

Golden Threads (1999)

Description

“Golden Threads” is a profile of Christine Burton, the ninety-year old founder of a senior lesbians networking organization. During the course of this 57-minute documentary, Christine’s setbacks and triumphs are chronicled against the mid-life crisis of the filmmaker, Lucy Winer.

“You ask me why I say I’ve had such a wonderful life. I am sure that in not any other segment, any time in the history of human race has a culture changed as much as it has during my lifetime. It’s not a revolution, it’s an explosion! And it’s just wonderful, because unless you have these explosions you’re going to live in a rut.” As Christine Burton speaks these words in voiceover against a soundtrack of exotic up tempo music, jerky camcorder moving images of elderly women dancing cheek-to-cheek at a party cut between photographs of other senior women bopping on the dance floor. The second you stop living, and growing, Burton’s voiceover proclaims as the camera moves in on her smiling face, is when you start to die.

While the women sit down at long, linen-covered dining tables, Christine, with the aid of her cane, approaches the microphone. She thumps it and looks around saying, It’s not on! A harp riff announces the film’s title as it dissolves up. Golden Threads, appropriately lettered in yellow against a lavender background, covers the screen, then dissolves out while Christine Burton introduces herself as the founder of Golden Threads to her applauding audience.

To a cheerful, cartoon-like musical soundtrack, an image of a seaside town fades up with the words, Provincetown, MA: June 1995 in the upper right hand corner. The still shots continue to reveal a Provincetown hotel, and Christine’s voiceover begins to read a welcome letter sent out to attendees of the Ninth Annual “Golden Threads” Celebration. I’m happy that you’re coming, her voice continues against a photographic montage of guests in various stages of arrival, “I hope you have a wonderful time, Love to all, Christine Burton.”

A photo of Christine in her hotel room cuts to a city street scene with the words, Meanwhile, back in New York City in the lower left-hand corner. The camera pans down the apartment building to reveal a photographic cut-out of a woman holding a video camera, standing in a cartooned street. As her still image dissolves from one pose to the next, her voiceover reveals her to be the film’s creator. A montage of cartoons images, photographs, and still and moving video images construct the woman’s walk upstairs to her apartment and her preparations for a trip. Throughout, her voiceover reveals her purpose: Making this movie, I was like a main character in my own nightmare. You see, I was in the middle of a mid-life crisis. I was scared. Having pretty much messed up the business of being young, I had more than my share of concern about growing old, and I wanted the clock to stop now. That’s when I met Christine Burton, a woman who not only accepted, but rejoiced in her old age. Videotaping from within a car on the highway, the woman’s voiceover introduces herself as Lucy Winer, then presents her girlfriend, Karen. The camera captures the passing roadside as Lucy ponders what lies ahead for her in Provincetown.

In the Provincetown hotel parking lot, a companion pushes Christine in her wheelchair as women greet the living legend enthusiastically. Once inside, Christine stands up and proudly shows off her tee shirt sporting the musical score to the Golden Threads Song which she wrote. A standing sign in the hotel lobby reads “Welcome to the Provincetown Inn, Golden Threads,” announcing the registration sequences that follow. Christine’s voiceover reads directives and lists of events from the Awelcome letter as women line up to check in. Between the registration sequences,

Christine appears in interview, describing an early attempt to “find (lesbian) friends through an ad in the paper.” Her application to the ad’s organization was returned to her, however, with the note, “Unless you’ve made a mistake in your birthday, you’re over fifty Nobody’s looking for anyone over fifty.” So, at age 80, Christine Burton tells the viewer, she founded “Golden Threads.”

Back at the registration table, Christine is greeted by Ruth Ellis. Oh, you’ve made me a baby dyke, Christine cries happily, I’m only ninety! Ellis leans in and confesses, “I’ll be ninety-six next month!” More photos of the women in the registration process cut past to the sound of a camera shutter, and a jazz clarinet solo fades up to provide a musical soundtrack. Against video footage of lesbian couples mingling inside and outside the hotel, Christine describes her early recognition of her homosexuality. “There was no name for it,” she says, “There were all kinds of euphemisms, we would (look at a woman and) wonder if she was ‘that way.’”

