**Video Script**

**Lecture 38 – When History Fails**

**Fall 2020**

**Popeye**

Welcome to our final lecture! My dog Popeye and I want to give you all the credit in the world for sticking with our class. It has not been easy to teach this way, and if that’s true from my end of things, I know that it’s only been exponentially harder on your end. With multiple classes, new expectations, new ways of learning, and the weight of current events pressing down on all of us, I hope you’ve made it through as happily and healthily as you can. I’m glad that I can share this moment with you, digital though it may be.

**[ANIMATION]** Before I get started, I wanted to give you some contact information. Why on earth might you want this, you wonder? Well, some reasons previous students have kept in touch with me include asking for recommendation letters for scholarships and applications, or to talk through general life or school stuff—especially if you want to know about graduate school or the publishing industry, which is where my life experience lies. I’ve also had students get in touch to talk about new film or media projects that they’re working on, for an extra set of eyes and some feedback. Really, the point is that I’m here as a resource for you beyond the end date of this class. I’m giving you my non-UT email address as well as my Twitter handle, where you can find me talking about movies, live-tweeting *The Bachelorette*, and posting pictures of my dog.

**Watermelon Woman still**

To end our semester, I wanted to briefly revisit some of the themes we talked about way back in our first lecture and put them into context with your screening for this week. So, I’m calling these brief parting remarks—not even a lecture, really—*The Watermelon Woman, or, When History Fails.*

**History/Historiography**

Back on our first day of class, we talked about the difference between history **[ANIMATION x 2]** or the story of what happened, and historiography **[ANIMATION x 2],** the study of how we tell the story of what happens, who gets to tell it, and what gets left out. I wanted to end the semester with *The Watermelon Woman* because the difference between history and historiography, between what gets remembered and what gets forgotten, between what media history we venerate and what media history fades into nothingness, is at the very core of this film.

**New Queer Cinema**

*The Watermelon Woman* is considered to be a key text in a wave of films known as New Queer Cinema. And just a very quick note about the term “queer”—I’ve had conversations with students who dislike this term. They have negative associations with it and don’t choose to use that term to refer to themselves. Within scholarship, “queer” has been the term of choice to describe a whole body of theory and research into sexuality and gender, and the literature and art that reflects on those themes. So, it might not be your term of choice, and you don’t have to use it! It’s simply the term applied to this specific movement and this this specific body of films *by* the theorists and filmmakers who began it, and that’s why I’ll use it here.)

The term New Queer Cinema was coined in 1992 by B. Ruby Rich, a film critic who went to the Toronto International Film Festival and recognized a whole slate of films and filmmakers whose work was talking about gay and lesbian lives; filmmakers like Rose Troche, Gregg Araki, Todd Haynes, and your filmmaker for this week, Cheryl Dunye (although *The Watermelon Woman* came a few years later). Rich noticed that their films had certain characteristics in common.

But, before I get into that, I want to recognize that this was not the *beginning* of queerness in Hollywood!

**Films**

You can go back twenty or thirty years before New Queer Cinema and find filmmakers like Chantal Akerman, Rainer Fassbinder, and even Andy Warhol addressing queer themes in their work. And these are just a couple of examples. But fundamentally, queer people have worked in film for as long as there has been film. It’s just that Hollywood was not particularly open to queer stories, unless they were told in highly coded ways, until this New Queer Cinema moment.

**Todd Haynes *Poison* still**

Reflecting back on this moment in the early 1990s, Rich says that **[ANIMATION]** in the 1980s, Hollywood was too busy manufacturing blockbusters to take much notice of the independent world. They were simply too busy dying hard and raiding the lost ark and busting ghosts to care what was popular or even what was profitable in independent film.

**[ANIMATION]** But Rich goes on to say that what eventually tipped a smattering of queer independent films into a full-fledged movement wasn’t an influx of Hollywood funding, but rather “repression, namely the savage attacks by US right-wing politicians on government funding for such films as Todd Haynes’s *Poison.* The bad press, though, made for good reviews and decent box office.”

