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Desire lines: An interview on the sociality of film with B. Ruby Rich

Dagmar Brunow and Skadi Loist

NECSUS 12 (1), Spring 2023

Abstract

A conversation with B. Ruby Rich, one of the most prolific film critics in the world. For decades she has been involved in film culture as a curator, film critic, professor, and journal editor. In this interview, Skadi Loist and Dagmar Brunow talk with Rich about her inspirations, her international encounters, and her take on film culture and criticism. Above all, this conversation highlights the importance of looking at the social relations that make film culture happen.

Keywords

film culture; film critic; B Ruby Rich; film festivals; documentary filmmaking; queer cinema

B. Ruby Rich is one of the most prolific film critics in the world. For decades she has been involved in film culture as a curator, film critic, professor, and journal editor. In this interview, Skadi Loist and Dagmar Brunow talk with Rich about her inspirations, her

international encounters, and her take on film culture and criticism. Above all, this conversation highlights the importance of looking at the social relations that make film culture happen.



Fig. 1: B. Ruby Rich, Skadi Loist, and Dagmar Brunow in conversation. January 2023. (screenshot). © Rich, Loist, Brunow.

Skadi Loist: Ruby, we are super happy to talk to you about film culture at large, and you as a brilliant chronicler of contemporary film culture in particular. We are interested in your vivid, smart, witty views on film culture and your ability to grasp moments in politics, society, and film.

Dagmar Brunow: Let us rewind. You grew up in Boston in the 1950s and 1960s, ‘reinvented yourself’, as you write in *Chick Flicks*,^[1] in Chicago in the 1970s, before becoming a *New Yorker* in the 1980s. Then you moved to San Francisco and to Paris. You come from a lower middle-class family and have called yourself an

'upstart entrepreneur in the field of learning',[2] and that is something I can relate to. How did you educate yourself and what were your cultural inspirations? Going to the local library for books is one thing, but what was your encounter with film culture? How did you get to love cinema?

B. Ruby Rich: This is a great question and thank you for that very inflated description. How did I get into film culture? I was not a cinephile, ever, and I was not someone who stayed up watching late-night films on broadcast television, like most film critics of my generation. I was not particularly interested. It was all about books for me – I thought I would be a writer, which I sort of am, but that's not what I had in mind. In high school our English teacher, my favorite English teacher, told us we really had to be going to films, that we were missing out if we weren't. At that time in Boston, in the 1960s, there was such a vibrant film culture that wasn't yet the arthouse culture of today. It was a much more natural environment, where there were these specialised theaters. For instance, I remember the Essex Theater in the Back Bay in Boston only showed British films, so if you wanted to see British films you went there. It was also the beginning of arthouse cinemas with very quirky approaches to programming; for instance, double bills that had really buried connections that you couldn't figure out until you were there and discovered that the last scene of the first film said something about the first scene of the next film, like some mad curatorial genius or sheer perversity was putting these together. I started going to films, as something that one did.

So, from the very beginning for me, and I think all the way through my life, film has always been about sociality. It's like people who don't drink alone, you know, they go to the bar – that was me with films. COVID taught me that I had to watch films alone, but I don't really like to. I don't have as much patience, or I don't take as much enjoyment. So it's always about sociality. I got into films in Boston and eventually moved to New Haven to finish college, after I'd dropped out in May 1968, very wisely [laughs], to live life and go to Europe for the first time with my little backpack and all of that. But, I moved to New Haven and I had friends who were involved with the Yale Film Society; this of course was the time of very vibrant college film societies. It was also the time of 16mm, so to check prints they would come to our house outside of New Haven where we had what we called a hippie commune, even though it was just four of us sharing a house. We had a projector that a friend had stolen out of a closet where it wasn't being used, and the film society guys would drive out to our house to watch the film in the living room and make sure the print was ok because they'd have to show it in a day or two. I became the preview house for the Yale Film Society and that was my original film education. It was all about having access to the technology and it was all about, from the very beginning, friendship networks.

I really lost interest in being an English major because I found it so pretentious (it was the reason I had gone to Yale but I found

it unbearable) - I took one class from Harold Bloom and dropped the course, and so I didn't have the chance to become one of the women abused by him - and I fell in love with archaeology and anthropology there, and with photography, and through friendship, with film. And I gave up my idea of becoming a classic scholar and moving to Copenhagen where I was going to translate Nordic sagas. I gave up that idea and eventually the idea of becoming a Mesoamerican archaeologist and traveling in Yucatan and Chiapas too. Instead I fell into showing films with the same friend from college. He and I moved to Boston together, got crummy jobs for a year, and started up the Woods Hole Community Film Society together with two other pals we recruited.

