

The Watermelon Woman (1997) Cheryl Dunye [85 min]

"*The Watermelon Woman* came from the real lack of any information about the lesbian and film history of African American women. Since it wasn't happening, I invented it." -Cheryl Dunye

Filmography:

My Baby's Daddy (2003)
Stranger Inside (2000)
The Watermelon Woman (1996)
Greetings from Africa (1994)
The Potluck and the Passion (1993)
Untitled Portrait (1993)
Vanilla Sex (1992)
She Don't Fade (1991)
Janine (1990)

Excerpt from an interview with Cheryl Dunye by T. Haslett / N. Abiaka for the *Black Cultural Studies Web Site Collective*, April 12, 1997.

<http://www.cheryldunye.com/pages/interview.html>

T Haslett: *In The Watermelon Woman, what was your thinking? and I know you have forms of direct address and talking head strategies in your other films but, in terms of Cheryl the character and your ideas around the audience, whoever the audience may be, conflating you with the character Cheryl. What guides your choice to insert yourself into the narrative?*

Cheryl Dunye: *I think actually this is the death of Cheryl in such a straightforward way. I think I've been working with that character and that sort of approach with the documentary talking head just that way for that long and I need to play with that. But I think it's quite effective, I mean I really reached a lot of people. I was part of a moment of people doing direct address talking head in popular culture with shows like Cops, this and that. I think it needs to shift a little bit for me. My whole theory about three visual presentations of messages where you need to be talking at somebody, doing a little vignette that acts it out, having some text – works! I think it works.*

So I definitely feel charged that beyond being a filmmaker, beyond being this and that, that being an auteur about making film language different, that some of my stuff worked. What we need to be doing is trying to construct other ways for us to communicate. Regardless of what our media background, our "ism" is. Hopefully I'm a part of that movement of like Sapphire and other writers in the sense of mixing it up for people. People are becoming more comfortable with that so anything is bound to come out.

STUDY/DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What popular forms (from TV, film, photography) does the film "quote" or appropriate to create its particular narrative language? How does the film combine these different modes of address? Above, Dunye refers to this strategy as "mixing it up." What is the effect of this?
2. In the interview above, Dunye mentions her use of these varying modes of presentation. She says, "I think it works." What might she mean by this?
3. In the quote at the top of this page, Dunye speaks clearly about her motivations and the context in which she is working as a filmmaker. Discuss its approach to narrative and history within this context after reading the remainder of Dunye's interview at the URL above.