

NEATH THE SHEXING

BY KASS BANNING



NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF CANADA

Gerda Munsinger

The dominant theme of this year's indie production is, surprisingly, that not-so Canadian standby—sex. From Don McKellar's **Blue**, to Lisa Steele and Kim Tomczak's **Legal Memory**, to Lynne Fernie and Aerlyn Weissman's **Forbidden Love: The Unashamed Stories of Lesbian Lives**, to Brenda Longfellow's **Gerda**, sex and sexuality, in its numerous guises, is in the air.

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ET THIS YEAR'S SEX studies are not necessarily hot or even erotic; they seem more influenced by the analytic thought of a Michel Foucault, rather than a one-trick Madonna. Foucault's thought begins from a paradox: the regulations that deal with sexual behaviours, whether initiated by church or state, far from repressing sexuality have, on the contrary, produced it and continue to do so. Sex

here is viewed as a byproduct of prohibition and not, primarily, emancipatory. Choosing to deconstruct instead of "laying it on," these filmmakers read sex as "residual" and betray an interest in forethought over foreplay.

Two unapologetically feminist feature films stand out from this crop of comers. Both *Forbidden Love* and *Gerda* decidedly share some common elements. Both films look back to the anti-sex, pre-feminist era of the 50s and early 60s and offer a re-visionist slice of Canadian socio-sexual history while at the same time targeting a specific audience. These films were made for women, with *Forbidden Love* primarily pitching to lesbian spectators, yet wildly seducing crossover constituencies.

To some degree both films could be seen to exemplify the two warring paradigms characteristic of feminist filmmaking over (roughly) the last twenty years. Crudely summarized: one practice (promulgated by the NFB's Studio D, for example) called for the documentation of real women's lives in the search for "positive images"; the other insisted on an oppositional formalism that demanded a rigorous interrogation of the medium in the hopes of staving off the ideological (né patriarchal) codes embedded in representation. The former favours political subjects and emotion; the latter, the politics of images and intellect.

Forbidden Love and *Gerda* shake down these dated

oppositions, transgressing and redefining the duelling dichotomies of feminist film aesthetics. *Forbidden Love*, following a documentary format, allows women to speak from experience, but without sacrificing complexity. Additional archival footage and "in-your-face," sensuously photographed reconstructed segments celebrate lesbian desire. *Gerda* begins with a recipe for political modernism, but slides into girl-rendered melodrama, while sending up its excesses. Both films mix genres producing delightful hybrids that doubly entertain and inform. This is mostly achieved through smarts and self-conscious humour.

Celebrated as the first NFB "queer" film, *Forbidden Love* gives voice to the senior progenitors of today's visible Lesbian Nation. Weaving a raucous coast-to-coast, affirming, multi-racial lesbian portrait of survival, ranging from a Haida woman in British Columbia to a black night-club singer in Montreal (with an exquisite Albertan rancher in between), nine outstanding women from 40-to-70 years of age (natural performers all) reveal with candour and humour the diverse Canadian, mostly undocumented lesbian lives of the 50s and 60s. Part lesbian oral history, part coming-out tale, the filmmakers give over the film to these eager raconteurs while at the same time paying homage to the very forces that helped mold their desires and identities.

The impact of popular culture during this era is playfully sent up. The pivotal role played by the lesbian pulp-novel is especially stressed—over and over again—by these stellar witnesses. Prompted by promises of a racy subculture, generously populated by butch and femme types, isolated women headed off to Greenwich Village "looking for the lesbians," but to no avail. One disappointed traveller relates (to hilarious ends) how she couldn't read the codes properly, or just wasn't dressed right for the part. For many isolated lesbians, these popular cheap paperbacks displayed across Canada in drugstores, Woolworths, and the like,

Lynne Adams
as Mitch
and
Stephanie
Morgenstern
as Laura
in
Forbidden Love



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offered the promise of a lesbian community, fantastic or otherwise. The titles of the lurid book jackets and accompanying blurbs are a hoot. Such screamers as *The Constant Urge*, *Lesbians in Black Lace*, *Girl's Dormitory*, *Man Hater* and *Black Nylon Lovers* betray the extent to which lesbian sexuality was regulated and relegated to the masochistic margins of female experience—sex-crazed, unhappy babes.

