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Killer Feminism

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2. KILLER FEMINISM

Patricia White

In coverage of independent film in both trade and independent outlets in the US, words like ‘powerhouse’ and ‘stalwart’ regularly appear in conjunction with the twenty-year-old production house Killer Films (Jones 2008). The aggressive attitude signalled in the company name is reinforced by co-founder Christine Vachon’s persona. A lifelong New Yorker, she can be intimidating – habitually clad in black jeans, T-shirt, and combat boots, Blackberry at the ready. She is also a beguiling raconteur with a keen sense of irony about her standing – she jokes that there are people working in her office who weren’t even born when Killer started up. Missing from the standard Killer profile is the explicit invocation of feminism, even of the ‘lean in’ sort that the mainstream press tolerates in reportage of female executives and entrepreneurs. While Vachon and her partner Pamela Koffler are often included in tributes to prominent women in film, such as *Variety*’s annual New York Women’s Impact Report (*Variety* staff 2015), the company narrative is identified most closely with the emergence of independent queer cinema and especially with Vachon’s close collaboration with auteur Todd Haynes, whom she met at Brown University in the early 1980s. Advocacy of women filmmakers for its own sake is not a major strain of Vachon’s self-narration in her two autobiographical books on indie producing, *Shooting to Kill* (1998) and *A Killer Life* (2007), which deal pragmatically and even-handedly with the problems plaguing low-budget productions helmed by men and women. (If the villains tend to be men – sales agents, talent managers, Harvey Weinstein – it is an apt characterisation of an independent film scene defined by male posturing and agon.)



Figure 2.1 Pam Koffler, Todd Haynes and Christine Vachon.

Is Vachon's toughness defensive, a disavowal of female (market?) weakness and/or feminist debt? I'll take it rather as butch swagger and explore the feminist forcefield surrounding Killer Films and its principals, connecting the production house to histories of feminist critique, aesthetic production, political affiliation and cultural work, while remarking on its position within independent film.

Four dimensions of Killer's relation to feminism are considered here: 1) New York City independent film culture, where women have played key roles historically; 2) the emergence of lesbian feature filmmaking in the 1990s; 3) collaboration within the company, with directors, and with other independent film entities, and 4) the shaping of contemporary women's cinema through the work of Todd Haynes. While postfeminist discourses of individual female merit inform Killer's success in the market economy of independent film, its woman-led, project-driven, hands-on, team-oriented culture warrants feminist consideration. At a moment when gender equity in filmmaking has become much more widely scrutinised (Smith 2014; Smith 2015; Lauzen 2014; Lauzen 2015), Killer exemplifies 'not Hollywood' practices on the level of labour, content, form, and conceptualisation of the audience (Ortner 2013). This case study offers a feminist reading of Killer's place within this culture while foregrounding political contradictions within its profile and the current independent film world.

NEW YORK STORIES

Vachon and Koffler started Killer in 1995, building on Vachon's early successes in the 90s. That work captured the activist energy of ACT-UP and participated in a surge of New York independent feature production alongside and sometimes in collaboration with maverick companies like Good Machine. Vachon and Haynes' first feature, *Poison* (1991), had won the Grand Jury Prize at Sundance in 1991, marking a swerve in the festival's burgeoning brand. *Poison* is a queer narrative in form and subject matter, indebted to Genet, addressed to HIV hysteria, and stylishly mounted on location in New York – including at an abandoned military facility on Governors Island – for a budget of around \$250,000. Vachon and Haynes had been working with Brown classmate Barry Ellsworth as producers of low-budget short films by emerging artists through their company Apparatus Productions. While financing independent films in the US has never been easy, in the 80s artists could get grants from places like the New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA), and the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). *Poison* became a flashpoint in the culture wars when the religious right latched onto its 'filthy' homosexual content (Vachon 2007: 4).

Vachon was back at Sundance a year later with her second feature as producer, Tom Kalin's *Swoon* (1992), a stylised interpretation of the notorious Leopold-Loeb murder case. Critic and former NYSCA programme officer B. Ruby Rich christened these boldly experimental, anti-assimilationist, and successful independent features the New Queer Cinema (Rich 1992). The first film in the wave that was by and about lesbians rather than gay men – Rose Troche and Guinevere Turner's *Go Fish*, produced by Vachon and Kalin – made market history in 1994 as the first film to sell *during* the Sundance festival. Not long after, Vachon and Koffler, who worked as line producer with Kalin and Vachon on *I Shot Andy Warhol* (Mary Harron, 1996) and several other projects, decided it was time to keep the production company's shingle out fulltime and start developing projects. The name came from photographer Cindy Sherman's debut feature film *Office Killer* – Vachon's fondness for true-crime can be seen across the Killer oeuvre.