We started a repertory theater in this summer resort town and charmed the little local culture committee into giving us the weekend use of the community hall and made up a very serious contract. We would pay them, I think, \$10 a night versus 5% of the gross, and we charmed the church into lending us chairs for the summer, when they were closed. We made a big banner, we made our own posters every week and we showed a different film every night - all standard repertory classics you know: *Sansho the Bailiff*, *Touch of Evil*, the Marx Brothers, just a whole mix. But this was the era before video, VCRs hadn't been invented yet. People were bored to death in this little town in the evening and so everybody came to our theatre and we gave out free popcorn and we dressed in the period of the films, and

we made mixtapes that we played on the sound system and everyone loved us. We sold out every film, Friday, Saturday, Sunday. And then we would spend the week creating the new posters, hand coloring them, getting the films shipped, ordering the next and so on, and that was my introduction to film, really, through showing them. I had this idea that it was this kind of miracle; that you could put up a sign saying you were showing these films and, mysteriously, people would show up at the door and come in, they'd believe you. And this was how we made our living for the summer. We all crammed into a tiny rental apartment and made a new friend with a car so we could get around, and this was all wonderful, I thought.

And then my friend was moving to Chicago to get an MFA at the School of the Art Institute and I tagged along, because I thought I was going to be a photographer now. When we got there we tried to start up this film society at the school and the Dean very seriously told us no, that there was a woman there who had just got a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, which had just started up a division on funding alternative exhibition. Because – and this is something I always like to talk about – these wonderful movie theaters were closing down due to the success of the censorship fights, they were all becoming porn houses, and so there was nowhere to see anything other than first run films. Thus the NEA was supporting the creation of these film centers in museums and universities, and so she got a grant, and she hired us to be the projectionist, the ticket taker, I

typed the program notes, and within a very few months she got a State Arts Council grant for an assistant and hired me.

And so I got an old fashioned apprenticeship. That was my graduate school, working there, reading all the film journals we subscribed to, meeting people. It was coincidentally when Peter Wollen was teaching at Northwestern, and Laura Mulvey (sometimes insultingly called Mrs. Wollen) had little to do, and was helping, as I was, organising a Women's Film Festival. They were preparing their first film, *Penthesilea*, and my loft was the rain date location for one of the scenes, but it didn't rain so they didn't need us. We were living in an illegal loft in an industrial building where they thought that we had an art studio. And there I was, as an assistant, then assistant director, then the associate director of the Film Center. And I got to meet everyone. I got to meet King Vidor, I got to meet Werner Herzog, Alberto Cavalcanti. It was unbelievable, and I got this very wonderful alternative to a degree. That was my PhD.

I was writing program notes - that was the start of my writing criticism - and then the free weekly paper *Chicago Reader* asked if I would start writing for them. *Jump Cut* was starting up as a journal in Chicago and asked if I wanted to start working on it. I began editing *Jump Cut*. So, I had this incredibly organic education in film curating, film criticism, writing, editing, and also in staging events and standing up there at the front of the auditorium telling the audience why they were going to love this

film, why they' d better, and it was again deeply embedded in sociality. I began writing for the *Reader* and I got to review, for instance, *Jeanne Dielman*. Chantal [Akerman] was on her US tour after debuting at Cannes, and the film was being shown at the Film Center and I wrote about it and she stayed with me. This was in our new loft, which was further up the street with a parachute tent decorating the guest room. Everything was very intertwined. And that' s how in 1976 I did an interview with Chantal for Video Databank, which they recorded on the original portapak in their little office downtown – because Kate Horsfield and Lyn Blumenthal lived downstairs from me in the loft building, and I had already written their original grant to start up Video Data Bank.[3]

I would say that the 1970s was a really fertile time to be lucky enough to get involved with film. I think of it as kind of the golden age of film, and I was lucky to be in that spot at that time, finding my way through this and figuring out, you know, what to do next. But I did go to Edinburgh then, and I used to go and stay with Laura [Mulvey] and Peter [Wollen], who were still married then, in Ladbrooke Grove. I went to Edinburgh several times. I met Sally Potter there in the 1970s, so all of that was starting to happen. I met Pam Cook then, whom I just saw again a few years ago after a long time. I met Rose English and Lynda Myles and all sorts of people. And in the early 1980s, when Channel 4 began, I was sent back to London. By then I was living in New York and *American Film* magazine, now long gone, commissioned me to

go over and write a big feature for them on what this new thing was [Channel 4], and I went around and visited a lot of the workshops and wrote about the Workshop Declaration. And again, to me, those early 1980s were such a fascinating time, with what was happening with the London Council, what was going on during Thatcher, and I loved going over there, and being based in New York made it very easy to get back and forth.

