarnished look at the seedy side of lesbian life, and was sexy as hell. And I loved that the moment had come in film making, when instead of [00:29:30] actors being afraid to play a gay role, because it would ruin their career, suddenly we're in this moment where Ally Sheedy could revive her career, by playing a lesbian junkie.

Desiree Akhavan: When I was coming out, the only thing that could give me comfort was watching gay films, and High Art was so powerful to me. I needed to see my desire on screen, and to not feel like such a fucking freak of nature.

Cheryl Dunye: We wanted [00:30:00] to make work that allowed people to see themselves on the screen. I was obsessed with any lesbian content, as most lesbians are. There

was nothing about black lesbians in that realm, so I decided to make the feature.

- Yvonne Welbon: It was so rich. The many different ways she unpacking being black, being queer, how black women's images were addressed historically. Some people didn't realize it was fiction.
- Cheryl Dunye: I loved film history, so I started to look in black [00:30:30] film history, for a queer person, or a lesbian, and there was none, and I knew there had to be one. I looked in the queer film histories that were coming out, these anthologies, and there was no black people, so I said, okay, I'll just make her up.
- Speaker 33: Her name, the Watermelon Woman, that's right, Watermelon Woman. Is Watermelon Woman her first name, her last name, or is it her whole name? I don't know, but girlfriend has it going on.
- Cheryl Dunye: And we wanted to buy an archive, [00:31:00] to use as photographs for her life, that Cheryl the character would find, and we couldn't afford it, so that's when the collaboration with Zoe Leonard started to make 81 pictures. These are photos of the Watermelon Woman, Fae Richards.
- Sarah Shulman: The scene that I'm in, when I got there, there was no script, so it was an improv. Excuse me, you do not have permission to photograph this, this is confidential. This is a safe space.
- Yvonne Welbon: [00:31:30] It was really important for there to be a feature film. She had a lot of support in the community, because she was going to be the first.
- B. Ruby Rich: But I'm a Cheerleader influenced a lot of people. I've heard a lot of younger directors and stars talk about being influenced by that film. Lesbian films aren't known for their humor, necessarily, but But I'm a Cheerleader really sent up a lot of misconceptions, specifically the sole question of being scared straight.
- Natasha Lyonne: What's [00:32:00] going on?
- Ru Paul: Hi Megan, my name is Mike. Your parents and your friends want to have a conversation with you. I'm here to help facilitate that dialog.
- Rachel Reichman: I wanted to make a work about a character really struggling with building an identity. What is it to matter? Can we build an inner life, by having a love affair with the strongest person we [00:32:30] know? Being Out in the Woods is kind of this fantastic universe, where we can all kind of leave the constraints of culture. They get to define their universe as this cozy little blanket on the ground.
- Speaker 37: Excuse me, ladies, [00:33:00] why don't we like all hang out and really party?

Rachel Reichman: So, in terms of these two guys showing up, Jenny is much more angry and upset.

Speaker 37: I know, you ain't never seen a couple of real men. That's okay. What's the matter? You don't like guys? [inaudible 00:33:24] fucking queers?

Rachel Reichman: And part of this is because I think that June is much more accepting of herself, [00:33:30] and also has probably encountered this kind of thing.

Speaker 38: You okay?

Rachel Reichman: Jenny, on the other hand, has probably never, in her entire life, encountered homophobia like that. I think she's nowhere near ready to accept the fight, to be accepted on her own terms, as a lesbian in the world. And this is the first bitter taste of that.

Yvonne Welbon: The 90s was the golden age of lesbian media making. And part of [00:34:00] it is because technology was changing. We were all getting these tools in our hands. Think about it as someone decided they wanted to be an artist, and they were gonna use the screen as their palette.

Rose Troche: I was in school at the time, and my work was very experimental, and I felt very hardcore about film needs to be experimental, it should never be a narrative, it should be ... it truly exists as an art form in this way. We were like, you know, dying our own film, [00:34:30] processing our own film, like burning it, scratching it.

