

The Hypothetical

Lesbian Heroine

in Narrative

Feature Film

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Feminist film theory based on sexual difference has much to gain from considering lesbian desire and sexuality. Women's desire for women deconstructs male/female sexual dichotomies, sex/gender conflation, and the universality of the oedipal narrative. Acknowledgment of the female-initiated active sexuality and sexualized activity of lesbians has the potential to reopen a space in which straight women as well as lesbians can exercise self-determined pleasure.

In this article, I am concerned mainly with films that do *not* depict lesbianism explicitly but employ or provide sites for lesbian intervention. This decision is based on my interest in the lesbian viewer and how her relation to films with covert lesbianism content resembles her positioning in society. In textual analyses of *Entre nous* and *Voyage en douce*—two French films that seemingly oblige different audiences and interpretation—I demonstrate how, rather than enforcing opposite meanings, the films allow for multiple readings that overlap. I use the term *hypothetical* to indicate that neither the character's lesbianism nor her heroism is an obvious fact of the films. I articulate a lesbian aesthetic that is subjective but not idiosyncratic.

In particular, I examine two sites of negotiation between texts and viewers, shifts in the heterosexual structure that are vulnerable to lesbian pleasuring: the lesbian look of exchange and female bonding. I place these in contrast to the male gaze and its narrative corollary, love at first sight. I then examine the contradictions that arise when the articulation of nonheterosexual subject matter is attempted within a structure conventionally motivated by heterosexuality. Finally, the question inevitably raised by women-only interactions—Where is the man?—inspires a radical disclosure of sex as historically and socially constructed and a redefinition of subjectivity.

Feminist Film Theory: Gender, Sexuality, and Viewership

Within the construction of narrative film sexuality, the phrase *lesbian heroine* is a contradiction in terms. The female position in classical narrative is a stationary site to which the male hero travels and on which he acts. The relationship between male and female is one of conquest. The processes of acting and receiving are thus genderized.¹

There can be no lesbian heroine here, for the very definition of *lesbianism* requires an act of defiance in relation to assumptions about sexual desire and activity. Conventional film discourse can accommodate the lesbian heroine only as a hero, as "male." Yet maleness is potentially irrelevant to lesbianism, if not to lesbians.

The lesbian heroine in film must be conceived as a viewer construction, short-circuiting the very networks that attempt to forbid her energy. She is constructed from contradictions within the text and between text and viewer, who insists on assertive, even transgressive identifications and seeing.

The Hollywood romance formula of love at first sight relies on a slippage between sexuality and love. Sexual desire pretends to be reason enough for love, and love pretends to be sexual pleasure. While sexual desire is visually available for viewers' vicarious experiences, sexual pleasure is blocked. By the time the plot reaches a symbolic climax, love has been substituted for sex, restricting sex to the realm of desire. So structured, love is unrequited sex. Since this love is hetero love, homosexual viewers are doubly distanced from sexual pleasure.

The sexual gaze as elaborated in much feminist film theory is a male prerogative, a unidirectional gaze from male onto female, pursuing a downward slant in relation to power. In contrast, the lesbian look that I describe requires exchange. It looks for a returning look, not just a receiving look. It sets up two-directional sexual activity.

Considerable work by feminist film theorists has attempted to articulate operations of looking in narrative film texts and film spectatorship. In "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey described how the patriarchal unconscious has structured classical cinema with visual and narrative pleasure specifically for the heterosexual male viewer, gratifying his narcissistic ego via a surrogate male character who condones and relays the viewer's look at the woman character, and providing him voyeuristic pleasure via a more direct, nonnarrative presentation of the woman as image (rather than character). Woman's erotic image elicits castration anxiety in the male viewer, which is eased by visual and narrative operations of fetishism and sadism. As Mulvey states, "None of these interacting layers is intrinsic to film, but it is only in the film form

that they can reach a perfect and beautiful contradiction, thanks to the possibility in the cinema of shifting the emphasis of the look."²

