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Sapphic Cinema: An Exploration of Films about Gay Women and their Relationship to
American Society in the Reagan Era and Beyond

By
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Heterosexuality has always been privileged within the United States, which has resulted in, among other things, a lack of representation of LGBTQ+ people film, especially women. Sapphic women and all things Sapphic have largely been marginalized in society. Sapphic, coming from the name of the Greek poet Sappho, means women, or things related to women, who are attracted to other women. While men who are attracted to men are discriminated against and marginalized by the homophobia of American society Sapphic women are affected by both homophobia and sexism. The intersection of these two forms of oppression is lesbophobia, discrimination against women who are attracted to women. The education that most Americans receive on the history of LGBTQ+ people in the United States is woefully limited and the majority of it focuses on men or the LGBTQ+ community in general while neglecting Sapphic women. In 2016, California became the first state to include LGBTQ+ history in its required school curriculum.¹ While learning the history of homosexual men is certainly important, the history of gay women is equally important and frequently overlooked.

Films can illustrate the views of cultures as well as the societal values of the time and place where they were made. Studying Sapphic films expands the understanding of Sapphic women during the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries including their lives, values, art, culture, experiences, and more. During the mid-twentieth century, morality codes in Hollywood began to loosen allowing for much greater leeway for people to make films about Queer women. Due to the efforts of LGBTQ+ activists and the increasing trend towards a more progressive and accepting culture there was a greater freedom for artists to create more films about non-heterosexual women. Films about gay women made for straight audiences have told distinctly different stories from those made by Sapphic creators. Overall, while many films about Sapphic

¹ Alex Grubbs, "California Soon to Be First State to Teach LGBT History in Public Schools." CNS News, July 20, 2016, Accessed October 22, 2017, <https://www.cnsnews.com/news/article/alex-grubbs/california-soon-be-first-state-teach-lgbt-history-public-schools>.

characters have included negative stereotypes they have become less overtly homophobic, more common, and more honest as a result of the work of activists and the advancements of political and cultural efforts to achieve equality for Sapphic women. To understand the development of films about Sapphic women it is important to know some crucial aspects of American film history.

Throughout most of the twentieth century film regulations limited the ways that filmmakers could create movies with gay characters. The early days of the film industry were less strictly regulated. Some early films discussed sex, violence, and life in a controversial way which led to protests from groups that were concerned about immorality. Catholic groups began to protest films which led to the Motion Picture Production Code, also known as the Hays Production Code of 1930.² This limited the kinds of stories that could be told in films for a large section of the twentieth century including bans of homosexuality and interracial relationships. The code began to lose importance following World War II and by 1968 its function was replaced by the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) film rating so that the film industry could be more self-regulating.³ After the code ended, there was a greater freedom for filmmakers to make the kinds of movies that they wanted to make. However, there were still unofficial limits as American Cold War culture was concerned about anything it viewed as explicit or pornographic and viewed it as a weakening of morality against the onslaught of communism.⁴ People felt compelled to self-regulate as a result of this and the lasting effects of the Hays Production Code of 1930. The film industry was under official or unofficial censorship for nearly half a century and this restricted the movies that could be made, especially films about

² John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 2012), 281.

³ Leonard J. Leff and Jerold Simmons, *The Dame in the Kimono: Hollywood, Censorship, and the Production Code*, 2nd ed. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 260-261.

⁴ John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, 291.

LGBTQ+ characters. People made films about gay characters before the MPAA but there were far fewer and the stories were limited. However, during the late 1970s and 1980s people established several companies that distributed films about LGBTQ+ characters.

Several companies helped to produce and distribute LGBTQ+ films, two of the most notable being First Run Features and Wolfe Video. First Run Features was established in New York City in 1979 to distribute independent films and it gained a reputation for producing controversial movies. It has been one of the longest surviving independent film companies and it has frequently produced foreign films and films about minority groups including LGBTQ+ people.⁵ Wolfe Video was established in 1985 and it is the largest independent distributor of exclusively LGBTQ+ films. It was founded in California by a woman named Kathy Wolfe, who began distributing films to interested LGBTQ+ people and from there the business grew.⁶ These companies, especially Wolfe Video, arose at a time of change and catered to a population that had previously not seen themselves reflected in most media. The companies helped to facilitate the production of independent films by Sapphic creators; otherwise, many films about Sapphic women would not have been produced. However, it took many cultural and political shifts in LGBTQ+ history in the United States before companies like this could begin to produce films with Sapphic characters.

During the nineteenth century the idea of being a lesbian had not entered the mainstream American consciousness. While there were women who would be considered lesbians in the twenty-first century, their relationships were not viewed in that sense. “Romantic friendships” and “Boston Marriages” were accepted institutions where women had strong relationships and

⁵ "About First Run Features." First Run Features. Accessed December 7, 2017. <https://www.firstrunfeatures.com/about.html>.

⁶ "About Wolfe." WolfeVideo.com. Accessed December 7, 2017. <https://www.wolfevideo.com/pages/intro>.

possibly cohabitated and combined finances. These relationships were accepted as women were viewed as incapable of being sexual outside of relationships with men.⁷ As long as these relationships did not cause women to dismiss male suitors they were acceptable. However, this was a privilege largely only available to wealthy women. Some working class women were arrested and trial records show that at least some of these relationships definitely had a sexual aspect.⁸ In 1890, “lesbian” first appeared in a medical dictionary to describe lesbian sex and it increased in usage within society which was instrumental in creating the modern conception of lesbianism.⁹ Sexologists claimed that lesbians were abnormal, sick, and men trapped in women’s bodies. Author Lillian Faderman argued that the timing of this changing terminology was suspicious as it came at a time when there were greater economic and educational opportunities for women allowing them more ability to support themselves.¹⁰ At a time when women were increasingly able to live alone or with other women society began to label those women who chose to be with other women abnormal. The origin of the word lesbian and the implications that it brought with it ended the era of “romantic friendships” and brought the history of LBPQ+, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, and queer women into the modern era.

During the 1940s, more young people worked in the city or joined the military allowing them to live away from their families and instead with people of their age and gender which created an environment where being gay was more possible but also more dangerous. This allowed gay people to develop community and subcultures. Articles, books, and music appeared about gay subjects. However, increasing visibility may have been more of a double-edged sword.

⁷ Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 1-2.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁹ Bonnie Zimmerman, *Lesbian Histories and Culture: An Encyclopedia*, *Encyclopedia of Lesbian and Gay Histories and Cultures*; v. 1. (New York: Garland Pub, 2000),

¹⁰ Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America*, 6.

Suspicion of gay people grew in the 1950's. Some believed that communism was caused by LGBTQ+ people, or that gay people in government was just as dangerous. President Eisenhower passed an executive order shortly after his inauguration in 1953 which including a new provision for evaluating government employees, "sexual perversion." This effectively banned homosexuals from holding government jobs.¹¹ This was difficult for LGBTQ+ people particularly lesbians as sexism already restricted women's economic options.¹² Discrimination and oppression continued to be problems for Sapphic women in many areas of their lives.

After World War II, gay culture began to grow and more gay and lesbian, mostly gay, bars were established.¹³ Gay and lesbian bars were often raided, especially near elections, when politicians were attempting to gain public favor. These raids could be devastating for people, sometimes large groups of women were arrested and their names were published in the newspaper. This could lead to them losing their jobs and place in society. The intent of these bar raids was to terrorize and humiliate lesbians. Police officers could show up at any time to jeer, manhandle, molest, and arrest anyone at a gay or lesbian bar.¹⁴ Despite the risk, these bars were essential for some lesbians as they offered just about the only space they could be themselves.