Killer did more than define and fill a queer niche, however. The sheer number of films on which Killer has received a production credit – seventy-five and counting – proves it a central player in the Sundance-Miramax era of independent film. The story Peter Biskind tells in *Down and Dirty Pictures* is of how in this period independent film – emblematised by the Sundance Film Festival, ski-trip distance away from Hollywood – emerged from a crucible of risk-taking to become an auxiliary to the studio system (Biskind 2004). Killer certainly was part of this mainstreaming – casting stars in independent productions, signing with a talent agency, and selling films to mini-majors, including

the New York-based Miramax. But its position in the ecosystem was more like that of the Poverty Row studios during the classical Hollywood era – producing low-budget, tawdry tales marked with the visual panache of new talent. The scandal of Todd Solondz’s sensibility defined the early Killer as much as did that of Todd Haynes. After acquiring independent distributor October Films, Universal notoriously dropped Solondz’s tale of suburban paedophilia, *Happiness* (1998), leaving Killer scrambling to release the film.

After twenty years Killer maintains its vanguard position, working with the post-Miramax The Weinstein Company, which financed and planned the savvy release strategy of Killer’s biggest Cannes success to date, Haynes’ *Carol* (2015). But while Harvey Weinstein earned notoriety and the nickname Harvey Scissorhands for wresting creative control away from filmmakers in his awards-driven vision of independent film commerce, Vachon represented his antithesis: fidelity to directors’ visions – often those of first-timers with correspondingly low budget projects – was the central plank of Killer’s platform. This principled stance has been possible because Killer remains far from Hollywood in ethos and location. Being based in New York facilitates its edgy aesthetic; filmmakers come from art and activist circles, fashion and film schools, and Killer draws on a talented pool of crew, actors, and post-production professionals who are often less imprinted by the hierarchies of the Los Angeles industry. It has also meant, however, that its business model hovers on the brink of sustainability.

New York is the setting of a romantic story of independent film whose leading men are Jim Jarmusch and Spike Lee. But as Emanuel Levy acknowledges in *Cinema of Outsiders*, a significant number of women, including feminists like Susan Seideman (*Desperately Seeking Susan*, 1985), were active at the New York film schools and especially in the downtown art scene that stirred up the wave of independent film in the 1980s (Levy 1999). Avant-garde film, video art, and activist documentary were thriving even as the push towards a viable theatrically exhibited independent feature film culture intensified, again with major contributions from women like director Martha Coolidge and producer Sandra Schulberg. The Association of Independent Film and Videomakers and the Independent Feature Project were founded a decade before Angelika Film Center opened its doors in 1989 and ushered in the era of the ‘indieplex’ (Newman 2011: 77). The threads of alternative film histories in New York crisscross Killer’s more industry-oriented practices, connecting with feminist networks that fall away in more standard chronicles. As B. Ruby Rich remarks: ‘Women were such a key part of that movement that it’s infuriating to see it reduced in the telling to Jim Jarmusch and Spike Lee’ (Rich 2015).

Vachon’s entrée to New York independent film was through the avant-garde venues her older sister – artist Gail Vachon – took her to in high school (Vachon

2007: 22). Later, in Brown's Art and Semiotics programme, Mary Ann Doane and Leslie Thornton exposed her to feminist film theory and practice. A figure like dancer/choreographer Yvonne Rainer, who stood at the intersection of this feminist-art-theory world and feature-length filmmaking, arguably paved the way for Apparatus and Killer as they sought a wider public. While the introduction of narrative elements into experimental practice had been almost heretical in modernist circles, Vachon understood it as given. She got started in the indie film scene after graduation by synching dailies for feminist filmmaker Jill Godmilow, who hooked her up with Bill Sherwood on the production of *Parting Glances* (1985). The film was the first independent feature by a queer filmmaker to confront the AIDS epidemic, and producer's representative John Pierson, who was instrumental in gaining attention for Lee, found Sherwood's film a distribution deal. Amid this elevation of the visibility of independent features, Vachon realised she wanted to produce.

Today the hegemony of narrative in independent media is undisputed; Vachon readily uses the term 'storyteller' instead of filmmaker to acknowledge rapidly changing platforms. But the deconstruction of visual pleasure and narrative convention undertaken in academic feminist film theory and experimental film practice continues to haunt Killer as a New York-based producer of films on the cutting edge of film form and politics. Not incidentally, this context strongly informs the visual art of Vachon's partner Marlene McCarty, a frequent collaborator on Killer films' title sequences and designer of the firm's graphic identity. McCarty, Kalin, and Haynes were members of the influential AIDS activist art collective, Gran Fury, and ACT-UP New York and its diverse constituency were a decisive aesthetic and political catalyst for their work with Killer.

