

# Lesbian minor cinema

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- 1 Patricia White, B. Ruby Rich, Eric O. Clarke, and Richard Fung, 'Queer publicity: a dossier on lesbian and gay film festivals', *GLQ* 5 (1999), pp. 73–93; 'Queer film and video festival forum, take one: curators speak out', *GLQ*, vol. 11, no. 4 (2005), pp. 579–603; 'Queer film and video festival forum, take two: critics speak out', *GLQ*, vol. 12, no. 4 (2006), pp. 605–7.
- 2 B. Ruby Rich's essay was published in both the *Village Voice* and *Sight and Sound*, and the latter included responses from a number of filmmakers and programmers. See B. Ruby Rich, 'Homo pomo: the new queer cinema', Pratibha Parmar, 'Queer questions: a response to B. Ruby Rich', and Amy Taubin, 'Queer male cinema and feminism', all reprinted in Pam Cook and Philip Dodd (eds), *Women and Film: a Sight and Sound Reader* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1993), pp. 164–79. See also Michele Aaron (ed.), *New Queer Cinema: a Critical Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), especially Anat Pick, 'New queer cinema and lesbian films', pp. 103–18.

As both programmers of lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender (LGBT) film festivals and a certain percentage of their attendees will acknowledge, the lesbian feature film is the most persistently elusive of programming elements. Of course curators have other urgent desiderata: formally challenging work, work by people of colour and from underrepresented nations, transgender films.<sup>1</sup> But the lesbian feature 'problem' goes to the very structure and philosophy of such events. It is a size thing. There is always 'another gay movie' to consider for the prime, feature-film-driven programming slots, and plenty of opening and closing night and centrepiece contenders, but the number of feature films by and about lesbians, though increasing, still lags behind, in correlation with the minority percentage of women feature filmmakers. Indeed, since B. Ruby Rich's designation of New Queer Cinema in 1991, critics have noted that restricted access to feature filmmaking, and thus theatrical exhibition, along gender, race, class and language lines, significantly skewed the sample and even neutralized the concept.<sup>2</sup>

If lesbians are rarely either subjects or authors of major motion picture events, we have nevertheless deployed the *minor* in a range of culturally successful ways. If major is to minor as film is to video, feature to short, cinema to television, fiction to documentary, women – and thus lesbians and often transpeople – tend to labour in the latter category of each of these pairs. Certainly, plenty of work by lesbian, bisexual and trans filmmakers with no pretensions to mainstreaming is featured at festivals. A great deal of it is minor in the sense of ephemeral – made expressly for the festival networks – and this includes the rapidly rising number of cases in which digital video technology has enabled filmmakers to extend

3 For the purposes of my argument, a 'feature' has some commercial or theatrical exhibition potential outside the festival networks. One attempt to archive the remarkable cultural phenomenon of production motivated by festivals is the Outfest Legacy Collection at the University of California, Los Angeles.

the length of works that otherwise fall short of theatrical feature film status.<sup>3</sup> But if there is still a paucity of viable lesbian features, there are also lesbian works that deploy a certain 'poverty' – in terms of means of production or aesthetic approach – in order to deflect audience demand for familiar stories, happy endings, repeatable pleasures, identity assurances. Although such practices do not and should not circumscribe the field of audiovisual work by and about lesbians, they enact the intersection of authorship and audience, form and subject matter, and desire and identification in crucial ways.

Chantal Akerman and Sadie Benning are affiliated with disparate traditions (European 'political modernism' or subsidized art cinema and US no-budget riot grrl and dyke punk video) and generations (1970s and 1990s); yet they both work in this mode. The undeniable significance of these lesbian 'auteurs' corresponds, in different ways, to an embrace of the insignificant – stillness, spareness, solitude – in works marked by a refusal of conventional formats. Akerman's *Portrait d'une jeune fille de la fin des années 60 à Bruxelles/Portrait of a Young Girl at the End of the 60s in Brussels* (1994) and Benning's *Flat Is Beautiful* (1998) – a portrait of an even younger, even less-comfortable-as-a-girl girl in 1980s Milwaukee, clock in at a little under an hour each. Their length, and their relatively impoverished relations of production, spare formal language and thematic concern with the liminal sexual and gender identities of their young female protagonists, actively engage the process of exclusion by the mainstream and suggest the appellation 'minor cinema'. Although both are poignant tales of girlhood self-recognition, neither of these films can adequately be described as a 'coming-out' story. They refuse predictive narratives in favour of an unrealized *potential*. Far from being stuck in a cultural moment before the 'L word' became speakable, even perversely implanted, in mainstream media, these lesbian works deliberately address past forms in order to question the present.

The term 'minor' is used here in reference, but not in strict allegiance, to the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and in particular to their monograph, *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*. In their remarkably generative formulation, 'a minor literature doesn't come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language'.<sup>4</sup> Kafka writes in German, which for Prague Jews 'is a deterritorialized language, appropriate for strange and minor uses'.<sup>5</sup> Both the language and the people who speak it are displaced in different ways. As a study of a canonical writer, Deleuze and Guattari's text goes against the received idea of minor literature as a trivial practice, often implicitly gendered and/or associated with women's, children's or regional literatures and marginal genres. Indeed, for the philosophers, 'minor no longer designates specific literatures but the revolutionary conditions for every literature within the heart of what is called great (or established) literature'.<sup>6</sup> This definition of 'minor' resonates with 'queer', another term that inflects rather than opposes the dominant, one that

4 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (1975), trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 16.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 17.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 18.

7 Ibid., p. 17.

8 On Benning's Pixelvision work, see: Mia Carter, 'The politics of pleasure: cross-cultural autobiographic performance in the video works of Sadie Benning', *Signs*, vol. 23, no. 3 (1993), pp. 745–70; Chris Holmlund, 'When autobiography meets ethnography and girl meets girl: the "dyke docs" of Sadie Benning and Su Friedrich', in Chris Holmlund and Cynthia Fuchs (eds), *Between the Sheets, in the Streets: Queer, Lesbian, Gay documentary* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp. 127–48; Julianne Pidduck, 'New queer cinema and experimental video', in Aaron (ed.), *New Queer Cinema*, pp. 80–97.