Working class and young lesbians frequented lesbian bars and within this community butch and femme subculture began to develop. Butch and femme were identities that meant different things to different people but mostly they referred to a style of dress, behavior, and dating customs. Butch lesbians tended to dress and act in a more masculine way while femmes tended to perform a more traditionally feminine ideal of gender expression. Both styles were gender non-conforming as they were not about appealing to men or societally constructed

¹¹ Charles Kaiser, *The Gay Metropolis*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1998, 80.

¹² John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, 293.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 291.

¹⁴ Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America*, 165-166.

expectations of womanhood. Butch and femme were essential to lesbian life, and they were almost required within the bars. Women who did not conform to either style were called kikis and they were often distrusted by other lesbians. There were various reasons for this. Lesbians feared undercover police officers which led them to distrust anyone who did not seem to fit into the community.¹⁵ For some their butch or femme identity was essential to who they were but for others these styles were fluid and important only as a part of being in the community. Either way butch and femme identity was a large part of the lives of working class and young lesbians.

Following World War II, during the 1950s and 60s, different oppressed groups such as women and Black people began to build social movements to gain respect and rights within American society. Gradually, LGBTQ+ people created organizations to support their community such as the Daughters of Bilitis, the first lesbian civil rights organization in the United States. These sorts of organizations held meetings, disseminated information, and led efforts to change legal and medical views that discriminated against LGBTQ+ people. There was a growing gay rights movement but it still had yet to reach the full potential that it achieved.¹⁶

In the early morning hours on June 28, 1969, at the Stonewall Inn, a LGBTQ+ bar in New York City, police raided the bar. Four officers entered and began the usual harassment and arrests. However, instead of running the bar's patrons stood their ground. They began to fight the police, throwing bricks and garbage, fires were started, property was destroyed, and people painted graffiti with gay and transgender messages.¹⁷ The riots continued for multiple days and became a rallying cry for the new gay rights movement. It led more people to get involved and be more active in fighting for their rights. Stonewall marked the beginnings of Pride parades and

¹⁵ Ibid., 168.

¹⁶ John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, 320.

¹⁷ Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America*, 194-195.

while the gay rights movement had been growing it was this event, more than any other, that led it to its take off.

The 1970s saw a rise of progressive views and expressions of sexuality as well as a backlash. During this time birth control was more widely available, people talked more about premarital sex, and people openly discussed gaining pleasure from sex. However this sexual revolution wasn't completely triumphant and the New Right, a new conservative movement, rose to prominence in the late 1970's. The Republican Party took up the platform of devotion to personal and Christian morality and repression of this new expression of sexuality. They stood for what they saw as traditional family values. Some Christians began to see the nation as having moved too far into an immoral state that no longer preserved the values that they held dear.¹⁸ This faction believed themselves to be disenfranchised and they joined other conservatives and helped to elect Ronald Reagan as president in 1980.

Reagan's election was in part a reaction against campaigns in the United States by minority groups such as the Civil Rights movement, feminism, and the gay rights movement. The religious fundamentalist crusade had many followers including Anita Bryant. Bryant was a Southern Baptist and former Miss Oklahoma. She was a signer and worked in several advertising campaigns; she became a wholesome model of white, heterosexual America.¹⁹ In the late 1970s she was part of a campaign to repeal a Florida law that prohibited discrimination based on sexual orientation.²⁰ She was elected president of a newly formed conservative Christian organization called Save Our Children, which argued that children needed to be protected from gay people.

¹⁸ Eric Foner, *Give Me Liberty!: An American History*, 2nd ed, (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2008), 1030.

¹⁹ Robert Aldrich and Garry Wotherspoon, eds. *Who's Who in Contemporary Gay & Lesbian History From World War II to the Present Day*, (Routledge, 2001) 62-63.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 63.

Her status as America's darling was used to run a highly successful campaign and the law was repealed.²¹ Bryant's story is indicative of the power of American homophobia at the time.

Bryant was not the only crisis facing the gay community. In the early 1980s, scientists began to observe a new disease killing people in the United States later referred to as HIV/AIDS. From the beginning the medical community was aware the disease was not isolated to homosexual men but the media dubbed it GRID, gay-related immune deficiency, in 1982.²² The disease spread within the gay male community in part due to coincidence, the tight-knit nature of gay social circles, and the unprotected, non-monogamous sex.²³ As AIDS began to spread gay men took steps to prevent this by encouraging monogamy and educating people on the importance of using condoms. Prior to the AIDS crisis, gay men and lesbians had not been very closely affiliated.²⁴ While they shared some social circles and common enemies, plenty of lesbians had very little interaction with gay men or had made efforts to eradicate men from their lives entirely. The disease brought them together. While some lesbians did not want to help because they blamed gay men, felt that they wouldn't help lesbians if they were in trouble, or felt that men's concerns were constantly overshadowing women's. Despite this many lesbians felt strongly compelled to take up the cause and do what they could to help gay men. Women gathered together and organized blood drives, fundraisers, and other volunteer opportunities to help gay men with AIDS. The AIDS crisis among other things helped to unite the LGBTQ+

²¹ Ibid.

²² Lawrence K. Altman, "New Homosexual Disorder Worries Health Officials." *The New York Times*, May 11, 1982, Accessed October 22, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/1982/05/11/science/new-homosexual-disorder-worries-health-officials.html?scp=1&sq=New%20homosexual%20disorder%20worries%20officials&st=cse>.

²³ John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, 355.

²⁴ Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America*, 293.

community during the 1980s into one powerful force. Lesbian efforts to help gay men came from a place of compassion and proved extremely helpful during this dangerous time.²⁵

The government and the rest of the American public was less helpful. Ronald Reagan made almost no effort to assist in efforts to curb the spread of AIDS. He refused to acknowledge it for years and AIDS research remained chronically underfunded despite the fact that tens of thousands of people were dying.²⁶ Historian Lucas Richert has argued that Reagan greatly mismanaged the AIDS crisis and his lack of proactive action exacerbated the disaster.²⁷ Other politicians advocated for the reinstatement of anti-sodomy laws and many people thought that AIDS was a punishment for the immoral behavior of homosexual men. AIDS had a devastating impact on the LGBTQ+ community. One gay judge from New York City, Richard Failla, said, “The psychological impact of AIDS on the gay community is tremendous. It has done more to undermine the feelings of self-esteem than anything Anita Bryant could have ever done. Some people are saying ‘Maybe we are wrong- maybe this is a punishment.’”²⁸

While Sapphic women struggled with danger and discrimination during the 1980s they did begin to make more films about LBPQ+ women. While some films came out before then it was not until the 1980s that a large number began to be released. There were not many Sapphic films made in the 1980s especially not by gay creators. One of the most impactful lesbian films of the decade was *Desert Hearts*. *Desert Hearts* was a film made in 1986 based upon a novel by Jane Rule and directed by Donna Deitch, both gay women. It was about a college professor named Vivian Bell who traveled to Nevada for the summer where she developed a relationship

²⁵ Ibid., 293-295.

²⁶ John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, 360.

²⁷ Lucas Richert, 2009, "Reagan, Regulation, and the FDA: The US Food and Drug Administration's Response to HIV/AIDS, 1980-90." *Canadian Journal Of History* 44, no. 3: 467-487, Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost (accessed September 18, 2017).

²⁸ John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, 355-356.

with Cay Rivers, a local confident lesbian.²⁹ It was a successful film, grossing nearly twice its budget.³⁰ The film was one of the earliest movies made by LBPQ+ creators to portray a lesbian relationship in a positive and supportive way. The love story of the film would have been socially acceptable had it not been between two women. While it does not push far in terms of content that would be viewed as controversial it was kind and respectful of its Sapphic characters.