Feminist art practice was an important context for what Douglas Crimp calls ACT-UP's 'demo graphics' (Crimp 1990). While feminist critiques of representation, heteronormativity, and spectatorship are more likely to be articulated by Haynes than by the pragmatic Vachon and her relatively silent partner Koffler, both producers are attuned to these discourses. The provocative nature of Killer's feminism finds its emblems in Bettie Page and Valerie Solanas, subjects of two biopics by Mary Harron, a key director on Killer's early roster. These 'sex positive' historical figures can be placed in a New York feminist genealogy with filmmakers Bette Gordon and Sheila McLaughlin, who confronted the politics of the gaze in their experimental features *Variety* (1983) and *She Must Be Seeing Things* (1987), on which Vachon worked as a PA. To sum up, Downtown New York in the 1980s was a key place and time for the emergence of the independent feature ecosystem that Killer would help anchor, and a strong history and networked culture of feminist image-making informed its aesthetic and mission. Both traditions contributed to what I would call the conditions of lesbian representability in independent film of the early 1990s (White 1999).

LESBIAN REPRESENTATION IN NEW QUEER CINEMA

If it weren't for the fact that B. Ruby Rich, who coined the term New Queer Cinema, was a lesbian writing from a feminist perspective, the male-skewing momentum of the movement might have gone unremarked. Instead, Rich raised the question of gender equity from the beginning; in a sidebar to Rich's original essay in *Sight & Sound*, Cherry Smythe amplified the concern that 'in the New Queer Wave, lesbians are drowning' (Rich 2013: 202; Smythe 1992). The imbalance could be understood partly in economic and technological terms, measured by material access to the theatrically exhibited feature film form and to the authoritative position of director.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, when I worked at the New York-based non-theatrical distributor Women Make Movies, lesbian films were in demand. Experimental filmmaker Su Friedrich's *Damned if You Don't* (1987), Michelle Parkerson's documentary video *Stormé: The Lady of the Jewel Box* (1987), and AIDS activist video artist Jean Carlomusto's hybrid *L Is for the Way You Look* (1991), all had deep roots in New York's downtown queer culture. Soon, the corpus and diversity of lesbian work available to the North American festival and educational audiences served through Women Make Movies' collection expanded. WMM distributed Pratibha Parmar's films about South Asian queer diaspora and women of colour feminism – including *Khush* (1991) and *A Place of Rage* (1991) – films made possible by government support of queer and Black and South Asian programming in Britain. Several lesbian feature films, including Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman* (1995) and Alex Sichel's *All Over Me* (1997) were moving through Women Make Movies' production assistance programme. Theatrically, however, the wave had yet to crest. There had been a few breakthroughs. Samuel Goldwyn released Donna Deitch's 1950s lesbian romance *Desert Hearts* in 1985; more representative of the New York ethos were the anti-racist, coalitional politics and documentary-style indie aesthetics of Lizzie Borden's *Born in Flames* (Rich 1998; Rich 2013: 7). That film was released by First Run Features in 1983 when the infrastructure for exhibiting queer independent film and video was yet to emerge and feminist festival networks were proving unsustainable.

As Rich and others have documented, the expansion of queer grassroots media production and of the international network of community-based LGBT film festivals were spurred on by new video formats and AIDS activism at least as much as by growing niche markets and mainstream political credibility for gay men and lesbians. When New York's gay film festival was revived as the New Festival in 1989 by Women Make Movies board member Susan Horowitz, I helped programme it, with an eye for inclusivity and gender equity. Energised by the efflorescence and diversity of short work by lesbians,

I was nevertheless keenly aware of the lack of feature-length, theatrical quality films by and about lesbians.

In 1992, Chicago film school graduate Rose Troche and her romantic and producing partner, writer Guinevere Turner, reached out for help finishing their hybrid documentary/fiction film *Ely and Max*, about sex and community among a group of young Chicago dykes. Vachon and Kalin knew audiences were waiting for it and jumped on the project. They formed Killer's antecedent, KVPI Productions, to complete what would become the first theatrically released feature by and about lesbians trumpeted in the New Queer Cinema, *Go Fish* (1994).

Lisa Henderson writes astutely about how this film met dyke audiences where they were; its 'narrative and stylistic gestures . . . animate utopic thoughts of community and a life within it', she observes (Henderson 1999: 37). The New Festival's opening night screening of the film was joyous, especially since many of the women involved in the film's production had relocated from Chicago to New York and their energy was infectious. *Go Fish* was scrappy and low budget, stylish and sex positive, and literate in women of colour feminism, and it made money – grossing \$2.4 million on an initial \$53,000 investment (Pierson 1996: 297). In fact, the story of the film's sale to Samuel Goldwyn at Sundance 1994 – recounted by John Pierson in his book *Spike, Mike, Slackers & Dykes* as a harbinger of deal-making to come – arguably overshadowed its breakthrough status in feminist film history.