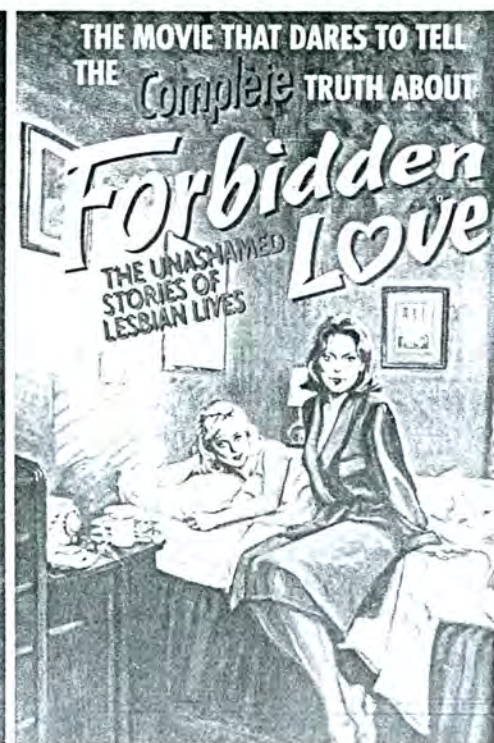
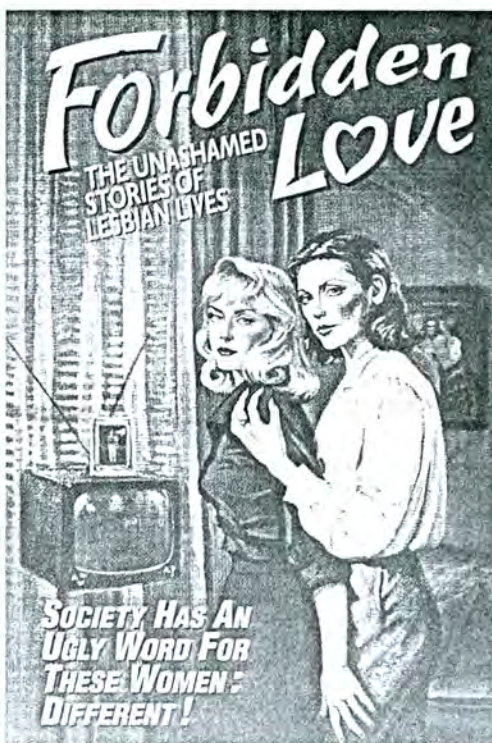
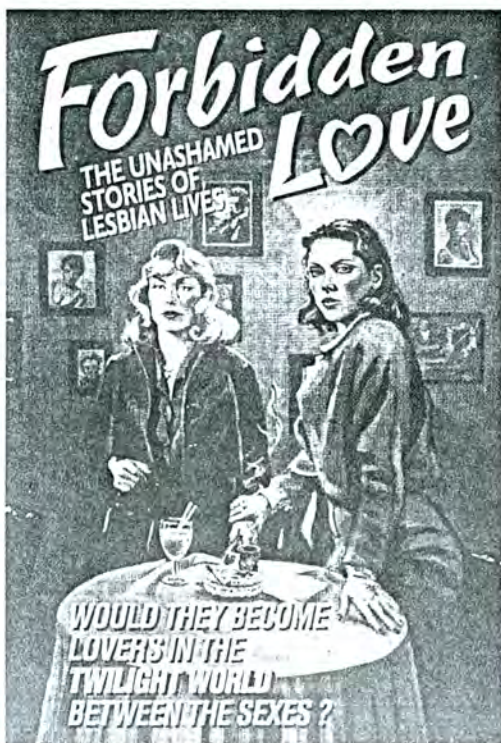
Filmmakers Fernie and Weissman cleverly invert these wild stereotypes to their advantage. Appropriating "racy" covers as their starting point and guide, they pump up the fun. Even the film's title, *Forbidden Love*, appears lifted from a book jacket. We open with a re-enacted bit, "Laura's story." Her journey towards lesbian self-discovery is intercut throughout with the interviews and archival footage, running as a trope for the film's entirety. The opening bit ends in a freeze frame—with the most sexualized direct address I've encountered—and the image "saturates" back to a book cover. All of the fictionalized sequences begin and end in this manner, with a purple prose voice-over juicing up the transitions. In one clever stroke, the fifties are evoked with sensuous campiness, while at the same time the inter-relatedness (and gap) between these fantasy images and lived lesbian lives is blatantly suggested.

As nine transgressive women elicit "those days," often we are left with the bittersweet. Part eulogizing, part revelatory, mostly outrageous, some offer auto-critiques of their former selves, revealing astute insights into the socio-cultural factors that shaped their lives and desires. Some bravely comment

on oversights dictated by constraints of the era, critiquing how they too easily adopted to circumscribed butch/femme roles or limited their circle to their "own kind," practising what now reads like watered-down racism.

A checklist of events which would impact on lesbian lives of the 50s are thrown out to the subjects. (We don't, however, hear the questions. No overarching voice-over interprets their lives.) The filmmakers deftly negotiate and order their subject's responses: the seminal place of the lesbian novel "coming out" stories; the doubly dangerous and enticing bar scenes of Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver; harassment and intolerance by police, menfolk and "tourists"; and lastly, the glorious vicissitudes of lesbian love, "the love that dared not speak its name."

Forbidden Love is an inside job and it shows. Not to raise the spectre of documentary ethics, but it is to the filmmakers' credit that they get the ribald (and poignant) responses they do. The trust is evident. Lines such as: "the whole world is full of stupid myths like all you have to do is find a good man"; "I think post-menopausal women should rule the world"; and, "I lock my doors to keep the men out and the women in," offer but a few of *Forbidden Love's* many pearls. The film is lesbian historiography at its best. A slice of lesbian history told by those who lived it but delivered as an entertaining and affirmative romp. We witness Canada's nascent Lesbian Nation emerge from oblivion, a nation fashioned by women who resisted, who forged a space for lesbians in the public sphere while bravely "fronting" in the straight world. Through such radical acts



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of remembering, through such exquisite nostalgia, community is affirmed.