What she means here is that New Queer Cinema owed its popularity to publicity—publicity that was gained through highly politicized battles over what art should be funded with federal dollars from the National Endowment of the Arts. Todd Haynes’s 1990 film *Poison* was made with some funding from the government through this agency. Inspired by the writing of Jean Genet, the film tells three stories that contain queer themes and explicit love scenes between men. Conservative politicians and pundits of the era were incensed that the federal dollars had funded the project, leading to a public debate about what kinds of art the government should support financially. **[ANIMATION]** The debate eventually led the ouster of John Frohmayer, the head of the NEA, but it also drew attention to the film and other New Queer Cinema filmmakers who might not have otherwise had so many eyes on their work.

**Rich**

In her 1992 article in *Sight & Sound*, Ruby Rich describes New Queer Cinema this way:

*the new queer films and videos aren’t all the same, and don’t share a single aesthetic vocabulary or concern, yet they are nonetheless united by a common style…there are traces in all of them of appropriation and pastiche, irony, as well as a reworking of history with social constructionism very much in mind. Definitively breaking with older humanist approaches and the films and tapes that accompany identity politics, these works are irreverent, energetic, alternatively minimalist and excessive. Above all, they’re full of pleasure. They’re here, they’re queer, get hip to them.*

**Dunye gif**

Lots of key aspects of Rich’s definition—appropriation, pastiche, irony, history, and pleasure—are written all over Cheryl Dunye’s *The Watermelon Woman*.

**Dunye & Duvernay**

Dunye is a Liberian-American filmmaker who has chosen, for most of her career, to work outside the Hollywood system making fiercely independent films. There were some exeptions, like a film she directed for Miramax and, recently, she’s begun directing television (like a number of episodes of *Queen Sugar*).

**Watermelon Poster**

1996’s *The Watermelon Woman* (if you haven’t gotten a chance to watch it yet) is made in a style she calls Dunye-mentary, or a blend of narrative and documentary filmmaking—in her words, “a mix of film, video, friends, and a lot of heart.”

**Still**

Dunye plays a character named Cheryl who works at a video store, shoots video at events like weddings for money, and wants to make films. The narrative plot revolves around her life in Philadelphia as a queer Black woman…

**Fake Photo**

…and the seemingly documentary portions of the film revolve around Cheryl’s research into a forgotten Black actress of the 1930s and 1940s named Fae Richards, who was billed only as “The Watermelon Woman” in a film in which she acted. Through Cheryl’s research into Fae Richards, she unearths this forgotten queer Black history of motion pictures.

**Stills (more)**

By the end of the film, though, the audience learns that, in fact, *this entire history is fabricated*. There is no Fae Richards. There never was. She’s invented. Dunye and a collaborator, Zoe Leonard, created all of these archival materials specifically for the film. It’s all fake history.

**Scarf**

Dunye, in fact, made *The Watermelon Woman* after *trying* to research the history of Black lesbians in film, and finding only dead ends. **[ANIMATION]** As she said to *Interview* magazine,

*“I did look for a Black lesbian in Hollywood with this story. I did do that as my research for the film, for a year. What I found was nothing. So, I had to tell that truth. I think that’s where the film gets its real depth.”*

This is the reason I wanted to end the semester with this film. Sometimes, we have to tell the truth through a kind of invention. History is just a series of stories that have been written down and retold. It’s not a comprehensive record of art made, and lives lived. And sometimes, when the archive yields nothing about a history that means something to you, you have to invent it based on what you know of your community and their collective memory. Other Black female creators like Toni Morrison have used this method, too, to piece together a history that has been passed down through memory, but too infrequently recorded. A scholar named Saidiya Hartman calls the technique “critical fabulation.”

If there’s anything you remember from this media history class, please remember that what I’ve offered you here is such an impossibly small slice of the world. If you haven’t seen yourself or your history reflected, find it. You’ve got the tools now. And if you can’t find it, that doesn’t mean it never happened. You just might have to write it yourself.

**Quote**

In an interview giving advice to young filmmakers, Dunye said this: “Just let yourself go. Stop stopping yourself. Stop being a naysayer, and say yes to yourself…Make mistakes.

They can always be corrected. You have to experience life to have a life.”

And I think that’s good advice to live by. I wish you all the best of luck, and I can’t wait to see the stories—and histories—you tell in the future.