



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

The Watermelon Woman

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

Twenty-five years after Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman*, the first US feature directed by an 'out' Black lesbian, you can count on a single hand the number of films offering such an audacious subversion of the filmic gaze.

The Watermelon Woman takes Black lesbians as its subject matter, but also – and most importantly – as a standpoint from which to challenge the basis of representation, history and how stories are told.

In *The Watermelon Woman*, Cheryl, a fledgling Black lesbian filmmaker played by Dunye herself, sets out to make a documentary about Faith Richardson, a lost cinematic ancestor glimpsed in 1930s race films. Playfully switching between 16mm film and the glorious, radical and short-lived 1990s grainy videotape aesthetic, Dunye layers slices of everyday life with black-and-white archival bits about Faith.

As a video store clerk, she's assisted in her research about Faith by co-worker and close friend Tamara (Valarie Walker), also a Black lesbian, and Diana (Guinevere Turner), a bourgeois white lesbian she's recently started to date. Yet, her efforts are frustrated by a succession of white gatekeepers, from the library in which a white gay man assumes her lack of literacy, to the white lesbian community archive in which the rare Black lesbian materials are brutalised by the archivists themselves, to the hostile policemen who profile her in the street – in a way reminiscent of the opening scene of Haile Gerima's *Bush Mama* (1979).

The Watermelon Woman is a landmark of the New Queer Cinema of the 1990s, a time of queer formal experimentation with cinematic language. These mostly low-budget indie features were characterised by excess, irreverence and the revolutionary cynicism of the AIDS period. Tom Kalin's *Swoon* (1992) boldly claimed to 'put the homo back in homicide'. Marlon Riggs' documentary *Tongues Untied* (1989) affirmed the fragile beauty of the hymns and spiritual songs Black gay men create for themselves in a world that has 'no tender mercy for sons who love men'. Todd Haynes' *Poison* (1991) spat society's hatred and ugliness back at it, asking if the horror genre remained possible in the time of AIDS. And Isaac Julien's *Looking for Langston* (1989) foreshadowed Dunye's inventive mix of archival material and fiction in its evocation of the time of the Harlem Renaissance. Lesbian cinema, in particular, with Sadie Benning's *Jollies* (1990) and other video works, turned the democratising videotape technology into a hallmark of subaltern aesthetics, often receiving less recognition than their cis-gay male counterparts working with film.

New Queer Cinema was, above all, a call to transform the heterosexual structures of cinema. In Dunye's own words, it was about 'playing with form,

[...] changing not only the stories that are being told and filling the void, but [...] push[ing] how narrativity works, how stories are told’.

In this vein, *The Watermelon Woman* shows a supreme disregard for the purity of form, proposing an aesthetic of promiscuity but also defacement. Dunye makes a mockery of traditional sites and figures of authority (including herself as director), places film and video in irreverent proximity, constantly eschews and reshuffles narrative conventions and refuses singular truths to affirm the authenticity found in multiplicity, collages and layerings.

This is sorely missed in our current neoliberal moment, in which queer content, bodies and stories are fetishised, included and normalised, but rarely allowed to actually trouble the cinematic frame. Where do we find, today, the kind of rebellious Black queer cinema that not only provokes the ire of governments but also refuses narrative transparency to invent its own filmic language?

Dunye developed her trademark combination of talking heads, witty and acerbic humour and her specific brand of interracial cringe in shorts such as *Janine* (1990), *Vanilla Sex* (1992), *The Potluck and the Passion* (1993) and *Greetings from Africa* (1995). Given her multiple iterations of the white girlfriend trope in these films, audiences will probably feel sympathetic with Tamara when she tells Cheryl: ‘All I see is that once again you’re going out with a white girl who wanna be Black.’ *The Watermelon Woman*, though, takes the romantic comedy genre more seriously than Dunye’s previous work. The realism of the often-lauded sex scene between Cheryl and Diana moves away from the delightfully off-putting deconstructionism of her short film *She Don’t Fade* (1991), in which intertitles and off-screen white voices constantly interrupt and restage the lovemaking between two Black lesbians. It’s the fragile balance between dramatic tension and self-reflexive filmmaking – attracting attention to itself rather than trying to disappear – that makes Dunye’s genre-bending ‘dunyementary’ work so well in *The Watermelon Woman*. In the opening scene, an irritated Cheryl yells off-screen: ‘Don’t you see the equipment?’ The cinematic space is Cheryl’s production, and we’re allowed to forget it just enough for the reminder to matter, with charmingly awkward on-screen camera, talking heads and off-screen voices.