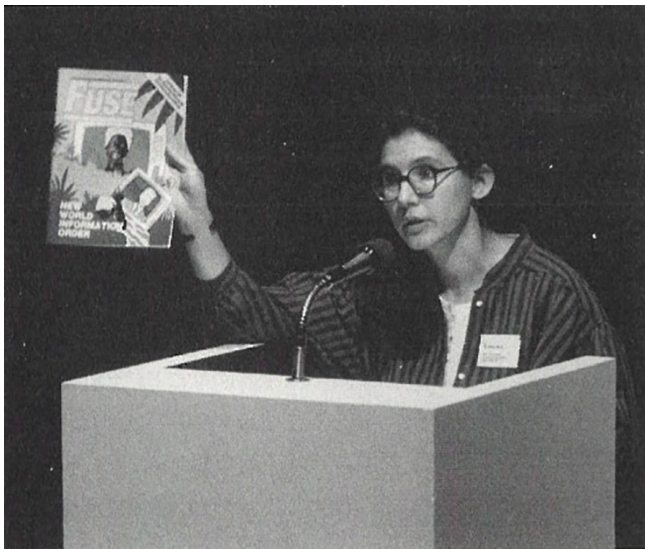


Fig. 2: B. Ruby Rich with the Canadian journal Fuse on the importance of an alternative press. At the National Alliance of Media Arts Centers (NAMAC). © Walker Art Center.

Brunow: Just as a quick comment, to hear about your integrative approach is very inspirational for us who are teaching film studies. It would be great for our students. When you talk about the quirky curation, I immediately thought of the Scala Cinema near King's Cross in London in the 1980s where they were also programming double bills.

Rich: Yes! And the Other Cinema, too! I would just say, Dagmar, that I'm always irritated that film is only taught by textual analysis of individual works or by national cinemas or by auteurism or by periodisation, because I think that what gets ignored are the social relations that make any of this happen. At that time in the late 1970s I began corresponding with Karola Gramann and Heide Schlüpmann whom I'd met at Edinburgh, [4] and that was how I was able to write the *Mädchen in Uniform* essay, [5] which I'm now trying to revive into a small book. I was writing letters to them, they were sending me things that they found, and these friendships, I think, were very deep because of being formed that way and you could learn things that you couldn't learn in your own country or from the people you had easier access to. It wasn't yet written about, it wasn't in books.

Brunow: I like how this interview already becomes a history of knowledge, an intellectual history, and this is what I particularly liked about *Chick Flicks*. It comprises several of your articles which were re-edited in the late 1990s, but it is so much more than an anthology. Each of them is introduced by a prologue with your autobiographical memories, reminiscent of 'journalists and journeys, conferences and conversations, partying and politicking, going to movies and going to bed'. [6] The book demonstrates how the private is political, but also how film is so much more than just 'a text'. Film culture includes the industrial framework, which films are available at festivals, which films are distributed, the role of exhibition and the cinema context, the film festival circuit, and all these aspects are

entangled. As a film scholar working on memory and archives, I would conceptualise the book as a way of activating the critical archive around film culture, and the archive of film criticism and how these moments resurface in new contexts for new generations of readers. *Chick Flicks* is creating a social and cultural memory of a specific historical moment in which your articles have been published, but you look at them decades later from a new perspective. Could you speak about your concept behind the book at the time of its inception in the late 1990s?

Rich: Well, thank you for that, Dagmar. I couldn't figure out how to write a book, and in the 1990s I'd moved to San Francisco, so I was away from the site of a lot of that work, and I was trying to figure out what bits to combine, how to make something, and whether I had to write something new. I didn't want to let go of the older pieces but they seemed to me to be very scattered and not really available - so I had the idea of trying to pull them together. Also, I was very angry about what was being ignored from the past histories of feminist film, the way it was being taken up in academia, in what I thought, was a really distorted way. Okay, you know, I love a mission, so I went off on my crusade to try to reorient the way this history was being seen and that's when I found that great quote from Chris Marker: 'History throws its empty bottles out the window.' And I wanted to grab them and fill them back up.

