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McWilliam, Kelly. "Girl Meets Girl: Sexual Sitings in Lesbian Romantic Comedies." *Intimate Relationships in Cinema, Literature and Visual Culture*. Eds. Gilad Padva and Nurit Buchweitz. London: Palgrave, forthcoming. http://www.springer.com/us/book/9783319552804

Girl Meets Girl: Sexual Sitings in Lesbian Romantic Comedies

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Abstract

Hollywood romantic comedies are, by and large, an ideologically conservative genre. Based around gender stereotypes and the idealised pursuit, however disguised, of heteropatriarchal monogamy, Hollywood romantic comedies offer countless variations of heteronormative 'intimacy'. How, then, does the shift from 'boy meets girl' to 'girl meets girl' in lesbian romantic comedies—a genre that emerged in 1994 with the release of films like *Bar Girls* and *Go Fish*—effect the representation of intimacy? This chapter focuses on *Better than Chocolate* to investigate how lesbian intimacies, and lesbian sex in particular, occupy space. Where are lesbian intimacies sited and what, if any, negotiations of space are triggered through the embodiment of those intimacies? Ultimately, this chapter argues that through an unusually explicit emphasis on sex, *Better than Chocolate* draws attention to the limited public mobility of lesbian intimacies through a consistent siting of lesbian sex as a site of spatial negotiation.

Keywords

intimacy; lesbian romantic comedies; romantic comedies; cinema; sex

Introduction

Hollywood romantic comedies, or comedies "whose central plot is embodied in a romantic relationship", have been a relatively consistent Hollywood staple since their emergence in 1934 (Mernit 12). They have also been consistently conservative in their representation of that romantic relationship. As Debra A. Moddelmog writes, the "structure of the romantic comedy is fairly predictable: boy meets girl" before "they work through a series of complications and misunderstandings until they are finally joined in marriage or a union presumed to be headed for the altar" (163). Based around gender stereotypes and the idealised pursuit, however disguised, of hetero-patriarchal monogamy, Hollywood romantic comedies thus offer countless variations of hetero-normative intimacy (Rubinfeld 112). How, then, does the shift from 'boy meets girl' to 'girl meets girl' in lesbian romantic comedies—a genre that emerged in 1994 with the release of films like *Bar Girls* (dir. Giovanni) and *Go Fish* (dir. Troche)—effect the representation of intimacy in the genre? After all, lesbian romantic comedies, as Dennis Allen writes of gay romantic comedies, invest "an ideologically heterosexual genre with a subcultural perspective that it itself modified by this fusion" (84).

This chapter is broadly interested in how lesbian intimacies, and how lesbian sex in particular, occupy space. In cultural geography, it is axiomatic to note that space is sexed. Indeed, for over a decade scholars have emphasised the heteronormativity of public space (see, for example, the work of Bell, Leap, and Valentine). But it is not simply that bodies occupy sexualised space; sexuality itself is "a spatial formation […] in the sense that bodies are sexualised through how they inhabit space" (Ahmed 67). Where, then, are lesbian intimacies sited and what, if any, negotiations of space are triggered through the embodiment of those intimacies? To consider this, I focus on *Better than Chocolate* (dir. Wheeler, 1999), though consider it in the context of other early lesbian romantic

comedies including *Bar Girls* (1994), *Go Fish* (1994), Maria Maggenti's *The Incredibly True Adventure of 2 Girls in Love* (1995), Kelli Herd's *It's in the Water* (1996), Julia Dyer's *Late Bloomers* (1996), and Jamie Babbit's *But I'm a Cheerleader* (1999).

Sexual sitings

All seven lesbian romantic comedies of this chapter depict sex between the central couple though, as Moddelmog writes of both Hollywood and lesbian romantic comedies, the sex is often "implied […] rather than explicitly displayed" (164-5). When it is depicted on-screen in lesbian romantic comedies, sex—or any act "of passionate carnality of whatever duration or profundity" (Frye 53)—between the central couple is overwhelmingly sited in conventional locations, from beds (*2 Girls in Love*, *It's in the Water*, *Late Bloomers*, *Better than Chocolate*, *But I'm a Cheerleader*) and lounges (*Go Fish*) to the cinematic cliché par excellence: in front of the fireplace (*Bar Girls*). As Chris Holmlund writes of mainstream lesbian cinema in general, sex "always takes place in relatively tame and traditional places" (39). Of course, the spaces sex occurs in have the potential to reveal much about the construction of sex and intimacy that occur within them. Space is not simply a "passive backdrop" but, rather, a dynamic site "constructed around particular notions of appropriate sexual comportment" (Hubbard, "Desire" 51). These sitings of lesbian sex thus suggest a number of factors about the representation of sex in the genre.

