

CASE STUDY: *GO FISH* (ROSE TROCHE, 1994)

Chris Jones

Lesbian stardom

Guinevere Turner, a leading actor and co-writer of this film, has become a lesbian film star. Her on-screen charisma and the intertextual effects of publicity in lesbian and gay media contain the classic ingredients for the development of the first openly lesbian film-star persona. This is a trail already blazed in other media by figures such as kd lang (music and film) and Ellen Degeneres (television).

In the tradition of most lesbian productions, *Go Fish* is a small-budget film. The long list of helpers and contributors following the main credits attests to strong community support. Typical of such projects, many of those participating in the making of the film did several jobs; for example, V.S. Brodie is both main actor and co-producer. The film has excellent black and white cinematography by Ann T. Rossi, and an attractive, specially written score. It took two years to complete, a fact which makes the quality and consistency of Turner's performance all the more laudable.

The time was right for the success of this film. Co-producer John Pierson was aware that what he calls 'the low-budget aesthetic' was very much in vogue in 1994 and the success of *Claire of the Moon*, despite very bad reviews, had made him conscious of the vastly underserved lesbian audience. The film was an immediate hit at the Sundance Film Festival that year, and Pierson used his considerable negotiating skills to persuade Goldwyn distributors to snap it up, the first such deal to be achieved. Nevertheless, its success with audiences, and its engaging charm, is mainly due to its lively script, direction and performances.

The script: speaking as lesbians

Go Fish has a simple main storyline. A young lesbian student, Max (Turner) is eager to find a girlfriend. Ely (Brodie) is very reserved, nervous of commitment, and sheltering behind her fading long-distance relationship with a lover who has been living far away in Seattle for over two years. Max and Ely get together with a lot of help from their friends, which include Kia, a black College lecturer in whose apartment Max rents a room, and Ely, Kia's Hispanic lover. Ely shares an apartment with Daria. These room-mates discuss the women's feelings, with each of them separately and between themselves as a group. Max is initially uninterested, but gradually changes her attitude. It emerges that Ely is very attracted to Max. Daria arranges a party in her apartment where all the friends are invited. At the party Max and Ely get to know each other better and, soon after, arrange a big date.

This outline indicates several features that make a refreshing difference in terms of lesbian film. In contrast with the all-too-frequent portrayal of lesbian relationships as relatively isolated and fragile, dependent on the goodwill of a limited number of (usually straight, usually liberal) friends, Max and Ely are surrounded by a supportive lesbian culture. Daria is constantly pressing Ely to make up her mind. Kia checks through Max's college paper for her, and discusses her well-being with Ely, Daria and other friends. These women work, eat, drink, make love, have sex, play cards and care for their cats. The script is a collaboration between Guinevere Turner and director Rose Troche. During one of their get-togethers the group of friends discuss various woman-positive words for 'vagina', just one notable example of the way the dialogue crackles with lively repartee about their lived experience as lesbians.

A further example of natural-sounding dialogue occurs during the phone conversation where Max and Ely arrange their date. Gently prompted by Max, Ely admits that she considers her relationship

with the woman in Seattle to be over. On hearing this admission, Max prompts Ely to ask her out on a date. They agree to meet at Max's apartment. The scene leading up to their lovemaking is underpinned with gentle humour. Max is late in getting ready, then tells Ely that she's having a 'fashion crisis' in deciding what to wear, and remains in her robe. The act of cutting Ely's nails, very odd for a first date as the friends later comment, brings them into close physical intimacy.

The script celebrates lesbian culture but prevents the tone of the film from becoming cosily idealistic. We see Kia fielding insults shouted in the street and hear Ely talking of being called a 'lezzie' at school. There is a scene where Ely goes home and has a major argument with her mother, because her brother has informed the family that he saw her going into a local gay bar. Her mother utters a stream of homophobic insults in Spanish and English. Ely angrily declares that she is leaving home. She flees to Kia's apartment where Max comforts her in her usual clumsy way, saying, 'we can be your family'.

Direction: seeing queerly

The film has a distinct visual style based on frequent use of close-ups. The faces of Max and Ely are shot in extreme close-up, for instance, as the two of them talk on the phone, thus underlining their growing intimacy. Close-ups of hair, ear-rings, lips and hands make the viewer feel part of the group. This sense of intimacy through physical closeness echoes the style of other lesbian film-makers such as Sadie Benning.

There are scenes throughout the film of Kia, Ely, Daria and the latter's various girlfriends talking about their lives and discussing the progress of Max and Ely's relationship. The director presents these shots in a memorable way. We see only the women's heads in various patterns as they are lying, presumably on some kind of large bed, looking up at the ceiling, an amusing physical embodiment of them putting their heads together in order to formulate their plans.

The narrative is punctuated by shots and montage sequences which comment on the main action. Shots of a spinning top reflect the game of pairing and mating that is being played. The song on the soundtrack echoes the theme, with lyrics about love spinning round. Shots of lights being switched off and wringing hands visually embody the initial tensions of the Max/Ely relationship. A montage sequence uses shots of Max and other women looking uncomfortable in white wedding dresses while people congratulate them. Sometimes the women try to pull off the dresses. In parallel, Max's voiceover gives us her thoughts on how to live her lesbian identity, along with comment on the lures and pitfalls of conformity.

Director/script-writer Rose Troche uses light touches which bring the characters to life. One longer close-up of Ely's black boot being carefully laced by her, in readiness for her date with Max, embodies this character's care and nervousness. On her way home afterwards, we see Ely leaping in the air with delight and accepting a rose from a stranger. There is a comic sequence towards the end. Scenes of Ely being closely questioned by Daria about what went on during the date are cross-cut with Max giving her account to her room-mates, and these in turn are comically underpinned by contrasting scenes of the date as envisaged by Max, Ely and their friends.

New lesbian images?

The viewer is introduced to a varying array of lesbians, although there are no older women. Ages range from Kia, who is thirty, to Max, in her late teens. Kia's dress and demeanour contain overtones of the traditional butch stereotype. The fact that she is black provokes further debate about racial and sexual imaging.

The women portrayed have a refreshingly realistic, non-glamourised range of bodies and faces. Characters and attitudes also vary. Ely is firmly monogamous while Daria is happily promiscuous. Ely and Max disagree about the gay images in the film they see when they first go out together. After having sex with a male friend, Daria is waylaid by an angry group of lesbians. The ensuing discussion airs a range of views about personal freedom and sexual identity as Daria insists that she is 'a lesbian who has had sex with a man'. A queer lesbian?

Awareness of age and image is foregrounded. Max initially dismisses Ely's looks as 'seventies hippie' and with typical youthful impetuosity calls her 'ugly', to Kia's annoyance. Max learns to be less rigid in her outlook. Ely undergoes a drastic change of image, having her long hair cut into a dramatically shaved style. On her next meeting with Max, she confides her worry that the new style may be 'too butch' and the two women talk of the constraints and expectations of body-image for lesbians.

The final sequence of the film, which accompanies the credits, contains an uplifting message. It shows various couples we have met during the film, making love. The imagery skilfully avoids hetero titillation and has a convincingly lesbian feel, recalling the photographic images of Della Grace. The voice-over advises viewers to keep an open mind because 'The Girl Is Out There'.