Sarah Shulman: Conventional narrative was the structure of heterosexual life, so it was romance, marriage, motherhood, or, for men, romance, war, marriage, fatherhood. But queer people, at the time, were not living in those paradigms. So experimental film was a more accurate representation of, not just the emotional lives of queer people, but the actual, literal trajectories of our lives.

Cheryl Dunye: I was a video artist, so I was playing around with form, [00:35:00] merging documentary and fiction. We were baby dykes at this point.

Yvonne Welbon: And then, people just wanted to start making a living as a filmmaker. First you're experimenting, you're loving, and you're like, well, how do I make this a sustainable career? So people started moving to making feature films. Your version of a Hollywood movie, instead of experimenting and breaking out of the form. The films became products, instead of art.

Rose Troche: It is a machine. It is a business, and I think that our little idealistic [00:35:30] minds got into it for other things. We live in a capitalist society. It's about wanting to be seen in this culture, and that means being sold to. Lesbians have not done well in that regard. It's because women don't make as much money.

Jenni Olson: In the 2000s, I think we see more larger releases, even like studio films, that have greater financial resources and production quality. Mostly, I think that's a good thing. *The Hours* is a film that manages to be [00:36:00] a queer film, and it transcends that label. And it's so amazing to see a film that is a big budget movie, with movie stars in it, making out. Then you have great American independents, like *Saving Face*, Alex Woo's debut feature, that premiered at Sundance. I think possibly, my favorite movie of all time, Angela Robinson's [00:36:30] *D.E.B.S.*, also came out in the mid-2000s. It's so fun and clever and smart and sweet and romantic.

Speaker 39: Come with me. Come on, what do you have to lose?

Speaker 40: Everything.

Jenni Olson: And like, it's such a movie, and I just love that, and I [00:37:00] love her.

Desiree Akhavan: There is something incredibly comforting, that I don't even have words for, to describe how I felt, even watching the fucking *L Word*, when I was like, everything about this is just confirming the most base desires I have in this moment, and the love that I feel in this moment, and I needed it.

Rose Troche: For anybody's who's gay, who has done work that's gay, unfortunately your agent will still have a talk with you about, you really want to do the gay [00:37:30] thing again, 'cause you're starting to get a reputation. And what I found in my entire career, is that it's alright to have that reputation. That's been my best audience. Interesting with *The L Word*, there's a certain level of realness, of the real image of the lesbian being sort of pushed away, to have these sort of affluent, well dressed, well appointed lesbians take over, and everybody really loved that, because they're just like, see, we are beautiful, and we are in charge. [00:38:00] And I've been really fortunate in my career, to have someone come up to you and say like, I sat down and watched *The L Word* with my mom, then I came out, and it made it a little bit easier. That is amazing. That's a beautiful thing. And I guess that's why I make work, to try to have those moments.

Cheryl Dunye: I made *The Watermelon Woman*, and my partner at the time, Alex, got a job at the Claremont Colleges. I had nothing to do at Pitzer, but I wanted to do my next big project, which is have my kid, Simone, [00:38:30] and I started thinking about mothering and motherhood, what motherhood looks like when you're not the birth parent. And my partner at the time, Alex, say wait, I'm black, and Simone's mixed race, and so *Stranger Inside* really came from that pool of ideas. It sort of struck upon a novel about a mother, Harriet Jacob's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, which is a slave narrative, which is about a mother having to escape slavery, by locking herself in an attic for 10 years. So I said this is sort [00:39:00] of like prison, but let me flip the narrative, and instead of a mother in prison, let me talk about a daughter in prison, looking for her mother.

I wrote the script. I took it and work shopped it with real inmates, who were like, this story is great, but you got this wrong or that wrong. And then was able to run into this guy name Jim McKay, who worked at a company with his friend, Michael Stipe, and they knew somebody who was starting HBO Independent Films, and so it just all lined [00:39:30] up where we were able to walk in with the script, pitch it to HBO, and became the first HBO Independent Film. We were given two million dollars, three million dollars, to make the film, and I wanted to make it the way that I wanted. So I wanted all women, all queers, or all people of color, as my keys. All women cast, except a few guards. It was a project of my mastery at that point, and it felt great. It was the first time I didn't have to fight for [00:40:00] what I wanted to make.