Christine’s voiceover begins reading more instructions from the “welcome letter” as the footage cuts to a beachside scene. “How does it feel to be here among other lesbians your own age?” Lucy asks a weekend celebrant from off camera. “Oh, I love it!” responds the white-haired woman, “But there aren’t enough my own age!” Back inside the Provincetown Inn, two elderly women identified by their name tags as Beverly and Doreen tell the unseen interviewer that today is their fifth anniversary. They continue to sweetly describe their first meeting at a previous “Golden Threads” gathering, their ensuing courtship, and their happiness at being together.

Another photo montage of women enjoying a dip in the hotel pool segues to videotape of the same. “Did I come here to meet somebody?” a bather answers, “No. Because I think if you have that feeling you’re setting yourself up for failure, disappointment.” “But I wouldn’t mind! I’ve met some spectacular prospects!” The scene presages Lucy’s rumination of her own state of mind. Against photo cut-outs of a despondent Lucy emerging from a cartoon ocean, the filmmaker describes her own depression as the result of being in the midst of so many lesbians “having a good time.” Perhaps, she wonders, she is experiencing “culture shock” of belonging at last.

Video footage of women line-dancing to a country-western soundtrack begins the next sequence. Between shots, an older African-American woman appears in interview, describing how, at an early age, she realized she “was just drawn to women,” while subsequently being asked by friends and family, “Why don’t you get married?” Footage of the woman standing alone, smoking a cigarette on the seaside deck completes the scene. Next, a montage of photographic portraits of weekend attendees accompanies Christine’s voiceover reading from her welcome letter: “Each one of us has much to celebrate. We are lesbian women. We can enjoy this particular time of life!”

An older lesbian couple is interviewed in their hotel room. I do not like the terminology ‘old,’ says one, “I don’t like to be called a ‘lesbian,’ I don’t like to be called an ‘old lesbian,’ but, you know, I am!” And it’s not hard to face that now, especially coming up here. The scene shifts to a large hotel gathering room, where women dance together, hold hands and obviously enjoy each other’s company. Here, Christine’s voiceover reveals a bit of her philosophy about Golden Threads: “When they go home, every person they touch, it’s going to be a happier touch.” The sequence ends with more still photos of a happy couple.

Back in her own hotel room, Christine is asked by the filmmaker, Do you have a girlfriend? Still shots of Christine in the midst of the video shoot segue to footage of the woman in interview. “I

don't think I'm relationship material!" she responds, "I've never had a relationship in my life that's satisfying; I think it's low self-esteem." Sepia-toned photos of a young, daintily-clothed Christine Burton dissolve from one to the next as she describes early affronts: "'You're only a girl. You can't do this, you can't do that,' I've heard this all my life." She describes how her childhood dreams of being an astronomer or veterinarian were dismissed by others because of her gender, a fact so depressing that she found herself muttering, "I'm not any good, I'm not any good." The photo montage ends with pictures of Christine in middle age, at which point she appears again in interview and relates how she finally took stock of herself and realized that the only negative thing about her was her poor self image.

The previous sequence brings Lucy to think of her own relationship with her mother. Again, photo cut-outs of Lucy and her mother appear against the backdrop of a cartoon sea. They hold hands and kiss, as Lucy's voiceover recalls her mother's advice, "'Do yourself a favor, dear. Never grow old.' What exactly did she think were my options?"

Another photo montage of twilight at the Provincetown seaside segues to Christine Burton in interview. She describes a memory of holding a small bird, then opening her hands to watch the bird pause for a full minute before it flies away. "We're not free unless we know we're free," Christine construes from the experience, "and you're not free unless you're fearless." A weekend group meeting follows. A banner for OLOC (Old Lesbians Organizing for Change) is seen on hanging on the wall, and the camera captures both close ups and group shots of women discussing issues of ageism and sexism.

The photo cut-out Lucy reappears against the cartoon seaside as the filmmaker confides, I came out as a lesbian in the heyday of the women's movement in those days, I never had to deal with my feelings about my sexuality, because I was too busy feeling superior to everybody else. To tell you the truth, that's the part I kind of missed. The next sequence involves two lesbians in their Provincetown Inn room who recount their experiences at "Stonewall," the 1969 New York City gay rebellion against police raids which is considered to be the start of the modern gay movement. A combination of photos and moving images present the interviews in varying stages of video equipment set-up and actual taping as the women describe the twenty-five year old scenario. Occasionally, a camcorder time counter appears in the lower right hand corner of the screen.