The Color Purple was a 1985 film directed and adapted by men based upon the book by Alice Walker. It was about a woman named Celie and it followed her throughout her long and difficult life. During the story, she fell in love and had a relationship with a singer named Shug Avery.³¹ The film was directed by Stephen Spielberg and starred famous actors such as Whoopi Goldberg, Danny Glover, and Oprah Winfrey. It was very successful, well-reviewed, and became a very high-grossing film.³² The film heavily downplayed the relationship between Celie and Shug to the point that it could almost be overlooked. However, it did preserve many themes of the original story such as the focus on Black women, the strength of women even in the face of the struggles of racism, misogyny, and poverty and the importance of relationships between women. While the film limited its lesbian themes it was still an important movie about women.

She Must Be Seeing Things was made in 1987 and it was different from *Desert Hearts* and *The Color Purple* as it showed a less positive and more controversial illustration of a Sapphic relationship. It was a film about two women, Agatha, a lawyer, and Jo, a filmmaker.³³ When

²⁹ *Desert Hearts*, Directed by Donna Deitch, Performed by Helen Shaver and Patricia Charbonneau, United States, 1985, DVD.

³⁰ "Desert Hearts (1985)" IMDb, Accessed September 17, 2017.
http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0089015/?ref_=nv_sr_1.

³¹ *The Color Purple*, Directed by Steven Spielberg, Screenplay by Menno Meyjes, Performed by Whoopi Goldberg, Danny Glover, and Margaret Avery, United States: Warner Bros., 1985, DVD.

³² "The Color Purple (1985)" IMDb, Accessed September 18, 2017,
<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0088939/>.

³³ *She Must Be Seeing Things*, Directed by Shelia McLaughlin, Performed by Shelia Dabney and Lois Weaver, United States: First Run Features, 1987, DVD.

Agatha found a journal about Jo's past relationships with men she became suspicious that Jo was cheating on her with a man. Her jealousy seemed to be portrayed as mostly unfounded though the film was somewhat ambiguous. In the end the two were able to connect and repair their relationship from the strain that had occurred.³⁴ *She Must Be Seeing Things* was directed by Shelia McLaughlin, a lesbian, feminist filmmaker. The film's expression of sexuality is somewhat darker and less positive than other films from around the same period which led to some criticism from viewers. As Alison Darren notes in her book, *Lesbian Film Guide*, many lesbians were unhappy with the film as they believed that it had negative, stereotypical portrayals of Sapphic women and catered to heterosexuals³⁵.

Desert Hearts, *The Color Purple*, and *She Must Be Seeing Things* displayed the ways that Sapphic creators sought to tell their stories and how the politics and culture during the time period affected LBPQ+ women. *Desert Hearts* was a film that showed an authentic and positive depiction of a lesbian relationship. The director, Dietch, committed completely to making this film because she believed that it was a story that had not yet been told. Dietch stated that all other films seemed to be tragic or catering towards heterosexual audiences.³⁶ Dietch devoted herself to fundraising, and she was so dedicated to the project that she campaigned for years and eventually sold her own house to help cover the costs.³⁷ Since *Desert Hearts* was made by Sapphic women, it had a more authentic and honest portrayal that didn't rely on popular narratives about the struggles of being gay and the perceived inherent tragedy of living as a lesbian. While *The Color Purple* was written by Alice Walker, a Sapphic woman, it was only

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Alison Darren, *Lesbian Film Guide*, (London; New York: Cassell, 2000), 191-192.

³⁶ Clarke Taylor, "New Films Treat Gays As A Matter Of Fact," *Chicago Tribune*, 1986, Accessed September 28, 2017, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1986-03-12/features/8601180757_1_gay-film-larry-kardish-ira-deutschman/.

³⁷ Ibid.

adapted from her work so her influence was limited. The lesbian relationship within the film was mostly subtext because it was a mainstream film in a homophobic society that was already pushing boundaries by focusing on Black women. *She Must Be Seeing Things* was an attempt by a lesbian filmmaker to diversify representations of LBPQ+ women, but it was not supported by many lesbians because it contained negative stereotypes. Lesbians may have reacted more strongly to this because of the homophobia within society. Lesbians felt pressured to support only positive representations of themselves as negative misinformation would reinforce the negative opinions of straight audiences towards LGBTQ+ people. There were undesirable stereotypes within the movie such as the notion that women will always be attracted to men in some way. While stereotypes do represent the experiences of some people, many others feel compelled to distance themselves from “those kinds of people” who fit stereotypes considered negative by mainstream society. However, lesbian audiences may have been less concerned by this if homophobia was not a dangerous ever-present reality in their lives. Ultimately, it is clear within these films that they were made by Sapphic women and they are influenced by these women’s experiences in the 1980s.

Distinctly different from these movies were those made by men and heterosexual women during the same time period. The 1982 movie, *Personal Best* was a partially positive portrayal of Sapphic women, but it had a limited perspective emblematic of its heterosexual, male creators and the time period. *Personal Best* was about two women, both aspiring Olympic track athletes, named Chris Cahill and Tory Skinner who fell in love. Their relationship was pulled apart by their coach’s interference, and Chris fell in love with a male athlete but the two ended on good terms.³⁸ The movie was unsuccessful and did not come close to making back its budget.³⁹

³⁸ *Personal Best*, Directed by Robert Towne, Performed by Mariel Hemingway and Patrice Donnelly, United States: Geffen Company, 1982, DVD.

Audiences did not flock to see *Personal Best* as it alienated both straight and gay audiences. The film did show Sapphic women and Chris was happy. But Tory was ignored for most of the film and by the end there were not any people in Sapphic relationships which freed the creators of the film from fully saying that LBPQ+ women can be in happy and fulfilling relationships.⁴⁰ There were several scenes containing nudity. Many of these nude scenes were non-sexual which could be viewed as a progressive idea of portraying the human body. However, despite the fact that this nudity was non-sexual it would still be sexualized by audiences. The filmmakers' intentions became even clearer in their poster which featured the actress who played Chris in a wet t-shirt leaning backwards with her eyes closed and mouth open in the arms of the actress who played Tory. This image was paired with the tagline, "How do you compete with a body you've already surrendered to your opponent?"⁴¹ The poster looked very voyeuristic and seemed clearly intended to intrigue its audience with taboo sexual imagery. *Personal Best* was a movie that showed being a gay woman as a struggle with no happy and successful gay relationship. While it had some positive aspects, it was also voyeuristic and included stereotypes.

The 1980 film, *Windows*, was more negative in its portrayal of a lesbian. It was about a woman, Emily, who was sexually assaulted by a strange man. This man was hired by her lesbian neighbor, Andrea, who was in love with her and wanted a recording of her moaning. Andrea also murdered Emily's cat and neighbor, spied on Emily, and took her prisoner in an effort to get closer to her.⁴² This film was protested by gay rights activists for its dreadful stereotypes of

³⁹ "Personal Best (1982)," IMDb, Accessed September 29, 2017, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0084489/>.

⁴⁰ Alison Darren, *Lesbian Film Guide*, 165-166.

⁴¹ The Geffen Company, "Personal Best Poster," Advertisement, Movieposter.com, Accessed September 29, 2017, https://www.movieposter.com/poster/MPW-87184/Personal_Best.html.