Although Mulvey's article remains invaluable in addressing patriarchal dominance as the ideological status quo formally enforced by/in the mainstream cinema/text, it does not account for other sexual forces and experiences within society. Mulvey's arguments have been constructively elaborated, revised, and rebutted by numerous other feminist film theorists. However, much of this work has brought about an unproductive slippage between text and actuality that presses this exclusive patriarchal structure onto the world. This excludes the reactions of "deviant" participants in the film event from theory's discursive event. Even though the spectator's psychology is formed within a culture that collapses sexual/anatomical difference onto gender, the same culture also contains opposing factors and configurations that generate a proliferation of discourses that instigates actual psychological diversity. It is this diversity rather than cinema's dominant ideology that we must examine in order to deconstruct the alignment of male with activity and female with passivity.

In a later article, "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' Inspired by *Duel in the Sun*," Mulvey suggests that female viewers experience Freud's "true heroic feeling" through masculine identification with active male characters, a process that allows this spectator "to rediscover that lost aspect of her sexual identity, the never fully repressed bedrock of feminine neurosis." With her "own memories" of masculinity, a certain "regression" takes place in this deft "trans-sex identification," and, like returning to her past daydreams of action, she experiences viewer pleasure. Nevertheless, "the female spectator's phantasy of masculinisation is always to some extent at cross purposes with itself, restless in its transvestite clothes."³

Such a confusion of clothing with sex, and of both with desire for action, accepts the limitations of sex-role stereotyping in the text. True, such desire on the part of female viewers usually requires identification with male characters, but this is a limitation of mainstream cinema, not a "regression" on the part of women.

By not addressing mechanisms of gay spectatorship, the above scheme denies such pleasure or suggests that it is achieved from the heterosexual text via transvestite ploys. Mainstream cinema's nearly total compulsory heterosexuality does require homosexual viewers to appropriate heterosexual representations for homosexual pleasure. However, the "transvestite" viewer-text interaction described by Mulvey and others should not be confused with gay or bisexual viewership.

Mary Ann Doane understands this cross-gender identification by female viewers as one means of achieving distance from the text. In "Film and the

Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator," she argues that, because woman's preoedipal bond with the mother continues to be strong throughout her life (unlike man's), the female viewer—unless she utilizes specific devices—is unable to achieve that distance from the film's textual *body* that allows man the process of voyeurism. "For the female spectator there is a certain over-presence of the image—she *is* the image. Given the closeness of this relationship, the female spectator's desire can be described only in terms of a kind of narcissism—the female look demands a becoming." As a result, woman overidentifies with cinema's female victims, experiencing a pleasurable reconnection that is necessarily masochistic. Because her body lacks the potential for castration, "woman is constructed differently in relation to the process of looking."⁴

Doane goes on to describe an alternate strategy for women to overcome proximity and mimic a distance from the(ir) image—the masquerade of femininity: "Above and beyond a simple adoption of the masculine position in relation to the cinematic sign, the female spectator is given two options: the masochism of over-identification or the narcissism entailed in becoming one's own object of desire, in assuming the image in the most radical way. The effectivity of masquerade lies precisely in its potential to manufacture a distance from the image, to generate a problematic within which the image is manipulable, producible, and readable to woman."⁵

The primary question that followed Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" was, How can women's film viewing pleasure be understood? Although subsequent feminist film theory drawing on psychoanalysis successfully opened up that field for feminist purposes and raised significant new questions, the answers that it has provided—elaborations of particular processes of masochism and transvestitism—remain only partially sufficient to the original question. Much of this work has circumvented a crucial option in female spectatorship by avoiding the investigation of women viewers' erotic attraction to and visual appreciation of women characters.⁶ Further work needs to examine how viewers determine films as much as how films determine viewers. And care should be taken that the theorized transvestite or bisexual viewer does not inadvertently suppress the homosexual viewer.