I think lesbians are in a position to see more clearly, Christine's voiceover remarks over scenes of women shooting pool, "In order to live their lifestyle, they have to be unconventional." Hey, we can do anything! Next, a group of women clustered around a hotel coffee table exchange memories of early gay bars, and their strategies of immediately conforming to gender stereotypes during police raids.

In the following sequence, the camera tracks Christine from in front as she is pushed in her wheelchair by a companion. The companion describes her own annual journeys from Germany to attend the "Golden Threads weekends, and Christine shows off her gardenia corsage. The two arrive at a banquet hall where scores of celebrants are gathered for dinner. "This is my first time and I'll be back!" declares one woman to the off-camera interviewer; "I can be me!" Myself is coming alive! effuses another. Dining and toasting and laughing, everyone rejoices in their existence. The soundtrack of "The Anniversary Waltz" fades up as Beverly and Doreen twirl around the dance floor. An interview of Christine cuts in and out of the joyous banquet hall scenes: "When I started 'Golden Threads,' it never occurred to me that it would benefit me," she confides, "I just thought, well, we need some kind of mechanism where we can get together and,

you know, not live isolated lives. But I've never had such friends in all my life. I'm glad I've lived this long to get my act together; I think I'm sexier than when I was young!" More and more women take to the dance floor, dancing as couples and in groups. Christine's interview continues, underscoring the purpose of "Golden Threads" not as a Lonely-hearts club but as a venue to make friends. A photo montage of the dance scene clicks by to the sound of a camera shutter.

Lucy interjects her own thoughts over a rare video shot of herself chatting with Christine and Ruth Ellis. As a pop music soundtrack fades out, Lucy admits to refusing to join the dance floor frolicking -- despite Christine's urging. "Social gatherings are not my thing," Lucy admits over still photos of happy, dancing women, "I prefer the telephone." The upbeat soundtrack, "I Am What I Am" cuts in for more video footage of the party scene, now with the revelers dancing in a conga line. "Watching Christine that night," Lucy comments in voiceover, "she appeared the very picture of life engaged. Video close ups of an ebullient Christine then begin to slow in motion as Lucy describes the stroke that would, within twenty-four hours, virtually paralyze the "Golden Threads" founder. The screen fades to white.

Fading from white back to a photo montage of outside morning scenes, Lucy's voiceover describes the final hours of the weekend of filming. At the last group gathering, Christine gives a passionate speech about the importance of belonging and staying connected as the camera captures the faces of her devoted audience. A yellow ball of string wound around the group symbolizes her words. Next, a slow motion sequence of Lucy crouching down to thank and kiss Christine accompanies the filmmaker's revelation: "I can only tell you what it felt like," she says against a gentle piano soundtrack, "Like something suddenly inside me let go, and I began to cry."

More video footage and photos depict the group's departure from the hotel. As Christine's car drives away from the camera in a slow motion sequence, Lucy explains the stroke that felled the "Golden Threads" founder at 3 a.m. the following morning. A photo montage illustrates Lucy's report of Christine's subsequent journey from hospital to rehab center to nursing home. The montage fades to black with the single line "four months later" appearing on the screen.

With her camera, Lucy visits the stricken Christine in a nursing home. The filmmaker crouches down to greet Christine, who, though partially incoherent, is obviously overcome by emotion at the visit. A number of other women visitors occupy the room, and a staff attendant tells them it is time for Christine's physical therapy session. Close ups of Christine reveal her difficulty moving from wheelchair to table, but she receives a round of applause from her visitors at her accomplishment. On camera, Lucy asks the attendant if Christine is the first "out" lesbian patient at the facility. The camera pans over to the attendant, who replies, "She's the first person to assert it." Christine raises a victorious fist in the air. A photo montage of the inside of the facility follows. In an interview, another attendant describes Christine's pro-lesbian t-shirts, whose messages seem to have been lost on the other residents of the nursing home, though not on the staff.