'deterritorializes' sexuality and expression. 'If the writer is at the margins or completely outside his or her fragile community, this situation allows the writer all the more the possibility to express another possible community and to forge the means for another consciousness and another sensibility.'<sup>7</sup>

Akerman and Benning have both been recognized for their distinctive uses of the film and video medium respectively, for signature styles that are irreducibly related to their works' representations of isolation, waiting, longing. For Akerman, deterritorialization is both theme – in the sense of exile – and practice – the reduction of cinema to a set of formal elements (stationary medium-shot, lateral track, refusal of the reverse-shot) that alter and frame apparently realist representation. Over forty years, Akerman's career has interspersed an impressive number of feature films with shorter works for television, video documentaries and, increasingly, museum installations; these 'minor' works define her oeuvre as much as do the theatrically exhibited features. Based in the US midwest, video artist Benning, who emerged as an art star when she *was* a minor with her series of distinctive short tapes shot in Pixelvision with a child's toy camera, has not yet come out with a theatrically exhibited feature film.<sup>8</sup> Rather, she has collaborated on a couple of experimental, animated television shorts (*The Judy Spots*, with Elisabeth Subrin [1995]) and music videos, the fifty-minute, black-and-white narrative video *Flat Is Beautiful*, and, after a number of years playing in and doing artwork for the band Le Tigre, exhibited large portrait paintings, audio work and the two-channel video projection *Play Pause* (2007) in a solo show created for Ohio's Wexner Center for the Arts. Akerman is not a minor artist, as her museum shows, retrospectives, a DVD box-set and many accolades attest. And yet most commentaries characterize her work by its deliberate withholding of most of the 'tricks' of cinema. Benning has also had significant art world exposure, yet even her recent gallery work remains consistent with the modest, DIY aesthetic of her Pixelvision videos and is sustained by queer audience and institutional networks. Although Akerman's work is far less 'out' in terms of lesbian content than Benning's overtly queer, performative tapes, the artists warrant discussion together both for the formal and conceptual links I hope will emerge in my readings and for the related ways in which they inscribe a lesbian authorial persona across a body of work. My focus here is on the affinities between works by these two in some sense accidental auteurs (in the sense that neither holds herself as a source of meaning and mastery yet is inevitably invoked as a proper name). However, a number of film and video makers deploy lesbian 'minority' within more dominant screen cultures and suggest a wider critical applicability of the concept.

In Deleuze and Guattari's account of minor literature, as in many Deleuzian terms and concepts, there is a poetic, energizing force that encourages borrowings and connections; although *Kafka* is about literature and language, its emphasis on the performative and the

9 Ibid., p. xxiv.

10 Verena Conley, 'Minoritarian', in Adrian Parr (ed.), *The Deleuze Dictionary* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 167.

11 Mette Hjort, *Small Nation, Global Cinema: the New Danish Cinema* (Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota University Press, 2005), p. ix. See also: Chapter 6 of D.N. Rodowick, *Gilles Deleuze's Time Machine* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997); Tom Gunning, 'Toward a minor cinema', *Motion Picture*, vol. 3, nos 1–2 (1989–90); Mette Hjort 'Danish cinema and the politics of recognition', in David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (eds), *Post-Theory* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), pp. 520–32.

12 Ivone Margulies, *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman's Hyperrealist Everyday* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), p. 16.

13 Guy Hocquenghem, *Homosexual Desire*, trans. Daniella Dangoor, intro. Michael Moon (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993).

14 Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*, p. 17.

15 Ibid., p. 18.

nonrepresentational sign invites extension to the cinema. As film theorist Dana Polan writes in his translator's introduction, their text opens 'the possibility of a micropolitics where everything is immediately and necessarily contiguous with everything else'.<sup>9</sup> The concept of 'minor cinema', understood most straightforwardly as making use of limited resources in a politicized way, has been productively elaborated in a number of contexts, from the philosophical to the pragmatic. For example, in *The Deleuze Dictionary* we learn that minor cinema is 'interested neither in representation or interpretation, but in experimentation; it is a creative act of becoming',<sup>10</sup> and in *Small Nation, Global Cinema*, Mette Hjort explains: 'The term minor points, then, to the existence of regimes of cultural power and to the need for strategic resourcefulness on the part of those who are unfavorably situated within the cultural landscape in question'.<sup>11</sup>

In *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman's Hyperrealist Everyday*, Ivone Margulies points out that the director herself identifies her practice as a 'minor cinema' in Deleuze and Guattari's terms.<sup>12</sup> Akerman has a cultural affinity with the philosophers' milieu, of course, and relates to Kafka in her austere, literal, formal modernism and in her exploration of Jewish exile and displacement. Benning's means of expression are a toy camera and childlike line drawing. As these artists' work shows, minor cinema may be produced within the major languages, not only of genre (coming of age) or national cinemas but also of such supposedly alternative formations as New Wave or independent cinemas, which they demonstrate to be equally reliant on heteronormative, individualized frames of vision. Short-format work in particular circumvents the commodity circulation and narrative boundedness of the feature film, crossing into other communities and contexts such as the festival networks I invoked above.

If 'literature' can be extended to 'cinema', 'minor' resonates with but is not a cognate for 'queer'. Queer theory has made use of Deleuze and Guattari's work since Guy Hocquenghem's *Homosexual Desire* in 1972,<sup>13</sup> and the way that 'minor literature finds itself positively charged with the role and function of collective, and even revolutionary, enunciation'.<sup>14</sup> could certainly describe queer experimental cinema's challenge to majoritarian film language, narrative patterns and conditions of production. As Deleuze and Guattari summarize the connections between formal work, desire and politics: 'The three characteristics of minor literature are the deterritorialization of language, the connection of the individual to a political immediacy, and the collective assemblage of enunciation'.<sup>15</sup> It is this felt immediacy that rings out in the demands of film festival audiences and that makes LGBT-produced media such an urgent, and intensely debated, collective endeavour. The 'assemblage' is not a consumer demographic but a reciprocal set of alliances traversed by desire and politics.

