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10 great lesbian films

We look back through film history at 10 of the greatest movies about lesbians.

Selina Robertson (</people/selina-robertson>)

Updated: 18 July 2018

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The Kids Are All Right (2010)

- 10 great British gay films (</news-opinion/news-bfi/lists/10-great-british-gay-films>)
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- 10 great British films directed by women (</news-opinion/news-bfi/lists/10-great-british-films-directed-women>)

It's tricky to pinpoint the moment when the movie world could proclaim the first openly lesbian film. Identifying early cinematic representations of lesbianism was like collecting crumbs off the top table. Sapphic sisters were used to watching whole films just to see a character (usually portrayed as victim, killer, neurotic or prostitute) shoot a covert look that audiences could interpret as queer – for instance, the apparent lesbian subtext between Vienna (Joan Crawford) and Emma (Mercedes McCambridge) in Nicholas Ray's *Johnny Guitar* (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2b6ada35e2>) (1954).

Watch a selection of LGBT titles now on BFI Player (<http://player.bfi.org.uk/rentals/collection/bfi-flare-london-lgbt-film-festival-presents>)

In the UK, 1967 was a milestone, the year that homosexuality was decriminalised (even if there was no mention of lesbianism in the new legislation). In the USA, the 1969 Stonewall riots were a turning point that led to the beginning of the modern gay and lesbian liberation movement. From those moments on, lesbians have been slowly coming out on celluloid (albeit mostly controlled by the gaze of male directors).

In tracking the key films of lesbian cinema, we've restricted our list to films available on DVD or for streaming in the UK. This sadly means we've had to leave out many favourites: *Mädchen in Uniform* (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2b6af7d212>) (1931), *Club de femmes* (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2b70242b5b>) (1936), *Personal Best* (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2b756caec6>) (1982), *Virgin Machine* (1988), and great films by Ulrike Ottinger (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2b9ee4ed1d>) and Chantal Akerman (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2ba1186075>). Which begs the question, why are there not more lesbian films available to watch on DVD/VoD? After all, Walter Benjamin did say that the lesbian is the heroine of modernism...

10 to try

Each of the recommendations included here is available to view (<http://www.findanyfilm.com/>) in the UK.

The Killing of Sister George (1968)

Director Robert Aldrich



The Killing of Sister George (1967)

Childie: Not all women are raving bloody lesbians, you know.

George: That is a misfortune I am perfectly well aware of!

The Killing of Sister George (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2b6ae11eef>) is one of the greatest and most grotesque of all lesbian crossover films. Life B.G. (before George) held little hope for cinema-loving lesbians. Pre-decriminalisation dramas included 1967's *The Fox*, which has the basic premise that all a lesbian needs is a man, and 1963's *The World Ten Times Over*, which is possibly the first British lesbian film but was heavily censored before its release.

All hail Beryl Reid (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2b9f6552b3>), magnetic in her portrayal of George, a loud, aggressive, cigar-chomping dyke who loses her job and her young lover. It has the mother of all lesbian love triangles: butch girl-chasing George; the predatory, sophisticated middle-class dyke (Coral Brown (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2b9ef757c7>)), and Childie, the coquettish neurotic femme (Susannah York (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2ba1d3e5b1>)). Rated X for its explicit sex scene, the film tanked at the box office but remains an era-defining cult classic. Significantly, some scenes were shot in an actual London lesbian bar, The Gateways Club, giving audiences a rare on-screen glimpse of London lesbian culture.

Dyketactics (1974)

Director Barbara Hammer



Born in Los Angeles but a New Yorker by choice, Barbara Hammer (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2ba29df5f7>) is a whole genre unto herself. Her pioneering 1974 short film *Dyketactics*, a four-minute, hippie wonder consisting of frolicking naked women in the countryside, broke new ground for its exploration of lesbian identity, desire and aesthetic. Abdellatif Kechiche, director of last year's sexually sensationalist *Blue Is the Warmest Colour*, might have done better if he had taken a leaf out of Hammer's book. Hammer calls the film her 'lesbian commercial'.

She went on to become one of the brightest and most significant lesbian avant-garde filmmaking voices of the past 40 years, whose work includes over 80 film and video works covering lesbian love and sex, women's spirituality, radical feminist politics, the figure of the goddess, and lesbian/queer film history. Without Barbara there would be no *Born in Flames* (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2b69ad035e>) (1983), no *Desert Hearts* (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2b70aae17d>) (1985), no *Go Fish* (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2b7d1675f8>) (1994). Her influence can also be seen in the new film *Concussion* (<https://whatson.bfi.org.uk/flare/Online/concussion>), screening at BFI Flare.