Through a gathering room window, the camera next captures Lucy, Christine and other visitors viewing the footage Lucy had shot during the 1995 Provincetown weekend. The camera moves inside for close-ups of the rapt audience, as Lucy's voiceover explains, "Sitting there," watching her watch the footage of the weekend she'd worked so hard to create, I felt a terrible sense of loss. The filmmaker continues to describe the life story of Christine Burton, which she had hoped to capture in interviews with the woman following the "Golden Threads" gathering. Over close ups of Christine and her visitors watching the television, Lucy explains, "I needed, for instance,

to hear in her own words, what it felt like when she, possibly one of the least crazy people I have ever known, was incarcerated against her will in a state mental hospital for five years when she was sixty-one years old.” Lucy continues to fill in the pieces of Christine’s life with unanswered questions: Why did she convert to Catholicism? What was the convent in which she served as a novice like? What was it like to run her own horse farm? What did she mean when she spoke of a career in the theater? Why did she not reach out for help when she was diagnosed with breast cancer? Regarding all of these experiences, Lucy ultimately asks, “Did she have any regret?” I needed to know.

The next sequence shows Christine entering a speech therapy room, where she first greets a small bird in a hanging cage located near the window. The camera here captures the woman talking, writing and reading. When asked to identify the two people depicted in a drawing of a man fixing a flat tire while a woman looks on, Christine’s insurgency against gender specificity bubbles up. Though slightly incoherent, she balks at the task; the speech therapist understands, saying, “So you would change the tire!” A photo montage of the speech therapy session ends with a picture of the bird in cage.

Next, Lucy appears in a cartoon sequence, lying on a living room couch receiving diet cola intravenously while the swiftly changing hands of an animated clock on the wall mark the passage of time. The months following Christine’s stroke were grim indeed, she admits in voiceover, “I desperately wanted to get up, take action, do something productive or meaningful, but I couldn’t move, I felt paralyzed.” A cartoon Karen brandishing an axe glides past in the foreground, then B with the scene enveloped in falling snow B back again with a Christmas tree. “Winter came, then Spring, then Summer, and with it, inspiration.” Cartoon flowers sprout around the prostrate Lucy, with the final bloom emerging from her shirt and blossoming not as a flower, but as her smiling and optimistic visage. “We would go back to Provincetown and meet Christine for the 10th anniversary of ‘Golden Threads,’” she ideates, “We’d be on the road again.”

Footage of a dazzling Provincetown sunset introduces the following scene, and Christine is wheeled into a lobby of expectant weekend revelers. As she approaches the camera, she raises her open palm toward the lens and laughs. Just as they had a year earlier, women greet her lovingly. Still photos segue to footage of the filmmaking team following Christine’s wheelchair down a hallway. I found it comforting just to be around her, Lucy says in voiceover, “In Christine’s face, basic truths were revealed, and the rest of the world seemed to slip away.”

I was always different, Christine remarks through slurred speech to a group of women relaxing around a hotel coffee table. She repeats the phrase, then adds, “But I knew who I was” while the camera captures close ups of her attentive and intergenerational audience. “I am what I am,” concurs another woman, and Christine erupts with enthusiasm.

Gentle electronic music fades up as the scene moves to the Provincetown Inn parking lot. Footage of Lucy with her camcorder quickly following Christine’s wheelchair is accompanied by Lucy’s voiceover: “I knew I had to make peace with Christine’s failure, we all did, and so we filmed and filmed and filmed. The footage cuts quickly from one angle of Christine to another, as Lucy continues, “The availability of cheap video equipment allowed us to shoot unimaginable quantities of footage of Christine’s faith could be our faith, and if we kept shooting long enough, we might be able to accept Christine’s reality, and our own uncertain future.” Lucy then appears in close up, recording with her camcorder as she asks, “So, Christine, are you happy to be here?” “Yes!, Yes!” the woman replies to the camera. More close up footage of Christine interacting

with a friend, dozing in her “Golden Threads” t-shirt, and wheeling herself along in her wheelchair underscores Lucy’s attempt to chronicle the senior’s every move.

Once again, the scene shifts to a hotel coffee table, yet this time the women gathered there discuss personal issues of disability. Christine is wheeled up to the group, and they effuse over her new purple blouse. “You look like a real dish!” gushes one woman. The conversation returns to the topic of disease and disability, with one participant noting that “I am something beyond (my physical self).” “As a result of my disease,” adds another, “I have become a very strong woman.” Video footage of the klatch cuts between still photos of the same, with Lucy captured in their midst recording the event. “I am what I am reemerges as a group motto.” Christine Burton waves at the camera.

