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"A QUEER KIND OF FILM: THE FIRST LESBIAN AND GAY EXPERIMENTAL FILM FESTIVAL."

Sept. 15-20, 7 and 9 pm

At Millenium, 66 E. 4th St., New York City

By DONNA MINKOWITZ

To gay filmmaker Jim Hubbard and lesbian author Sarah Schulman, the organizers of this festival, avant-garde film and gay and lesbian consciousness have a lot in common. Both "must be resolutely created in a world that insists on homogenous sexuality and aesthetics enforced through a stiflingly limited media," say Hubbard and Schulman in their program notes. "Both demand an endless re-imagining of the self and the world in order to envision and create what the mainstream believes should not and must not exist."

This is an appealing premise, but I am not sure it is correct. While the decision to live as a gay man or lesbian does indeed require "an endless re-imagining of the self," and a terrific struggle against the received images we have of sex, love, men and women, I am not at all convinced that the search for experimental art forms requires a similar battle against the prevailing hegemony.

BADLY NEEDED FILMS

Film that is experimental or, as some would term it, "radical" in form might represent an artistic breakthrough, but there is no guarantee that it represents a political one. The political effects of any given film depend on the specific features of the film and on the contexts in which it is produced and shown, not on the mere fact of its manifesting a divergence in form. Indeed, capitalism's capacity to absorb and to politically neutralize many divergent and formally "contestational" art forms has been noted by many critics.

That said, the 61 films by 37 filmmakers presented here comprise an extremely interesting and important collection of gay and lesbian film. Some of the films are beautiful and some are radical, some are neither beautiful nor radical and some are both. All were filmed from a lesbian or gay perspective and as such are badly needed works, given the dearth of either positive or self-defining images of lesbians and gay men. Unlike most gay film festivals, this one has equal representation of men's and women's films. At press time, I was able to preview only a fraction of the films.



Su Friedrich's "Damned If You Don't," which premieres at this festival, is an extraordinarily powerful film about the repression of female sexuality. A sexy young woman stares, obsessed, at a TV melodrama about nuns, which makes unwilling chastity its central issue. Afterwards she reads aloud from the trial records of a 16th century nun accused of sexual sin with other women. Then she goes out to pursue the fully-habited nun who is her neighbor, following her in the street and even into church. The nun shivers in her cell, fills in the lips—and only the lips—of a needlepoint of Jesus, which when turned around become a depiction of female genitalia. Friedrich makes the sense of sexual deprivation so acute that when the two finally come together it is a terribly necessary, longed for and joyous moment. This film is equally potent as an erotic drama and as a political tool. Pelly Healy plays the nun and Ela Troyano the neighbor. (A retrospective of Su Friedrich's work opens at the Whitney in October.)

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