By the time Pierson revised his book in 2004 as *Spike Mike Reloaded*, dropping the dykes from his title, *Go Fish* might have seemed less relevant to the course the history of independent film had taken, one marked by male mavericks and mini-majors. Selling a film at Sundance for \$400,000 was no longer news. Troche has directed only two subsequent features to date, certainly an indicator of the difficulty women directors face sustaining careers in film. 'The situation is dire for women', she notes, 'I don't even know if it is harder for women of color . . . Film school costs at least \$100,000 . . . it's a class thing more than a race thing' (Troche 2015). But in a parallel development Troche and Turner joined executive producer Ilene Chaiken at the launch of the Showtime series *The L Word* (2004–9), with Troche serving as co-executive producer and the series' most frequent director. The move signalled the migration of lesbian talent to premium cable and of the aesthetics and staging of lesbian media visibility from New York to Los Angeles. Showtime's niche, carved out as a major sponsor of the US LGBT film festival circuit, helped the show capitalise on the truth of *Go Fish*'s slogan in demographic terms: 'the girl is out there.'

Go Fish's impact signals the contribution Vachon and her co-producers made at the precise historical intersection of New Queer Cinema and an energetic, if not necessarily lucrative, feminist film culture energised by a new

generation of producers, many of them film-school educated. While the AIDS crisis is correctly invoked as context and catalyst for New Queer Cinema's rise in the 1990s, the less remarked upon but crucial co-currents of lesbian activism and the DIY aesthetic and feminist savvy of riot grrrl also inform the lesbian feature films Vachon produced. *Go Fish*, *I Shot Andy Warhol*, and *Boys Don't Cry* (Kimberly Peirce, 1999) – all directed by women – challenged the visual politics and critical understanding of lesbian representation within LGBT communities, engaged with academic queer theory and fractious queer politics, and smashed through to larger publics via art-plex release and the advent of DVD distribution.

Harron, an experienced documentary producer when she teamed up with Vachon and Kalin, made her debut feature with *I Shot Andy Warhol*. Like *Go Fish*, the film made artistic use of black and white cinematography and ignored political correctness: the 'I' of the film's title is Valerie Solanas, radical lesbian feminist author of the SCUM Manifesto (Society for Cutting Up Men). With its dyke anti-hero, Warhol factory setting, and creative team – straight feminist director Harron; queer co-writer Dan Minahan; cast of indie icons including Lili Taylor, Jared Harris and Martha Plimpton; Ellen Kuras as cinematographer; plus Koffler, Vachon and Kalin – *I Shot Andy Warhol* epitomises Killer Films' and New Queer Cinema's polymorphous appeal.

Soon after, recent Columbia film-school graduate Kimberly Peirce's *Boys Don't Cry*, about the life and tragic death of trans man Brandon Teena in Nebraska in 1993, earned Killer its first Academy Award and secured the company's place in the history of lesbian feature filmmaking, even though the film wasn't about lesbians. Rather, *Boys Don't Cry* engaged and ignited debates about lesbian and transgender identities that had emerged within feminist, queer, radical, and anti-racist theory and politics in the 2000s. Jack Halberstam positioned the film in terms of female masculinity and metronormativity, and many other scholars wrote about the film's race, class, and gender politics (Halberstam 2007; Stacey and Street 2007). The film also galvanised audiences beyond the queer community, 'crossing over' spectacularly with Hilary Swank's Oscar for Best Performance by an Actress in a Leading Role.

As Vachon details, *Boys Don't Cry* was also one of Killer's most problem-plagued productions (Vachon 2007: 93–107). First time director Peirce, who was adapting her short thesis film, *Take It Like a Man*, had a single-minded passion for the project that was both an asset and a liability. Script revisions and casting caused delays. Peirce's intensity presented challenges to the star, the crew, and the budget. The MPAA threatened the film with an NC-17 rating, in part because of an orgasmic facial close-up of Chloë Sevigny, as Brandon's girlfriend Lana. But the results of this difficult production were incandescent. Executive produced by Killer lawyer and sales agent John Sloss, a key player in the sustainability of independent film through his company Cinetic, *Boys*

Don't Cry was released by Fox Searchlight to critical acclaim and a worldwide gross of over \$20 million (on a \$1.7 million budget).

Without Vachon and the female-dominated producing team at Killer, there would not have been a New Queer Cinema, and certainly not one in which lesbians had much say. This is not to minimise the contributions made by directors like Derek Jarman and Jennie Livingston whose formally and politically audacious work helped Rich name a corpus that would quickly become a market trend. But it took Killer's commitments to art and market, to lesbian features and women filmmakers, to blatant gay male niche films (*Kiss Me Guido*, Tony Vitale 1997) and tasteful ones (*A Home at the End of the World*, Michael Mayer 2004), to films that were queer in the fullest sense – *Stonewall* (Nigel Finch, 1995), *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (John Cameron Mitchell, 2001), *Camp* (Todd Graff, 2003), and *A Dirty Shame* (John Waters, 2004), and to auteur-directors like Kalin and Haynes – to sustain this sea change in queer self-representation.