The final sequence is a simple photo montage of the weekend’s banquet dinner set to a gentle piano melody. Lucy admits, “To my surprise, I felt a part of things.” Then, of Christine, she determines, “With as little control as she had over her life, Christine was a bird in flight.” Despite her circumstances, she was free. And she knew she was free. And she was fearless. Banquet photos of Christine, with Lucy consistently at her side, click past as the soundtrack to “I Am What I Am” fades up. The final photo shows the two posing for the camera, smiling broadly. A post script dissolves up: “In November 1998, Christine was given a Lifetime Achievement Award by SAGE (Senior Action in a Gay Environment).” The upbeat soundtrack gains volume and momentum as the photo fades to black and the credits roll.

Style/Analysis

As a video diary, *Golden Threads* offers personal recollections of Lucy Winer, a forty-five year-old lesbian enduring a self-described mid-life crisis. Yet the strength of the documentary is derived from Winer’s juxtaposition of her private impasses against the optimism of ninety-year-old Christine Burton. Burton’s outgoing, activist life takes center stage in *Golden Threads* while Winer’s ruminations provide a regulated, introspective counterpoint, and the differences between the way these two women view their lives remains a primary point throughout the film.

Golden Threads renders its dominant theme of aging by interlacing three filmic devices: moving video images; Rotoscope™ animation; and still photographs. Each method is assigned a specific role in the narrative, with the moving image aptly conveying the liveliness of Christine Burton, the two-dimensional animation suggesting the inconsequentiality of Lucy Winer’s self-doubts in comparison to Burton’s triumphs, and the still photographs creating a commemorative photo album of their film experience. The two women’s physical and emotional differences youth vs. old age, self-doubt vs. self-confidence, health vs. infirmity are continuously emphasized within the film’s narrative until Winer’s epiphany begins to close the gap in their attitudes. In fact, one begins to assume an interchangeability of their lives: Burton’s previous mental state, the viewer has learned, was at one point similar to Winer’s current outlook; Winer, on the other hand, appears to have achieved the capacity to embrace old age in the manner of Burton by the closing credits. Winer’s final willingness to appear on camera and in still photos having a good time as herself and with her new friends underscores her transformation at the hands of Christine Burton and the women of “Golden Threads.” As Christine Burton was able to reinvent herself at age eighty, one supposes Lucy Winer has inherited the same gift.

While Winer voices her fears of aging throughout the film, *Golden Threads* is elevated to levels of inspiration as additional themes intersect the main narrative. Stereotypes of sexless seniors are overturned by profiles of vibrant, elderly women who rejoice in their twilight relationships. More pointedly, the oppression historically experienced (and discussed) by these lesbians is replaced

by the accepting attitudes of today's populace. Though Lucy Winer could not have foreseen Christine Burton's stroke halfway through the filming, the incident serves to add another theme to the documentary's inventory the issue of health care for the aging homosexual. The film makes abundant use of one-on-one interviews, but Winer often employs direct cinema-styled filmmaking to allow these topics to play out among group discussions.

Golden Threads does not presume itself to be a high-tech, slick documentary. In fact, Lucy Winer admits to her audience that the availability of "cheap video equipment made her high shooting ratio possible." The musical score relies heavily on original artists' pre-recorded pop hits (occasionally piped through the Provincetown Inn sound system), and the editing together of photographs and moving images seems at times haphazard. Still, this home-movie quality of Golden Threads fittingly supports the introspection of Winer and the "day-in-the-life" chronicle of Christine Burton. The real sophistication of the film is exemplified by the compelling arc of its narrative, the spunk of its main character, and the optimism of its message (adopted as the motto of the "Golden Threads" organization): "You're never too old to love or be loved."

Background on Director/Film

Prior to Golden Threads, Lucy Winer worked on such award-winning films as 1985's Silent Pioneers, about early lesbian and gay activists, and Greetings from Washington, D.C., a chronicle of the 1981 Gay Rights March on the nation's capital. In addition, she assumed the roles of program director and series producer during 1995 for the Independent Television Service's four-part series, "Positive: Life With HIV."