⁴² *Windows*, Directed by Gordon Willis, By Barry Siegel, Performed by Talia Shire, Elizabeth Ashley, and Joe Cortese, United States: United Artists, 1980.

lesbians.⁴³ *Windows* perpetuates the notion of the dangerous predatory lesbian who preys on innocent straight women which was a common stereotype that inspired fear of lesbians.⁴⁴ It was a fairly unsuccessful film that was generally disliked by critics. Overall, it was a film that featured an insulting and dangerous portrayal of a lesbian.

The 1980s were a very difficult time for LGBTQ+ people. There was a rise of a new tide of conservatism and homophobia and the impacts of AIDS served to feed into homophobic notions while taking the lives of thousands of people. The gay community grew stronger and more unified and there were efforts by activists to further the cause of gay rights. Films made by gay women generally sought to portray Sapphic relationships in a more authentic way than had previously been shown. Most of the films made by Sapphic and non-Sapphic people were on the surface positive but many of them still perpetuated negative stereotypes such as crazy lesbians and lesbians that were secretly straight. Overall the films from this period commonly portrayed romantic relationships that would have been generally non-threatening if they had not been between two women. The 1990s were a distinctly different time characterized by a changing of the tides of history and more unique, diverse films that were unlike those made during the 1980s.

Following Ronald Reagan's terms in office, George H.W. Bush, another Republican, was elected president. However, due to a recession caused by financial practices during the Reagan administration, Bush lost public favor. In the next election, the American people voted for a Democrat, Bill Clinton. Clinton instituted several new progressive policies and appointed several minorities and liberal people to government positions.⁴⁵ But, as the recession continued into

⁴³ Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies*, Rev. ed, Triangle Classics, New York: Quality Paperback Book Club, 1995.

⁴⁴ Alison Darren, *Lesbian Film Guide*, 3.

⁴⁵ Eric Foner, *Give Me Liberty!: An American History*, 1056-1057.

1994, Clinton began to lose popularity.⁴⁶ This led to rise of conservatism led by Representative Newt Gingrich who created what he called the “Contract with America.” It sought to limit the size of government, end environmental regulations, reduce the welfare system, and end affirmative action. However, the American people did not support this, and Gingrich lost popularity when Congress was unable to agree upon a budget. Despite the fact that the United States experienced an economic boom and recovered from the recession, wealth inequality began to grow as the poor and middle class began to fall further below the wealthy. Clinton’s presidency ended in controversy when he was tried for carrying on affair with Monica Lewinsky, a White House intern and committing perjury during his testimony. However, he was acquitted of this charge.⁴⁷ Before the end of the Clinton administration significant legislation passed which greatly affected LGBTQ+ people.

From its inception in 1994 to its ending in 2011, Don’t Ask Don’t Tell (DADT) was a policy that drew controversy from all sides. For decades, gay people had been banned from or discriminated against within the military. DADT stated that LGBTQ+ people were allowed to serve in the military if they did not discuss their sexuality or romantic life. Other members of the military were not allowed to discriminate or harass any people that were gay or suspected of being gay.⁴⁸ This was a compromise that allowed gay people to be relatively protected in the military while not fully alienating homophobic military and political figures. Conservatives disapproved because they viewed LGBTQ+ people as, among other things, predatory, promiscuous, and immoral. DADT had very real consequences for LGBTQ+ people. Thousands

⁴⁶ Ibid., 1057.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 1084.

⁴⁸ Aaron Belkin, Morten G. Ender, Nathaniel Frank, Stacie R. Furia, George Lucas, Gary Packard, Steven M. Samuels, Tammy Schultz, and David R. Segal, "Readiness and DADT Repeal: Has the New Policy of Open Service Undermined the Military?(Don't Ask, Don't Tell)(Author Abstract)," *Armed Forces & Society: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 39, no. 4 (2013): 587-601.

of people were discharged from the military in between 1994 and 2011 for being gay or suspected of being gay. A disproportionate number of these people were women.⁴⁹ Ultimately it was a damaging policy that, while it did offer some protections to gay people, it restricted people's freedoms, caused over ten thousand people to lose their jobs, and still resulted in insecurity for gay people.

During the 1990s there was some progress towards marriage equality as the case of *Baehr v. Lewin* traveled through the Hawaiian court system. After three same gender couples applied for marriage licenses the case started and it debated whether or not the state could constitutionally deny homosexual couples the right to get married. There was a commission created within the Hawaiian government that suggested that there should be a domestic partnership system that extended benefits similar to those from marriage to same-sex couples.⁵⁰ Ultimately, very little significant legal impact was made from this case and gay marriage was not legalized in Hawaii until 2013. However, the case did worry many people who were opposed to marriage equality but it represented one of the first significant victories towards the legalization of same-sex marriage. In 1996, there was a Republican majority in Congress that feared some states would begin to legalize same-sex marriage so Representative Bob Barr proposed the Defense of Marriage Act also known as DOMA. This bill said that states did not have to recognize marriages between people of the same gender even if they were legal in other states. Furthermore it defined marriage on a federal level as between a man and a woman and denied gay and lesbian couples any of the benefits or privileges that were extended to heterosexual

⁴⁹ Rosalind Rosenberg, *Divided Lives: American Women in the Twentieth Century*, Rev. ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2008), 262.

⁵⁰ William N. Eskridge, *The Case for Same-Sex Marriage: From Sexual Liberty to Civilized Commitment*, (New York: Free Press, 1996), 162-166.

married couples. Ultimately, the law passed in 1996.⁵¹ DOMA slowed efforts for marriage equality and domestic partnership laws.

Despite the danger and tragedy that existed in the world for LGBTQ+ people filmmakers continued to develop their art. During the 1990s there were an increasing number of films made by Sapphic creators that authentically and positively portrayed romantic relationships between LBPQ+ women. *Late Bloomers* was a 1996 movie that showed a positive romantic relationship and it addressed the movement for legal same-gender marriage. It was about a married school secretary named Carly who began a relationship with the basketball coach, Dinah, at her school when they began to play basketball together. The two women grew stronger as their relationship developed but when word got out about their relationship they were humiliated harassed and fired. Despite all of this Carly and Dinah decided to stay together and at the end of the film they got symbolically married.⁵² This film sought to address some of the issues that were facing LBPQ+ women at the time. It portrayed the kind of workplace discrimination that greatly inhibited the economic opportunities of lesbians. In addition to this the film featured a lesbian wedding at a time when gay marriage was beginning to gain traction but the backlash against it was also developing. The movie showed sympathetic characters in a healthy and relatable romance. It showed that they should not have experienced the kinds of struggles that they did.

Far more dangerous crises faced the LGBTQ+ community than the fight for marriage equality. Reparative or Conversion Therapy was a pseudo-scientific practice designed to change people's gender or sexuality to make them cisgender, someone who is the gender they were assigned at birth, and or heterosexual. This practice experienced a resurgence in the 1990's with

⁵¹ John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, 267.

⁵² *Late Bloomers*, By Gretchen Dyer, Directed by Julia Dyer, Performed by Connie Nelson and Dee Hennigan, United States, 1996, DVD.

prominently placed add campaigns and supportive new stories.⁵³ Many organizations that practiced conversion therapy did so for religious beliefs but there were also secular organizations designed to change people. These organizations use a variety of different practices because conversion therapy is not accepted by mainstream medical organizations so it has no common guidelines or procedures. Different individuals and organizations offer inpatient and outpatient services. Some techniques that have been used in conversion therapy during the twentieth and twenty-first century included aversion therapy, talk therapy, and in some cases electroconvulsive therapy.⁵⁴ Many programs have used tactics designed to humiliate patients and destroy their self-image which has been shown to be very damaging. The American Psychological Association (APA) has denounced conversion therapy as homosexuality is not a disease and efforts to alter sexuality have not been proved effective. The APA has shown that those who experience conversion therapy are 8.9 times more likely to attempt suicide.⁵⁵ As of September 2017, nine states as well as several counties and cities within the United States have banned conversion therapy for minors. Despite changing attitudes in the 2010s, conversion therapy has created a legacy that has affected public perceptions and personal lives of LGBTQ+.