Yoruba Richen: I remember going to see Desert Hearts, must have been like sixth grade. I sat in the movie theater, and saw it by myself. Seeing adults and seeing people who were like me, in films, was, for my young self, really revolutionary. [00:40:30] I think that was probably the first lesbian movie I saw. When I graduated college, I moved out to San Francisco, and I was trying to figure out what I wanted to do. I'd always loved documentary, but now, with the technology, it seemed that it was something that was more accessible. [00:41:00] It was just one of those ah-ha moments. We were editing one time, and this organization called Artists Television Access, ATA, is like, you know, weekend, and it was like dark and dank, and I was like, oh my god, I love this. This is how I can meld being creative, telling a story, research, talking to people, and really trying to say something, and that was kind of the beginning.

I was finishing Promised [00:41:30] Land, my first film, and the 2008 election happened. Barack Obama was elected president, and proposition eight, which banned gay marriage in the state passed. It was this huge moment for civil rights, and then this huge defeat for the LGBT community. And pretty immediately, the narrative became that black people were to blame. Blatant racism came out, and latent homophobia came out.

Yvonne Welbon: Said more black voters came out, and therefore it [00:42:00] was their fault, that this happened. But the reality is, blacks make up like seven percent of the state of California. There's absolutely no way.

Yoruba Richen: And I wanted to look at how it was these two groups were being pitted against each other, how we got to this political moment. Black LGBT voices were so absent from the conversation, so I really felt like I was the person to do the story.

Speaker 42: Let's be clear, this is the unfinished business [00:42:30] of black people being free.

Yoruba Richen: There was an effort, at least during the Maryland vote, that black people talk to black people about this. That's going to be where change is going to happen.

Speaker 43: I ain't voting on that gay shit, though.

Speaker 44: Okay, why, what's up?

Speaker 43: I ain't with that.

Yoruba Richen: With President Obama as a leader, who really came out for marriage equality, [00:43:00] and for LGBT rights, forcefully, I think it opened the door in the black community, in a way that wasn't there before.

Barack Obama: Our journey is not complete until our gay brothers and sisters are treated like anyone else under the law, for if we are truly created equal, then surely the love we commit to one another, must be equal as well.

Yoruba Richen: Gay marriage is more than just about marriage, it's kind of like a metaphor for equality. [00:43:30] I think that's what it became.

Su Friedrich: Of course gay people should get married like straight people can get married, but dontcha know. Once you give people the right to do whatever it is they want to do, you can not predict that a gay person is going to stay in the East Village, and hang out at the bar. No, they're gonna move to Westchester, and get a Labrador, and have three kids.

Janet Baus: Oh, The Kids are Alright, it was my life, because [00:44:00] I had a kid with a donor, that the kid becomes old enough to contact the father. I feel like I'm gonna be facing those questions. That was a very complicated film.

Jenni Olson: From a storytelling perspective, in a story, you have to have dramatic tension, so yeah, she sleeps with the guy. The scene at the end, where Julianne Moore apologizes to Annette Benning, to me, that kind of redeemed the whole thing. The burden of representation on a filmmaker [00:44:30] is huge, when there are so few films a year that get larger release, but it's not their job to make us happy, it's their job to be artists, and to actually, hopefully, do complicated things, and tell complicated stories.

Rachel Reichman: I think Lisa Cholodenko's work is fantastic, in terms of the visibility. The fact that she was able to make work that went all the way to the Oscars, is just extraordinary. It's powerful in terms of culture, it's powerful in terms of art, [00:45:00] it's powerful in terms of social change.

B. Ruby Rich: We need lesbian film makers still, whether they're avant garde filmmakers, or mainstream filmmakers, whether they're American or whether they're from some other country, Latin America, Asia, Europe.

Desiree Akhavan: I had never heard of a gay Iranian person, before I came out. I felt like I was coming out as a leprechaun. Being openly gay there is punishable by death, so I

have no solid proof that I would be in trouble. [00:45:30] But because of the work I make, it's not safe. So, since I made *Appropriate Behavior*, even *The Slope*, I have not felt safe going back. When I was a kid, I had never heard of Iran outside the context of my own family, and the only time I'd ever seen it reflected to me, was that film *Not Without My Daughter*, which is like really terrifying. It's like a very upsetting depiction of Alfred Molina as an Iranian man, who kidnaps his family, and forces [00:46:00] them to live in Tehran. And he's just like, just come for the summertime, we go, we have good time in summer. And then he's like, you're staying forever. And Sally Field is like, no.