Rather than aligning the minor with queer cinema *tout court*, I confine my discussion to specific films. Moreover, I modify minor with lesbian

16 Ibid, p. 19.

17 For an influential critique, see Alice Jardine, 'Deleuze and his br[other]s', *Sub-stance*, vol. 13, nos 3–4 (1984), pp. 46–60. In relation to the 'minor,' see Dana Polan, 'Translator's introduction', in Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*, p. xxvi.

18 Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*, p. 27.

19 Alison Butler, *Women's Cinema: the Contested Screen* (London: Wallflower Press, 2005), p. 19.

20 Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*, p. 22.

and hope thereby to bring forward the gendered (and pejorative) associations with the former term – the implication of the substandard, the trivialized, the dismissed, the real chance that minor work expresses not only a 'willed poverty'<sup>16</sup> but also underfunding. Through this conjunction I hope to emphasize the materiality of the minor and to keep in play dimensions of gendered sexuality and subjectivity that are not obviously compatible with Deleuze and Guattari's anti-identitarian models of flux or with reflexive uses of queer. The feminist critique of the valorization of 'becoming-woman' in Deleuze and Guattari is a powerful one. Not to stray too far from their vocabulary, the deterritorialization signaled by this term for the male subject represents the displacement of the female.<sup>17</sup> (Similarly, in *Kafka*, the project to 'find points of nonculture or underdevelopment, linguistic Third World zones'<sup>18</sup> designated by 'becoming-minor' feels like a form of divestiture that depends upon initial privilege.) Yet many feminists have mobilized Deleuzian concepts of becoming in affirmative ways. Most notable for my purposes is Alison Butler's persuasive assertion in her fine study *Women's Cinema: the Contested Screen* that: 'the plurality of forms, concerns and constituencies in contemporary women's cinema now exceeds even the most flexible definition of counter-cinema. Women's cinema now seems 'minor' rather than oppositional.'<sup>19</sup> Whereas 'women's cinema' may be envisioned from a feminist social space, it is reductive to confine it there. Ironically, the nomination 'minor cinema' accounts for the *expansion* of women's filmmaking globally and transmedially.

Drawing on Meaghan Morris's comments, Butler argues quite compellingly for conceiving of women's cinema as minor cinema in Deleuze and Guattari's sense: 'women's cinema is not "at home" in any of the host cinematic or national discourses it inhabits, but . . . is always an inflected mode, incorporating, reworking and contesting the conventions of established traditions'.<sup>20</sup> This formulation offers an intriguing approach to women's cinema and a useful parallel to addressing the debates about the assimilation of New Queer Cinema – which is no longer clearly new or oppositional – that I alluded to in my opening discussion of the value accorded the theatrical feature. Butler's formulation also enables one to connect lesbian practice to women's cinema (as one among a 'plurality of constituencies') without 'reterritorializing' it under the sign of the feminine. Yet linking or analogizing 'women's' (or 'queer') with 'minor' immediately invokes a collectivity that I am arguing these lesbian filmmakers, as a minority within a minority (whether queers, women or lesbian filmmakers), only reach for through a deliberately singular practice.

Rather than modifying all women's, or even all lesbian, cinema with the still in-some-contexts self-defeating term minor, my readings attend to the aesthetic transformations of particular texts in which reduced means (short, low-budget or small-gauge formats, minimal narrative and sets) become signature authorial practices, ways of inscribing desire. My

21 Ibid., p. 17.

22 In *Kafka*, Deleuze and Guattari see 'a becoming-child of the adult taking place in the adult, a becoming-adult of the child taking place in the child, the two in contiguity' (p. 79). In contrast, Lee Edelman critiques 'a political order that returns to the Child as the image of the future' in his *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), p. 3.

interest in how authorship marks enunciation, while not incompatible with Deleuze and Guattari's approach – *Kafka* is, among other things, an author study – also emphasizes formations of desire that are bound up with subjectivity in ways that they do not consider. Minor literature's 'cramped space forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics',<sup>21</sup> write Deleuze and Guattari, and although I do not claim political transparency for these films, I suggest it is through the authorship that is signaled by their autobiographical and formal elements that the work achieves collective implications.

Finally, as I have indicated, lesbian minor cinema is about minors – the teenage and pre-teen heroines of Akerman's and Benning's films display irresolution and lack of power even as they are figures of desire and becoming.<sup>22</sup> The distinction of *lesbian* minority is thematized through particular representations of the juvenile that mark the marginalization of lesbian in relation to a series of terms including gay, women, feminist, queer. Instead of giving a retrospective coherence to a past experience as a more conventional narrative would do, these modest films drift along with their inarticulate protagonists, moving the viewer in the process.

Chantal Akerman's substantial yet minimalist oeuvre is exilic and agoraphobic by turns. It includes films about hotels, subways, apartments; it records travels in *D'est* (1993, about Eastern Europe) or *De l'autre côté* (2002, about the US–Mexican border), sojourns in *Là-bas* (2006, shot in Tel Aviv) and 'cramped spaces' from *La Chambre* (1972) to *La Captive* (2000), but always breaks out of these frames; she has made more than one film about moving out, and her debut short film is memorably titled *Blow Up My Town/Saute ma ville* (1968). It is understandable that Akerman relates Deleuze and Guattari's definition of minor literature to her position; she is Belgian in Paris, Jewish and the daughter of refugees, a lesbian in the *cinéma d'auteurs*. The characteristics they enumerate in *Kafka* – exile, the refusal of metaphor, an arid style, a refusal to hierarchize the small incident and the eventful – also mark her work. The most explicitly modernist of lesbian filmmakers and least at home in the LGBT film festivals, Akerman is a major figure whose embrace of the minor traces a route through identity politics and commercial demands that offers an interesting precedent to contemporary figures who enter filmmaking from different points. Looking at Akerman's short and early films multiplies sites of authorial and spectatorial inscription. It also calls attention to what could be seen as either an enviable flexibility in the European production context within which she works or as a familiar consignment of women artists to less capably intensive forms of film production like television commissions, short-format and small-gauge work.