Another Way (1982)

Director Károly Makk



At time of writing, Ukraine is going through a 21st-century revolution and if the geopolitical land grab ends in victory for Russia, with its anti-gay laws, then the future for Ukraine's LGBT community will be uncertain.

Another Way (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2b693de284>) is set in another eastern European country dealing with its own revolution: Hungary immediately after the failed 1956 uprising against communism. The film details a courageous and intelligent love story between two pro-democracy journalists. The topic was a double taboo because it was the first Hungarian film to deal with homosexuality as well

as a controversial look back at the consequences of the revolution. Director Károly Makk (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2b9ee61307>) sensitively juxtaposes this tender but doomed love affair with the high hopes and bitter suppression of the Budapest Spring. It's clear that Makk was not especially interested in homosexual rights in 1950s Hungary; nevertheless his portrayal of lesbianism is neither exploitative nor melodramatic.

Paris Was a Woman (1996)

Director Greta Schiller

Oh la la! C'est Paris, c'est magnifique! Well it would have been magic if you happened to be a boho creative woman living on the city's Left Bank in the early decades of the 20th century. Greta Schiller (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2ba1b2c18e>)'s absorbing investigative documentary could have been called Paris Was a Lesbian for the amount of Sapphos living, working and loving together. Writers Collette, Djuna Barnes, Gertrude Stein, Alice B. Toklas, poets H.D. and Natalie Clifford Barney, booksellers Sylvia Beach and Adrienne Monnier... the list goes on and on.

Schiller (*Before Stonewall* (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2b6f31b831>), 1984), together with her long-term collaborator Andrea Weiss (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2ba4fe0202>), rewrites (her)story with unseen home movies and new research to create a magical film about this most original of women's artistic communities. Weiss' British queer film history documentary *A Bit of Scarlet* (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2b7e8d8d09>) (1997) is also worth a look and can be watched (<http://player.bfi.org.uk/player/watch-a-bit-of-scarlet-150440289/9nN2R4ZDrFgiX7BOPoSiDqXW4IYoYj6Y>) on the BFI Player.

Bound (1996)

Director Lana and Andy Wachowski

Bound (1996)

No lesbian film list is complete without the Wachowski siblings' dazzling sexy noir/crime caper/slapstick comedy Bound (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2b7dfafa21>). It was their pre-Matrix breakout film, a titillating Playboy hybrid thriller mashed up into a lesbian feminist love story. The Wachowskis don't just play with the male gaze, they flip it sunny side up and get feminist writer Susie Bright in as their lesbian 'sexpert'.

The story concerns a mobster's girlfriend falling in love with the ex-con dyke next door. Jennifer Tilly (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2ba4c07037>) and Gina Gershon (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2ba91d8c82>) positively sizzle as couple on the run, Violet and Corky, giving audiences plenty of girl-on-girl action. Taking inspiration from Billy Wilder and their love of comics, Bound completed a 90s trilogy of (in critic B. Ruby Rich's phrase) 'Lethal Lesbians' films (beginning with Thelma & Louise (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2b7a36431f>), 1991, and Basic Instinct (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2b7a9e7d13>), 1992) – a cinematic expression of lesbian feminist desire.

Stranger Inside (2001)

Director Cheryl Dunye

US indie writer/director/educator Cheryl Dunye (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2baeb85f02>) burst onto the New Queer Cinema scene in 1996 with The Watermelon Woman (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2b7f17bad2>), an audacious, self-styled 'Dunyementary'. However, it's her rarely screened follow-up film, Stranger Inside (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2b86ef1fde>), which really impresses. Made for HBO and produced by R.E.M.'s Michael Stipe (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2bb3c6320a>), it's set within the US women's prison system and tells the story of an incarcerated young African-American woman who goes in search of her biological mother.

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Based on four years of research into the lives of women inside, the drama is a powerful study of prison life in the 21st century. Far away from the piss and vinegar of *Scrubbers* (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2b697291d0>) (1982) and *Prisoner Cell Block H* (1979-86), Dunye's film makes a potent case for how race and class have created a new caste system behind bars.

Do I Love You? (2002)

Director Lisa Gornick

In 2002, when Lisa Gornick (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2bbf5378ca>)'s debut feature premiered at the BFI London Lesbian & Gay Film Festival (now BFI Flare (<http://www.bfi.org.uk/flare>)), it was a significant moment because the film was the first British lesbian feature in 10 years. As such, the film and director attracted considerable attention both at home and abroad. Gornick wrote, directed and starred in this breezy, urbane comedy, which she described as “a thesis on love and its labels”.

