

Hide and Seek: Looking for Lesbians

The last film that I want to discuss in the context of the various disciplines of the gaze takes up themes of sexuality, zoology, and education from the perspective the 1990s avant-garde and “queer cinema.”⁵³ Gay and lesbian filmmaking, by people such as Marlon Riggs, Pratibha Parmar, Richard Fung, Sadie Benning, and others, is often preoccupied with the representation and organization of the gaze. To think of queer filmmaking as ethnographic is to recognize the problem of representation as one of self-representation, in which the self is socially as well as sexually configured. Gay and lesbian filmmaking is frequently about “culture”: gay, straight, or more narrowly defined by a specific ethnic or cultural scene. The marginality of gay culture is perceived ethnographically, but from the inside, and thus provides a model of indigenous ethnography. The look at the Other is necessarily inverted as “the other’s look” to become part of the film’s aesthetic and epistemology.

American experimental filmmaker Su Friedrich’s film *Hide and Seek* might be described as an experimental documentary about adolescent lesbian identity. It combines three different orders of representation that are woven into a one-hour black-and-white film: a dramatic, scripted narrative about a twelve-year-old girl named Lu who struggles with her sexual identity in the context of her female classmates; interviews with adult lesbians, mainly about their childhood memories; and a range of found footage and still photographs, including clips from *Simba* and 1960s sex-education films.

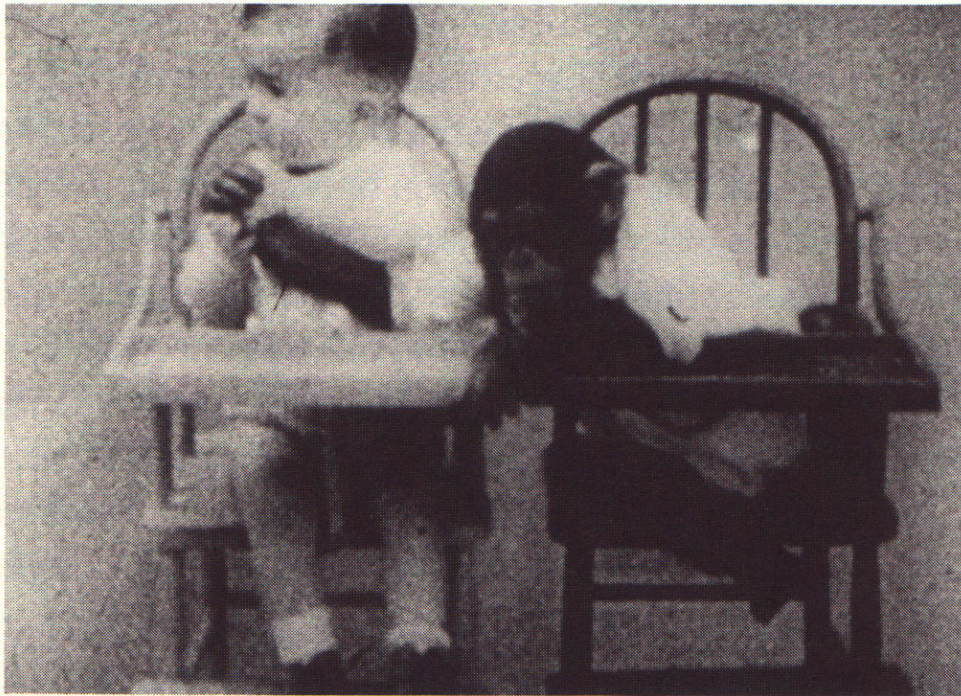
Like much of Friedrich’s work, *Hide and Seek* privileges “content” far more than is common in American experimental filmmaking. She works from the idea of the personal film, through autobiography, to

articulate “identity” as a cultural construction that is nevertheless embedded in experience. Experimental techniques are deployed as means of personal expression, but equally as means of questioning issues of representation. The representation of lesbians and the articulation of a lesbian look is often downplayed in Friedrich’s work, and unlike most filmmakers identified with queer cinema, it is often incidental and even overlooked by many critics.⁵⁴ In *Hide and Seek*, she appropriates the disciplinary gaze for her own purposes to explore the various ways of seeing lesbians *and* to represent ways of seeing as a lesbian.