Akerman's status as a female auteur within the influential cinematic political modernism of the 1970s and as an icon within feminist theoretical interrogations of film language makes her relationship to the 'queer' cinema that decisively emerged in the 1990s a rather curious one.

23 Chantal Akerman interview in Angela Martin, 'Chantal Akerman's films: a dossier,' *Feminist Review*, no. 3 (1979), p. 28.

24 See in a related context, Amy Villarejo's discussion of lesbian filmmaker Ulrike Ottinger's 'non lesbian' documentary *Exile Shanghai: Lesbian Rule: Cultural Criticism and the Value of Desire* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

25 Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archives of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

26 Judith Mayne makes a similar point, connecting the film to Akerman's short *J'ai faim, j'ai froid* (1984) in her lovely reading of the film, 'Girl talk', in *Framed: Lesbians, Feminists, and Media Culture* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), pp. 179–92.

She is one of the few lesbian filmmakers with multiple feature films to their credit, and her work certainly foregrounds the formal innovation that queer cinema advocates. Yet besides the raw and still unmatched sex scene in her first feature-length film *Jet tu il elle* (1974), the lesbian content of her work is rarely apparent enough to warrant inclusion in LGBT festivals. As Margulies has detailed, the filmmaker's 'hyperrealist everyday' does not easily fit a group designation. A statement like, 'I am not making women's films; I am making Chantal Akerman's films' – however disheartening to feminist film scholars eager to claim her – arguably reaches beyond the platitudes of artistic integrity or the willingness of brand promotion to a principled position on identity politics.<sup>23</sup> 'Chantal Akerman's films' are inflected, not determined, by gender, generation, Jewishness, nationality, feminism and queerness.<sup>24</sup>

Her 1994 *Portrait of a Young Girl at the End of the 60s in Brussels* represents for me an unforgettable convergence between a 'minor' institutional form – the television commission – and a deliberate use of the minor, that is youthful, subject. In one sense, the film describes a (literal) line of flight; its heroine runs away. In the first scene, during the early morning hours, the young girl of the title, Michèle, takes money from her father's wallet. After he drops her off at the station, she goes to a cafe instead of school and writes ever more dramatic sicknotes to explain her absence: 'her uncle died'; 'her father died'; 'she died'. Yet as much as the character's smile as she speaks indicates a moment of becoming, the line also registers violence. Like an avatar of the filmmaker, Michèle awaits animation by the film's aesthetic rendering of a fairly unexceptional experience of first love and self-recognition. Michèle does not run very far, because her best friend and love object Danielle remains at school. Far from the alienated youth of popular culture – seen in a film such as Catherine Hardwicke's *Thirteen* (2003), with its frenetic, intimidating depiction of the interdependency between girl friends – Michèle seems rather to embody what Ann Cvetkovich calls 'the everyday life of queer trauma'.<sup>25</sup> In the course of the film she will befriend a young French army deserter at the movies, lose her virginity (implied in an ellipsis), rendezvous with Danielle and, in the final image, walk alone at dawn towards the frame's vanishing point.

It is notable that *Portrait of a Young Girl*, the Akerman film that made the LGBT festival rounds during the rise of New Queer Cinema, revisits her own 'juvenilia'.<sup>26</sup> Linking *Saute ma ville*'s setting and *Je tu il elle*'s structurally restrained yet emotionally chaotic representation of adolescent lesbian passion, *Portrait of a Young Girl* is a kind of remake of both early films, presenting a protagonist who physically resembles the filmmaker and whose youth decentres her relation to power and desire. Thus within a wide-ranging oeuvre, Akerman's return to a specific situation (albeit in what might be considered one of her 'minor' works) represents more than a thematic concern with girlhood, it signifies rather an interest in the 'minor' as an open-ended, unfinished state. A sense of being stuck, and of simultaneously being nowhere, pervades

27 The film is not in DVD distribution. The scene I discuss below is included in *Chantal Akerman by Chantal Akerman* (1997), from the Arte television series *Cinéma, de notre temps*, and released on DVD.

these representations of youth and longing. Girlhood is not incorporated into an even line of developmental growth or offered as a nostalgic backstory.

*Portrait of a Young Girl* is Akerman's contribution to the French television series, *Tous les garçons et les filles de leur âge/All the Boys and Girls of Their Age*, commissioned by Arte, of nine, hour-long programmes in which filmmakers were asked to render the period of their youth in part by drawing on the era's music.<sup>27</sup> Akerman's film is at once autobiographical and circumspect; its title is generic in subject, 'a young girl', but specific in place, Brussels. Just below the title appears a small caption that gives us the specific time as well – April 1968. Thus the film's place and time evoke Paris, May 68 – a place and time whose massive student-led strikes function as a mythical origin story in narratives of the new left, poststructuralist theory and film culture – by virtue of being not quite Paris, not yet May. If the film makes no attempt to disguise that it is filmed in present-day Brussels, it may be because its girl's own story is not given meaning by the heroic (male) politics that would require historical authenticity. The protagonist, Michèle, seems stranded, bored, at one point mustering a half-hearted anti-Vietnam war chant. Part of the film's poignancy as a not-quite coming-out story is the absence of reference to the era's emerging feminist and gay social movements. A minor, Michèle does not connect with the idea of political minorities.

It is from this position of not quite, not yet, that Akerman rewrites the major language of the French New Wave of the 1960s. Each segment of the television series includes an obligatory party scene. Akerman responds to the letter of the commission while deflecting its homogenizing potential (with 'boys and girls' having both anti-sexist and heteronormative valences) in a rendition of the rituals of teenage heterosexuality that makes the perspective of a queer youth as devastatingly central as, yet much more restrained than, the culminating prom scene in Brian DePalma's *Carrie* (1976). In Akerman's penultimate scene, Michèle and Danielle arrive at the party. Their separation at the film's end has, however, been prefigured. Michèle's tryst with the boy from the cinema prepares the gesture that will conclude the film, as decisive as the one with which Michèle began the fateful day: she will send Danielle to Paul, cutting herself off from, yet controlling, their story.