Alfred Molina: I know it's the right decision, if you just give it a chance.

Sally Field: No, I won't stay here. You can't keep-

Alfred Molina: Now you listen to me, you're in my county now, you're my wife. You do as I say, you understand me?

Desiree Akhavan: It's really upsetting. I remember being like, daddy, I started thinking, oh my god, they're speaking my language, and everybody looks like my family, but they're [00:46:30] all like, like women hating beaters, so that wasn't great. I'm not saying that film is responsible for my low self esteem, I'm just saying that, when you have so few representations, they hold a lot of weight. Iranians are the villains, and the gays are the joke. That's the narrative that sticks to you, and it's how you start to see yourself. But at the same time, it's how the world starts to see you.

I made this one friend, [00:47:00] who was like, if you come with me to this class at Mount Holyoke, 'cause we were in the Five College Systems, she was like, let's go to this other college class, it's history of film, world cinema. But if you come with me, so I'm not alone on the ride, I will smoke you out before we go, at like 8:00 AM. It was like way too early to get stoned, but I really wanted the free weed, so I went with her to the class, and I fell in love. It was really like romantic love. I started watching these films, [00:47:30] and suddenly I was like, oh my god, this is the language I should be speaking. It changed everything, and I focused all my energy into this. For a film to matter, it needs to have some urgency, and a reason to be told.

Shirin.

Rebecca H: Maxine.

Vicky Du: I really like *Appropriate Behavior*. I feel like my favorite moment was at the end, when Desiree Akhavan's character comes [00:48:00] out to her mom.

Desiree Akhavan: Mom, I'm a little bit gay.

Speaker 34: No [fopreign language 00:48:11].

Desiree Akhavan: Yes, I am, and I was in love with Maxine.

Speaker 34: Ssh.

Vicky Du: It's a really quiet scene. I think the mom ignores her, but still Desiree Akhavan's character still feels strong, [00:48:30] or that she accomplished something, even just by telling, even if she was ignored. That's what makes that movie uniquely lesbian, and also hits at the emotional core of that struggle. I feel like mother/daughters specifically have a conflict, when it comes to lesbians. There's something self conscious about it.

Desiree Akhavan: We are bonded through this experience of having to doubt ourselves, and go through whatever that was, whether it was positive [00:49:00] or negative, whether your mom instantly joined PFLAG or not. You had to have an uncomfortable conversation, and that's a process, and it does something to you, and I think that binds me to all other queer people. Everybody has a great coming out story.

Vicky Du: I came out to my mom before senior year of college. I was just kind of like, this just feels like I've lied too much. She was fine with it during the call, [00:49:30] but she said something later like, you know, Vicky, you were smart, pretty, and had a good personality. You could have found a good husband. I think, in my mind, I was kind of like, I'm gay already, so like, I can just do whatever I want now. I've completely disappointed you. I've completely shattered your expectations of who I am, so now I can do anything I want, and actually it was like ultimate freedom. I started loving films, because of the Netflix DVDs, specifically the on demand, there's [00:50:00] like the gay and lesbian section. I got really into it around high school. I probably watched every single title. Just at night, would watch two or three, like a night, every night. Then you start getting in to the films that are like really bad, like borderline unwatchable, and they were still like totally delicious.

Interviewer: Did you see any Asian lesbians ever?