I had left my job at the Arts Council by then so I had the time. You know, by the way, that I worked full time in public funding in the 1980s. I ran the film program at the New York State Council on the Arts from 1981 to 1991, so I was in New York City. I was funding so many great filmmakers and, by the way, was not allowed to write about any New York filmmakers at all, because it was a conflict of interest. I had sort of been gagged a bit, so I had a lot to say that I hadn't been able to say.

Meanwhile, I had moved to San Francisco and fortuitously the MacArthur Foundation offered me a two-month residency in Fall 1992. They gave me a full-time salary and a furnished apartment if I'd come live in Chicago and dip in and out of their meetings and consult with them and give my opinions. It was phenomenal. And therefore, I was kind of back at the scene of the crime, I was back in what was left of my Chicago of the 1970s, where everything had started for me. That was a big influence for me, that happenstance. And that serendipity is kind of how I run my life, and led to the book being done that way, because I was able to start going around and talking to people and asking what they remembered and what had happened and what was important and what had stuck. And it was really cool. I loved being back in Chicago, I've never stopped loving Chicago, and I got to see people who stirred memories. It was really a fortuitous way to get started on the book and then I just continued, once I moved back and started making a life in San Francisco. It was a way to create some continuity for myself. I could go into my little office that I had rented in North Beach and

inhabit these different times and places in my life. So, I think writing the book was very useful for me and I've been relieved that it's been somewhat useful as a volume.

Brunow: You coined the term 'cinefeminism' in *Chick Flicks*, [7] to capture the cross-fertilisation between cinema and the second wave of the women's movement. The concept also epitomises the idea of cinema as a response to an urgent political situation. Such a 'historical conjuncture', as Stuart Hall would call it, captures a moment of crisis as a moment of opportunity. Meanwhile, a lot of valuable work has been done since then in the field of cinefeminism, for instance via the London-based Club des Femmes. According to you, which aspects of cinefeminism are still missing from both the academic debate and even from curatorial efforts?

Rich: I think a lot of it is missing. I think the misunderstanding and overvaluation of the gaze is really crazy. It was never what Laura Mulvey really wrote and it's been taken up in a very self-serving way by some people and a very conceptually sloppy way by other people. It throws everything together now into the misnomer of a 'female gaze'.

First of all, what's missing is any kind of politics of production. Second, what's missing is any kind of real solidarity. I think that it's very much about a rush into the commercial space that wasn't there before, but which has suddenly opened, partly due to the streamers, partly due to that system's need for personnel

being so extreme that even women are allowed in, so there's kind of a rush to the door, which is wonderful, but I don't think it has a politic apart from a career politic.

This particular year is a wonderful one in terms of the representations of women and the debates over those representations, whether *Women Talking* or *Tár* or so many other films; there's no consensus, because I think there's no underlying vision of what a feminist practice should be. I find myself in a lot of arguments about this present moment, but I think it's indicative of what's been going on – a confusion between directorial gender and the value of a work or the meaning of a work or even the intention of a work.

I think that there's a great mission right now for feminist academics and theorists to engage this moment and try to make sense of it. I remember that in the 1970s, when there was suddenly all of this work by women being seen for the first time, there were huge debates: what is a feminist aesthetic? People would say there isn't one. Some people would get angry at all these disparate films being lumped together just because they were in a festival, even though they'd been made all over the world and all over the decades. And then people would have fights and say, 'No, this is all different.' I feel as though the debate hasn't progressed much. I feel as though we're back in a moment that isn't very helpful. And I think it's actually a moment that calls out to women in the academy to think about this and think

about how to engage with the public debate in a way that's more useful.

Loist: What is also missing is a good book on feminist film analysis, or for that matter intersectional queer feminist film analysis for my students. We need to know how to discuss, describe, and recognise cinefeminisms or queer cinemas. You end the introduction to *New Queer Cinema* with a lovely quote: 'I'm never happier than in those rare times when my own interest, the films I love, the interest of the community to which I belong, and the larger society's attention all converge. I live for those moments.' [8] To me that perfectly sums up what is brilliant about your pieces. So with that book in mind let's jump back to 1992 where your seminal essay 'New Queer Cinema' appeared in *Sight and Sound* [9] as a re-edit of the *Village Voice* article.