To the sound of Trini Lopez's version of *La Bamba*, the party scene cuts in abruptly as the teenagers circle, arm in arm, to the left around Danielle, who chooses Michèle to join her as a dance partner in the middle of the circle. When Danielle rejoins the circle, the scene cuts to a medium closeup of Michèle. She looks worried as she scans the crowd, then her face lights up. As she turns her head to choose, the film cuts to Michèle stepping up to . . . Danielle. There is a beat or two of tension as her friend rejoins her within the circle, then Danielle flashes a reassuring smile. But when the anthem ends and the swirling overture to James

Brown's 'It's a Man's, Man's, Man's World' starts up, the circle immediately breaks down, a tall boy cuts between the girls and sweeps Danielle into his arms. Michèle just stands there, perfectly still amidst the slow-dancers, her face held in closeup as she feels and thinks. Finally she turns and walks out into the night.

Not since Max Ophuls's films has *la ronde* or the relay of desire and lack been so dizzyingly or economically rendered. Akerman's characteristic exclusion of a point-of-view shot (which would show the couple dancing), here brilliantly conveys precisely the point-of-view of exclusion, even as the camera remains trapped with Michèle within the circle of teens. We are given only three shots of the scene, and Michèle remains their focus: the first follows her as she circles in the chain, watching Danielle unobserved, and then reveals the even greater pleasure of being chosen; in the second, stationary shot she withstands the scrutiny of others as she moves to declare her own choice; in the third, duration is used to relay Michèle's palpable emotion at being passed over back to Akerman's signature, respectful authorial observation. Negotiating the delegation of the gaze in a way radically different from classical cinema's almost transitive uses (subject looks at and thereby acts upon object), Akerman's camera finds its anchor in a spinning, desiring and above all gazing surrogate. The signifying effects of diegetic sound – for example, of footsteps as the girls move through the streets – have been so built up across the film that the song's clichéd lyrics (the cliché of the song) are deafening. By virtue of its deterritorialization of cinema's audiovisual codes, the film shows how they construct that taken-for-granted man's world as surely as do the patriarchal family, the school and pop music, the targets of the film's internal critique.

Circé, the young actress who plays Michèle, bears a physical resemblance to the young Akerman in stance and presence. Akerman also appears in *Saute ma ville* – as a manic young woman who comes home to her high-rise apartment, cooks herself some spaghetti and finally takes a match to the gas before a final freeze-frame is accompanied by the sound of the explosion implied by the title. The later film is thus a less fatalistic revision of that first portrait of a young girl at the end of the 1960s in Brussels. But *Portrait of a Young Girl*, with its lovesick lesbian protagonist, is also a (less sexually explicit) revision of *Je tu il elle*, made when Akerman was in her early twenties. The filmmaker later remarked about casting herself in that film, with its nudity and still remarkable lesbian sex scene: 'When I did it . . . I didn't have a relation with the public. . . . I wouldn't dare do that again – I was completely unaware of how strong it would appear.'<sup>28</sup> *Portrait of a Young Girl* finds a way to 'do it again', but differently. The film's story of an almost unbearable schoolgirl crush hints at how a 'strong' lesbian representation such as that found in *Je tu il elle* might follow from the gesture of directorial and adolescent self-definition made in *Saute ma ville*. In other words, it shows how a young girl at the end of the 1960s in Brussels came to make

28 Martin, 'Chantal Akerman's films', p. 30.

29 Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*, p. 17.

30 Margulies, *Nothing Happens*, p. 1.

31 Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*, p. 85.

32 See 'The *Boys Don't Cry* debate', in Jackie Stacey and Sarah Street (eds), *Queer Screen: a Screen Reader* (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 257–95.

'Chantal Akerman's films' and to establish through them a unique and renewable relation with a 'public' itself still in the making.

In minor literature, 'the individual concern . . . becomes all the more necessary, indispensable, magnified, because a whole other story is vibrating within it'.<sup>29</sup> In the direct address, personal narration and physical presence of the artist in Benning's *Me and Rubyfruit* (1989) and *It Wasn't Love* (1990) and Jennifer Montgomery's *Age 12: Love with a Little L* (1991), in the casting of younger actors as versions of themselves in these two artists' longer works *Flat Is Beautiful* and *Art for Teachers of Children* (1995), and in Su Friedrich's hour-long docudrama about baby dykes, *Hide and Seek* (1996), one detects a remarkable formal consistency. These works help define lesbian minor cinema in terms of format (the short or short feature shot on 16 mm, 8 mm or analogue video), a 'de-aestheticization' (black-and-white or hand-processed) comparable to Akerman's minimalism, and the inchoate sexual and gender identities of their young female-bodied protagonists. These films and tapes do not belong to a 'coming out' genre; although they deal with the interstitial moments between childhood and adolescence or adolescence and adulthood, they are inconclusive and liminal, youth is not universalized, lesbianism is not affirmed. Resisting commodification or authorization by categories such as lesbian chic or New Queer Cinema, they share commonalities that do not cancel out their particularities. Margulies opens her study with a quote from Akerman: 'I haven't tried to find a compromise between myself and others. I have thought that the more particular I am the more I address the general.'<sup>30</sup> Akerman's 'minoritizing' queerness thus paradoxically links her singular vision to that of these other artists in what Deleuze and Guattari call a 'collective assemblage of enunciation'.<sup>31</sup> In this view, the modest quality of the works of these artists need not consign them to the ephemeral.