The only hint of an autobiographical aspect to this film is a message scratched onto the film itself in Friedrich’s signature style, a technique that she adapted from Stan Brakhage and uses most extensively in *Gently down the Stream* (1981): when Lu hears that her teacher is getting married, the inserted message “I’m never getting married” doubles as the character’s and the filmmaker’s thoughts as Lu goes to the blackboard. This is not the only inscription of a subjective, psychological space in the film, but it does jump out, especially in contrast to the exercise that Lu proceeds to complete in the classroom: diagramming the grammar structure of sentences. It is significant that Friedrich inscribes herself in this way, in the collapse of the image and the representational apparatus. Unlike Kubelka (or Bill Viola), it is not *her* look that is in question in this film, but a look, a way of looking at, and with, lesbians.

In her use of the *Simba* footage and instructional documentaries, Friedrich adopts a series of different gazes to evoke the experience of an ethnographic subject. Early in the film, several interviewees discuss the “nature-nurture” question, or the “gene theory” of homosexuality. Although most of the women respond that it makes little difference to them, and that they no longer need an explanation for their sexual orientation, it is significant to the film’s negotiation of “scientific” and experiential modes of representation. Friedrich inserts a few shots of monkeys and chimps, along with shots of young girls, into this discussion, indicating the way that the nature-nurture discussion places lesbians in the role of monkeys to be studied.

Instead of a scientific explanation, Friedrich inscribes a discourse of desire as a representation of lesbian identity, the causes of which remain a mystery. One of the last confessional voices that is heard in the film, as a voice-over while Lu and her friends visit the zoo, says, “I went through a period of time to try to find the lesbian bits and then realized that that wasn’t a narrative I could really impose on those years, ’cause



Still from *The Ape and the Child*, by G. Stoelting, as used in *Hide and Seek* (Su Friedrich, 1996).



Still from *Hide and Seek* (Su Friedrich, 1996). The girls watch a film called *Social Sex Attitudes in Adolescence*.

those years were more about . . . well, especially when I was twelve to eighteen, just holding it together. Or realizing . . . that I was moving through this whole world that I wasn't a part of." The imposition of a narrative is indeed a form of explanation, one that is frequently used in ethnography. This interviewee points out that experience doesn't work that way. It is more contingent, and more about survival. *Hide and Seek* takes up these themes of science and experience (and marginalization) as modes of visual representation and visual culture.

While the interviews, such as the one quoted in the foregoing paragraph, belong to a documentary aesthetic of realism and confessional discourse, Friedrich (like Moffatt and Gaitan) resorts to a fictional mode to dramatize the experience of adolescent lesbianism. The correspondences between the interviews and the dramatic material cast the latter as a form of illustration. When Lu and her friends watch a sex-ed film in class, the relation between Friedrich's footage and the found instructional material becomes clear. Friedrich's adolescent actors are endearing but "stiff," like those in the films they watch; their scenes are likewise written bluntly, almost as if Friedrich is appropriating the style of the educational documentary for her own aesthetic. Moreover, a receding effect of cultural positioning is created through a *mise en abyme* of spectatorship. In a classroom scene, for example, Lu and her friends hear the familiar male voice-over explain, "At about twelve and a half Mary reached puberty. At around this time her friends wanted to talk about sex."

The struggle of understanding one's sexual identity is one of social construction, or of seeing oneself in the "big picture," a struggle that is cast in this film as one of spectatorship and documentary address. *Hide and Seek* borrows its voice-over narration, in fragments, from educational films, and also from the lesbian interviewees. In one hilarious sequence, Friedrich substitutes one form of voice-over for the other. An educational film about "emotional behavior" (shades of Birdwhistell) begins with a man and a woman sitting facing the camera. The set is sparse and lablike. The male voice-over says, "You will see these two people react to stories that they have been prepared to accept as real happenings," and a title announces the first sample story involving Pain. As one of Friedrich's interviewees starts talking about the "bull dykes" at her school as a child, the two people on-screen begin to grimace in disgust. In this sight gag, Friedrich laughs at the epistemological naï-

veté of the educational film while highlighting the incongruity of gay culture and “straight” culture.

