



Stolen MOMENTS

Memories of an Existence Underground

By Kathleen Pirrie Adams

All photos courtesy of the National Film Board of Canada

Where men and women are forced to endure terrible things at the hand of others...the need to remember becomes a general response. Spontaneously, they make it their business to record the evil forced upon them. Here and in similar situations survival and bearing witness become reciprocal acts.

—Terrence Des Pres, *The Survivor*

Invisibility can serve dehumanization. In other cases it shelters and protects. For lesbians and gays, visibility is a highly charged term and coming out—the personal process of becoming visible—an emotionally complex undertaking. The relationship between the individual process and the collective meaning of queer visibility and coming out is no longer what it was. A critical mass has been reached. Being out and being an outsider are no longer synonymous. The degrees of danger and glory, the complicated relations of repression and pride are in flux. Today, it sometimes seems as if coming out is little more than a question of etiquette. (With Miss Manners exploiting the question of coming out at the office to remind everyone that knowing a little less about your colleagues' private affairs could increase the office's overall level of professionalism.)

As out lesbians spread rhizomically through all sectors of society, as human rights legislation is enacted, as moderates help undermine the acceptability of homophobia, and as fashion embraces and deintensifies political trends, the urgency of survival seems less relevant than the textures of everyday lesbian life. Survival and everyday life are not, as they once were, inexorable. Visibility becomes more and more an automatic right and a matter of entitlement, rather than a rite of passage.



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listen, look,
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never forget.**



Winding around this increased visibility are a couple of recurring suspicions. One concerns the relation of media representation to (invisible) everyday lives: does mainstream media's enthusiasm for lesbians echo acceptance in other social and political realms? The other concerns the relation between the current environment of entitlement and the possibility of historical amnesia: if not by shared pain or memory, how will we continue to insure that we remain capable of bearing witness to the past?

Stolen Moments anthologizes a number of lesbian voices and offers a compendium of lesbian history. It provides an excellent introduction to lesbian history and culture and makes an impassioned appeal for acceptance, respect and legitimacy. *Stolen Moments* is, however, a film with its genesis in another era. One that predates the explosion of popular and subcultural lesbian representation that has enlivened the last five years. Consequently, it seems a little ill-at-ease in the world it shares with *Bound*, *Fire* and *Ellen*. Despite this awkwardness, its intentions are clear and its ambitions still relevant and pressing.

Although the film begins with the requisite dykes-on-bikes pageant and ends with the celebration of sexual awakening and the Amazon nation's rising at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, at the core of *Stolen Moments* is a desire to bear witness to lesbianism's long history of repression and its painful coming of age. In the words of veteran NFB director Margaret Wescott (*Some American Feminists, Behind the Veil: Nuns*): "I wanted to honour those who came before us and stood in the front lines. People—gay, lesbian and straight—should have an idea of what life was like before the Stonewall riots sparked the gay civil rights movement."

Before the Stonewall riots lies a huge chunk of history. Wescott's film addresses it by selecting individual stories that represent not only a particular time and place but also a recurrent issue of lesbian identity. Illustrated by archival photos, film clips and reenactments, these segments alternate with present-day interviews that recall past events and offer critical analysis. Holding together

the whole, binding the fragments and providing a sense of direction, is a traditionally external and objective, but untraditional female, voice-over narration.

For instance, the story of Jeanne Bonnett, 19th-century French immigrant brothel habitué and girl-gang leader of California's Barbary Coast, highlights a section of the film focusing on passing women. The account of Bonnett's assassination then leads to a further discussion by gender outlaw Leslie Fineberg on a general threat of death and the lack of police protection from violence that greeted lesbians in most public spaces.

Other stories tell of women whose claims on public life proved highly successful. In the rue Jacob of *belle époque* Paris, sapphic socialite Natalie Barney established a famous and influential salon which continued to flourish and repopulate itself until 1968. In the red-light district of Amsterdam in the 1930s, Bet van Beeren opened a very successful lesbian establishment called the Café d'Mandje where men were welcome only if they allowed Bet to trim their ties. Waked on her favourite billiard table, Bet's funeral drew hundreds of people, many of whom were neighbours who had enjoyed van Beeren's shows of generosity such as the annual seniors party she hosted.

The idea of bearing witness governs the internal structure of *Stolen Moments* as well as providing it with an overall sense of purpose. For unlike certain other styles of documentary, there is no pretence of the audience not being there. The whole of the film says: listen, look, remember, never forget. The film is not about disclosing shocking new information; indeed, its memorializing efforts would even seem to require a measure of previous familiarity. At the same time the film takes on the role of educating the uninitiated—of introducing them to the history of legal restrictions, of lesbian survival tactics such as cross-dressing and passing, of utopian aspirations and undertakings—as if it were unknown or obscure.