Such films can be connected and contrasted with such breakthrough lesbian independent films of the same period as Maria Maggenti's *The Incredibly True Adventures of Two Girls in Love* (1995), Alex Sichel's *All Over Me* (1997), or even Kimberly Peirce's *Boys Don't Cry* (1999) – fine first features that also depict girls' culture but which, to a greater or lesser degree, are expressed in 'major' languages involving narrative incident, structures of revelation and denouement and genre formulae.<sup>32</sup> A critical approach to what I call lesbian minor cinema reaches beyond the thematics of girlhood to stylistic features and material issues – limitations in the means of production intensify the effects of formal choices. The very title *Flat Is Beautiful* suggests a strategy of deterritorialization that also fits the cheap, analogue media in which the work is produced. Benning's (mostly) video work has an almost serial quality that, like Akerman's 'remakes' of earlier films, keeps open a space that the more familiar kinds of repetition delivered by lesbian feature films consumed in the art-house cineplex might close off.

Though at a very different stage of her career than Akerman, Benning has been making work for fifteen years and one can detect similar

elements of mediation of her earlier work, self-representation and 'relation to the public'. Benning's ten early tapes made with the Fisher Price camera produced highly contrasted, pixellated and *flat* images. These short, achingly resonant depictions of adolescent angst and insight feature extreme closeups of Benning's face speaking in synch sound and direct address, handwritten or pasted-up texts and astutely selected and affectively charged shards of popular culture – music, film and television clips, objects, tabloid headlines and other texts. Played out in her bedroom in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where she lived with her mother, the tapes are infinitely resourceful yet infused with a longing to take off; they show a baby dyke creatively, anxiously marking time. The last of this series of works, *Girlpower Part I* (1992), was billed as the forerunner to an independent feature, but this film was abandoned. *Flat Is Beautiful* remains her longest work, and while it maps terrain familiar from the Pixelvision tapes, the notable difference is that Benning herself does not appear. Instead, *Flat is Beautiful* incorporates graphic representations in the form of crudely constructed masks and animation (figures 1 and 2). In *Play Pause* and other recent short video pieces, a similar naive drawing style is used as the exclusive means of visual representation (the audio mixes of recorded ambient sounds and guitar chords are also crucial), continuing an abstraction of human form and of the subject at the centre of the earlier work while serving as a literal form of inscription (drawing).

*Flat Is Beautiful* is set in a poor Milwaukee neighbourhood in the mid 1980s, the scene of Benning's adolescence and inevitably read as the scene of her early filmmaking. If the man's world of teen romance and pop culture clichés exclude Akerman's Michèle, it is exclusion itself that renders her a powerful figure of the filmmaker's position and sensibility. Benning's *Flat is Beautiful* is a similarly heartbreaking depiction of an 'odd girl out', this time a twelve-year-old in gender trouble. Taylor (played by Sammy Steele) and all of the tape's other characters wear oversized handmade masks drawn in thick black marker; their crude but touching features and stiff hairdos echo the high-contrast presentation of Benning's own face in the Pixelvision tapes. Yet the topography characterized in Benning's early works by her tightly framed



33 'Toy stories: Sadie Benning interviewed by Gavin Smith', *Film Comment*, vol. 34, no. 6 (1998), p. 30.

physiognomy, a space flattened by the Pixelvision camera's close range and fixed focus, expands in *Flat Is Beautiful* to exteriors, shot in black-and-white 16 mm, of the sparsely populated streets of a midwestern, mid-1980s neighbourhood in decline. (*Play Pause* continues this trend, consisting of line drawings of a cityscape peopled with human figures but no discernible main characters, though a few figures come to the forefront in a central gay bar sequence.) Stationary, frontal medium long-shots depict abandoned storefronts, murals and hand-lettered shop signs; tighter shots indoors, rendered in Pixelvision's frank, foreshortened stare, show the mass-produced objects that fill Taylor's world and her dreams: a Hungry Man-brand TV-dinner placed in the microwave, the cartoon *Jem and the Holograms* flickering on the television, a tapping foot clad in an Adidas Samba, an Atari game. Placed and dated, these images are concretized rather than metaphoric.

The actors too become puppet-like, their everyday interactions are defamiliarized; affect is flattened and at the same time strangely heightened by the unchanging expressions of the masks. A single mom pushes potato chips wearily through her mouth slot. 'I wanted to create a world that was constructed so that it was fake but also kind of real at the same time, because that's kind of how life is,' Benning explains.<sup>33</sup> Even Benning's quite ambitious expansion of her characteristic short format marks a simultaneous turn towards the minor: the protagonist is younger, much less empowered and less articulate than the 'Sadie' who narrates videos such as *Me and Rubyfruit*. *Flat Is Beautiful's* length makes it a not-quite feature, and, although scripted, it is in fact not particularly 'dramatic'. Instead, it consists of all the in-between times – and that is about all there is – in the life of a fifth-grade latchkey kid. Events, such as they are – Taylor is rejected by her friend Julie, who does not like the teasing they are subjected to at school; gets her period for the first time when she is home alone ('what am I going to do?'); has a nightmare and is comforted by her mother; confides to their gay roommate she likes girls – transpire and are processed with the impoverished vocabulary of an eleven-year-old. The phone call from Taylor's best friend Julie is a sing-song argument rather than a melodramatic disclosure: 'You're not a boy you know'. 'What am I then?' 'You're a girl!' 'No I'm not!' The emphasis on the temporal in-between is a poignant correlate of the 'in-between' status of Taylor's age and gender.

After Taylor retreats to her room, her reverie is rendered in an animated sequence (resembling the technique of *The Judy Spots*) in which a cutout figure of Taylor practising the guitar is juxtaposed with drawings of figures that seem to represent Taylor and Julie kissing, eyes from which tears fall or stars spin, and images clipped from magazines and packaging, most of them graphic rather than photographic – a comic-book heterosexual couple, a kung fu figure, a bike, a pack of BubbleYum. Taylor's dreams of love and loss are mediated by popular culture, at once heterosexualized and creatively gendered. A magical array of images figures her own liminal identity, linking the 'flat' of a

tomboy's chest to the aesthetic possibilities of cutout animation, the two-dimensional television/video game screen, and the useful ambiguity, the literal sketchiness, of drawing. Of course Benning employs this ambiguity in the masks themselves; the fact that equally inexpressive cutout animation is used in this sequence for a representation of interiority invites us to find the beauty in the surface, not the depth. Strangely thing-like renditions of people call attention, in turn, to what are otherwise banal objects, bringing them to life here and throughout the tape, with its shots of a companionably dripping tap or an unattended television set.