Eroticizing Looks between Women Characters

Visual exchanges between same-sex characters typically are nonsexual. The challenge becomes to eroticize these looks. This is the goal of homosexual viewers, who bring their desires to the heterosexual raw material and representational system of the text. Occasionally, they collaborate with texts to excavate

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Notes

- 1 See Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), esp. the chapter on desire in narrative.
- 2 Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 17.
- 3 Laura Mulvey, "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' Inspired by *Duel in the Sun*," *Framework* 15-17 (Summer 1981): 13.
- 4 Mary Ann Doane, "Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator," in *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 22, see also 24. Doane's "Masquerade Reconsidered: Further Thoughts on the Female Spectator," also in *Femmes Fatales*.
- 5 Doane, "Film and the Masquerade," 31-32.
- 6 Such an investigation was called for over a decade ago by Michelle Citron, Julia Lesage, Judith Mayne, B. Ruby Rich, and Anna Maria Taylor. See their discussion in "Women and Film: Discussion of Feminist Aesthetics," *New German Critique* 13 (Winter 1978): 88-91.
- 7 See Lucie Arbuthnot and Gail Seneca, "Pre-text and Text in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*," in *Film Reader* 5 (Evanston, Ill.: Film Division/School of Speech, Northwestern University, 1982), 13-23. Arbuthnot and Seneca describe the pleasure afforded the lesbian viewer by such framing together of women characters.
- 8 Although my own position differs on some points from hers, Monique Wittig is the foremost contemporary theorizer of a lesbian "third sex." For her arguments that oppression constructs sex, that the concept *lesbian* is beyond the categories of sex, and therefore that "lesbians are not women," see her "One Is Not Born a Woman," *Feminist Issues* 1, no. 2 (Winter 1981): 47-54, and "The Category of Sex," *Feminist Issues* 2, no. 2 (Fall 1982): 63-68. For a useful discussion of Wittig's antiessentialist materialism, see Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature, and Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 39-53.
- 9 Michel Foucault, introduction to *Herculine Barbin: Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century French Hermaphrodite*, trans. Richard McDougall (New York: Pantheon, 1980), vii-viii.



Figure 1. Frame enlargement from *Voyage en douce*.

subtexts and uncover ambivalence in the patriarchal "order." Since the heterosexual structure of the gaze is already established as sexual, it can be built on to accomplish an erotic homosexual look.

Independently structured glances between women, however, are outside conventional definition and therefore threaten. The ultimate threat of eye contact between women, inherent in all scenes of female bonding, is the elimination of the male. Any erotic exchange of glances between women requires counter-efforts to disempower and deerotize them.

I now focus on two films, both open to lesbian readings, that are interesting for their similarities and differences. *Voyage en douce* (directed by Michele Deville, 1980) is an erotic art film, bordering on "soft porn," about two women who take a trip to the country together. They exchange fantasies and flirtations, then return home to their male partners. *Entre nous* (directed by Diane Kurys, 1983) is also about the interactions between two women, but their relationship leans ostensibly toward the buddies genre. They too take a trip away from their husbands. The women demonstrate growing mutual affection, and, at the film's conclusion, they are living together. Although the two films appear opposite—one pseudolesbian soft porn serving a male audience, the other feminist and appealing to a female audience—this dichotomy is deconstructed once viewers are actively involved.



Figure 2. Frame enlargement from *Voyage en douce*.

Voyage en douce is particularly interesting in relation to looking because, instead of resolution, it attempts sustained sexual desire. According to the conventions of pornography, the erotic involvement of two women functions as foreplay for a heterosexual climax. This does not happen in *Voyage en douce*. Erotic looking and flirting between women is thematic in this film. The lesbian desire this stimulates is accentuated by a hierarchical looking structure that mimics the male gaze. Throughout the film, a blonde woman, Hélène, played by Dominique Sanda, is the more active looker and the text's primary visual narrator. It is primarily "through her eyes" that sexual fantasies are visualized on the screen. When taking nude photographs of her brunette companion, Lucie, played by Geraldine Chaplin, a camera prop "equips" Hélène/Sanda for this male role. (See figures 1 and 2.)

