



Reading for Knowledge and Pleasure: Re-evaluating *Forbidden Love*

Jean Bruce and Gerda Cammaer. *Forbidden Love: A Queer Film Classic*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2015. 160 pages.

Reviewed by Kristi Kouchakji

A production and exhibition study mixed with a healthy dose of analysis, Jean Bruce and Gerda Cammaer's monograph *Forbidden Love: A Queer Film Classic* (2015) examines the multiple ways Lynne Fernie and Aerlyn Weismann's 1992 film raises questions of identity in public spaces. The authors begin with an analysis of the archival material used in the film and the research process undertaken by the filmmakers before moving into a more fleshed-out production history. They thus position *Forbidden Love* as a film about identity in public spaces expressed through the interactions between its archival materials, documentary interview segments, and fictional sequences, while being careful to situate the film's production in its proper historical context of queer visibility in Canada and within the National Film Board specifically. Bruce and Cammaer then explore the film's hybridity and direct address as a means of both queer subject formation and challenging non-queer spectators. They conclude with an overview of the struggle to return the film to the NFB's circulation catalogue in a time of extreme austerity-minded budget cuts, as well as a critical reflection on the digital mastering and French versioning of the film.

Forbidden Love examines the ways in which lesbians in the 1950s-1970s were forced to hide their identities outside gay bars and hew to stringent butch/femme norms inside the bars. The film does this through interviews with lesbians who had been part of the bar scenes in Vancouver, Toronto, and Montreal, as well as with Ann Bannon, the author of lesbian pulp fiction novels that had happy endings (an unusual resolution in the genre at the time). These interviews are intercut with fictional sequences taking up these issues in the style of Bannon's novels, and archival material depicting police raids on gay bars and general societal attitudes towards homosexuality. Stating that the explicitness of the fictional scenes in *Forbidden Love* serve as "corrective narrative strategies" for the forcibly hidden identities described by the women interviewed in the film's documentary sequences, Bruce and Cammaer ultimately argue that "cinematic representation is a vital means by which we can gather together historical and contemporary resources (...) and by gaining such visibility, become known to each other again. This is a political act" (44). While this argument would retain some urgency even if the film had been made today, Bruce and Cammaer contextualize it by positioning both the film and the research process behind it as effectively recuperating a queer archive from mainstream erasure. This recuperation is successfully presented as being as political as the film itself.

In analysing the film, Bruce and Cammaer argue that in mixing documentary with melodrama, the filmmakers rely on a strategy whereby the viewers are invited to read the film

either as “straight” (so to speak) documentary, or as camp. This speaks to both lesbian and non-lesbian viewers in ways that invoke multiple identifications, queering film, form, and spectator at once. For Bruce and Cammaer, this is exemplified in the “payoff” of the sex scene between fictional characters Laura and Mitch, ending with a freeze frame. The authors contend that this serves as a means both for lesbian viewers to see their desires and identities projected on screen, and of making all viewers aware of their voyeuristic desires, further calling attention to a more general desire to produce or acquire new knowledge, and blurring the line between the two desires while calling the spectator’s attention to the politics of their own gaze. Writing that “the result is that *Forbidden Love* manages to be pro-lesbian for lesbians and non-lesbians alike, independent of their access to the stories,” the authors further position the film’s mismatched or subverted expectations as the film’s primary strategy in queering a number of genres and aspects of cultural history (96). This includes happy endings in place of pulp’s tragedies, fictional inserts in documentary, and camp elements in a format (and from a studio) thought of chiefly in association with the term discourse of sobriety.

That said, the authors’ claim that *Forbidden Love* “speaks for and to generations of gay women” is just broad enough to run counter to the film’s argument against essentializing queer women’s identities. This is ironic, given that one of the things the authors admire is the film’s approach to its subjects, as evidenced by their vigorous defence of the film against test-audience complaints about the majority of subjects being white middle-class women while non-white subjects are treated in a reductive way. Further, this claim is footnoted to attribute it to one specific co-author, as if the other wished to distance herself from it. This indication of potential conflict between the authors is echoed in several abrupt shifts in voice and tone throughout the book, as well as some structural inconsistencies and areas where ideas seem out of place by tens of pages, all pointing to a potential disconnect between the authors that could not be resolved in the editing process. A side effect of this is the authors’ habit of ending paragraphs with insightful nuggets, such as “melodrama offers new approaches to the documentary as well as to the pulp novel, and in doing so it suggests new ways of exposing cultural history to the accountability of a critical gaze” (111), without more thorough build-up or further development.

Also contradicting *Forbidden Love*’s anti-essentialism is a strange implication throughout the book that viewers of the film can be divided into two camps, lesbian and non-lesbian, and a further implication that non-lesbian here means straight. This erasure of spectators who identify between these two poles in the authors’ working definition of queer is troubling. However, applying what the authors position as a queer approach to spectatorship—namely, reading against the grain in order to derive pleasure or produce knowledge, as exemplified by the film’s subjects’ recollections of reading lesbian pulp fiction—to the reading of this book allows for pleasure and knowledge to be created even if such a tack implicitly confirms monosexism as a new norm against which to define queer. This comes through most clearly in the authors’ discussion of the camp aesthetic at work in *Forbidden Love*’s formation of a queer spectator. Writing that “If the camp aesthetic is understood at all, whether it is read as politically retrograde or progressive, it indicates not only its volatility and subversive potential, but also the central ambivalence of postmodernism and, arguably, of the political concept of queer itself,” the authors further claim that camp as political and cinematic strategy requires a spectator who already “gets it” and can interpret the film both ways in order to derive maximum benefit from it (118). This seems to also be the mode of readership required here: a reader who gets both the

political and scholarly projects inherent in both the book and the film will be most readily able to find something productive in the breach between the two, and to derive both knowledge and pleasure in this work.

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