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Director Cheryl Dunye on her groundbreaking LGBTQ film 'The Watermelon Woman,' 20 years later



Director Cheryl Dunye's 1996 film, "The Watermelon Woman," is being re-released in New York theaters and on DVD in January 2017. (Genaro Molina / Los Angeles Times)

By, Tre'vell Anderson
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To most, being invisible is something to balk at, to complain and protest about. After all, an individual's humanity rests, in part, on being seen as themselves for themselves. But to writer-director Cheryl Dunye, one's invisibility — for her, as a black queer woman — can be a benefit. Her film, 1996's "The Watermelon Woman," is proof of that, of "what you can do when you're invisible," she said.

Not being seen gave her a bit of freedom to craft a uniquely black and lesbian tale on camera during a time period when black lesbians were nowhere to be found on film or television. But it's been 20 years, and as Hollywood has surely changed, it too has remained very much the same: There is still a dearth of black lesbian, and gay, bisexual and transgender, representation.

"I think [the film] lives on for that reason, because people still don't know what a black queer person looks like, unless it's a farcical, drag queeny, commercial way," said Dunye, 50. "That's not all that we are. We're a varied, beautiful 'rainbow' of identities."

To celebrate the film's 20th anniversary and digital restoration (it will hit DVD in January), Los Angeles locals can visit the Hammer Museum's film program "How to Love a Watermelon Woman" (running through Wednesday and returning Dec. 20-31) and the exhibition "Memoirs of a Watermelon Woman" at the ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives at USC through Dec. 22.

"The Watermelon Woman," which was the first feature directed by a black lesbian, follows the efforts of a young black lesbian filmmaker, played by Dunye herself, to find out everything she can about a black actress known as the Watermelon Woman, who played maids in 1930s black-and-white films. Following various leads, the main character slowly discovers the history of the actress and the fact that she had a long affair with a white woman who was one of Hollywood's few female directors.

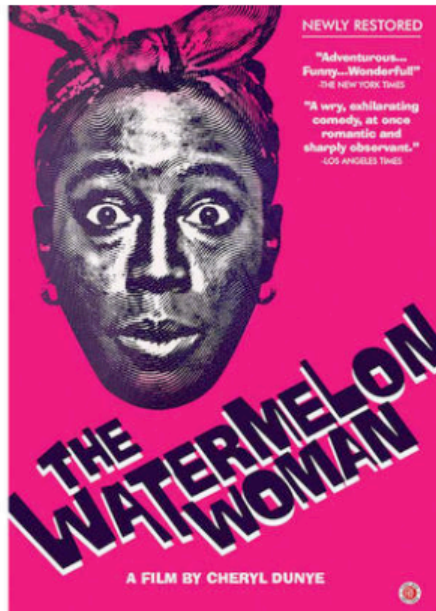
Dunye's character ironically begins to develop a romantic interracial relationship herself, with a character played by Guinevere Turner (who went on to write "American Psycho" and "The Notorious Bettie Page"). Captured in what Dunye calls the "Dunyementary" style — a hybrid of narrative, documentary, comedy and autobiography, with talking heads, man-on-the-street interviews and Dunye herself as a character or narrator — the film challenged both the genres of black cinema and the then-budding queer cinema.

"Tons of people were in black cinema — toms, coons, mulattoes, mammies and bucks," she said, quoting the title of historian Donald Bogle's foundational 1973 text analyzing the history of black people in American film. "There had to be a gay person in there. But it's written out of that text and all the books. Flip to [the history of] lesbian and gay cinema, what you do get is women, but not women of color. Somebody existed [during those times], just nobody cared. That gave me the chance to say, 'I want to see somebody like me who existed.'"

To do that, Dunye, along with artist Zoe Leonard, made archival material for the film, inventing a historical, Hollywood lineage for black lesbians. (Though they might have been able to find real archives through the Library of Congress, licensing and research fees were too costly. Some of the archives created used photos from lesbian playwright Ira Jeffries.)

Perhaps for this very reason — how the film blurs the lines of fact and fiction, feature and documentary, all the while providing cultural critique — "Watermelon Woman" is experiencing a wave of renewed interest amid a now persistent, industry-wide conversation about diversity and representation.

“Twenty years later, it still feels so urgent, very contemporary, like it was made yesterday,” said Erin Christovale, curator of the Hammer program. “I think that says a lot about [Dunye’s] legacy and her foresight about issues that still aren’t resolved in the film industry and media making.”



Poster of "The Watermelon Woman." (First Run Features)

Lucy Mukerjee-Brown, program director of Outfest, which screened the film during its initial release, agreed, highlighting the importance of preserving films like “Watermelon Woman,” which won the coveted Teddy Award at the Berlin International Film Festival in 1996.

“We’re losing these really vital stories from the queer canon and these representations of LGBTQ individuals are just disappearing throughout history,” she said.

Taylor Morales, manager of the festival’s Legacy Project, which, in partnership with UCLA’s Film & Television Archive restored the film, added: “The Watermelon Woman’ redresses the historical erasure of African American lesbians from both mainstream and LGBT histories. This mirrors the work the Legacy Project is doing to capture the diversity of the LGBTQ community. Like the films we choose to create, the films we choose to preserve impact the historical record.”

And though Dunye, now a professor at San Francisco State, was invited to become a member of the film academy earlier this year — its largest and most diverse class to date — it's important to her to remain dedicated to working outside the traditional system. It's a decision that came after her second feature, Miramax's "My Baby's Daddy" in 2004.

"It took me over the edge and I said I'm not going to do this [ever again]," she said about the studio experience.

Since, she's made two other features, serving as writer and director of indies "The Owls" (2010) and "Mommy Is Coming" (2012). While doing so hasn't been easy, the struggle is a byproduct of her choice to make cinema, as opposed to making movies.

"Movies are about making money," she said. "But when you're in it to make cinema and statements and art and media that matters in a different way, you're saying that it's going to take a while, that I'm not going to have money, but I'm going to make a mark."

And because too many filmmakers want to make movies and not enough want to make cinema, 20 years after her first feature, the industry hasn't substantially changed.

"Hollywood is exactly the same as it was," she said. "They still are not letting us in. And when you do go in, as everyone is magnetized to go in, you get white-washed."

But Dunye isn't interested in being anything other than the person she is: a black queer woman, or what Mukerjee-Brown calls a "triple threat to the establishment."

Luckily, Dunye finds herself "re-inspired by my own creativity" doing the press tour for the "Watermelon Woman's" 20th anniversary. The anger and invisibility she experienced earlier in her career, however, are still present. As she funnels that into her next piece of cinema, titled "Black Is Blue," an Afro-futuristic tale centered on a black transman in Oakland, she hopes the new generation of filmmakers and creators being introduced to "The Watermelon Woman" is inspired to push the bounds of what black queer imagery looks like.

"There are a lot of stories to tell," she said. "I think 'The Watermelon Woman' is there for someone to say I can do better than that."