By 2000 Rich was writing in 'Queer and Present Danger' about the death of New Queer Cinema; the changing face and fortunes of indie cinema since then have shaped this evolution along with assimilationist LGBT politics and small-screen breakthroughs in queer representation (Rich 2013: 130–7). The economic downturn of 2008 had a deep impact on independent film financing, and digital technologies and corporate consolidation have destabilised the distribution terrain. Though it is hard to pinpoint how gender hierarchies in independent film influenced what got made and who got to make it during this period, it is interesting to observe that Killer didn't produce another lesbian feature until *Carol* in 2014. The project was a long time in the making. Producer Dorothy Berwin optioned Patricia Highsmith's book *The Price of Salt* (1952) around 2000 and asked London-based lesbian playwright Phyllis Nagy to write the script under the title of the book's British reissue, *Carol*. She approached Troche, with whom she had twice worked as producer, to direct. Nagy had known Highsmith in New York and had discussed the book with her – she later successfully adapted the author's *The Talented Mr. Ripley* for the London stage. After acquiring the project in 2008, the film's British producer, Elizabeth Karlsen, fought hard to get the film made until Vachon and Haynes joined the production. The delays – extraordinary even for an indie film – were caused by rights issues and the availability of a package of script, stars and director that would appeal to financiers. Even with Cate Blanchett attached, biased industry assumptions against the earning power of films headlined by women played their part – lesbian films have *two* female leads. The Killer brand gave the project credibility within the genealogy of New Queer Cinema, but it is telling that the project only got made with Killer's most prestigious collaborator, a male director, attached.

The question of authorship is a key dimension of lesbian representability,

not because of an essentialist definition of creativity, but because of historical lack of opportunity. Troche, Turner, and their collaborators drew on their own experiences to create the lesbian verisimilitude that Henderson prizes in *Go Fish*; Chaiken's lesbian identity was the basis of her pitch for *The L Word*; and Peirce speaks of her almost mystical connection with Brandon Teena. Auteur theory favours the director, but *Carol*'s authorship, as with any media text, and especially with adaptations, is multi-dimensional. As I shall discuss below, the film fits like a glove into Haynes' oeuvre. Yet obviously Highsmith has formidable authority as a rival signatory, and screenwriter Nagy has a strong proprietary claim on *Carol*, especially given the project's long gestation. Even the status of *The Price of Salt* as a pseudonymously published, 'neglected' Highsmith makes its generations of lesbian readers feel like *they* own it. With Karlsen's passionate involvement in the project, Berwin's executive production, the support of executive Tessa Ross at Film 4, and Vachon as producer, *Carol* was significantly shaped by women in aesthetic and material terms.

The example of Killer and *Carol* underscores the importance of female producers in independent film culture. *Carol* debuted during a moment of increasingly vocal protests against gender disparities in directing in Hollywood, with the ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union) calling for an investigation into the industry for discrimination. Sundance Senior Programmer Caroline Libresco believes that nurturing women producers is key to building a film culture in which women directors can have sustainable careers: 'The presence of strong creative producers (who understand story and the cinematic art form as well as the business) elevate the work of a director from merely good to great. Killer's body of work is a massive contribution to the culture' (Libresco 2015). Killer's statistics – thirteen features by women in the can and counting, or roughly 26% of their output – are much better than Hollywood's and consistent with the percentage of dramatic features by women shown at Sundance over the twelve years reported by the Institute's groundbreaking Female Filmmakers Initiative (Smith 2014). A later phase of the report confirmed that productions with women in key creative positions tend to employ more women, which is true of Killer's crews (Smith 2015).

But the women directors they've worked with have had a harder time in feature filming in comparison to their male cohort, with both Harron and Troche finding work in television. In a revealing profile in *The New York Times Magazine* timed with the release of her *Carrie* remake in 2012, Kimberly Peirce spoke frankly of her struggles as a woman in Hollywood. Despite several exciting prospects and numerous almost-deals, *Carrie* is only her third feature: the second, *Stop-Loss*, didn't make it to the screen till 2008, nine years after *Boys Don't Cry*. Neither was a lesbian project (though *Carrie* has its moments): Peirce's queer script *Butch Academy* languishes in development at Universal.

Discussing Peirce's direct experience of the disrespect shown to women in Hollywood, author Mary Kay Schilling asked whether being butch is an advantage in the profession. 'There's a picture of me with David O. Russell, Spike Jonze and Alexander Payne,' Peirce answered. 'We're all hanging out, and I'm in the middle, and I respect these guys, and it *is* a boy's club' (Schilling 2015). She explained that if she projected any kind of femininity, the balance changed, acknowledging that authorship is performance as well as filmography.