Perhaps most obviously, siting lesbian sex exclusively within the spaces of the home casts it as familiar and domesticated, and is highly gendered. Sex between men is stereotypically sited in outside spaces like parks and public toilets, which associates gay sex and sexuality with sexual agency and non-monogamy. Conversely, the overwhelming siting of lesbian sex in domestic spaces

—spaces associated with femininity and the private—associates lesbians with monogamy and the family or as “icons of domesticity” (Pellegrini 27). These domestic spaces frame lesbian sex as conventional and conventionally feminine (rather than hyper-feminine, as in much porn, or masculine, as in many earlier stereotypes), which is consistent with the broader genre’s conservative enunciation of gender and intimacy. The domestic spaces of bed- and lounge-rooms are not just physical spaces, then, they are ideological spaces that normalise a particular version of lesbian sex and sexuality, one that plays out the genre’s privileged “script” of monogamous, romantic love (Moddelmog 164).

But the domestic siting of lesbian sex can also be understood in terms of gender privilege and the regulation of public space. Leap, for instance, argues that one reason men are more “closely associated” with sex in public spaces is that there is an inherent danger in potentially being “found”; thus, engaging in public sexual activities in the first place “depend[s] heavily on questions of status and privilege”, such as being male in a patriarchal society (11). The siting of lesbian sex in domestic spaces, aside from being a social norm, equally locates lesbian sex in the safety of the home and away from the heteronormative regulation of public space. Lesbians are not only “expected to confine the expression of their sexuality to the private sphere so as not to contaminate the public” (Lister, *Citizenship* 123), it can also be dangerous to enact lesbian intimacies in public space for fear of homophobic retribution.

These simple, but consistent sitings of lesbian sex in domestic spaces emphasise the limited public mobility or privileges of lesbian intimacies, so it is of interest, then, that these are precisely the spatial negotiations that *Better than Chocolate* foregrounds, in part through its unusually (for the genre) explicit depictions of sex and sexual apparatus. *Better than Chocolate* is set in Vancouver and focuses on the nascent romance of Maggie, a young writer working at the local queer bookshop,

and Kim, a young travelling artist who has just arrived in town. The two meet and move in to a sub-let warehouse apartment almost immediately, after Kim's van is impounded during their first date and she cannot afford to have it released. Their apartment is quickly also home to Maggie's mother, Lila, and younger brother, Paul, who arrive for an unexpected visit the same day and to whom Maggie has not yet 'come out'.

Lesbian negotiations of heteronormative public space are drawn attention to in numerous ways throughout the film. Early in the film Maggie is shown scrubbing "die dyke, die" off the sidewalk in front of the queer bookshop in which she works, for example, and is later shown protesting an imminent raid by Customs for material erroneously claimed to be "obscene". In her protest, Maggie stands naked in the night-time bookshop window with signs over her breasts and genitals that read "obscene lesbian"— locating the lesbian body as a site of spatial contestation—but is soon accosted by four male skinheads who, on seeing her, aggressively proposition her and (unsuccessfully) attempt to break into the locked shop. As Gill Valentine reminds us, the street "and I mean this to include not only the pavement/sidewalk but also the places, such as shops and cafes, which the street contains – is not an asexual space. Rather, it is [. . .] heterosexual" ("(Hetero)sexing" 146). This is emphasised most clearly in the depiction of lesbian sex and, more broadly, lesbian intimacies.