This brief critique of the aesthetics of visual knowledge helps to establish Friedrich’s own use of fictional narrative as a viable documentary form. The dramatic footage illustrates many of the experiences recalled by the women: crushes on gym teachers, the ambiguities of friendships, tomboy looks and behavior, learning about sex, learning about one’s own body. Although Lu is the “main character” of the narrative, her psychological profile is developed within what might be described as “girl’s culture.” Slumber parties and party games, little fortune-telling games, pop songs, tree houses, and jealousies constitute a set of ritualistic behaviors that characterize this culture.

In *Hide and Seek*, adolescence and puberty are privileged not as a loss of innocence but as an acquisition of identity. The lack of identity experienced in childhood, before sex, is inscribed within the film through still photos of young girls. Dozens of portraits and snapshots, which are not necessarily linked to the interviewees, are intercut throughout the film, increasing toward the end. Like home movies, many of these images are heavily coded within the frame of the family. It is not clear who these images are of, or whether they are photos of children who grew up to be gay, although the surrounding discourse suggests that possibility. By leaving the identity of each one open, and unfixed, the photo of the child figures as a blueprint of the adult; but unlike a genetic theory of sexuality, it is not deterministic. Insofar as the still image plays a metaphysical role in film, these photos are in another sense cinematic blueprints. They have a contingent aspect, a sense of possibility that is linked not to death but to fulfillment. Indeed, the adult lesbian interviewees project a strong sense of confidence, self-knowledge, good humor, and integrity, in great contrast to the awkwardness of the girls in the photos and the girls in the narrative.

Between these two poles of childhood and adulthood, the problem of understanding one’s body, one’s sexuality, and one’s desires is depicted as a problem of identity. As one of the interviewees says, “I didn’t identify with what I was.” Friedrich’s inclusion of women and girls of color incorporates a heterogeneous sense of identity, which emerges as a process of self-imaging, rather than one of stereotyping. Identity may be linked to the gaze, but it is much more complex than the Lacanian mirror stage might suggest; that is, it is not simply a formal construction. In *Hide and Seek*, the gaze operates as a form of projection and desire,

linking the possibility of being seen to the act of seeing. By way of the look at animals, it is also a means of locating otherness in visual culture and opens up a place for lesbian identity within a specifically cinematic space.

In addition to the shots of monkeys at the beginning of the film, animals appear as a means of signifying Lu's inarticulate desires. She goes to see a movie with her best friend Betsey, pausing at a poster for "My Life with the Lions," which turns out to be *Simba*.⁵⁵ Friedrich uses clips of animals running through forests and plains, along with shots of Osa Johnson cranking the camera and holding a rifle. She also incorporates title cards indicating the narrative format of the movie. In the midst of the collage of excerpts is a shot of Lu at home cutting images of animals out of a book and sticking them on her wall. Later in the film, while listening to her older sister argue with her mother about dating, Lu "dreams" of more clips from *Simba*, this time including images of Africans. These images become a kind of fantastic escape for Lu, continuing as daydream images while she is alone in her tree house.

The climactic scene of *Hide and Seek* takes place at the zoo, where Lu and Betsey and another friend named Maureen have gone for the afternoon. Lu is intensely jealous of Betsey's friendship with "prissy" Maureen, and Lu tells Betsey of her hope that the two of them could go to Africa together. Betsey says it is too far away (her dream is to get married and live next door to Lu), and she goes off to the snack bar with Maureen, leaving Lu alone watching a pacing lioness. Lu's fantasy of Africa, linked to the imagery of Osa Johnson, is a scene of lesbian desire that Friedrich designs by situating Lu as a spectator—of *Simba* and of the zoo animals. Lu is also seen as a spectator of sex-ed films, but the zoological gaze is privileged as a more appropriate index of her lesbian subjectivity and identity. Because Friedrich's clips include images of Africans as well as the Johnsons and the animals, Lu can be said to identify not with the image but with the ethnographic/zoological gaze and the inscription of Osa and an African camera operator at its point of origin.