As in Marlon Riggs’ *Tongues Untied*, Dunye’s use of talking heads is worlds away from the usual bland device of the documentary genre, in which interviewees perform expert, disembodied authority. In Black queer filmmaking, talking heads become animated with defiant energy, formal eroticism and a kind of affective proximity. For instance, Dunye does not work with a fixed script, creating a sense of play and performance. She asks questions and lets the interviewees improvise – a call-and-response structure that becomes hilarious when they offer resistance or refuse to play along, such as when Cheryl’s mother insists that she’s never heard of the watermelon woman, even as the plot hinges on her revealing a crucial piece of information about this figure.

The Watermelon Woman is a deeply textured film that challenges the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction. As Cheryl makes progress on her documentary about Faith, the archival quest often threatens to take centre stage, while her daily life begins to resemble ‘behind the scenes’ footage for the documentary itself. An uncanny sense of kinship ties Cheryl and Faith – ‘something in her face, something in the way she looks and moves is interesting’ muses Cheryl while watching (fictional) old Hollywood movie *Plantation Memories*. Their lives mirror one another. The present relationship between Cheryl and Diana echoes the past one between Faith and white queer filmmaker Martha Page. Both find an uneasy template in the romance Cheryl imagines between the mistress and the maid in *Plantation Memories*. Credited as ‘the watermelon woman’ in movies in which she performs mammy roles, Faith is also tenderly remembered as Fae Richards in the Philadelphia lesbian bars where she used to sing.

And yet, at the end of the film, Faith is revealed not to exist. She’s a fictional placeholder for a number of Black actresses sidelined or erased from film history – named ones such as Butterfly McQueen, Hattie McDaniel and Louise Beavers, as well as those still unnamed. She’s also a placeholder for archive footage the film’s modest budget couldn’t afford. Instead, New York photographer Zoe Leonard artfully designed photographs and newsreel with a 1930s/40s look, which were auctioned to support the production of the film. This is one of the many ways Dunye turned imposed absences or difficult access into a space of possibility.

Still, the figure she crafts is never quite reducible to archival appearances, even fictional ones. Rather, Faith exceeds her fictional archive. We get a glimpse of the expansiveness of her life and intimate attachments as well as the complicated and protracted struggles over her memory. Incorporating *cinéma vérité*-style footage, Dunye conjures Philadelphia’s collective imagination, asking Black people in the street if they know who the watermelon woman was. She doesn’t hide the tensions between an older Black lesbian generation’s memory of Faith and her own desire to hold all of Faith’s fragmented selves together.

Dunye gives us permission to define ourselves in ways that both claim our ancestors and mark the space between us and them – a space for different yet entangled freedoms. How do we tell stories that cannot but must be told? *The Watermelon Woman* offers another way to search for ‘our mother’s gardens’ (as author Alice Walker puts it), one in which imagination is a form of birth and repair.

Chrystel Oloukoï, bfi.org.uk, 22 July 2021

THE WATERMELON WOMAN

Director: Cheryl Dunye
Film Recreations Director: Doug McKeown
Watermelon Woman Photo Arcs: Cheryl Dunye, Zoe Leonard
Production Company: Dancing Girl Productions
Executive Producer: Michael Light
Co-executive Producers: Annie Taylor, Burke Moody
Producers: Barry Swimar, Alexandra Juhasz
Producers (Watermelon Woman Photo Arc): Cheryl Dunye, Zoe Leonard
Co-producer: Cate Wilson
Co-producer (Watermelon Woman Photo Arc): Alexandra Juhasz
Associate Producer: Joy Malinowski
2nd Unit Associate Producer: Judy LeBold
Production Co-ordinator: Duana Butler
Directors (Watermelon Woman Photo Arc): Petra Janopaul, Shu Hung
Office Co-ordinator: Pamela Turchin
Production Manager: Sharon Stein
Location Managers: Tim Downs, Missy Moyer
Post-production Supervisor: Burke Moody
Photos/Home Movies of The Watermelon Woman: Zoe Leonard
Assistant Director: Renae Dinerman
2nd Assistant Directors: Ted Shields, Elenie Marsalis
2nd 2nd Assistant Director: Michael La Corte
Script Supervisor: Sonya Klimuk
Director Casting: Gail Lloyd
Casting: Keylan Bradley, Sharon Levin Cohen
Screenplay: Cheryl Dunye
Film Recreations: Cheryl Dunye, Doug McKeown
Director of Photography: Michelle Crenshaw
Additional Photography: Dane Smith
Photography (Watermelon Woman Photo Arc): Zoe Leonard
Film Recreations Graphic Design: Scott Purcell
Editor: Annie Taylor
Additional Editors: Magali Taylor, Burke Moody
Associate Editor: Jim Ford
Production Designer: Robert 'Ratface' Holtzman
Set Decorator: Stacey Byers
Costumes: Solomon Wise, Luciana Moreira
Period Costumes: Alison Froling
Wardrobe: JoAnn Colameco
Wardrobe (Watermelon Woman Photo Arc): Alison Froling, Sara Vogt
Make-up: Kathy Robertson
Additional Make-up: Rebecca Sawyer
Make-up (Watermelon Woman Photo Arc): Luciana Moreira, Lily Marnell
Titles: Effects House, John Alagna
Original Music Score: Paul Shapiro
Original Music Performed by: Paul Shapiro's Quintet
Trumpet: Steven Bernstein
Drums: Steve Johns
Bass: David Hofstra
Piano: Dan Rosengard
Saxophone/Flute: Paul Shapiro
Additional Production/Keyboards: Gary Schreiner