The life and loves of thirtysomething Marina are explored as she searches for answers to the big questions in her life. Made two years before the internationally successful TV series *The L Word* (2004-09), *Do I Love You?* (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2b8905bb75>) deftly captures the zeitgeist with its investigation of lesbian identity and sexual mores in the 21st century. It's like a lesbian *Annie Hall* (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2b6bc053b7>) (1977) or *Frances Ha* (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/51ae677933353>) (2012), with Gornick (who recently starred in *The Owls* (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2b8dd0f6ac>)) cornering the market as the thinking woman's favourite dyke.

The Kids Are All Right (2010)

Director Lisa Cholodenko

The Kids Are All Right (2010)

Lesbian cinema finally hits the big 'O' time with Lisa Cholodenko (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2bb39620be>)'s (High Art, 1998) family-friendly comedy The Kids Are All Right (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2b8dbcd571>) ratcheting up four Oscar nominations in 2011, including best picture. Annette Bening (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2ba861c9bd>) and Julianne Moore (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2bab04e6a8>) tear up the straights-can't-play-gay rulebook as long-term married couple Nic and Jules, who hit midlife parenting and partnership problems.

The mainstream press went nuts, joyful that they had a homosexual film they could write about without unsettling their more conservative readers – though Cholodenko suffered a backlash from some queer corners for her inclusion of hetero sex (with beefcake Mark Ruffalo (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2baee2af90>)), and for her film's apparent advocacy of traditional family values.

Tomboy (2011)

Director Céline Sciamma

Tomboy (2011)

The French term for tomboy is 'garçon manqué', which translates literally as 'failed boy'. "I don't need to comment, you can see how bad it is", said writer/director Céline Sciamma (Water Lilies (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2b8c3e37dd>), 2007) on the phrase, preferring to give this honest little film about gender confusion an English title.

Laure/Mikael is 10 years old, her/his family has moved to a new town and we follow her/his adventures over one summer as s/he negotiates the early complexities of selfhood: playing a game of football, finding s/he is attracting the attention of local girls and facing the ultimate test of wearing a bathing suit. In France, the film was received as a family film and went on to be shown in primary and

secondary schools as part of classes about cinema.

- Watch Tomboy online on BFI Player (<https://player.bfi.org.uk/subscription/film/watch-tomboy-2011-online>)

Break My Fall (2011)

Director Kanchi Wichmann

The second British lesbian film to be included on the list, *Break My Fall* (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ded82e9c0892>) is the story of the painful end of a one-time loving relationship. A previous BAFTA nominee for best short with 1999's *Travelling Light*, writer/director Kanchi Wichmann (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2bcfe9f838>) made this feature debut shooting on 16mm on the streets of east London. (Campbell X's East End-set *Stud Life* (<https://www.peccapics.com/product/stud-life/>), made a few years later, is also worth a peek)

Influenced by the formalism of early Chantal Akerman films such as *Je tu il elle* (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2b7315c3aa>) (1975), it boasts music from local bands (Wet Dog, Peggy Sue) and the kind of realistic characterisation of people and city that can be found in Bette Gordon's cinema (eg *Variety* (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2b782ad9fa>), 1983). Released in 2012, *Break My Fall* (together with *Weekend* (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4f4b862f93324>) and others) was identified as part of a new wave of queer cinema, charting queer experience in all its complexities.

- Watch *Break My Fall* online on BFI Player (<https://player.bfi.org.uk/subscription/film/watch-break-my-fall-2010-online>)

Your suggestions

Mulholland Dr. (2001)

1. Mulholland Dr. (David Lynch, 2001)
 2. Blue Is the Warmest Colour (Abdellatif Kechiche, 2013)
 3. The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant (Rainer Werner Fassbinder, 1972)
 4. The Children's Hour (William Wyler, 1961)
 5. Pariah (Dee Rees, 2011)
 6. I've Heard the Mermaids Singing (Patricia Rozema, 1987)
 7. Desert Hearts (Donna Deitch, 1985)
 8. Heavenly Creatures (Peter Jackson, 1994)
 9. Go Fish (Rose Troche, 1994)
 10. High Art (Lisa Cholodenko, 1998)
- Watch Blue is the Warmest Colour online on BFI Player (<https://player.bfi.org.uk/rentals/film/watch-blue-is-the-warmest-colour-2013-online>)
 - Watch The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant online on BFI Player (<https://player.bfi.org.uk/subscription/film/watch-the-bitter-tears-of-petra-von-kant-1972-online>)

We asked you on Twitter (<https://twitter.com/BFI>) and on our Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/BritishFilmInstitute>) what you would have put in your top 10 lesbian films, and answers came there plenty. Fans of Audrey Hepburn, Shirley MacLaine and guilt-ridden hysteria pushed The Children's Hour into the top five, while the most talked about lesbian film of last year, the sexually explicit Palme d'Or winner Blue is the Warmest Colour, narrowly missed the top spot. But nothing topples David Lynch's extraordinary neo-noir puzzle Mulholland Dr., featuring a career-best turn from Naomi Watts as a budding actor who strikes up a passionate relationship with an amnesiac woman – or does she?