The exchange on butchness bears on the question of lesbian authorship's visibility and indeed authority, a matter I see as germane to valuing Vachon's persona and her work with Killer. Peirce's assertion about modern day Hollywood feels both anachronistic and like common sense. In the 1930s and 1940s 'mannish' directors like Dorothy Arzner and the recently rediscovered Chinese-American Esther Eng claimed masculine entitlement for themselves on film sets through their dress and manner (Mayne 1994; Wei 2013). Although these codes have relaxed, I posit a modern day parallel in Vachon's manner of negotiating gender norms and protocols in the male dominated worlds of both industry and independent filmmaking. (A minor controversy bubbled up at Cannes 2015 around the requirement that women wear heels to red carpet galas. Vachon wore her customary combat boots.) I am not arguing that a butch persona is a necessity, discounting the role of Killer partner Pam Koffler, or even staking a feminist argument on this characterisation. I'm simply accruing evidence that, though her work with Killer, Christine Vachon has indisputably produced the oeuvre of a lesbian auteur.

INDEPENDENT COLLABORATORS

This part sets out to correct any previous over-emphasis on Vachon's singular agency by foregrounding the practice of collaboration at Killer on material as well as symbolic levels. Both 'female' and 'producer' trouble the conventional vision of the auteur-hero of indie film as male director. At Killer these categories do not take a back seat; the female-led company's twenty-year history shows the central role of hands-on creative producing to the history and practice of US independent filmmaking.

A primary theme of Vachon's books is the multifarious nature of the producer's job. 'What *don't* they do?' she asks (Vachon 1998: 2). *Shooting to Kill* starts with a record of 'a day in the life', tracking meetings with talent, disputes with distributors, crises with the bond company. Vachon's writing, teaching, and lecturing aim to demystify the filmmaking process and make it seem accessible to anyone willing to work hard. She and Koffler are regularly called upon as mentors at programmes like Sundance's annual Creative Producing Summit and Feature Film Program Lab. Vachon doesn't comment on the fact

that collaboration, multi-tasking, and caretaking are also qualities of female socialisation. She does note that she doesn't care when money people condescend to her – as a woman she's used to it. But the perception that women are good at hands-on producing also affects the prestige of the profession. Status and credit hierarchies range from the line producer who has responsibility for every penny of the budget to the executive producer who may have 'earned' his credit by investing in the film. Vachon recognises that: 'The bottom line is, you cannot be a producer unless you understand that it's all your fault' (Vachon 1998: 9).

At the core of Killer is the partnership and seemingly intuitive working relationship between Vachon and Koffler. Vachon knew she wanted a partner in the venture and found their temperaments and outlooks worked well together. In interviews, both use the term 'organic' to describe how they collaborate on everything from selecting projects to deciding who will be on-set producer. Yet Koffler's personality and role contrast with Vachon's; she avoids confrontation and seems content to stay out of the limelight. She describes two aspects of her role:

I try to step back now and then and assess the big picture. How are we doing: how are we going to get the bills paid, are our employees happy? I . . . see where Christine's energies are going and follow that – she is a very instinctual, visceral person . . . [A]t the other end of the spectrum, I tend to dive into a project and be a bit more soup to nuts on a particular movie than she is.

While they will both work on a large production like *Mildred Pierce* (2011), they also divide responsibilities with an eye towards work-life balance.

Through several moves following the fortunes of independent film and Manhattan real estate, the Killer office floor plan has always been open. Vachon and Koffler look out across their desks at each other, consulting 'back and forth all day long' as Vachon comments, and involving other staff in whatever capacity they are needed. This work style has facilitated the advancement of other women at Killer, where the assumption of responsibility is a key dimension of the labour culture. It has also demanded a thick skin. Over Killer's twenty-year history, employees who started as entry-level assistants or interns have gone on to receive full producer credits on Killer Films (not only line producer, co-producer or executive producer, though sometimes those as well). Eva Kolodner rose to producer on *Boys Don't Cry*. Katie Roumel got her first producer credit on *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* and became a third partner before leaving in 2007. Koffler herself started as a line producer. Balancing those who have moved up the ranks are the many others who found the work pace and style too demanding.

Killer's mode of production foregrounds the fundamentally collaborative nature of independent – indeed all – filmmaking. New York-based female crew such as DPs Maryse Alberti and Ellen Kuras, production designers Thérèse DePrez and Judy Becker have risen to prominence on Killer productions, and casting director Laura Rosenthal is a regular collaborator. And as we will discuss in more detail below, actors see in Killer projects a chance to do challenging work. Low-budget filmmaking requires everyone to pitch in, highly trained and highly trainable personnel alike.

It would be a stretch to call Killer's culture feminist, however. Killer has worked with women-led companies like the New York distributor Zeitgeist, which released *Poison*, and, recently, with Adrienne Becker's Glass Elevator Media to produce for new platforms. But in an effort to stay afloat it has cycled through a series of industry alliances and partnerships that push identity politics and experimental tastes aside. Vachon's attraction to edgy material translates into projects like *Kids* (Larry Clark, 1995) whose gender politics are questionable. Overall Killer fosters what might be called queer collaborations – driven by economic necessity and animated by creativity – that do not necessarily conform to expectations of gendered work.