Rich: And crucially, a re-titling of the *Village Voice* [10] article.

Loist: Exactly, and already you had organised the Barbed Wire Kisses panel at Sundance with the important filmmakers of this movement, or moment. You kept writing about exactly these issues: whether what you saw on the film festival circuit, in the season 1991-92, was a movement or a moment of irreverent queer cinema which responded to a specific time, coming out of the AIDS crisis, ACT UP, and what I would say is an urgent will for survival and also for solidarity and political alliances. So this label has been taken up in film studies and books, and MA theses,

like mine back then, and PhD theses that have been written about exactly that, examining cinema for the term that you coined. Looking at that, what would you say inspired your original piece and the continued interest? Because the book came out almost 20 years after the original article. What inspired the original piece in this moment, this movement, and also kept your attention for those 20 years?

Rich: Good question. What inspired and what kept my attention? I think what initially inspired it was that conference and festival in Amsterdam in 1991. That was the start of it. It brought a lot of people together, lifetime achievement awards were given to Derek Jarman and Ulrike Ottinger, there were tee-shirts emblazoned with women, or men, actors or actresses, and you were scolded if you wanted the opposite one – you had to take your assigned gender. And there were all kinds of racial debates and arguments over the little statues of Black men posted around the streets of Amsterdam as part of Christmas: Zwarte Piet, or Black Pete, alleged to accompany Saint Nicholas. The festival was almost like a terrarium of all of these issues of race, sexuality, and gender coming to the fore. What struck me was the experience of being in Amsterdam and having this opening ceremony for a queer festival and with the mayor of Amsterdam there greeting everyone, something I had not experienced in the United States (although San Francisco soon would do that). And I had this idea that something radical was happening, and getting the attention and imprimatur in this

way, and yet at the same time was exploding from within over all these unresolved issues; so the energy was just undeniable.

I got inspired by this. I had just been in Toronto where I saw *Edward II* and I had just seen *Young Soul Rebels*. I had actually viewed *Young Soul Rebels* on an earlier visit to London when I saw Isaac [Julien] who was still in post-production, so I saw it on the editing table. I thought: all of this is coming together; this is an amazing moment. I ran into people everywhere in those days. In Toronto on the sidewalk I ran into the people who programmed Sundance and I said, 'Look what's going on, look at these films, we have to organise something.' Because I was involved with Sundance already at that time - I was on the selection committee, I had been brought in in the early 1980s, around Latin American film actually - and I said, 'We've got to do something, let's do a panel.' And they were all on board. I then went to Amsterdam with this in mind, saw more films there, and then at Sundance, sure enough, we organised this panel.

They titled it. I did not come up with the Barbed Wire Kisses title, I'm afraid, but a very sweet hip heterosexual guy came up with it, their programmer Alberto Garcia. And we did this panel that they had to move to this large theater because so many people wanted to come. And I've never understood why anyone goes to panels at Sundance, because there's so many films you want to see. But in fact something like 150 people came to this and it was amazing to be on a panel with Sadie Benning and Derek Jarman,

one turning 18 and one turning 50. People forget that at this time video could not be projected in theaters, it was purely on monitors in galleries, and so no video had ever been shown at Sundance up to that point, and it wouldn't be until the mid-to-late 1990s when the technology evolved. It's funny: you get video projection around the same time you get the AIDS cocktail. The world changes in both of these unconnected ways that shift the field a lot. But I managed to show Sadie Benning's short video *Jollies* in that theater because it was also used as a lecture hall and they had that ability, unlike in all their movie theaters. So we did this video projection to start the panel and then we had the event and it became almost like an AA meeting. People were standing up in the audience saying, you know, I work for Disney and I am gay; all of these things were going on and everybody got very worked up and very inspired. I had wisely made my *Village Voice* editor Lisa Kennedy one of the participants on the panel and she agreed to let me write a feature on it all, because she saw for herself what a vibrant moment it was, what an important moment.

Loist: But I love how it's had these different iterations, because when I was writing my new queer cinema thesis at Smith College in 2000-01, you had just written that other piece arguing that, no, it wasn't a movement, it was just a moment and now it's been co-opted and mainstreamed and it's gone.[11] And then a few years later you were like no, now it's the New Trans Cinema, and that's where the urgency and the activism is.[12]

Rich: Which hadn't come about yet. I think that's true, but it has yet to come to fruition - though the Berlinale may have just changed that with four trans films that I saw! But I did see a film this year, the Brazilian short, *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me Here*. Did you see it? Directed by Érica Sarmet, produced by Lívia Perez. It's a film that has that early energy and sexiness. Club des Femmes is showing it in London.