Music Supervisor: Bill Coleman
Karaoke Music Tracks: Raphael Paris
Music Co-ordinators: Stephen C. Rocamboli, S. Madison Bédard
Drum Programming: Jim Mussen
Sound Recording: Jack A. Mehlbaum
Sound Mixers: Tom Jucarone, Rob Sayers
Sound Editors: Jim Ford, Magali Taylor
Cheryl's stand-in: Giselle Anatol

Cast

Cheryl Dunye (*Cheryl*); Guinevere Turner (*Diana*); Valarie Walker (*Tamara*); Lisa Marie Bronson (*Fae 'The Watermelon Woman' Richard*); Irene Dunye (*herself*); Brian Freeman (*Lee Edwards*); Ira Jeffries (*Shirley Hamilton*); Camille Paglia (*herself*); Sarah Schulman (*CLIT archivist*); V.S. Brodie (*karaoke singer*); Shelley Olivier (*Annie Heath*); David Rakoff (*librarian*); Toshi Reagon (*street musician*); Christopher Ridenhour (*Bob*); Kathy Robertson (*Yvette*); Jocelyn Taylor (*Stacey*); Bill Wayterra (*photographer*); Elaine Freeman (*bride's mother*); Erin Cramer (*bride*); Wellington Love (*groom*); Toni Nash (*groom's mother*); Zoe Goldberg (*little white girl*); Calder Goldberg (*little white boy*); Shanel Johnson (*little black girl 1*); Olivia Bokelman (*little black girl 2*); Madelyn Bokelman (*little black girl 3*); Barry Swimar (*relative in yarmulka*); Sara Vogt (*'Plantation memories' mistress*); Ana Margaret Sanchez (*'Souls of Deceit' mulatto*); Eve Oishi (*karaoke white girl*); Joy Malinowski (*emcee*); Anthony Christopher (*black banker on the street*); Suzi Nash (*black school teacher on the street*); Earl Pittman (*Sorry Rosie 1*); Jonathan Ellis (*Sorry Rosie 2*); T. LaMonte McKinnon (*Sorry Rosie 3*); S. Elizabeth Evans (*leather girl on street*); Amadee Braxton (*bus stop girl 1*); Denise Sneed (*bus stop girl 2*); Robert Reid-Pharr (*street queen in library line*); David Hanson (*grungy white boy*); Rita Porter (*white woman at produce truck*); Brian Balsemore (*produce man*); Gail Lloyd (*Diane's black date*); Tatum Kendall (*white girl student 1*); Tania Galtoni (*white girl student 2*); Jake Carlo (*white boy student*); Zanolbia Webb (*poet*); Nana Korantemaa (*drummer*); Nana Akousa Agylriwah (*percussionist*); Virginia Manning (*Annie's girlfriend*); Patricia Ellis (*Mrs Edge-Fletcher*); Lillie Hayes (*her maid*); James Charles Roberts (*newsreel narrator*); Robert Sciasci, A. Ron Marigna (*police officers*); Donnita Hamilton (*June's next door neighbour*); Lisa Marie Bronson (*Fae Richards*); Cheryl Clark (*June Walker*); K. Brent Hill (*J. Liberty Wells*); Alexandra Juhasz (*Martha Page*); Jody Benjamin (*Josie*); Claudine Benoit (*butch at party*); Zoe Bissel (*white bar dyke*); Anna Blume (*Eleanor Van Clyde*); Mark Breitenberg (*Claude Thornton*); Kenrick Cato (*Ray Blake/NAACP*); Kristina Deutsch (*Sandra Vincent*); Charlene Gilbert (*card playing dyke*); Reggie Griffin (*Hambone Jones*); Valerie Manenti (*rent party/white bar dyke*); Lily Marnell (*femme at party*); Fawn McGee (*Bobbi/Willa Clark*); Darrell Moore (*NAACP*); Luciana Moreira (*set stylist*); Eve Oishi (*woman in audience*); Robert Reid-Pharr (*Fred de Shields*); L.M. Doris Roberts (*Reba Richards/Banana Skirt*); Linda Salerno (*Margaret Fitzgerald*); Carolyn Shapiro (*white actress*); Sara Vogt (*Cassandra Brooke*); Julia Zay (*white bar dyke*)

USA 1997©

84 mins

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