Though her critically acclaimed body of work included affirmative gay and lesbian-themed documentaries, Winer, 45, had struggled with her own inherent homophobia and was experiencing serious apprehensive about her future as an aging lesbian. In a later interview with Gerard Robinson (from the Golden Threads press kit), she addressed the concerns of the aging homosexual as centering around issues of isolation. Many are economically vulnerable. Some are alienated from family members. Those who have lived in the closet all their life may find that when a partner dies there is no one to understand the profundity of their loss. While in the midst of her personal crisis, Winer met 90-year-old Christine Burton, who, ten years earlier, had founded "Golden Threads," a worldwide networking service for lesbians over 50. Burton's spirited self-assuredness was an intriguing contrast to Winer's private struggle, effectively inspiring the filmmaker to fashion a documentary about Burton and her cause.

During June 1995, Lucy Winer and producer Karen Eaton (who had previously worked with Winer as art director on Silent Pioneers) traveled to Provincetown, MA to film the ninth annual "Golden Threads" gathering. Following the three-day event, the filmmakers were looking forward to a scheduled one-on-one interview with Christine Burton in which they had hoped to record more detailed anecdotes of the activist's life, but Burton's sudden stroke derailed their plans. Instead, Winer and Eaton pieced together the fragments of Burton's pre-"Golden Threads" life from the woman's journals. It was also during this time that Winer developed the idea of using animation in the film to convey her own fears of aging. I think it gives the audience permission to have a fuller experience of what they're seeing, she told Gerard Robinson. The following summer, with Christine Burton's health improved but weak, the filmmakers followed her again to Provincetown to complete their filming of the activist and her organization.

In November 1998, Christine Burton was selected to receive a Lifetime Achievement award from SAGE (Senior Action in a Gay Environment), a "social service and advocacy organization" dedicated to LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) senior citizens founded in 1977. Since

she was confined to a nursing home and much less mobile by this point, Winer and Eaton raised funds to hire a specially-equipped van to bring Burton to the New York City ceremony. Afterward, they took Burton back to her hotel room to show her their recently completed film. Sadly, Christine Burton did not live to see *Golden Threads* premier to global accolades. She died on December 28, 1998 in Leeds, Massachusetts.

Golden Threads, produced by Wildlight Productions, was made with major funding by the ITVS and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. Other funders, including the New York State Council for the Arts, New York State Foundation for the Arts, and the Paul Robeson Fund, contributed to the film's \$257,000 cost.

Reception/Distribution

Within months of its completion, *Golden Threads* was premiering at film festivals worldwide. In February, 1999, the film debuted at Queerscreen, Australia's Mardi Gras Film Festival, and in March it played at the London Lesbian and Gay Film Festival. Other gay and lesbian-themed film festivals presenting *Golden Threads* within its first six months of release included those in Toronto, New York and San Francisco. Yet the film also found appreciative audiences at non-gay film festivals, including the Taos Talking Picture Festival, dedicated to "media education and community service," in April, 1999, and Chicago's Silver Images, a showcase for films celebrating seniors, the following month. It made its national television debut on PBS's P.O.V. ("Point of View") summer documentary series, and the P.O.V. "Talk Box" a threaded discussion group established on PBS's website B was flooded with diverse viewer opinions. It illustrated how PBS muscle is used to advance mainstreaming of perversion as an acceptable 'alternative lifestyle,' wrote one audience member. The most distressful piece of garbage I have witnessed on T.V., added another. The subject matter was not appropriate for public television and is a complete miss use (sic) of tax dollars that help to fund PBS, elaborated a third. However, the majority of comments were positive, praising not only the film, but also the network for presenting it. "Thank you, PBS for caring and responsible TV," a viewer wrote, while another described the essence of the film with her thoughts, "In the end, the words that stuck in my mind weren't 'old' or 'lesbian.'" The words that stuck in my mind were 'strong,' 'intelligent,' 'brave,' 'heartwarming,' 'spiritual,' and above all, 'love.'