I was really delighted to discover it because I had been in Brazil in the early 1980s for the Film Festival in Rio just at the moment when the military was stepping down and the constitution was being signed for the new government, i.e. the opposite of the moment in early January 2023 in Brazil. And Lívia Perez told me something I didn't know: that the moment when I was in Rio, which was just phenomenal for me, is seen as the lesbian golden age in Brazil, and she thought this was hilarious that I was there right at this moment - picking up girls and drinking Caipirinhas, and discovering the city's 'fuck motels' and generally getting in trouble. I had been asked to hand-carry a print of Lizzie Borden's *Born in Flames* to be shown at the film festival. So there I was, plunged into this scene, going off to this notorious lesbian bar called Gaivota that's legendary. And I didn't know that this moment that I experienced is actually emblematised in Brazil as a significant cultural moment that they're returning to, in a way, in this film.



Fig. 3: At the Latin American Film Festival, Havana in 1986. Left to right: Lita Stantic, Argentine producer of Maria Luisa Bemberg's *Miss Mary*; her daughter Alejandra; Sheila Whitaker of London's National Film Theater and London Film Festival; Julie Christie, star of *Miss Mary*; and B Ruby Rich. © Nereida García-Ferrez.

Brunow: And yet, there must be such moments today. You have perceived the 1990s as a time full of political possibilities. Do you think queer cinema has squandered the opportunity to resonate with urgent political questions?

Rich: Well, I suppose so, because here we are 20 years later. We don't know, do we? I should say that a lot of my point of view has been shaped by being the editor-in-chief of *Film Quarterly* for the past decade. So that's influenced it somewhat, and we did do a special Brazilian issue [74:2 Winter 2020] because there was this surge of production coming out of the Lula and Dilma years. Well of course, we know what then happened. All of that was stopped, the archives were almost destroyed. We've seen what

went on in the Trump-Bolsonaro years. I don't know what's going to happen now. But, the economy. I don't think that we can talk about any of this without talking about what's happened to the global economic order. And as I've said many times, but never wrote the book I was going to write: people keep talking about late capitalism, but we aren't in that. We're in early feudalism. We're in a new period that I call 'neo-feudalism'. I think these questions can't be answered because the entire class that created this work, participated in this work, watched this work, this entire class is being systematically eliminated. So, we don't know what's coming next or what form culture is going to take. Is it still going to be in the cities? Is it going to be in other places?

I tried for years to convince my students not to try to make a career in New York or LA or San Francisco. I said: 'Pick a city, look on the map, pick a place where all the industry has shut down, take all your friends, move there, towns or cities, pool your money, buy cheap places, create your website destination and branding, and start doing your work.' Nobody ever took me up on it, ever, because they couldn't imagine functioning that way, they wanted to go see what scene to join. But I still think that that's the only solution: to try to create a new, fresh kind of work, and a way of working, and a community to support the work. In a perverse way, that's what the tech guys did in the beginning with Silicon Valley.

Loist: Since you mentioned yourself that a lot of your views or your perspective on film culture has also been shaped by being the editor of *Film Quarterly*, in the time you've been there, I think it has changed a lot and has become, at least in my view, a lot more inclusive and diverse. I really see different voices there. Could you say a bit about your vision of being the editor of *Film Quarterly* in that respect?

Rich: Thank you. I should preface this by saying that I'm stepping down at the end of June. It will be 10 years that I've done this. But of course, I will have a shadow presence through 2023 and hopefully the culture I've tried to create there will continue. But I will say that one of my failures has been not really having a fresh voice for queer film or theory in those years. There's been almost nothing and I'm not sure why. There's still time, but I think that it hasn't felt like a vibrant sector to me. And also of course, I will speak the unspeakable: the disappearance of the lesbian as a figure.

I think there's another radical trajectory and that's fine, but not at the cost of the disappearance of the figure of the lesbian, so that's a problem. Maybe I'll write that piece at some point, but I think it requires new frameworks, it requires new theoretical approaches to avoid pitting one against the other, and not to pit identity against gender. My old friend Jewelle Gomez had a moment when she tried to organise a group called 'SOB' – 'save our butches'. This was probably 15 or 20 years ago, and it got

infiltrated by a trans partner who then denounced them publicly. So these things are very tricky. There's a new documentary I haven't seen yet on Jewelle, made by Madeline Lim, who runs the Queer Women of Color Media Arts Project (QWOCMAP) in San Francisco. And Jewelle's book *The Gilda Stories* about Black lesbian vampires has been optioned by Cheryl Dunye for a future project. I think there is space for a lot of new work to get made. We have to call it into being, there has to be a call out for this new work and a space for it.