Hélène is also the primary pursuer in the narrative, while Lucie functions to stimulate, tease, and frustrate that desire. The film's episodic structure—another convention of pornography—alternates between the women's individual sexual stories and fantasies and their erotically charged interactions. Hélène pampers and grooms Lucie, appreciates her visually, and verbally reassures her about her beauty and desirableness. This serves to build both a generalized sexual desire and a more specific lesbian desire. In both cases, a series of narrative denials and delays establishes an "interruptus" motif. Early in the film, there is a point-of-



Figure 3. Frame enlargement from *Entre nous*.

view shot of a look from Lucie at Hélène's breast, which Hélène quickly covers. Later, when Hélène purposely exposes her breast to excite Lucie, Lucie is not responsive. When photographing Lucie, Hélène encourages her to remove her clothes. Lucie does so hesitantly and coquettishly, but, when Hélène attempts to take the final nude shot, she is out of film.

In several scenes, Hélène and Lucie exchange unmediated glances, as do the two women characters in *Entre nous*—Lena, played by Isabelle Huppert, and Madeline, played by Miou Miou. Such exchanges, which occur primarily within two-person shots, gain sexual energy from the women's physical proximity and subtle body contact. The fact that two women share the film frame encourages this lesbian reading; that is, the women are consistently framed as a "couple." This visual motif provides a pleasurable homosexual content that is frustrated by the plot.⁷ However, the absence of a shot-reverse-shot, reciprocal point-of-view pattern in these two-shots excludes the viewer from experiencing the looking. Thus, the viewer's identification with the women's looking is necessarily more sympathetic than empathic.

In *Entre nous*, the addition of a mirror to such a shot establishes a second internal frame. The reciprocal point-of-view exchange achieved between these two simultaneous frames—a two-shot of the women looking at each other through



Figure 4. Frame enlargement from *Entre nous*.

the mirror—allows the viewer to be sutured into the looking experience while also experiencing the pleasure of seeing the two women together. It is notable that, during this shot, the women are nude and admiring each other's breasts. (See figure 3.)

A similar construction occurs temporally instead of spatially when, in a sequence in the garden, the camera temporarily identifies with the look and movement of Lena/Huppert approaching Madeline/Miou Miou through a subjective tracking shot and then holds steady while Lena enters the frame. The viewer is carried into the women's space via an identification with Lena's look, then observes their embrace from an invited vantage point. This is followed by a shot of Madeline's father and son watching disapprovingly—a look from outside. Standing together, hand in hand, these two males foreground the generation missing between them—Madeline's husband. Hence, their look both acknowledges and checks the dimensions of the women's visual exchange.

Voyage en douce also contains abundant mirror shots, some of which similarly conduct visual exchanges between the characters, while others seem to foreground hierarchical erotic looking. In particular, several mirror shots occur in which the two women examine Lucie's image while H  l  ne compliments or grooms her.

Female Bonding in Film

What becomes evident from these examples is that, when one searches for lesbian exchange in narrative film construction, one finds a constant flux between competing forces to suggest and deny it. As with sexuality in general, efforts to subdue lesbian connotations can stimulate innovations. Female bonding and the exchange of glances between women threaten heterosexual and patriarchal structures. When female bonding occurs in feature narrative film, its readiness for lesbian appropriation is often acknowledged by internal efforts to forbid such conclusions.

Conceptually, female bonding is a precondition for lesbianism. If women are situated only in relationship to men or in antagonistic relationship to each other, the very idea of lesbianism is precluded. This partially explains the appreciation that lesbian audiences have for films with female bonding. So often has female bonding stood in for lesbian content that lesbian audiences seem to find it an acceptable displacement at the conclusions of such "lesbian romances" as *Personal Best* (directed by Robert Towne, 1982) and *Lianna* (directed by John Sayles, 1982).