Taylor's object-companions retain their magic, even as childhood wanes, through Benning's camera. The reverie scene can be read as a revisiting of Benning's earlier videos, set in her room, in which another toy, the Fisher Price camera, was used to animate her own face. Through *Flat Is Beautiful*, the closeup intimacy of those extraordinary tapes can be understood as Benning keeping herself company, consoling herself. The direct address of the videos meets a similarly isolated viewer in a space that is separate yet shared. Poet Eileen Myles describes the course of Benning's work: 'Everyone was staring at Sadie when she was a kid. Trying to figure out what sex she was. So she just went and made her own fateful representation. Initially she kind of joined the staring people and her camera was staring at her but then it started moving around, and slowly she began to replace herself . . .'<sup>34</sup> *Flat Is Beautiful*, like *Portrait of a Young Girl*, can thus also be read as marking the emergence of the author ('A gay teen decides to stay home from school and make her own world'<sup>35</sup>), but without endowing her with 'authority' or control. In the oeuvres of both Benning and Akerman, recent works that seem to be less explicit portraits of lesbian adolescence are connected to earlier, seemingly more explicit authorial performances. Rather than simply filling in autobiographical gaps, these works keep open the potential of the 'minor', linking youth with the refusal of closure (reterritorialization) by eschewing depictions of definitive 'events' and inviting a spectatorial participation that is not reducible to identification and catharsis.

In the scene I analyzed from *Portrait of a Young Girl*, Akerman renders Michèle's crush, and her being crushed, through the social isolation of the dance; Benning expresses the much younger Taylor's feelings through a representation of interiority and isolation anchored in social, mass-mediated images. In contrast to James Browns's 'It's a Man's, Man's, Man's World', which emblemizes Michèle's status as lesbian outcast, this character's disappointment has do-it-yourself guitar accompaniment that signifies the riot grrl movement on the historical horizon. Yet the two films' protagonists share a profound aloneness that is communicated to viewers through intensification of the crude, even minor (in the sense of banal, hardly noteworthy) signifiers of the adolescent crush.

Given the distancing mechanisms employed in both works, it is interesting that our participation in baby-dyke pathos depends on the closeup, whether of mask and cutouts or of Michèle's stoic face. For me

34 Eileen Myles, *Sadie Benning: Suspended Animation* (Columbus, OH: Wexner Center for the Arts, 2007), p. 16.

35 *Ibid.*

36 Amy Taubin, 'Teen spirit', *The Village Voice*, 14 January 1997, p. 70.

37 Béla Balázs, *Theory of the Film: Character and Growth of a New Art*, trans. Edith Bone (New York, NY: Dover, 1970); Gertrud Koch and Miriam Hansen, 'Béla Balázs: the physiognomy of things', *New German Critique*, no. 40 (1987), pp. 167–77.

38 'Toy stories', p. 29.

39 Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*, p. 158.

these shots are not primarily about identification with the protagonists' subjectivity or interiority; they keep us at a distance even as they address us. As Amy Taubin writes of the closeup of Michèle: 'To the degree that this . . . film is autobiographical, we are watching Chantal Akerman at the moment she discovers her vocation as a filmmaker'.<sup>36</sup> In *Flat is Beautiful*, it is a closeup of objects that introduce an equivalent representation of subjective recognition. The pan over the figurines on Taylor's dresser foreshadows the animated objects in Taylor's reverie to follow; Benning's camera emphasizes what film theorist Béla Balázs, in his paean to the closeup, called 'the physiognomy of things'.<sup>37</sup> But if Balázs looked for the soul in the closeup, Benning and Akerman are doing something different by making the surface opaque.

Responding to critic and programmer Gavin Smith's question about her use of the device of masks in *Flat is Beautiful*, Benning says:

I was influenced by Chantal Akerman's films – the actors almost feel like they're wearing masks some of the time because their facial expressions don't change. I wanted to evoke that, but also other things – the mask is a metaphor for wanting to know what's going on underneath. And in relationship to the ambiguity of Taylor's gender, this split between the head being a cartoon and the body being real makes the audience more attuned to body language.

GS: For me the masks actually facilitate a deeper emotional response.

SB: That's true also in cartoons. Cartoons use animals and hybrid human animal characters . . . but children relate to them almost more than they would to real people. Children relate to cartoons as something that is for them, and in some ways I wanted to make an adult version.<sup>38</sup>

For Benning, the ambiguity of gender, spread over the head/body split, makes the body hyperreal; the hybridity of human/animal doubles that of boy/girl. Her desire to make an adult version of a cartoon could be thought of as a literal form of minoritization. Kafka's hybrid human-animals are an important example of 'becoming' in Deleuze and Guattari's analysis: 'There is no longer man or animal since each deterritorializes the other, in a conjunction of flux, in a continuum of reversible intensities'.<sup>39</sup> Here, becoming-animal is a way of refusing anthropomorphism and escaping repressive, oedipalized notions of personhood.

But Benning's more mundane interest in 'the mask as a metaphor for wanting to know what's going on underneath' is where she parts company with the French thinkers. For conflict over oedipalized destiny is central to this film and to Akerman's *Portrait of a Young Girl*, suggesting how minority depictions can engage, without faithfully reproducing, major tropes and identity narratives (a chapter of *Kafka* is called 'An exaggerated Oedipus'). *Flat Is Beautiful* movingly depicts Taylor's extremely close relationship with her struggling single mother,

Peggy, eloquently condensing the precariousness of mother–daughter intimacy when Peggy tries to comfort her daughter by introducing the topic of *Bambi*, somehow forgetting about that film’s traumatic depiction of the mother’s death. Taylor seeks affirmation from the family’s gay roommate Quiggy; when she confides that she thinks it is ‘great’ when he falls in love with men, she is sweetly fishing for him to say it would be great if a girl fell in love with her too. But Quiggy is moving out, like her father did, and even queer affirmation must contend with loss.