While the inscription of lesbian subjectivity has been discussed and theorized in the context of narrative film, most notably by Teresa de Lauretis,⁵⁶ *Hide and Seek* extends that construction into the domain of ethnography. The images of Africans from *Simba* evoke a generic discourse of ethnography that is taken up in the film's examination of lesbian adolescence as a cultural site. De Lauretis's argument against



Still from *Hide and Seek* (Su Friedrich, 1996). *Left to right:* Kirsten Orial, Apryl Wynter, Ariel Mara, Ashley Ferrante, Chels Holland (Lu).

“positive images” of lesbians insists on the articulation of the conditions of visibility in lesbian filmmaking. It is not enough to substitute lesbian content or images into structures of seeing and desire borrowed from the mainstream, because lesbian fantasy has a fundamentally different structure, which de Lauretis describes as a conjunction of autoerotism and female object-choice.⁵⁷ A fantasy figure such as Osa Johnson might thus appeal to the young Lu as both role model and love object; and for the spectator of *Hide and Seek*, Lu herself is an object and identity that is configured differently, but not as the Other.

In the invocation of cinema as daydream in the context of a film “about” lesbians, *Hide and Seek* suggests the terms of a different orientation of the ethnographic gaze. The look at animals in *Simba* becomes the projection of a desire for escape and a symbol of marginality in Friedrich’s appropriation. The trip to the zoo is a reality-check for Lu, who comes to understand her own social construction as a form of exclusion from the pop world of “dream lovers.” And yet the last scene of the film prolongs an earlier one of the dreamlike utopian aspect of girl’s culture: the girls dance together to pop music at a slumber party, their bodies much looser than their acting, as if Friedrich could finally see

her actors as girls and watch them through the lens of “the gaze” without it becoming a form of knowledge.

The transparency of this final scene is worked for through a thorough deconstruction of the ethnographic gaze. It is not coincidental that Friedrich takes us through the realms of both sex and animals in her exploration of the terms of visibility. The problems of invisibility, which queer cinema has tackled from any number of different angles, are not unrelated to the “overvisibility” of ethnographic conventions of representation. “Being seen” is unequivocally linked to “subjective vision,” as the title of the conference and book *How Do I Look?* (in which de Lauretis’s article is included) suggests. Any revision of, or experimentation with, the ethnographic gaze must also come to terms with the tripartite structure of the gaze as a triangulation of looks between spectator, filmmaker, and person filmed. *Hide and Seek* deploys the gaze as both dream and knowledge, thus blurring the desires to see, to know, and to possess.

From Vision to Visibility

Ethnography, like zoology and pornography, tends to assume a particular orientation toward the gaze to establish and maintain a relationship between viewer and viewed. Mixing genres of film practices and disciplines of seeing is a means of upsetting these conventional relationships. In keeping with Foucault’s theorization of power as that which “comes from below,” the gaze is a structure that produces its own forms of resistances. The panopticon generates a discourse of delinquency just as the sexual confession generates “perversities.” Foucault says of the discourse of criminality in the nineteenth-century popular press, “Through all these minute disciplines it is ultimately ‘civilization’ as a whole that is rejected and ‘wildness’ that emerges.”⁵⁸

The “other look” of the avant-garde takes up the ethnographic gaze but looks beside it as well, enabling a view of the disciplinary gaze of the cinema alongside the “wildness,” or excess that evades its frame. The educational film, exemplified by *Microcultural Incidents* and deconstructed by Friedrich in *Hide and Seek*, appropriates the gaze as an instrument of pedagogy and social control. Personal film also assumes a certain relation to the gaze as the terrain of an individual’s vision. This convention is equally subverted by the undisciplined gazes of *Hide and Seek* and *Unsere Afrikareise*, and in the structural films of the next chap-

ter. Seeing is not believing but a means of making visible, as the rhetoric of discovery in *Simba* makes evident. If the ethnographic gaze conventionally lies somewhere between the cage of the zoological frame and the peephole of the pornographer's desire, these films pose the question of the viewer. Once the subject of vision is destabilized and fragmented, the gaze is transformed into a new way of knowing. The gaze is both a structure of vision and a condition of visibility, and its disciplinarity is always tenuous.