But I'm a Cheerleader was a 1999 film about a cheerleader named Megan who was sent to a gay conversion camp after her family and friends all concluded that she was a lesbian. While she was utterly convinced that she was straight after she arrived she met a group of gay and

⁵³ Jonathan Merritt, "How Christians Turned Against Gay Conversion Therapy," *The Atlantic*. April 15, 2015, Accessed December 8, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/04/how-christians-turned-against-gay-conversion-therapy/390570/>.

⁵⁴ Stephanie Pappas, "5 Things You Should Know About Gay Conversion Therapy," *LiveScience*, November 27, 2012, Accessed December 8, 2017, <https://www.livescience.com/25082-gay-conversion-therapy-facts.html>.

⁵⁵ Nico Lang, "Conversion Therapy is "Torture": LGBT Survivors are Fighting to Ban "Pray the Gay Away" Camps," *Salon*. March 21, 2017, Accessed December 8, 2017, <https://www.salon.com/2017/03/21/conversion-therapy-is-torture-lgbt-survivors-are-fighting-to-ban-pray-the-gay-away-camps/>.

lesbian teens and engaged in a variety of activities intended to make the young people straight. All of this was unsuccessful, and Megan began a relationship with Graham, another lesbian at the camp, and together they embraced their sexualities and fell in love.⁵⁶ The film was a zany comedy starring RuPaul, a famous gay celebrity, as one of the camp administrators. *But I'm a Cheerleader* took a truly terrible situation that resulted in death and serious harm to many LGBTQ+ young people and turned it into a comedy that satirized this practice. It systematically showed that trying to make someone straight was ridiculous and cruel. *But I'm a Cheerleader* and *Late Bloomers* portrayed a positive example of a romance between lesbians. These movies helped to normalize lesbian life for Sapphic women as well as for all audiences. The desire to normalize gay life was common among Sapphic women for decades which resulted in many films like these, but other filmmakers were not concerned with appearing normal.

In the 1990s, increasing numbers of LGBTQ+ filmmakers created movies unlike those of the past decades and they were known as part of a movement called New Queer Cinema. New Queer Cinema did not consider it important to have happy endings or respectable characters; they sought to create more complex and diverse examinations of sexuality.⁵⁷ Conservative audiences viewed them as pornographic and some gay audiences viewed them as confusing, overly negative, or sexist and racist. New Queer Cinema drew its roots from the AIDS crisis, the renewed activism that came after it, and the activist movies made about AIDS. These activists, hardened from the AIDS crisis used these films to explore their world. New Queer Cinema was characterized by its defiance against societal norms and its audacious style of storytelling. It mixed different genres and narrative formats to cause audiences to question and examine the

⁵⁶ *But I'm a Cheerleader*, Directed by Jamie Babbit, Performed by Natasha Lyonne and Clea Duvall, United States, 1999, DVD.

⁵⁷ Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin, *Queer Images: A History of Gay and Lesbian Film in America*, (Lanham (Etats-Unis): Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 220.

nature of storytelling.⁵⁸ New Queer Cinema's rebellious style was a reaction against homophobic society and against respectable, upper class gay society.⁵⁹ New Queer Cinema was a significant and defiant movement that produced many notable films during the 1990s.

In 1997, Cheryl Dunye wrote and directed a notable film from the New Queer Cinema movement entitled *The Watermelon Woman*. This made her the first Black lesbian who was public about her sexuality to direct a film that was distributed in the United States.⁶⁰ This movie was partially shot in a documentary style. It was about a woman named Cheryl who worked at a video store to support her documentary about Fae Richards, a forgotten Black actress from the 1940s.⁶¹ This movie has a unique exploration of identity. It was outwardly about a Black woman making a film to explore the life of a woman that she strongly identified with; both of them were Black lesbians in the film industry who were unappreciated. Cheryl felt a kinship with Fae and became almost obsessively invested in telling her story. The character of Cheryl seems, at best, a loosely fictional persona based heavily on Dunye's own feelings and experiences. Through this film she was able to make a statement about her own sense of identity as a Black, lesbian, feminist filmmaker.

During the 1990s several films were made that featured not just one Sapphic woman or a couple but circles of friends who were all or basically all Sapphic women. These films were all made by Sapphic women and they appealed uniquely to lesbian audiences because they featured large groups of gay women and had a distinctly gay voice that spoke to humor and culture that

⁵⁸ Ibid., 221-222.

⁵⁹ Michele Aaron, ed, *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 7.

⁶⁰ Nick Davis, *The Desiring-Image: Gilles Deleuze and Contemporary Queer Cinema*, (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2013), 106.

⁶¹ *The Watermelon Woman*, Directed by Cheryl Dunye, Performed by Cheryl Dunye, United States: First Run Features, 1997, DVD.

blossomed in communities of LBPQ+ women. *Go Fish* was a movie from 1994 that was loosely based upon the experiences of the creators living in the Chicago lesbian community. It was about a lesbian named Max who was set up on a date with a woman named Ely who she initially did not find attractive but together they worked through their issues with one another and began a relationship. This story was only a portion of the film which featured a large number of Sapphic characters and, through a series of meta-theatrical conventions that frequently broke the fourth wall, it expressed experiences and problems of lesbians at the time. It included one scene where a group of gay women gathered in a classroom to discuss lesbians from history.⁶² This scene addressed the paucity of lesbian figures in history and present society due to the dismissal and erasure of lesbian women. These women felt the desire to be represented and to see themselves reflected in their society. They wished to claim their own roots with the history of humanity. It includes many jokes specific to the Sapphic community about love, sex, and dating. While it has also appealed to straight audiences its main draw has been with LBPQ+ women because of its clear and distinct understanding of their experiences.⁶³

As Alison Darren noted the director of a film called *Bar Girls*, Marita Giovanni, intended her movie to be not a “coming out” but a “being out” film.⁶⁴ In many ways this is precisely the reason for the appeal of films like this. Rather than showing one or two women trying to come to terms with their sexuality they show a whole group of women who already know who they are. This made the film free to tell other types of stories about other problems that may or may not be specific to lesbians. Creating a “being out” movie allowed the creator to tell stories about gay women that may or may not be about their sexuality, it opened the film up to a greater range of

⁶² *Go Fish*, Directed by Rose Troche, By Guinevere Turner, Performed by V.S. Brodie and Guinevere Turner, United States, 1994, DVD.

⁶³ Alison Darren, *Lesbian Film Guide*, 16.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

stories but despite this, “being out” films were not very common. They also appealed to Sapphic audiences because they usually included many queer characters as well as jokes and political topics that were specific to LBPQ+ women. These films and others like them represented a distinctly different tone that clearly showed the impact of their Sapphic creators.