Vachon sees her role as producer as facilitating the director's artistic vision. While her temperament bucks traditional notions of feminine supportiveness, she is a deeply loyal advocate, especially in her storied collaboration with Haynes. Trust is paramount between producer and director, she explains. 'With Todd it is a lot about protecting his vision, but also, because the trust goes both ways, I can just . . . tell him the truth . . . he's got a lot of people around him who would say yes'. Inevitably the discourse of expressive auteur pushes her into the background, something to which Haynes objects. But it is clear that certain components of Haynes' amiable and intellectual authorial persona are enabled by the steely and pragmatic qualities of Vachon's. And it is Killer's efficiency and expertise that have enabled Haynes to maintain his independence. On set with *Far From Heaven* (2002) in Bayonne, New Jersey just after 9/11, Vachon writes, 'Everybody is jumpy: our days are punctuated by the wail of police sirens, anthrax alerts, and Code Orange. At least Todd is our one saving grace. He's completely calm and focused' (Vachon 2007: 170). Their professional collaboration is fortified by a deep personal friendship and a moving allegiance: together they have weathered the deaths of their mothers, of Haynes' partner and editor Jim Lyons, health scares, and major surgeries, all set against the vicissitudes of development, production, and promotion – and extravagantly positive reception.

Vachon recounts: 'People think that if you're not in a state of crisis on a movie, you're not really working. I learned from Todd that it didn't have to be that way. When we started making movies together, he said. "Don't yell at me and I won't yell at you. Let's not be like that . . ."'. That said, I yell at people

all the time' (Vachon 1998: 9). For Haynes, Vachon's legendary fierceness is chivalric. He describes the shift in scale on the production of *Mildred Pierce*:

It was a great experience working with HBO in the end . . . it felt finally for the first time maybe ever that we were [o]n intensely solid ground, I don't think I've ever felt that before – I don't think Christine has ever felt that before. Even just for her, I was thinking, you have so earned this, man! . . . [W]here there are other people worrying about every cent and you can be there for the creative experiences, like she was on *Poison* . . . But she was often dueling with the dragons and slaying the beasts on most of the films we've made together since. (Leyda 2014: 226)

The Haynes/Vachon collaboration – and Killer's approach to collaboration more generally – challenges gendered discourses as much as it conforms to them. In fact it renews debates on the nature of women's cinema that characterised feminist film theory and practice from their emergence in the 70s.

KILLER FILMS AND WOMEN'S CINEMA

As a female-owned company Killer makes 'women's cinema' of a kind, though signature titles like *Kids*, *Happiness*, and *One Hour Photo* (2002) would be hard to assimilate to a generic characterisation. As a director collaborating closely with female artists on women-centred stories that appeal to spectators keyed to experiences of socialised femininity, Haynes makes a very specific kind of 'women's cinema' at Killer. Both of these definitions can leave explicit feminism to the side – Killer doesn't privilege female makers, stories, genres, or spectators per se; Haynes' films are often period dramas with relatively disempowered heroines. Nevertheless feminism informs the work at many levels, including, as we've seen, that of collaboration itself.

Haynes is arguably the most significant director of women's pictures in world cinema today. In *Superstar* (1987), *Safe* (1995), *Far From Heaven*, *Mildred Pierce*, and *Carol*, Haynes has explored the self-reflexive dimensions of the classic genre – the expressivity of décor, music and costume and performance codes – and the revolutionary implications of films in which 'women think', as Fassbinder memorably characterised Sirk's oeuvre (Fassbinder 1992: 81). The period settings of Haynes' women's films function as historical pastiche and as thought experiments – how do these white, middle-class American women cope without access to feminist discourse? Mildred and the lovers in *Carol* are fighters; Karen Carpenter, Carol White and Cathy Whitaker suffer. These are roles that recall the 'superfemales' and 'superwomen' Bette Davis and Katharine Hepburn infused with critical passion in the 1930s and 1940s (Haskell 1974; Dyer 1986: 61–64). And one dimension of Haynes' genius is a

Cukor-like queer rapport with actresses, transposed to a vastly different political universe.

Certainly any definition of Killer feminism has to include the contributions of stars Julianne Moore, Kate Winslet, and Cate Blanchett in Haynes' films: these women are his public face, even as the women producers have his back. Of course their prominence is on one level an index of the importance of star casting to the sustainability of independent film, a demand that can compromise a film's integrity. But Haynes has adapted his mode of working to this reality in a way that would do honour to his fellow queer auteurs Warhol and Fassbinder, with their ironic takes on studio glamour and ensemble work. This female scaffolding, this multi-pronged collaboration, makes Haynes' authorial persona significantly more feminist than that of other male mavericks of indie cinema from Steven Soderbergh to Quentin Tarantino.

