

CASE STUDY: *DESERT HEARTS* (DONNA DEITSCH, 1985)

Chris Jones

Critical attitudes

Like Andrea Weiss, Richard Dyer sees Donna Deitch's *Desert Hearts* as an example of a feature film which breaks refreshingly free of dominant heterosexual ideology. The film concentrates closely on the psychological world of its two central female characters, and their love is seen to grow and realise itself in a natural progression. Black lesbian film-maker Michelle Parkerson, on the other hand, sees the film as part of what she calls the 'easy heterosexist niches for homosexuality on the silver screen' negotiated by Hollywood (Gever, M. 1993: 234). The relationship portrayed is easy in the sense of being an idealised one between two beautiful, socially well-placed white women, and the male characters are too good to be true (see also Mandy Merck's views in *Dessert Hearts*, Gever, M. 1993: 377). On the level of the film's production history this comment seems less warranted, since Deitch spent nearly ten years trying to persuade reluctant financial backers to support this film adaptation of Jane Rule's novel. It was eventually made independently on a very small budget by Hollywood standards.

Plot patterns

The opening scene is signalled with a caption, 'Reno, Nevada, 1959' and shows a woman, Vivian Bell, tentatively descending from a train, and welcomed by Frances, in whose house she is staying as a paying guest. Most American viewers know that people come to Reno to gain divorces and we subsequently see Vivian consulting her lawyer. Driving Vivian to the house, Frances talks of her 'wild' daughter who, she says, is just like her dead father. We see the wide-ranging desert scenery glide past.

Frances's daughter Cay zooms up in her car, Buddy Holly blasting on her radio. She recklessly drives on the wrong side of the road in order to converse with Frances, who introduces her to 'Professor Bell'. After Cay zooms off Vivian reaches for a cigarette, and is portrayed as nervy, shy and tentative. She later starts to get to know Cay, who produces sculpture and works at one of the casinos. The two are soon discussing ambitions and plans.

In keeping with its genre pattern of romance, this film follows a simple plot whereby Vivian and Cay gradually come together, fall for each other and, towards the end, make passionate love. The generic plot complications consist of the very different personalities and backgrounds of the two women, and the neurotically possessive nature of Frances which is gradually revealed. She is not Cay's natural mother but lived for ten years with Cay's father and is the mother of Cay's half-brother Walter. We learn that Cay's father died young, that Frances still loves and adores him, and that she has a voracious need to keep Cay near her as a reminder of him. When she dances with Cay at the engagement party of Cay's friend Silver, Frances talks of how special the memory of Glen, her lover, is to her 'because he reached in and put a string of lights around my heart'. She tells Vivian: '... I got what I wanted. I had a love of my own.' Vivian's reply: 'You had more than most people dare hope for', sets up the main dramatic expectations of the plot as we gradually learn of Vivian's conformist marriage that she is escaping from. She tells her lawyer; 'I want to be free of what I've been'.

Character patterns

The differences between Vivian and Cay are clearly signalled through dress and behaviour. Vivian wears a steel-grey, precisely cut 1950s skirt-suit with a matching cloche hat. Her blonde hair is up in a neat, business-like style which matches her stiff, formal movements. She is ten years older than

Cay. She lectures in English Literature at Columbia University, and makes frequent references to what she calls her 'circle'. In terms of representation in American films, this brings into play a whole set of stereotypes in the contrast between the more intellectual, snobbish Easterner and the more physical Westerner. Cay shows off her long brown legs in skimpy denim shorts and cowboy boots. Her medium-length black hair flows freely. A representational tradition of associating blonde hair with aloof coolness, and dark hair with a lively, passionate nature, is being brought into play.

Cay is open and positive about her love of women. The first time Vivian visits Cay in her cottage she is disconcerted to glimpse another woman, Gwen, in Cay's bed. Vivian accepts Cay's offer of a lift into town, but is evidently awkward sitting between Gwen and Cay. Cultural differences are underlined when Cay replaces the blaring pop music on the radio with another station playing Prokofiev, whereupon Vivian recognises the music and says she likes it.

Although undeveloped in her education, Cay is open to new ideas and cultural influences, and it is for this reason that Vivian later wants to take her to New York. Cay is strong-minded, and tells Frances firmly: 'One of these days I'm gonna meet somebody that counts'. We see her resisting various social pressures to 'settle down' with Darrell, the male supervisor at the casino. She makes it clear to her friend Silver that she wants to be accepted for what she is, and Silver declares her continued friendship.

Cay tells Silver that she is very much in love with Vivian, but doesn't know whether anything will come of it. Darrell is shown protecting Cay from the unwanted advances of a client at the casino, and is polite and patient with her. His offer to 'look the other way' about Cay's affairs with women evokes her exasperation, and shows his complete misunderstanding of who Cay is.

It is Cay who makes most of the moves in bringing herself and Vivian together. At the motel, when Vivian, on the opposite side of the door, asks her to go away, Cay replies: 'I can't, honest'. Once she has let Cay into the room, Vivian turns round to find Cay naked in her bed. Cay succeeds, once again, in relaxing Vivian by making her laugh.

Vivian slowly develops a more relaxed outlook. She adopts a looser hairstyle, wears jeans and visits the casino. As she watches a rodeo, we see a close-up of her slipping her wedding ring off her finger, symbolising a new life. When she finally gets her divorce, the lawyer remarks that Vivian has found a 'pen-pal' in Reno. Her reply: 'I've found much more than that, Mr Warner' is strong and confident.

Sex and the spectator

A key scene in advancing the couple's intimacy occurs when Cay is driving Vivian home after the party, where Silver's performance of her loving country song is accompanied by shots of the two looking at each other. Cay tells Vivian that she can only find real love with a woman. When Vivian, continuing to wrap her reactions in a cloak of academic tolerance, says: 'Are you trying to shock me?' Cay replies calmly: 'No, I was only telling you the truth'. As Vivian flees to the car Cay makes her wind down the window, bends down and caresses Vivian's cheek with her lips. The romantic convention of the first kiss is made dramatic and memorable through the heavy shower that is drenching Cay, and the unusual positioning of the lovers.

The love-making scene at the motel raises the vexed question of erotic voyeurism. We have a woman directing a scene of woman-to-woman love-making which generally avoids angles or shots which could echo those traditionally associated with images directed at heterosexual males. Helen Shaver as Vivian conveys pleasurable sexual awakening and a nervousness that is carried into the

next scene. In a restaurant, the two declare their love for each other but Vivian is uncomfortable and her lack of 'points of reference' leads to a quarrel and reconciliation with her lover.

Given the 1950s setting, remarkably little homophobia is encountered by the two lovers in this film. The prejudice of Lucille, another house guest, and the incomprehension of Darrell are balanced by the tolerant support of Silver and Walter. Frances's attitudes remain ambiguous and perhaps more credible given the era in which the film is set. When they return to find Frances has kicked Vivian out of her house and booked her into a motel, this act is equally aimed at hanging on to Cay, although she says 'at least I'm normal'. The act backfires, and Cay moves out to stay with Silver. In her final conversation with Cay, Frances displays mystified antagonism: 'I just don't understand it. Women together.' Cay uses Frances's words to explain: 'She just reached in put a string of lights around my heart' and earns a reluctant blessing and a hug, an action marred by Frances's comment that people will be talking about her.

The fragility of this lesbian relationship across the class, regional and educational differences of 1950s America is echoed by the question posed narratively at the end as the train pulls away: will it be to the next station as she claims, or will Cay stay with Vivian on that train journey to New York?