The 1990s also saw an increase in films about Sapphic women that were not made by Sapphic creators. While some of these films were positive representations of lesbians many of them played upon stereotypes of gay women and tropes of the genre. Among these movies were several that featured incredibly tragic stories. While films like *Gia* and *Set It Off* often portrayed gay women as sympathetic characters their lives were always extraordinarily sad. *Gia* was a 1998 film that dramatized the life and career of Gia Caragni, often considered to be one of the first super models. The film illustrated her difficult relationships with her family, her rapid rise to fame, her bisexuality, her drug abuse, and her eventual death as a result of AIDS related complications that she contracted from her drug use.⁶⁵ This film was a TV movie made through HBO; it was quite successful as it won two Golden Globes and one Emmy for acting. The film’s portrayal of Gia’s relationship with her girlfriend was not very positive and showed Gia as an aggressive and unpleasant partner. While this and the excessively tragic story could be justified by the fact that it is based upon a true story the creators still bear some blame for this. The filmmakers chose to tell this story rather than one about someone else and they also edited some details of her life story for dramatic effect including in ways that were not flattering to her memory. *Set it Off* was a movie from 1996 about four black women Stony, Cleo, Frankie, and T.T., who were in desperate need of money due to a series of unfortunate circumstances that, for the most part, stem from the fact that they were impoverished, Black, women. The four women

⁶⁵ *Gia*, Directed by Michael Cristofer, By Jay McInerney, Performed by Angelina Jolie, Faye Dunaway, and Elizabeth Mitchell, United States: HBO, 1998, DVD.

robbed a bank, but discord spread in the group, the crimes became more violent, and a detective caught them. This eventually led to the deaths of three of them.⁶⁶ In the film, Queen Latifah played a lesbian named Cleo. Cleo was very butch and quite stereotypically so. She was portrayed as quick tempered, violent, controlling, and disrespectful towards women. Then, at the end of the film, she died. While in some ways these films showed queer characters as sympathetic people in tragic situations, their problems could be blamed upon their own actions. At the end of their films, Gia and Cleo died, which was a tactic used in many early films about LGBTQ+ characters as a means of avoiding controversy. Movies included gay characters but their stories were tragic and usually ended in their own death or the death of their love as a way to punish the character for being gay and to show that the movie did not support homosexuality.⁶⁷ Repetitive imagery like this was very demoralizing for gay women to watch, especially young gay women, because it reinforced the idea that their life would be terrible and heartbreaking because of their sexuality which they had been taught was wrong. Positive validation of their love was important for lesbian youth.⁶⁸ At this time there were many competing narratives about Sapphic women that had a strong influence on society.

While lesbians had been viewed as mentally ill or a threat to male privilege with their sexuality that excluded men, that all changed; to some people lesbians became fashionable. United States society began to sexualize lesbians. A certain type of lesbian became sexy: one who was beautiful, femme, white, and upper class. She was exceptionally attractive and as

⁶⁶ *Set it Off*, Directed by F. Gary Gray, By Takashi Bufford and Kate Lanier, Performed by Jada Pinkett Smith, Queen Latifah, Vivica A. Fox, and Kimberly Elise, United States, 1996, DVD.

⁶⁷ Alison Darren, *Lesbian Film Guide*, 3.

⁶⁸ John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, 291.

gender conforming and “straight” as possible.⁶⁹ While the butch lesbian was the popular stereotype of lesbians, the media was almost completely devoid of butch lesbians and instead filled with attractive femme lesbians. Lesbian chic symbolically began in 1993 when k.d. lang appeared on the cover of *Newsweek* and even more infamously when she appeared that year on the cover of *Vanity Fair* with Cindy Crawford dressed in a bathing suit shaving her face.⁷⁰ It was during this time that there was a rise in more palatable representations of lesbians. When Ellen DeGeneres came out, was publically honest about her sexuality, in 1997, she appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine with more makeup and jewelry than usual. This made her appear more feminine and not like a threatening lesbian. Ann Ciasullo argued in her article, “Making Her (In)Visible: Cultural Representations of Lesbianism and the Lesbian Body in the 1990s” that this was emblematic of the trend at the time to use femininity to make lesbians appear acceptable and to purify the concept of lesbianism. Ciasullo argued that there was a large movement in the 1990s to make the lesbian appear more beautiful, more feminine, whiter, and less political than the man-hating butch that had been society’s image of a lesbian for decades. Lesbians may be hyper sexualized for a variety of reasons. Possibly it is that women are attractive so two women is twice as attractive. It may also be that a lesbian who is acceptably feminine and attractive to men may be considered someone that they could win over. She may say that she is a lesbian but maybe there is some way for that man to convince her to choose him, an exciting challenge.⁷¹ During the 1990s, a new image of lesbians entered the public conscious and lesbians became fashionable and desirable.

⁶⁹ Ann M. Ciasullo, "Making Her (In)Visible: Cultural Representations of Lesbianism and the Lesbian Body in the 1990s." *Feminist Studies* 27, no. 3 (2001): 577-608.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

In the films *Basic Instinct* from 1992 and *Chasing Amy* from 1997, both written and directed by men, women's same-sex attraction is ignored and used as a voyeuristic gimmick. In *Basic Instinct* a detective named Nick was investigating a woman named Catherine. He was attracted to her but convinced that she murdered her boyfriend. She was also involved with a woman named Roxy. Both of the women were conventionally attractive and the romantic aspect of their relationship seemed nonexistent.⁷² The relationship added little if any to the film or the character it seems as though the relationship was merely used for titillation of the audience and Nick through the hypersexualized and taboo idea of two women together. This illustrates the ways that Sapphic women, and in this case bisexual women, were sexualized and used as ploy.

Chasing Amy was the story of a comic book artist named Holden who met another comic book artist named Alyssa who he was attracted to, however she was a lesbian but he continued to pursue her anyway. However, Holden succeeded in "getting the girl" in the end.⁷³ The character of Alyssa is every stereotype of the "cool lesbian;" she can hang out with the guys, joke about having sex with women, and drink beer while still being a beautiful girl. She is shown to have very little identity out of being Holden's cool lesbian crush. Her career, her interests, and her girlfriend, are all but completely ignored. She lived out the lesbophobic idea of a lesbian who just needed the right man to make her straight. Holden was only offended by the possibility that she might have slept with men before him, he didn't take any of her relationships with women seriously. He considered her a "virgin," and believed he would be the first man to sleep with her. The movie claims to be an example of sexual fluidity but Alyssa's preferences are poorly expressed and unestablished early in the film so it fails to properly portray a woman attracted to

⁷² *Basic Instinct*, Directed by Paul Verhoeven, By Joe Eszterhas, Performed by Michael Douglas and Sharon Stone, United States: TriStar, 1992, DVD.

⁷³ *Chasing Amy*, Directed by Kevin Smith, By Kevin Smith, Performed by Joey Lauren Adams, Ben Affleck, and Jason Lee, United States, 1997, DVD.

more than one gender. Not only was it lesbophobic it was also homophobic. The one gay man in the film, Hooper, was a flamboyant stereotype of a gay man. In addition to this Holden's friend and fellow comic book artist, Banky, was upset with Holden for ignoring him to pursue Alyssa. This and the fact that Banky was homophobic was considered evidence that Banky was secretly gay. The idea that homophobic people are secretly gay is negative because it implies that homophobia is a problem that is only within the gay community and it absolves straight people of responsibility for this bigoted and oppressive system. Holden's solution to losing his best friend and girlfriend was to have a three-way with both of them so that Banky could begin being gay and Holden would be as sexually experienced as Alyssa and he wouldn't be threatened by her. In these three cases the film showed a clear disrespect for gay people by portraying them only as negative stereotypes. Near the end of the movie a man told Holden the story of his ex-girlfriend Amy and the moral of the story and the movie as a whole was to tell men that if they just keep trying women will love them.⁷⁴ *Chasing Amy* includes a woman that fits into the phenomenon of the "consumable lesbian" that was observed by Ciasullo in her article.⁷⁵ Alyssa was beautiful, white, feminine, and her sexuality was non-threatening to men. She offered the possibility that she could become straight at any time and in turn perpetuated the notion that this could be true of any real life lesbian.