If "all romantic comedies depict at least a kiss" between their leads (Moddlemog 165), then it is significant that the first two attempted kisses between Maggie and Kim are interrupted by men in public space. The first example occurs when Maggie and Kim are asked to leave a cafe by cafe-owner Tony after they attempt to kiss across the table, but are halted just before making contact: "What do you think you're doing? There's no kissing […] Fuck, I got families coming in here!". When Maggie reminds Tony she has previously seen him kissing a woman in the cafe, he responds:

"I'm a man, she was a woman: that's different". The couple, though exasperated, playfully query him with "Handholding? Handholding OK?" before being told to "get out". Though the scene occurs between friends (Maggie and Tony), it nevertheless highlights both the heteronormative policing of public space as well as the couple's attempts, albeit unsuccessful, to negotiate the mobility of lesbian intimacies within that space.

The couple next move to a semi-public space—Kim's van is parked on the street outside Tony's cafe—before they are again interrupted by a man. The interior of Kim's van includes a bed, a desk, curtains, shelves, and various knick knacks that reveal the van to be Kim's primary living space. In other words, the van's interior, as well as Kim's initial invitation to "my place", encourages viewers to read the space as a private, domestic space, even though, as the scene quickly reveals, the van's public context destabilises any real sense of it as private. Inside the van the curtains cast the scene in a burgundy light, imbuing the scene with a sense of passion and of imminent sex. The anticipation of sex is emphasised by the juxtaposition of slow and fast motion: the scene contrasts fast motion shots of traffic and activity outside the van with the comparatively slow, and intense, shots of the women talking and dancing slowly inside the van. The juxtaposition emphasises a kind of 'spatial tension' in the couple's search for an appropriate space to be intimate, with their "location in public (heterosexualised) space as being in tension with the desire for 'privacy'" (Bell 305). The couple eventually move to the bed in Kim's van and, as Kim leans in to begin kissing Maggie and to seemingly initiate sex, they are again interrupted, this time as a man attaches the van to a tow-truck and drives (them) away, dislodging the couple from their oblivious position on the bed.

While these interruptions function in part to frustrate and increase viewers' anticipation of a sex scene, they also foreground how privacy is "public[ly] constituted" (Bernstein and Scanner xiv)

and, from the recurrence of men as ‘interrupters’, hetero-patriarchally managed. Valentine argues:

> age and gender have a profound impact on individuals’ perceptions and experiences of everyday spaces […] in particular, differences between the sexes stem from inequalities of power between men and women which are reflected in the way space is designed, occupied, and controlled. But [. . .] the ability to appropriate and dominate places and hence influence the use of space by other groups is not only the product of gender; heterosexuality is also powerfully expressed in space. (“(Hetero)sexing” 395)

Even in the semi-public privacy of Kim’s van, Maggie and Kim still exceed the boundaries of the limited public mobility of lesbian intimacies—given that it is their intimacies that kept the van parked on the street for so long—and are again interrupted and ejected from the space by a man policing that space.

The couple next move to an ostensibly private space where they are, for the third time, interrupted by a man. This scene occurs in the warehouse apartment after Lila and Paul have arrived and the household has gone to bed for the evening, Lila in the sole bedroom, Paul in the hallway, and Maggie and Kim in a smaller room where they lie awkwardly together on a small lounge. The couple’s spatial relegation to the lounge evidences the comedic conflict of the film: namely, Lila does not know Maggie is a lesbian and consequently does not recognise the women as a couple. As Kim whispers in mock frustration, “maybe” if Lila knew they were a couple “she’d give us the bed!”. Indeed, Lila’s presumption of Maggie and Kim’s heterosexuality is spatially reproduced in the domestic spaces of the home; because they are not recognised as a site of intimacy within the family, they do not have access to conventional sites of intimacy within the home. The scenario

reflects the "schizophrenic spatial lives of many gays, lesbians and bisexuals who are not 'out'" in all spaces or with all people (Hubbard, "Sex" 56) which, to some extent, plays out in the couple's sex scene that evening.