Father–daughter conflict is inscribed at the very outset of *Portrait of a Young Girl*, when Michèle forges her sicknotes. These very poignant moments indicate the limits of Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the ‘minor’ for the cinema of lesbian or queer childhood. Precisely because these protagonists *are* minors, Oedipal conflicts loom large. The arrival of Taylor’s period, her being teased at school, her losing Julie, show the costs of ‘becoming a woman’ in a way that is far from the subjectless state that Deleuze and Guattari signify through the term ‘becoming-woman’. Monique Wittig asserts that ‘the refusal to become (or remain) heterosexual always meant to refuse to become . . . a woman’.<sup>40</sup> These films explore the potential of girlhood as the state of not (yet?) becoming a woman from an enunciative position that I would describe as lesbian – despite the historical and political divide between Wittig’s era (which Akerman and Deleuze and Guattari shared) and Benning’s, and the possibility that Taylor might eventually find a new transgender vocabulary for her self-perception.

The much more visible lesbian presence in recent popular culture that would seem to mark the difference between these periods has been characterized by a notable cultural shift in attitudes toward queerness in girl culture, signaled by the popularity of queer characters on US teen-oriented shows (such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*’s Willow), the box-office success of *Boys Don’t Cry*, Katy Perry’s hit song ‘I Kissed a Girl’, and even the findings of studies of teen sexual practices. Such transformations in girl culture (however commodity- and femme-oriented) arguably draw energy from the dyke punk and riot grrl subcultures from which Benning’s work emerged. The talented cadre of US lesbian filmmakers who began to make feature films in the 1990s have often keyed their work to that overlap: see, for example, Jamie Babbitt’s *But I’m A Cheerleader* (1999) and *Itty Bitty Titty Committee* (2007), Angela Robinson’s *D.E.B.S.* (2004), and Rose Troche’s work in progress, an adaptation of Ariel Schrag’s graphic novel of her junior year in high school, *Potential*.<sup>41</sup> *Flat Is Beautiful* has affinities with these works, yet, with its backward-looking settings and sensibilities, like *Portrait of a Young Girl* it refuses triumphalist narratives. Youth – minority – is not an oppositional term, but one that resides within a category, projecting a potential future even while undermining a positive state. It is this enunciation that positions a spectator in relation to both the filmmaker and her young protagonist that distinguishes lesbian minor cinema.

40 Monique Wittig, *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1992), p. 13.

41 Ariel Schrag, *Potential* (San Jose, CA: Slave Labor Graphics, 2000). See also Ariel Schrag, *Awkward and Definition: the High School Comic Chronicles of Ariel Schrag* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2008). The film reteams Troche with producer Christine Vachon, the key lesbian figure in New Queer Cinema, whose Killer Films developed Troche’s debut film with Guinevere Turner, *Go Fish* (1994), into the first significant lesbian feature of the movement. Troche, Babbitt, Robinson and Schrag have also been involved to varying degrees with the benchmark lesbian text of the noughties, Ilene Chaiken’s US premium-cable lesbian soap opera, *The L Word* (2004- ). Also worth citing in the context of teen lesbian representation are the television series *South of Nowhere* (2005- ) in the USA, with which Rose Troche had early creative involvement, and *Sugar Rush* (2005–06) in the UK.

42 Elizabeth Freeman, 'Packing history, count(er)ing generations', *New Literary History*, vol. 31, no. 4 (2000), pp. 727–44, p. 728. Judith Halberstam citing Freeman, points to queer participation in subcultures as a form of extended adolescence, read in a positive sense as a politics of refusal. In *Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2005), p. 152. See also Elizabeth Freeman, guest ed., 'Queer temporalities', *GLQ*, vol. 13, nos 2–3 (2007).

43 Freeman, 'Packing history', p. 741.

44 Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

45 *Ibid.*, p. 728.

In 'Packing history, count(er)ing generations', Elizabeth Freeman has eloquently described a queer displacement of generational models of history and futurity. Identifying with feminist history functions as, in Freeman's definition, a form of 'temporal drag, with all the associations that the word "drag" has with retrogression, delay, and the pull of the past upon the present', through which otherwise occluded possibilities become meaningful for contemporary subjects.<sup>42</sup> In particular, Freeman discusses Elisabeth Subrin's *Shulie*, a reenactment of a late 1960s film portrait of a young, pre-radical feminist Shulamith Firestone. In this and in Subrin's collaborative work with Benning *The Judy Spots*, Freeman argues, 'refusing distance from the child-self becomes a means of critiquing contemporary public culture'.<sup>43</sup>

Benning's affinity with Akerman can thus be seen as itself a kind of temporal drag, an identification with a modernist aesthetic and with a representation of lesbian loneliness and outsiderhood that precedes the out-and-proud queer present (Heather Love's account of 'feeling backward' is apt).<sup>44</sup> Freeman notes that her concept 'suggests the gravitational pull that "lesbian" sometimes seems to exert upon "queer"',<sup>45</sup> and I have utilized this in my nomination 'lesbian minor cinema'. Akerman's own return to a prefeminist late 1960s might be seen not so much as another way of circumventing identity politics or subcultural inscriptions in her films but as a way of making those times, that self, present. For each filmmaker, reworking her own past (films) produces a new relationship between the filmmaker and the protagonist that addresses the viewer not as a member of a niche market, but as part of a network or collectivity.

In the demand for feature films, LGBT audiences express both their desire for what has never been and for more of the same, following both utopian and commodity logics. *Portrait of a Young Girl* and *Flat Is Beautiful* are notable for the filmmakers' choices to work in more marginal modes and formats rather than to produce commercially oriented features. The concept of minor cinema helps reformulate questions of authorship and identity, form and circulation, aesthetics and audience at stake in their work. Yet any attempt to use the idiom and resources of cinematic production is to engage the 'major'. This means confronting dominant narrative and visual codes as well as entering into the technology and commercial apparatus of production/distribution/exhibition, and it also means engaging the populist aspirations that will always animate screen cultures. If cinema is, in turn, the major language of youth narrative, then these lesbian filmmakers advocate for the minor within it.

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