Loist: So, what was your vision to change or to achieve with *Film Quarterly*? My observation is that you're brilliant at picking the moments and the places where something interesting happens, and at the same time picking people writing about that, and that is something that I find really remarkable. There are many discussions about diversity and sustainability as the new trend words, but that often feels very superficial. However, what I see happening in *Film Quarterly* is the opposite. It's always been intersectional.

Brunow: I agree. It's the practice, through editorial practice and not through a top-down policy. That's the big difference.

Rich: Thank you so much for noticing! When I took it on, I agreed to do so partly because there wasn't a single film journal being edited by a woman, except *Screen*, and I was also furious at the whiteness of film studies. What I had noticed early on, and what I said a lot in interviews and talks, was that if you wanted to find

people of color who are doing film criticism you had to go to the American Studies conference, or you had to go to the Asian American Studies conference, or you had to go to all these different spaces where people were aligned with community across the disciplines. But film studies did not incorporate them. I thought that it didn't have to be that way and so I began to search out the writers that I thought were really interesting and asked them to start contributing and then made them editors and contributing editors, moved them up onto the editorial board, asked them to bring other writers, invited them to edit dossiers with people that weren't yet publishing in *FQ*. It has to be built organically. And when people ask me – how did you do it, how can we do it, how did you get 'diversity'? I say: who are your friends, what events are you going to, what writers are you reading? That's how you do it; that's how 'it', whatever it is, happens. You cannot be in a segregated zone and decide to sprinkle in some bits of color from the paint store. Life does not work that way, culture does not work that way, publication does not work that way. But I like to think that I've created in *Film Quarterly* what I've taken to calling 'an alternative commons' for thinking about and writing about cinema and video and the present and its histories.

So the issue that we just finished, that came out in the winter, is on disability in media [76:2, Winter 2022]. That was really tough to do. And if you look at the website, you'll see that there's a link at the top that says 'accessible issue',[13] and you click there and

it takes you to one with alt text tags that screen readers can handle (because we could not remediate our own site, since the University of California Press had not updated its journal sites and they couldn't be made compliant). So we just started an alternative site and jumped to it and put it onto the page. But as you can imagine this was very time consuming, because it was a steep learning curve for us; we also got someone from the disability community to remediate the articles and make sure the whole alternative site was user friendly. This is something that doesn't happen automatically. And we've also held two webinars with ASL interpreters and live CART captioning, in conjunction with our dossier co-editor Faye Ginsburg's Center for Disability at NYU. They are both up on our YouTube channel.[14]

And I should add that our website offerings, like all the videos of events and webinars, the Quorum column that Girish Shambu edits for us, and all the rich content there, have been made possible thanks to the support of the Ford Foundation's JustFilms initiative. I never could have done this without them. I am so grateful for their support. It's an extraordinary model of what a foundation can do to sustain deep intellectual change. I certainly could not have done the disability issue without Faye Ginsburg and Lawrence Carter-Long; he's been a figure in disability studies and disability activism actually across many years, but also had come to us through Faye and wrote a manifesto for an earlier issue of ours and had also written a disability report on Sundance several years back when they had

a new initiative (it was the year of *Crip Camp*). So we're not only discovering people in this other way, they are also people we've been involved with – that was the same with João [Luiz Vieira], who is on our editorial board and edited the Brazil issue with me.

In a way, you could say that I've selfishly inserted myself into all of these different fields, much in the way I did when I first started out at the Film Center in Chicago in the 1970s, trying to learn, and that I've been lucky enough to be alive in this field, decade after decade, where I've been able to meet people. When I first met Racquel Gates it was because she had just finished her dissertation and had submitted an essay on *Watermelon Man* and Melvin van Peebles to *Film Quarterly* the first year I was editing it,[15] and that's how I was able to find her and say, 'Come on board, come be a contributing editor, and edit a dossier with Michael Gillespie, and join the editorial board.' Really, it's just a pleasure. Michael, whom I'd first met at SCMS browsing the Criterion DVD table, just edited a new dossier on 'The Black Infinite' in our Spring issue and Racquel has an essay on *Dumbo* in it. Same with Brian Hu, who edited the dossier on Asian American media with me; a wonderful intervention, and now he's a contributing editor. And he's just curated a wonderful history of Asian American media for the Criterion Channel, and is inspiring new contributors.