Though Lila has presumed the women's heterosexuality, which is then reproduced in the spatial organisation of the home, the spaces of the home nevertheless threaten to 'out' the couple. In fact, the lesbianism of the apartment and the practices of the couple within it are marked as lesbian in a range of ways, many of which are comically obvious. While there are numerous markers, the most obvious include life-size paint impressions of the couple's nude bodies hanging in the lounge-room that they completed shortly before Lila and Paul arrived; books focused on lesbian sex (including *Good Safe Lesbian Love*, *Lesbian I Am*, and *Lotus Love with a Same-Sex Partner*) that Paul obliviously uses as make-shift weights; and a large number of sex toys (dildos and vibrators) displayed throughout the apartment that Maggie and Kim try (and fail) to hide (signifying a sexual 'excess' that cannot be contained or controlled). Though the books and sex toys are the property of the apartment's unnamed, absent owner, these furnishings nevertheless collectively mark the space not simply as lesbian space, but as *sexualised* lesbian space, as well as hints at the ridiculousness of the wilfully ignorant presumption of heterosexuality in the space in the first place. As Hilary Harris writes, "lesbians can no longer enter the heteronormative narrative—we cannot pass—because our own sexual spaces, practices and apparatuses mark our difference" (205).

These 'spaces' and, in particular, 'apparatuses' also mark the film's comparative explicitness in the context of the genre, too: sex toys are a highly unusual inclusion because of both their sexual explicitness and implicit association with non-normative sexualities. Significantly, Maggie and Kim never use or show any interest in the sex toys, suggesting that they function to provide, to adapt Chris Straayer's work, a "protected walk on the wild side […] without jeopardising romantic

illusions” (p. 220). Indeed, the sex toys spatially foreground lesbian sexuality at the same time as offer a contrast to the couple’s comparatively conservative and romanticised sex in those spaces. The romance of their sex is, in fact, flagged by the couple. Awkwardly re-positioning themselves on the small lounge, Maggie ruefully asks: “Could this be love?”. The couple laugh and Kim responds with mock resignation: “It must be love. There’s no other reason we’d be putting ourselves through this”. While the couple are joking the conversation functions to recuperate the speedy progression of the couple’s intimacies—it is still only the first day the couple have spent together—into the genre’s privileged “script” of monogamous, romantic love (Moddelmog 164).

This is emphasised in the couple’s subsequent sex scene. Candles flicker beside the lounge as conventional symbols of romance as well as signifiers of sexual practices that are in “no way sexually explicit, merely suggestive of a sort of romanticized erotic relationship” (Harris 205). When Kim pulls the covers off them, two slim, white, feminine bodies are visible, both in matching bra and underpants. The outfits code the women’s bodies as feminine, sexualised, and, by keeping them partially clothed, as respectably middle-class (on which see Harris). By removing the covers, Kim not only reveals their sexualised bodies, she also sexualises the space they are sharing and, indeed, sex is almost immediately initiated. Maggie lies on top of Kim and the couple begin kissing, before Kim unclips Maggie’s bra with a flourish, coding Kim as sexually skilled and experienced (qualities typically valorised in male characters in mainstream cinema). Kim’s apparent experience is juxtaposed, perhaps to recuperate the threat of lesbian virility, with the couple’s frequent and decidedly ‘girlish’ giggling fits.

The next shot shows the couple nakedly writhing together, Kim lying on top of Maggie, in an intense, but gentle rhythm; while there is an intensity in the scene there is nothing rough, extreme, or unconventional in their sex. The scene alternates between close-ups and medium shots which,

like the depiction of sex in mainstream lesbian cinema in general, “shows a distinct preference for the caress, the kiss, and the gaze over anything else. […]. Sex […] is never rough” (Holmlund 39). In fact, the “preference for the caress, the kiss, and the gaze” is evident in all of the films of this chapter to the extent that most depict them at the exclusion of all other sexual imagery. This is the case in *Bar Girls, But I’m a Cheerleader, Late Bloomers*, *It’s in the Water*, *2 Girls in Love*, and *Go Fish* (the more graphic depictions in the latter do not occur in the sex scene but, rather, in other characters’ imaginations after the fact). For example, in *Bar Girls* Loretta and Rachael stand in front of the fireplace in Loretta’s lounge-room, which is softly lit by the fire. The scene alternates between close-ups and mid shots focusing on the couple gazing at each other, stroking each other’s face and hair, and kissing. However, moments after the kissing intensifies the camera tilts upwards until the couple’s heads are no longer in the frame, signalling the end of the short scene. The camera similarly tilts away from Alex and Grace kissing in bed in *It’s in the Water* to end the scene, while in *Go Fish*, *Late Bloomers*, *2 Girls in Love*, and *But I’m a Cheerleader* the camera cuts from shots of the couple kissing to post-coital scenes.