As a lesbian film, *Carol* teases out some of the ramifications of Killer's contribution to women's cinema. As I noted, the project didn't start out with the company – although Patricia Highsmith is a quintessential Killer author, one of Vachon's favourites. *The Price of Salt*, the 1952 lesbian romance written under the pseudonym Claire Morgan, is Highsmith's only novel lacking an actual killer. Written after a chance encounter with an elegant female customer in the store where Highsmith was earning extra cash, the novel is a fever dream of first love tinged with anxiety. Although *Carol* was finished in fall 2014, the Weinstein Company, always canny about Oscar potential, held the film for a holiday 2015 release, building on festival dates and critical acclaim. Although it came up short at the Academy Awards, Rooney Mara shared the award for best actress at Cannes and Cate Blanchett, in the title role of the beloved, garnered rapturous press. The triangulation of the two female stars and director Haynes made for some good red carpet photo opportunities. Outside the press bubble, these relationships, gendered and queered, intertextual and material, became a fascinating roundelay – producer protecting director, director tendering a rare intellectual respect for stars – ripe for feminist interpretation.

Even as Vachon was back and forth from Cincinnati for the *Carol* shoot, where Karlsen stayed fulltime, Koffler was on the set of *Still Alice*, Richard Glatzer and Wash Westmoreland's adaptation of Lisa Genova's 2007 best-seller about a fifty-year-old linguistics professor struggling with early onset Alzheimer's. Koffler, a French literature major at Yale who loves psychologically compelling material along the lines of *Madame Bovary* and *Portrait of a Lady*, puts her mark on Killer cinema as women's cinema with this film. Koffler took on an especially difficult role with *Still Alice*: to get the film made during the crisis of Glatzer's rapid decline with ALS. Glatzer had been diagnosed in 2011 while making the couple's first Killer film, *The Last of Robin Hood* (2013), with Koffler producing. Koffler says of the strains on the couple

directing, ‘Making the movie was enough – like *dayenu* – “it would have been enough!”’ The creative and personal collaboration was tragically affected by the illness – with one of the directors literally losing his voice by the end – and trust was paramount. Koffler said: ‘I dealt with our VFX and our Toronto deadlines and then I would be finding someone from the ALS community who knew how to get this particular breathing machine so Richard could get on a plane’. The race to finish *Still Alice* mirrored that of the protagonist of the film to communicate her sense of self before losing the power to do so.

Julianne Moore finally won her Oscar for her role in *Still Alice*. Glatzer and Westmoreland are close friends of Haynes, so Moore’s casting in *Still Alice* has an almost dizzying intertextuality, her performance of suffering a symbolic tie between the films and filmmakers materially grounded in Koffler’s work as producer. Star of *Safe* and *Far From Heaven* and featured as Joan Baez in *I’m Not There*, Moore is often considered a muse to Haynes. Based in New York, Moore has worked on other Killer films, notably starring in Kalin’s *Savage Grace* (2007) as an incestuous mother finally murdered by her son. Moore’s star persona is as rich as any classic women’s picture star, and goes beyond to comprise archetypes of damaged femininity achieved collaboratively with gay male filmmakers (Çakırlar 2015). The fact that *Still Alice* was finished and released and Glatzer saw Moore thank him in her Oscar acceptance speech was at once unspeakably sad and a fairy-tale ending. Kind of like a women’s picture.

These nuanced feminist dramas are onscreen projections of queer worlds built from intimate friendships, hard and unpredictable work, and a rough and tumble production culture. But melodrama is ultimately not Killer’s primary genre – on the uncertain terrain of independent film in the age of media convergence, their approach is necessarily realistic. I interviewed Christine in 2015 just before Cannes; I came back to interview Pam two weeks later – in between *Carol* had been tipped for the Palme d’Or, and although things didn’t go that way, the Killer team was pleased with the film’s profile and ready for what would come next. Down to a staff of four in difficult times for independent film, and occupying part of Moxie’s Pictures’ Union Square space, Killer’s resourcefulness was on full display. A white board listed eight feature films in the works, several by women. Once again Killer is collaborating, developing work for new platforms through Killer Content. Koffler says there are parallel motivations. The material is cool and challenging, and ‘you can’t just make small independent features and run a business.’ For their first project, they have compiled a list of directors that excite them – all of whom are women.

Is it a paradox that the most fearless women producers in independent film are turning to the stereotypically feminised format of non-theatrical serial drama for a livelihood (a terrain that has already lured some of their most talented female directors)? It is a feminist truism that in TV women play bigger roles both in front of and behind the camera – television drama

inherits the cultural space of the women's picture. And, as Troche told me, the paycheck is bigger. But Killer's brand of feminism goes beyond concerns with gender equity and identity politics: its institutional, political, and formal affiliations and proclivities; its intertextual (bordering on incestuous) bonds; its queerness – all put the company on dangerous ground in the current climate of independent media production. Just where it feels most safe.

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