So, I think that if you are open to a repositioning of the field, then you will meet people. There's a lesson I used to teach my

students, when I was teaching undergraduates. I would tell them, and maybe you'll be amused by this: 'Everything that I do in my life happened by accident, but accidents can't happen to you unless you're playing in traffic'; it's not gonna happen sitting under a Redwood smoking dope, nothing's gonna happen to you, you've got to get out there.' And I really feel that my approach to film, being grounded in sociality, has meant that I'm always curious about people, I'm always curious about events going on, and through pursuing this very haphazard path, I've been able to discover organically a lot of what still delights me.

There's a term in architecture, 'desire lines', that describes the way that people move through space; it is actually a disciplinary term. And I was once told a fable about a college campus that was being built and wanted to put in the paths between the buildings and, it's a famous story, the architect refused and said no we have to wait a year; and then he watched how everyone, all the students and staff and professors, moved between the buildings. And then that's where he put the paved paths and roads. So, I would say that is my approach to knowledge, that's my approach to theory and history, that's my approach to how you edit a journal. You watch and see where people are moving, where the heat is, where the interest is, what catches your eye, where you want to go – and then if you're lucky, like I have been, in being invited, you get a chance to put that all together.

Loist: I still very much remember when, in 2014, you came to Hamburg and delivered a brilliant keynote for my Queer Film

Cultures conference that happened in conjunction with the 25th anniversary of the Hamburg Queer Film Festival, and your keynote was translated and published in *Spiegel online*.^[16] One of the things that really struck me is that you were very skeptical about developments of streaming and basically were arguing that streaming leads to individualised or isolated reception. And now it's almost a decade later, plus almost three years after a pandemic that called for social distancing, with different technologies and the so-called streaming wars. So, what would be your take on that whole complex of exhibition, distribution, and reception online today.



Fig. 4: B. Ruby Rich 2023. © Mary Peelen.

Rich: My take would be that I'm a lousy prophet. But honestly, I'm still stuck between these two spheres. I remain nostalgic about screening in a room full of people. I remain endlessly nostalgic about film festivals and what they have meant to me throughout my life. Film festivals were already under economic threat. That already started, and was accelerated by COVID and by shutting down – which also led to wonderfully inventive online presences that hugely expanded the audience for a number of festivals, but also massively reduced the financing for almost all of those festivals. It also led to a kind of renaissance when they reopened, but I fear that may only be a temporary renaissance. And will people do *mea culpas* to Greta Thunberg as they try to fly to a film festival again? Many people are saying, 'No, I won't.' So I have no idea what is about to happen to film festivals, either on the ground or online.

I wonder whether festivals will start having satellite gatherings, where people can convene – that might solve the problem of traveling, but it won't solve the problem of immediate transmission in your home metropolis that you've gone to, within your country or within your region, it also won't solve the problem of festival survival if there is no geo-blocking and they are no longer able to have a regional premiere or a national premiere or an international premiere. All these categories have been devised to make places feel special and to allow film makers or distributors to put their work and their products in more places. I do not see that anyone has the solution yet and I would mistrust anyone who claims to, because we just don't

know. To borrow the film title *Everything Everywhere All At Once* – I think that we have no idea what's coming next but I have lots of hopes. I'm a very optimistic pessimist. I guess I'm very Gramscian that way.

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Notes

[1] Rich, *Chick Flicks*, p. xv.

[2] Ibid., p. xvi.

[3] <https://www.vdb.org>

[4] See the NECSUS interview with Karola Gramann and Heide Schlüpmann (Leyda & Tedjasukmana 2018).

[5] Rich, *Mädchen in Uniform*, 1981.

[6] Rich, *Chick Flicks*, p. 3.

- [7] Rich, *Chick Flicks*, p. 1.
- [8] Rich 2013, p. xxix.
- [9] Rich 1992a.
- [10] Rich 1992b.
- [11] Rich 2000.
- [12] Rich 2013, p. 271.
- [13] <https://filmquarterlyaccess.org/>
- [14] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=18wRlgCaOuM>;
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i17GPPEEKfw>
- [15] Gates 2014.
- [16] Rich 2014a, b.