However, while consistent with the genre’s general depiction of sex, what is perhaps most interesting about Maggie and Kim’s intimacies in their sex scene is that they are again interrupted by a man. Younger brother Paul hears the women giggling and groaning together and tip-toes down the hall to investigate. The scene presents Paul’s point-of-view from the door as he first sees the women’s feet and lower legs flexing together before the camera pans slowly around the doorway to reveal their naked bodies. Paul immediately tip-toes back down the hall, tripping over furniture and making a noise that catches the couple’s attention. Though temporarily halted, however, Maggie directs Kim to keep going and orgasms seconds later.

The scene differs from the earlier scenes where Kim and Maggie were interrupted and ejected from

public and semi-public spaces. Unlike cafe-owner Tony and the tow-truck driver, it is not Paul's intention to interrupt the women: on making sense of the scene, he immediately retreats. Moreover, Paul, as Maggie's younger sibling is not depicted as having any power over the women or their space. Most importantly, however, on becoming aware of the potential interruption signalled by the noise outside their room, Maggie chooses to ignore it and, in orgasming, asserts, if only temporarily, a sexual agency over the space. As Kath Browne writes, "pleasure can be productive as well as spatialized" (63). Despite its differences from earlier interruptions, however, the scene nevertheless gestures towards the "'false security' of the bedroom" where queer intimacies are often at risk of "intrusion, supervision, and/or disruption" even in the most private spaces (Leap 10-11). As Ruth Lister writes, "notions of privacy, as well as of public space, are exclusionary; the right to privacy being primarily a right of legally married heterosexuals" ("Citizenship" 89-90).

Conclusion

The depiction of intimacy is central to the romantic comedy genre, organised as it is around the formation (or re-formation) of a romantic relationship. But where Hollywood romantic comedies offer countless variations of hetero-normative intimacy in their narration of the idealised pursuit of hetero-patriarchal monogamy, as Moddelmog writes, lesbian romantic comedies' introduction of a lesbian couple is not in itself "enough to subvert or rescript this narrative" (164). Indeed, the lesbian romantic comedies of this chapter are, in many ways, consistent with the representation of intimacy in the broader genre. *Bar Girls*, *Go Fish*, *It's in the Water*, *2 Girls in Love*, *Late Bloomers*, *But I'm a Cheerleader*, and *Better than Chocolate* all privilege the formation of monogamous relationships and preference depictions of kissing, gentle caresses, and romantic gazes in their representation of lesbian intimacies and, specifically, lesbian sex between the central couple. However, these films nevertheless problematise genre conventions by drawing attention to the heterosexual privilege of

enacting intimacies in the first place.

Indeed, these films overwhelmingly site lesbian sex in conventional locations in private spaces, namely in bed- and lounge-rooms, casting lesbian romance in the stereotypical domain of the domestic sphere. But these sexual sitings also draw attention to gender privilege and the regulation of public space. *Better than Chocolate* in particular calls attention to these issues by showing how lesbian mobility in public space becomes constricted the very moment that lesbian intimacies are enacted. Indeed, in every scene where the central couple attempts to be intimate in public space, they are interrupted and ejected from that space by a man. These consistent meditations on the spatial contestations of lesbian intimacies are particularly interesting in a genre that likes to celebrate and enact intimacies with grand public spectacles, such as in *Never Been Kissed* when Josie waits on the pitcher's mound in a packed baseball stadium until Sam walks out to kiss her to the adoring cheers of the crowd. Moddelmog argues that such public spectacles of intimacy are the "genre's most overt way of impressing upon us the ideology of romantic heterosexual love" (167). But in calling attention to the hetero-policing of lesbian intimacies, lesbian romantic comedies also call attention to the "constructed-ness of these 'natural' heterosexual environments" and to the 'constructed-ness' of these normalised heterosexual genre conventions, too (Valentine "Creating" 477). While further research is needed to consider how widespread these representational trends are in the lesbian romantic comedy genre in general, perhaps they nevertheless represent a first step towards breaking down and transgressing these very conventions.

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