Not all of the films made by non-Sapphic creators during this time were negative. In the 1995 film *Boys on the Side*, Whoopi Goldberg starred as a lesbian singer named Jane. Jane went on a road trip with two other women, Holly and Robin. Eventually the three of them moved into a home together in Arizona, and Jane fell in love with Robin. Robin was dying of AIDS, and

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ann M. Ciasullo, "Making Her (In)Visible: Cultural Representations of Lesbianism and the Lesbian Body in the 1990s."

Jane's love for her never materialized into a large plot within the film.⁷⁶ Overall, Goldberg was presented as totally desexualized, and her love for Robin was severely toned down. However it featured a strong emphasis on female friendships and the strength of women. It also included a cameo by the Indigo Girls, a notable lesbian musical group. *Boys on the Side* depicted Jane in a positive way, but it did show her sexuality in the most invisible and nonthreatening way that it could. While there were some good films made by non-Sapphic filmmakers during the 1990s many films about LBPQ+ women were negative, stereotypical, and discriminatory. Sapphic creators made films that positively and authentically represented their identity and complex films that examined and dissected lesbian identity. The 2000s led to a change of politics and change of films that represented a complex diversifying of the kinds of LBPQ+ media that was produced.

The 2000s ushered in a new era of activism and politics. The main narrative about LGBTQ+ politics became focused on the movement for gay marriage. Before the 1990s many gay people fought for the end of laws like anti-sodomy policies that restricted gay peoples' ability to live in peace. During the 1990s and 2000s LGBTQ+ people fought to be able to participate in society and in many institutions that they had been previously excluded from.⁷⁷ Following the passage of the Defense of Marriage Act several states passed laws that created domestic partnerships, non-marital unions that extended some of the benefits of marriage to gay couples, but several other states passed their own laws that defined marriage as between a man and a woman. Conservative backlash began to grow when Massachusetts became the first state to legalize same-sex marriage in 2003. During the next four years the majority of states changed their constitutions and created laws that impeded the path towards marriage equality. Most

⁷⁶ *Boys on the Side*, Directed by Herbert Ross, By Don Roos, Performed by Whoopi Goldberg, Mary-Louise Parker, and Drew Barrymore, United States: Warner Bros., 1995, DVD.

⁷⁷ John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, 373.

Americans were opposed to gay marriage and President George W. Bush supported a constitutional amendment to define marriage as between only a man and a woman.⁷⁸ It took a great deal of effort from LGBTQ+ activists to change public perception of gay marriage and eventually cause legalization in individual states and finally across the nation. In June 2015 in the case of *Obergefell v. Hodges* the Supreme Court ruled that the Constitution guarantees the right for all citizens to marry regardless of gender. But it took the work of many dedicated activists who came before to lead to nation-wide marriage equality.

Laurel Hester was one these activists who advanced efforts for marriage equality. She was a police detective in New Jersey. During her time at Stockton State College she helped to found the school's first gay student organization. She did so under a false name until she was inadvertently exposed. She continued to participate in the organization but it did result in her losing her internship with the local police department. In 1982 she began her career with the Ocean County police department. While her bosses were aware she was a lesbian she was required to remain closeted to keep her job. Hester had wanted to be a police officer since she was a child and she worked with the department for decades.⁷⁹ In 1999, she met Stacie Andree and the two of them fell in love, purchased a home, and became domestic partners in 2004. That year, Hester was diagnosed with lung cancer. As her condition worsened she became concerned that Andree would not be able to afford their home after her death. In New Jersey at the time it was up to the discretion of local governments to extended pension benefits to domestic partners. The government of Ocean County had elected not to do this and they ignored repeated pleas from Hester and the police union. Even when she appeared before the governing board, The

⁷⁸ Ibid., 366.

⁷⁹ "Laurel Hester Biography.com," Biography.com, September 11, 2015, Accessed October 21, 2017, <https://www.biography.com/people/laurel-hester-090915>.

Board of Chosen Freeholders, in person the entirely male and Republican group voted to deny her. One freeholder clearly showed that his opposition was due to the fact that they were a lesbian couple.⁸⁰ Her case gained media and support from various gay rights groups. After all of this pressure was placed upon the Freeholders, they finally capitulated just a few weeks before her death in 2006 at the age of 49.⁸¹ She had wanted to counsel LGBTQ+ youth after her time on the police force, but she died before she could so a scholarship was set up in her honor after her death.⁸² Her work and the work of other gay activists who helped her gained a lot of media attention and heralded an important victory in the fight for gay rights, domestic partnerships, and marriage equality. Her legacy had an incredible impact on the politics and the gay rights movement during the time.

The early twenty-first century saw the rise of a variety of new and types of films. The period of New Queer Cinema had ended. There were increasing numbers of films about queer women, made by both Sapphic and non-Sapphic creators. There were many positive romantic films during this period. The 2004 film *Saving Face* was a romantic comedy about a young surgeon in New York named Wil. She came from a traditional Chinese-American family. At a gathering organized by the Chinese community within New York she met a dancer named Vivian and they fell in love but their relationship fell apart because Wil feared publically expressing their love.⁸³ Wil's mother, Gao, was disowned by the family because she became pregnant with a new child despite being an unmarried widow. Gao accepted a proposal from a

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Michael Wilson, "Lieutenant Who Won Pension Rights for Her Domestic Partner Dies at 49," *The New York Times*, February 20, 2006, Accessed October 21, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/20/obituaries/lieutenant-who-won-pension-rights-for-her-domestic-partner-dies.html>.

⁸² "Laurel Hester Biography.com."

⁸³ *Saving Face*, Directed by Alice Wu, Performed by Michelle Krusiec, Joan Chen, and Lynn Chen, United States: Sony Pictures Classic, 2004, DVD.

man that had loved her even though she did not love him but thanks to Wil she ran away from the wedding and united with the father of her baby who she truly loved. At another gathering like the one that they met at Wil publically danced with Vivian and they began their relationship again.⁸⁴ The story of Wil and her mother parallel one another as both of them found love in way that was controversial and rejected within their community. Both of them found their strength to believe that love was more important than living up to others expectations. In addition to that the mother and daughter strengthened their relationship and embraced the importance of honesty, love, and acceptance. The movie was a very personal story for its writer and director Alice Wu. The story was very similar to her own experiences coming out to her mother. Throughout the process of making the film she was pressured by others to make the film whiter and straighter but she remained committed to telling her story her way and authentically representing her experiences as a Chinese-American lesbian, this was her passion project.⁸⁵ The film was distributed through Sony which showed a growing acceptance from mainstream studios to produce films starring LGBTQ+ characters.

The film *Carol* based on the book *The Price of Salt*, also known as *Carol*, by Patricia Highsmith premiered in 2015. The movie was set in the 1950s and it was about a department store clerk named Therese who fell in love with a housewife in the process of getting divorced named Carol. The two of them went a road trip together and when their relationship became sexual they were exposed and Carol's husband used it evidence against her for their divorce. Carol broke off her relationship with Therese and returned home to sort through her divorce.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ G. Allen Johnson, "Alice Wu saved up her own doubts and struggles and turned them into the new comedy 'Saving Face'," SFGate, June 06, 2005, Accessed October 21, 2017, <http://www.sfgate.com/entertainment/article/Alice-Wu-saved-up-her-own-doubts-and-struggles-2629266.php>.