Film critics, too, praised the thematic content of *Golden Threads*. "An exhilarating look at a tireless leader of an intergenerational dialogue about intimacy, life choices, and what it means to grow old in America, crowed the Pittsburgh Senior News. It's about people we know exist but never hear about or see, wrote Mark J. Huisman in the Lesbian and Gay News. Erica Marcus, in the San Francisco Bay Times elaborated, Winer's film portrays the kind of history that we all need to know. Even so, reviewers diverged on the issue of the cartoonish figures Winer used to depict herself and her own demons, referring to the sequences with differing assessments from "amateurish" to "charming" to "gorgeous." Yet *Golden Threads'* account of an aging American had proved to both audiences and critics that along with "wisdom (and) experience (XTRA! Toronto), seniors were just as capable of possessing the initiative, enthusiasm, and quest for love typically assigned to younger generations."

Following its "P.O.V." premier, *Golden Threads* began an award-winning run on the film festival circuit, garnering Best Documentary at the Austin International Lesbian and Gay Film Festival in August, Honorable Mention at the Columbus International Film and Video Festival in October, and Best Female Feature at Out Takes, the Dallas Gay and Lesbian Film Festival the following month. In Spring, 2000, *Golden Threads* was nominated for Best Documentary by the media watchdog organization, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD). To expand

the influence of their film, Lucy Winer and Karen Eaton have sought to incorporate Golden Threads into sensitivity training courses designed for healthcare professionals working with elderly lesbians and gay men

Film Production Context

With the turn of the new millennium, nostalgia-swept America was taking a closer look at the senior citizens who had defined pivotal events the previous century. Scores of documentaries had been produced with a focus on the accomplishments of the elderly during their prime, but filmic examinations of senior citizens per se were relegated only to informational videos about aging issues not designed for the intergenerational mass audience. A major breakthrough in the senior genre of documentary film occurred in 1999 when, after winning numerous film festival awards, Keiko Ibi's *The Personals: Improvisations of Romance in the Golden Years* was bestowed the Oscar for Best Documentary Short. Eschewing sentimentality, the film presented senior citizens as noteworthy members of the contemporary community, discussing not only their anxieties of aging but also their concomitant desires of relationships, love and sex.

For years, gay and lesbian documentarians had also been capturing the memories of seniors who had been instrumental in the early gay rights movement. Then in 1999, the same year *Golden Threads* debuted, Yvonne Welbon created *Living With Pride: Ruth C. Ellis at 100*, a documentary which devoted a large part of its story to the centurion's enduring influence as a campaigner for gay and lesbian senior citizens' issues. Ellis, coincidentally, appears in footage from the 1995 and 1996 "Golden Threads" gatherings in *Golden Threads*.

Like their heterosexual counterparts, gay and lesbian seniors hold particular concerns about their futures. Organizations such as SAGE, *Golden Threads* and OLOC (Old Lesbians Organizing for Change), founded in the 1970s and 1980s, continue to bring together companionable elderly gay men and lesbians. In the 1990s, as these original groups evolved to address more specific issues, niche organizations such as GLARP (Gay and Lesbian Association of Retiring Persons), LGAIN (Lesbian and Gay Aging Issues Network) and Pride Senior Network were established to create professional networking groups, dispense legal and medical advice, and promote gay-friendly retirement communities. As of 2000, approximately 5,000 lesbians had, at various times over the organization's 15-year history, held membership in "Golden Threads," with 1,600 members currently receiving the group's quarterly newsletter. Two hundred forty members attended the Fifteenth Annual *Golden Threads* Celebration in Provincetown in June, 2000.

Discussion

Lucy Winer uses animation for the sequences in which she reveals herself to the audience. How does this technique dramatize her state of mind? How does it influence the viewer's perception of Christine Burton?

Why does Lucy Winer find Christine Burton worth making a film about? What do they share and how do they differ? Does Christine Burton have anything to share with a non-lesbian audience?

Christine Burton says that freedom is a central value for her. How does Lucy Winer show that value in the film?

Further Reading

Outing Age: Public Policy Issues Facing Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgendered Elders, a comprehensive report released by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (Elizabeth Toledo, Executive Director) following the organization's Creating Change conference in Atlanta, GA;

November 15, 2000.

Also consult the Golden Threads website at <http://www.itvs.org/goldenthreads/>, which contains links to other resources, including the Golden Threads organization.

Contributors: Bob Connelly, Pat Aufderheide