The widespread popularity of *Entre nous* among lesbian audiences can be attributed to basic narrative conditions, which are reiterated throughout the film. Most important is female bonding. The film begins with parallel editing between Lena's and Madeline's separate lives. This crosscutting constructs audience expectation and desire for the two women to meet. Once they have met, the two women spend the majority of screen time together. Lesbian viewers experience pleasure in their physical closeness. Although lesbianism is never made explicit in the film, an erotic subtext is readily available. The specific agenda held by lesbian viewers for female bonding warrants an inside joke at the film's conclusion when Lena and Madeline are finally living together. In the "background" a song plays: "I wonder who's kissing her now. I wonder who's showing her how."

The development of Lena and Madeline's relationship stands in sharp contrast to the development of Lena's marriage. During World War II, she and Michel are prisoners in a camp. He is being released and is allowed to take a wife out with him. He selects Lena by sight alone.

In many ways, female bonding is the antithesis of love at first sight. While love at first sight necessarily deemphasizes materiality and context, female bonding is built on an involvement in specific personal environments. Furthermore, the relationship acquires a physical quality from the presence of personal items that, when exchanged, suggest intimacy. Women frequently wear each other's clothes in both these films. Body lotion and love letters pass between Lena and Madeline as easily as do cigarettes.

Such bonding activity between women suggests an alternate use for the feminine masquerade. This mutual appreciation of one another's feminine appearance, which achieves intimacy via an attention to personal effects, demonstrates the masquerade's potential to draw women closer together and to function as nonverbal homoerotic expression that connects image to body. This "deviant" employment of the feminine masquerade is in contradistinction to Doane's elaboration of it as a distancing device for women. (See figure 4.)

The primary threat of female bonding is the elimination of the male. The unstated but always evident question implicit in such films—Where is the man?—acknowledges defensive androcentric reactions. Its underlying presence attempts to define female bonding and lesbianism in relation to men. Publicity that accompanies a distribution point of *Voyage en douce* from New Yorker Films describes the film as "what women talk about when men aren't around." In *Entre nous*, scenes approaching physical intimacy between the two women are juxtaposed with shots signaling the lone male. Depicting female bonding as the exclusion of men moves the defining principle outside the women's own interactions. The lesbian potential, an "unfortunate" by-product of the female bonding configuration, must be checked.

The Male Intermediary

One way to interfere with female bonding is to insert references to men and heterosexuality between women characters. In *Entre nous*, Madeline and Lena spend a considerable portion of their time together talking about their husbands and lovers. For example, they jointly compose a letter to Madeline's lover. Reassuring references to offscreen males, however, remain a feeble attempt to undermine the visual impact that the women together make.

To be more effective, the interference needs to be visual in order physically to separate the women's bodies and interrupt their glances. Male intermediaries are common in films with female bonding. In *Entre nous*, when Lena and Madeline are dancing together in a Paris night club (which opens with a *male* point-of-view shot at Madeline's ass), two male onlookers become intermediaries by diverting the women's glances and easing the tension created by their physical embrace. (See figure 5.)

Voyage en douce literally places a male between the two women. The soft porn approach of *Voyage en douce* relies on titillating the male viewer with lesbian insinuations. Ultimately, however, female characters must remain available to male viewers. In one scene, Hélène verbally instructs a young male, placed between the women, on how to kiss Lucie. The inexperienced boy reinforces the



Figure 5. Frame enlargement from *Entre nous*.

male viewer's sense of superior potency—the male viewer is represented but not replaced. In this scene, the boy connects the two women as much as he separates them. It is Hélène who is sensitive to Lucie's pacing and is manipulating her desire. The boy is an intermediary. Hélène's vicarious engagement, however, is confined to the realm of desire. The actual kiss excludes her. (See figure 6.)