Carol lost custody of her daughter, she was alone, and her life had fallen apart. Therese ended her relationship with her boyfriend and took time to grow on her own and then Carol sought her out and the two reconnected their relationship.⁸⁶ The movie starred Cate Blanchett and Rooney Mara, two famous actresses at the time, and it was quite successful with a budget of just under twelve million and gross of over forty million within six months.⁸⁷ The film treated the main characters realistically and sympathetically as complex and fully formed characters. It preserved most of Highsmith's original story and characterization. Overall it was an adaption that sought to authentically portray how a lesbian had viewed her world during the 1950s. *Saving Face* and *Carol* were both romantic films that positively portrayed lesbians and showed the unique insight that Sapphic creators had in the creation of films about LBPQ+ women.

During the 2000s and early 2010s, increasing numbers of men and straight women created films about Sapphic women. Some of these were positive but as they had done in previous decades many of them perpetuated stereotypes and tropes about gay women. *Kissing Jessica Stein* was a movie from 2001 about a woman named Jessica Stein who was unlucky in her relationships with men so she decided to have a relationship with a woman. She met a lady named Heather Cooper and their relationship developed well but it was mostly nonsexual and it was implied that Jessica had little to no attraction to other women. As the movie progressed their relationship dissolved, they broke up, and in the final scene Jessica met up with Heather in a café to chat excitedly about successfully flirting with a man she was interested in.⁸⁸ The movie was ostensibly about bisexual women but there was no evidence that before or after the events of the

⁸⁶ *Carol*, Directed by Todd Haynes, Screenplay by Phyllis Nagy, Performed by Cate Blanchett and Rooney Mara, United States: The Weinstein Company, 2015, DVD.

⁸⁷ "Carol (2015)." IMDb. Accessed December 09, 2017. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2402927/>.

⁸⁸ *Kissing Jessica Stein*, Directed by Charles Herman-Wurmfeld, By Jennifer Westfeldt and Heather Juergensen, Performed by Jennifer Westfeldt and Heather Juergensen, United States: Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2001, DVD.

film Jessica had any interest in dating women. It seems as though she chose to date a woman to try it out not because she was really interested in women. At the end of the movie she returned to dating women and had a good friendship with her ex-girlfriend. Ultimately, her romantic relationship with Heather is shown to be basically a friendship. According to *Kissing Jessica Stein* a woman can choose to be bisexual and then choose not to be. It reinforces the idea that all women will eventually be attracted to men and any love for women is only a phase.

In 2015, the movie *Freeheld* premiered. It was an adaptation of the life of Laurel Hester. It told the story of her relationship with Stacie Andree, her illness and fight to be granted equal rights, and her eventual death.⁸⁹ *Freeheld*, like *Gia* before it, was a very tragic film based upon the story of a real LBPQ+ woman who died. *Freeheld* unlike *Gia* included many positive moments from Hester's life but in some ways it did merely show another tragic film about the struggles of being gay. But the film did make an effort to illustrate a happy and successful lesbian romance. It showed the progression of Laurel and Stacie's romance and featured heart-warming scenes showing them buying a home, getting a dog, and registering their domestic partnership together. The film featured famous actresses, Julianne Moore and Ellen Page, who created a believable relationship. The inclusion of Page in the project was especially notable as in the previous year she had come out as a lesbian and begun using her position as a celebrity to appeal for gay rights. The film hired two skilled and famous actresses to portray Hester and Andree's relationship is an uplifting and supportive way. While the first half of the film illustrated this side of the story the second half was ostensibly about Hester's fight for equal rights and her death but it instead focused on her partner at the police department Dane Wells and his support of the couple. For the majority of the remainder of the film Dane, a straight man,

⁸⁹ *Freeheld*, Directed by Peter Sollett, By Ron Nyswaner, Performed by Julianne Moore and Ellen Page, United States: Lionsgate, 2015, DVD.

and his efforts to help Laurel became the center of the movie. *Freeheld* was a movie that should have honored the legacy of a lesbian who advanced the cause for gay rights and marriage equality but instead it became a movie about how helpful and important a straight man was in the movement for equality. It seemed clear that the movie had straight not gay audiences in mind as it decided to spend so much time praising a man for his role as an ally rather than telling the courageous story of the brave women who devoted so much of their time and energy to winning the rights that they deserved. *Freeheld* did have a positive lesbian romance that was a major focus of the plot but it also devoted a lot of time to placating its straight audience with a hero for them to identify with.

The films made by both Sapphic and non-Sapphic creators showed a significant change during this period from those made during the 1980s and 90s. Films made by gay women about gay women increased in number and they featured increasing racial diversity in films such as *Saving Face* though the majority of films continued to feature white women. Many of the films featured some of the political storylines from the 1990s and some of the positivity of the 1980s but the main difference was the sheer number of films that were made. This trend was also noticeable in the films made by non-Sapphic creators. As LBPQ+ women gained more acceptance in society there were more films that featured lesbian characters. There were more movies made by men and straight women that were supportive of LBPQ+ women but many films still contained lesbophobic and misogynistic plot lines and techniques but they were subtler as evidenced by *Kissing Jessica Stein* and *Freeheld*. While creators may have had good or bad intentions they still created lesbophobic films. People grew more tolerant of lesbians and overtly homophobic stances became less socially acceptable and people's homophobia became quieter and better hidden.

From 1980 to 2017 the United States underwent great political and social change. Conservative forces rose to power and life was especially difficult for LGBTQ+ but gay and lesbian activists united in solidarity to help one another. As the 1990s began gay rights advocates fought for gay people to have the right to participate openly in society and have rights equal to their heterosexual counterparts. Among these rights that people wished to have was the right to marry who they chose to. This gained significant attention and momentum over the years, and in 2015, the Supreme Court ruled that people had the constitutional right to marry anyone regardless of their gender. During this time, LGBTQ+ people experienced great tragedy and persistent homophobia which has continued into 2017 and which has impeded their ability to find happiness and equality but it also helped to strengthen and unite gay people into a strong political force. LGBTQ+ people in particular women experienced struggles and misfortunes around the turn of the century in the United States and this has shaped the public's perception of LGBTQ+ women and the way that LGBTQ+ women view themselves and this has been reflected in the progression of media created about Sapphic women.

1980 through 2017 saw many films about Sapphic women. As film critic Alison Darren said in summary of typical depictions of lesbians,

“To put it mildly, lesbian have been inadequately served by the cinema. Misrepresented and misunderstood, the images we have seen – when they have existed at all – have presented a sad gallery of interesting losers, victims, killers, neurotics, drug addicts, prostitutes and so on... Our fate has included humiliation, rape, miraculous conversion to heterosexuality or, if not, death.”⁹⁰

Those made by Sapphic women tended to tell authentic stories that represented their experiences as gay women. Movies from the 1980s normalized lesbian life. 1990s films showed more controversial stories that pushed boundaries to truthfully show the lives of gay women. During

⁹⁰ Alison Darren, *Lesbian Film Guide*, 3.

the 2000s and 2010s it became easier and more accessible for people to make stories about queer women. As a result there were more films and they told a larger variety of stories about Sapphic life including ones that were, political, romantic, dramatic, about family relationships, and focused on friendship. Films from non-Sapphic creators were distinctively different. Some of them sought to portray lesbians in a way that non-Sapphic people viewed as honest and positive. Others were, intentionally or not, lesbophobic and misogynistic. Overall from 1980 to 2017 while the majority of films about Sapphic characters have included many negative stereotypes they have become less overtly homophobic, more common, and more honest as a result of the work of activists and the advancements of political and cultural efforts to achieve equality for Sapphic women.

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