Watch the best lesbian films on BFI Player (<http://player.bfi.org.uk/collections/bfi-flare-london-lgbt-film-festival-presents/>)



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Find the best features, shorts and exclusive lesbian content from the BFI Flare: London LGBT Film Festival.

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(<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/54f4872a74d71>)

Film programmers discuss some of their favourite LGBT love scenes, including *The Color Purple*, *A Very Natural Thing* and *Something Must Break*.

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[British certification and tax relief \(https://www.bfi.org.uk/supporting-uk-film/british-certification-tax-relief\)](https://www.bfi.org.uk/supporting-uk-film/british-certification-tax-relief)

[Search for Lottery awards \(https://www.bfi.org.uk/film-industry/funding-awards\)](https://www.bfi.org.uk/film-industry/funding-awards)

[Future learning and skills \(https://www.bfi.org.uk/education-research/future-learning-skills\)](https://www.bfi.org.uk/education-research/future-learning-skills)

[Education & research \(https://www.bfi.org.uk/education-research\)](https://www.bfi.org.uk/education-research)

[BFI Reuben Library \(https://www.bfi.org.uk/education-research/bfi-reuben-library\)](https://www.bfi.org.uk/education-research/bfi-reuben-library)

[Teaching film, TV and media studies \(https://www.bfi.org.uk/education-research/teaching-film-tv-media-studies\)](https://www.bfi.org.uk/education-research/teaching-film-tv-media-studies)

[Education events at BFI Southbank \(https://www.bfi.org.uk/education-research/education-events\)](https://www.bfi.org.uk/education-research/education-events)

[Classroom resources for teachers \(https://www.bfi.org.uk/education-research/teaching-film-tv-media-studies\)](https://www.bfi.org.uk/education-research/teaching-film-tv-media-studies)

[Courses, training and conferences for teachers \(https://www.bfi.org.uk/education-research/education/courses-training-conferences-teachers\)](https://www.bfi.org.uk/education-research/education/courses-training-conferences-teachers)

[BFI Film Academy \(https://www.bfi.org.uk/education-research/5-19-film-education-scheme-2013-2017/bfi-film-academy-scheme\)](https://www.bfi.org.uk/education-research/5-19-film-education-scheme-2013-2017/bfi-film-academy-scheme)

[Into Film \(https://www.bfi.org.uk/education-research/into-film\)](https://www.bfi.org.uk/education-research/into-film)

[About BFI Education \(https://www.bfi.org.uk/education-research/about-bfi-education\)](https://www.bfi.org.uk/education-research/about-bfi-education)

[Film industry statistics and reports \(https://www.bfi.org.uk/education-research/film-industry-statistics-research\)](https://www.bfi.org.uk/education-research/film-industry-statistics-research)

[About the BFI \(https://www.bfi.org.uk/about-bfi\)](https://www.bfi.org.uk/about-bfi)

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[Selling to the BFI \(https://www.bfi.org.uk/about-bfi/business-services/selling-bfi\)](https://www.bfi.org.uk/about-bfi/business-services/selling-bfi)

[Your National Lottery funded project \(https://www.bfi.org.uk/about-bfi/your-national-lottery-funded-project\)](https://www.bfi.org.uk/about-bfi/your-national-lottery-funded-project)

[Help and FAQ \(https://www.bfi.org.uk/about-bfi/help-faq\)](https://www.bfi.org.uk/about-bfi/help-faq)

[More from the BFI \(https://www.bfi.org.uk/\)](https://www.bfi.org.uk/)

[BFI Members \(https://www.bfi.org.uk/bfi-membership\)](https://www.bfi.org.uk/bfi-membership)

[Venue hire \(https://www.bfi.org.uk/about-bfi/business-services/venue-hire\)](https://www.bfi.org.uk/about-bfi/business-services/venue-hire)

[Viewing theatre hire \(https://www.bfi.org.uk/venue-hire/bfi-stephen-street-venue-hire\)](https://www.bfi.org.uk/venue-hire/bfi-stephen-street-venue-hire)

[Archive content sales and licensing \(https://www.bfi.org.uk/archive-collections/archive-content-sales\)](https://www.bfi.org.uk/archive-collections/archive-content-sales)

[Book a film for your cinema \(http://www.bfi.org.uk/distribution/contact_us\)](http://www.bfi.org.uk/distribution/contact_us)


[Stills sales \(https://www.bfi.org.uk/archive-collections/archive-content-sales/stills-sales\)](https://www.bfi.org.uk/archive-collections/archive-content-sales/stills-sales)

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