Often, as in the following example from *Entre nous*, the connection that an intermediary provides is less obvious. Lena is on her way to meet Madeline in Paris when she has a sexual encounter with an anonymous male. A soldier who shares her train compartment kisses and caresses her. Later, while discussing this experience with Madeline, Lena "comes to realize" that this was her first orgasmic experience. The scene on the train reasserts Lena's heterosexuality. At the same time, this experience and knowledge of sexual pleasure is more connected to her friendship with Madeline, via their exchange of intimate information, than to her heterosexual marriage of many years. In fact, it is Madeline who recognizes Lena's described experience as an orgasm and identifies it to her. Because the film cuts away from the train scene shortly after the sexual activity begins, the film viewer does not witness Lena's orgasm. Had this train scene continued, her orgasm might have approximated, in film time, the moment when Madeline names it—and Lena gasps. In a peculiar manner, then, Madeline is



Figure 6. Frame enlargement from *Voyage en douce*.

filmically credited for the orgasm. Likewise, Lena's excited state on the train, her predisposition to sexual activity, might be read as motivated by her anticipation of being with Madeline.

A male's intrusion on female bonding, then, is just as likely to homoeroticize the situation as to induce corrective heterosexuality. In *Entre nous*, it is Lena's jealous husband who gives language to the sexual possibilities of their friendship. By calling the women's boutique a "whorehouse," he foregrounds the erotic symbolism that clothing provides. When he calls the women "dykes," he not only reveals the fears of a jealous husband but confirms the audience's perceptions.

While I would not go so far as to equate these two films, it would be naive to dismiss *Voyage en douce* simply as a "rip-off" of lesbianism for male voyeuristic pleasure while applauding *Entre nous* as "politically correct" lesbianism. In their different ways, *Entre nous* does just as much to stimulate lesbian desire as does *Voyage en douce*, and *Voyage en douce* frustrates it just as much as *Entre nous* does. The two films exhibit similar tensions and compromises. As far as any final commitment to lesbianism, *Entre nous* is no more frank than is *Voyage en douce*. Lesbian reading requires as much viewer initiation in one film as the other.

One could argue that any potential lesbianism in *Voyage en douce* is undermined by heterosexual framing in early and late scenes with Hélène's male part-

from our consciousness allows male and female terms to appear unambiguous and definite. In effect, the hermaphroditism existing within each of these terms is dismissed.

If we understand male and female sexes as constructs, we must ask ourselves what investment empowers them. Certainly, within classic narrative film, the language/expression/momentum of heterosexual desire relies precisely on this particular system of binary opposition.

Within contemporary psycholinguistic thought, the subject is always male. Because of her different psychological development and relationship to the mother, the female remains more strongly connected to the prelanguage imaginary. Any "I" she speaks is constructed for her by the male principle, just as female is defined not from itself but as male's other.

Lesbian sexuality generates an identity that is *not* defined by an opposition to maleness. Thus, the lesbian (of a lesbian) remains outside the male-female polarity. She demonstrates a radical possibility for attaining subjectivity through activity that asserts personal meaning and is understood via similarities as much as differences.

Lesbian "deviance" refutes the all-encompassing "natural" power of the male-female opposition as defining principle. Lesbianism demands a new operation of subjectivity in which active desires, pleasures, and other specific declarations of identity construct a field of multiple entry points. Within this new operation, a heterosexual woman's active sexuality would not be consumed but empowered. Rather than enforcing two "true" sexes, which allow one (male) subject, we must recognize the power of individual activities, in this case sexualities, to assert subjectivity.

I am not merely suggesting that sexual preference be added to anatomy as a determiner of the subject position, but rather that individual activity and assertion can construct subjectivity. Thus, for example, the experience and assertion of one's ethnic or racial identity would be acknowledged as an authentic subject component.

The proposal that lesbians might abandon the female "position" without adopting maleness uncovers a historical investment in and enforcement of a system of two sexes as well as two genders. This consistent maintenance of a historical construct explains the overloaded significance of the question, *Where is the man?* in response to relationships between women and lesbians. It raises the ultimate importance of investigating lesbian aesthetics.