The two-tier address of *Stolen Moments* results in an odd positioning for the lesbian audience member. This is most obvious in reference to the voice-over of *Stolen Moments*. Kate Nelligan's hushed

tones and the use of the third person to speak about the lesbians, has an unsettling “othering” effect. Similarly its sense of intimacy seems at odds with the film’s purpose: to make lesbianism visible and knowable as a historical phenomenon.

Every documentary plays with our curiosity and desire to know. And while film theory has long debated what distinguishes documentary from other types of film—what constitutes its essence—positive audience and critical reception generally seem to depend upon fusing the familiar with the new and making either a hinge for a “tell me more” feeling. Much of the film is made up of interviews with well-known lesbian writers, activists and spokeswomen such as Leslie Fineberg, Audre Lorde and Judy Grahn. As a result, for the lesbian audience much of what is seen is already familiar. But unlike the Paris in the 1920s archival footage, which is also fairly familiar, it does not possess the same naturally fascinating quality.

Relatively speaking, queer history has had a rather limited official dimension. Magazines, fanzines and small press publications have had such a crucial role in constituting queer community. Legend, gossip and the oral histories of bar life and the social scenes that flourished around various activist undertakings are crucial to queer history. *Stolen Moments* seems to take its cue from this tradition and embrace the anecdotal and personal as the material from which to cull the truth or reality of lesbian experience. The destruction of “evidence” of lesbian lives by families, political reactionaries and those people in charge of public institutions such as libraries and archives is another good reason for the extensive use of interviews in the reconstruction of our history. The inclusion of archival newsreel footage of the Nazi’s burning of the holdings of the Hershfeldt Sexual Institute—12,000 books and over 30,000 images—provides a disturbing moment of self reflection.

While the paucity of archival footage leaves many holes in the visual history of lesbianism, the film’s historical reenactment fails to fill them. *Stolen Moments*’ 1940s butch-femme bar raid and Weimar cabaret scenes are marred by lack of narrative development, a cast of too readily recognized faces and a redundancy of visuals and voice-over—the posing figures simply illustrate what

has already been explained. The film’s mission of making historical remembering imperative is better served by compelling speakers (of which there are many in the film) and archival investigations than by historical tableau. The use of reenactment is a tricky problem for any filmmaker. While it is usually used in a documentary to make up for missing visual materials or to draw out the psychological aspects of a historical event, there often also seems to be an accompanying interest in injecting added entertainment value. In the end, it is the question of representing and conveying pleasure that proves to be the film’s greatest challenge.

As if to counterbalance stories as raw as Leslie Fineberg’s rape at the hands of the police or a recent attack on a gathering of lesbians by neo-Nazis, *Stolen Moments* also documents the creation of local lesbian cultures, the fun and games aspects of our history. To affirm a whole spectrum of experience and not concentrate exclusively on a history of repression and trauma the film includes scenes of: a dance performance; a stand-up comedy routine; a stage-show at an Amsterdam nightclub (the Homolulu); and footage of festivities at Michigan. The problem with this material is not so much how it is integrated within the whole of the film, but the nature of the images and events themselves. The dated footage of lesbian culture and leisure are not old enough to be interesting in an easy archival way, nor is it current enough to provide an opportunity for lesbian audiences to enjoy the inflating and amplifying mirror-effect that film can offer. Instead, the experience is more like

having your family photo album dragged out and passed around the high school cafeteria.

One of the strengths of the sapphic literary scene of the 1920s was its ability to influence the artistic heartbeat of its time. The more recent manifestations of lesbian culture recorded for *Stolen Moments* tend to emphasize recreations that are local, participatory and often separatist. While these activities, these ethos, have the power to provide immediate involvement and are valuable, if only for this reason, they seldom set the pulse of their time. And, under the gaze of the mainstream they can appear amateurish, cheesy. This is especially so because footage that is years old—such as the scenes from Michigan which were shot in 1986—appears without any historical markers, as if it were the here and now of lesbian culture. As a result, contemporary lesbian culture is represented by images that are, in terms of pop culture, both marginal and generations old.

Legitimacy and credibility in the world of mainstream media has certain requirements. Within the powerful and pervasive operational logic of the society of the spectacle it would take a very selective eye, an impossibly provocative framing to make lesbian line dancing (in 1997) seem anything other than hokey—at least within this context. (The subject surely deserves its own treatment, but suffers from the quick take of the survey.) Moments of squirming uncomfortably in our seats thus have a greater significance. ■

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