Vicky Du: Yeah. I saw Asian lesbians in the seminal Saving Face. I watched that, [00:50:30] actually, when I was in college, at Columbia. And I was starting to come out, you know. It was maybe my freshman or sophomore year, and the Asian American Alliance was screening it. I had no idea that film existed. And I'm sitting with my new friend, sobbing the whole time. That one was just like a blow to my gut. It's catharsis, that is deeply personal, and it's this personal part of you that's deeply wounded, that's hidden, that's [00:51:00] often like a shameful part of you, and to feel catharsis there, I think really showed me the power of film. It's funny, it's a cathartic experience watching films. It's an even more cathartic experience making them. Gaysians is my first documentary film, so I was basically just



wondering how other queer and trans Asian Americans talked about their gender and sexuality with their family. This film also touches on just how hard immigration and assimilation is, that [00:51:30] process of being expelled from one's home country, coming to America, trying to create a sense of home, is such a difficult and often times like violent and crippling process. You don't have to take your family's reception of your queerness so personally.

B. Ruby Rich: We're in a sea of protest right now, about the lack of women directors. Okay, fine, but where are the lesbian stories gonna come from? [00:52:00] In the past few years, the lesbian stories have come from men. What have I seen in recent years that have filled me with hope and desire and joy? Carol, by Todd Haynes.

Rachel Reichman: I think it's not necessary for people to make films about strictly the now-ness of their own life experience. I think it's delicate, and I think that problems arise, but I think there is a kind of authenticity, [00:52:30] that comes from core feelings, and I don't think it has to be the life lived by the artist. Carol is extremely interesting on so many levels, because though each of the women, the protagonists, are exploring their emergence from a straight relationship into a gay relationship, they are doing it with a lot of confidence.

Cate Blanchett: I'm so sorry to keep you waiting. I'll have the cream spinach over poached eggs, and [00:53:00] a dry martini with an olive.

Speaker 50: I'll have the same.

Speaker 52: The meal or the drink?

Speaker 50: All of it, thank you.

Rachel Reichman: And it might be one of the questionable realistic aspects of the film for me. The much more natural thing to do, would have been to have made them kind of miserable in their lesbian selves, in their sort of shut down, scared selves. It is a fantasy, [00:53:30] but it's so beautifully executed, and the performances are so poignant, that I really want to believe that those guys are gonna have a great life. And I think, to be whole people, we really need to be able to feel the full range of emotion, and sometimes that means unhappy endings, which are not always the most commercial option, [00:54:00] but what they do is they allow a viewer to leave the theater, turn off the television, and carry the story with them. Robin Wood, who was one of my favorite writers, said that a film that functions as a successful feature film, in it, the patriarchy has to win, and that's what makes, really, a Hollywood film, or a successful commercial film. Because I've always thought about Thelma & Louise, and whether, in fact, when they go down [00:54:30] in that canyon, are they winning or are they losing, does the patriarchy win? That's actually, I think, essential to queer cinema, when you begin to stake that claim and do it on your own terms. [00:55:00] Would I rather live on my knees, or die standing?

- B. Ruby Rich: We take so much about our lives from popular culture, whether that's film or television. So much of our own sense of what's possible, comes [00:55:30] from our encounter with those stories, those characters, those kinds of examples, that if we're not able to see some version of ourselves at all, we really become impoverished or frightened or fearful, or just plain ignorant.
- Desiree Akhavan: It's very important to see yourself reflected on screen, 'cause it gives you humanity, but also it humanizes you to other people.
- Lesli K: We rely on film to be a reflection of our society, [00:56:00] and in many ways, it's a validation.
- Yoruba Richen: It's more important than ever before, to have these stories out there, and to really reach people. It's not the truth if we don't see a diverse body of people reflected, it's not real, it doesn't reflect what's going on in the world, and media should do that.
- Su Friedrich: We know how much it's mattered that straight white men have seen themselves on screen, in novels, in paintings, in everything. That's why [00:56:30] they've done it.
- Vicky Du: I'd love for the future of queer storytelling to just be that, anyone who wants to tell a queer story, can tell it.
- Cheryl Dunye: Media is a powerful tool, and you need to see yourself represented. By having more images, there's more options for people to choose who they want to be.
- Rose Troche: I get really excited by the stories that are told, and what I feel excited about, too, [00:57:00] is that that identity is still a subject matter. I still think that there's a need for an LGBTQ festival. There's still a need for a bar that's just a queer bar. There are places that still need to be ours. We're still working on this. People think we're there, and we're not there yet, so I love the filmmakers who are making work for where we are now.