Just one year prior to Canada's 1967 Centennial—the rite-of-passage that helped legitimize our status as a modern, more “imagined” nation-state—an alleged sex-and-spy scandal rocked its tenuous foundations. The Gerda Munsinger Affair—Brenda Longfellow's *Gerda* excavates this alleged sex-and-security site from a specific perspective—a gendered perspective. Eschewing the objective heights of traditional (né masculinized) historiography, Longfellow widens the stakes and adopts ambiguity as her model.

Gerda is no dowdy docudrama. Part feminist archaeology, part fable, *Gerda* takes its cues from the real, enigmatic Gerda Munsinger, a femme fatale who contributed to the prevailing mass media hysteria and fabrication around her own identity. A myriad number of techniques help uncover her mythological construction, while at the same time these eclectic approaches weave a complex and contradictory portrait. The truth behind the scandal, whether she was a Soviet spy prying secrets out of unsuspecting Cabinet ministers (Pierre Sevigny, the Conservative minister of defence, plays the male lead in the scandal), or just an ambitious party girl undone by the “love thing,” is never clearly ascertained.

Laced with irony and driven by intellect, *Gerda* challenges the official version of the Gerda Munsinger story. Gerda Munsinger's rise and fall is re-presented through a mélange of postmodern fragments, with historical fact wedded to personal fantasy. Radio, television, newsreel footage (both real and simulated), sample newspaper headlines, the odd interview and campy tableaux, and Gerda's own fragmented memories (shot in black and white), punctuate melodramatic re-enactments.

An RCMP officer holds the works together, doubling as both chronicler of the Munsinger affair and as continuity device. A stand-in for the inexorable drive towards mastery and truth, representing both the law and male desire, his reminiscences kick-start and order the film. The character's fact-finding zeal, however, gradually betrays an underlying warped fascination with this particular “case” as he obsessively maps Gerda's sexual activities onto her suspected espionage. The most banal, everyday occurrences he obtains through surveillance are interpreted as symptoms of guilt. He assigns terms like “turpitude” and “illegal border-crosser” to Munsinger as anti-communist hysteria melts into a dread of women's bodies.

This is admittedly a risky work, one that generally pitches to the head, rather than the heart. Part factual, part analytical, but decidedly fun, there is enough lyricism and enough strategically placed visual sumptuousness to carry the idea off. Obviously *Gerda* is no realistic depiction of a lived life, as no one singular authenticity is privileged. A lot of folks, however, have a word or two to say about Gerda Munsinger. These competing (occasionally complementary) histories make up the film. At the same time an abiding effort is made

to locate Gerda's story within the context of historical events. Her “flashbacks” to the political trauma of postwar Germany are set against contemporary Canadian parliamentary history and cold war paranoia.

This overarching duelling reference, this radical contradictoriness, informs *Gerda*'s every frame. Call it history versus history, or public versus private sphere, this contradictoriness divides along gender lines which invariably contribute to and comment on the instability of narrative (and national) construction. *Gerda*'s structure perpetuates such divisive effects and is blatantly operative from the get-go. The interplay between nation and sexuality is perhaps the film's central dichotomy—the commerce between the realms of patrie and Eros suggests that relations between men are forged across the bodies of women. Nationhood, conceived as fraternal comradeship, is highly articulated in *Gerda*. Indeed, heterosexual sex reads as libidinal spill-over from excess fraternity at the parliamentary club house. And this heavily symbolic demarcation between the sexes offers a rich source of tongue-in-cheek humour.

It also bespeaks the impossibility of an eroticized nationalism (especially a Canadian one). One visually, erotically charged sequence (comprised of shots of fragmented body parts of Gerda and Sevigny) is matched to the RCMP officer's voice droning on about the Beaumark missile, radar installations and security risks. The sequence fittingly concludes with, “we were keeping a close watch on all of these activities,” as a missile ascends out of frame.

The “girl stuff” is especially delightful. The dialogue is rife with sexual innuendo, usually at the expense of object choices. Scenes that feature Berenice (Gerda's “best” friend) and Gerda are extremely successful (their delicious party-girl dresses are over-the-top). Their relationship, however, bears more than the surface manifestations of friendship, and Berenice's betrayal is just one more punishment for Gerda's excess for not playing by the rules. Eventually, Gerda is expelled through a violent act of censorship. She is deported back to Germany in 1961, her image retrieved for scandal-mongering purposes in 1966.

Both *Forbidden Love* and *Gerda* are risky, revisionist projects that portray fragments of real women's lives, lives produced by sexual regulation. Thankfully they surpass the recent rash of “feminist” (girl-authored at best) films which privilege single-issue “boy troubles” over the more conceptually rich subjects and approaches evident in these two sophisticated, but decidedly “out” feminist works. *Forbidden Love* and *Gerda* inexorably prove how memory and desire can condense history into meaningful, often humorous and outrageous associations without foreclosing representation or pleasure. **FI**

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Diana Fajrajsl as Gerda

