

MULTIPLE
VOICES
IN
FEMINIST
FILM
CRITICISM

Diane Carson, Linda Dittmar, and Janice R. Welsch, editors



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Contents

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12. Russo, *Celaloid Closet*, 65.
13. Rebecca Louise Bell-Metereau, *Hollywood Androgyny* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 74.
14. Britton, *Katherine Hepburn*, 11.
15. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The New Woman as Androgyne: Social Disorder and Gender Crisis, 1870-1936," in *Disorderly Conduct* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).
16. Mary Ann Doane, "Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator," *Screen* 23 (September-October 1982): 78.
17. *Ibid.*
18. A black lesbian, recalling the movie stars that were important to her growing up in Chicago in the 1950s, looked back to films of the 1930s, especially *Morocco*: "I was just enthralled with Dietrich. . . . She has a sustaining quality about her that I know has turned on thousands of women in this world. I can't say I identified with her. I wasn't thinking in terms of black and white in those days. . . . [It was just] lust, childhood lust, I'm sure."
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21. Flavia Rando, "Romaine Brooks: The Creation of a Lesbian Image" (unpublished paper).
22. Smith-Rosenberg "New Woman," 282.
23. *Ibid.*
24. Andrea Weiss and Greta Schiller, *Before Stonewall: The Making of a Gay and Lesbian Community* (Tallahassee, Fla.: Naiad Press, 1988), 24.
25. E. Ann Kaplan, "Is the Gaze Male?" in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, ed. Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 314.
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The Hypothetical Lesbian Heroine in Narrative Feature Film

Chris Strayer

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 relationship to films with covert lesbian 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 non-heterosexual 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 dis-closure 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 gendered.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 filmic 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 of 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 proedipal 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."⁵⁴ 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."⁵⁵

Doane goes on to describe an alternate strategy for women to overcome proximity and mimic a distance from the(fir) 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."⁵⁶

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 it has provided—elaborations of particular processes of masochism and transvestitism—remain only partially sufficient to the original question. Much of this work has circumscribed a crucial option in female spectatorship by avoiding the investigation of women viewers' erotic attraction to and visual appreciation of women characters.⁵⁷ 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 the homosexual viewer who brings her/his desires to the heterosexual raw material and representational system of the text. Occasionally she/he collaborates with texts to excavate 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 de-eroticize them.

I now will focus on two films, both open to lesbian readings, that are interesting for their similarities and differences. *Voyage en Douce* (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* (Diane Krays, 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.

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, Helene, 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" Helene/Sanda for this male role.

Helene is also the primary pursuer in the narrative, while Lucie functions to stimulate, tease, and frustrate that desire. The film's episodic



Erotic looking, flirting, and photographing occur between Helene (Dominique Sanda) and Lucie (Geraldine Chaplin) in *Voyage en Douce*.

structure—another convention of pornography—alternates between the women's individual sexual stories and fantasies and their erotically charged interactions. Helene pampers and grooms Lucie, appreciates her visually, and verbally reassures her about her beauty and desirability. 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-view shot of a look from Lucie at Helene's breast, which Helene quickly covers. Later, when Helene purposely exposes her breast to excite Lucie, Lucie is not responsive. When photographing Lucie, Helene encourages her to remove her clothes. Lucie does so hesitantly and coquettishly, but, when Helene attempts to take the final nude shot, she is out of film.

In several scenes Helene and Lucie exchange unmediated glances, as do the two women characters in *Erzte Nous*—Lena, played by Isabelle Huppert, and Madeline, played by Mion Mion. 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.⁸ However, the absence of a shot-reverse-shot, reciprocal point-of-view pattern in these two-shots excludes the viewer from experiencing the looking.



In *Erzte Nous*, the reciprocal point-of-view shot sutures the viewer into the looking experience.

Thus, the viewer's identification with the women's looking is necessarily more sympathetic than empathic.

In *Erzte 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 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.

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 (Mion Mion) 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 inviolate 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 Helene compliments and/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 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* (1982, Robert Towne) and *La Femme* (1982, John Sayles).

The widespread popularity of *Entre Nous* among lesbian audiences is attributable 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 de-emphasizes materiality and context, female bonding is built upon an involvement in specific personal en-

vironments. 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 of 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 contrast to Doane's elaboration of it as a distancing device for women.

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 print 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 to physically 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 nightclub (which opens with a *male* point-of-view shot of Madeline's ass), two male on-lookers become intermediaries by diverting the women's glances and easing the tension created by their physical embrace.

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, Helene verbally instructs a young male, placed between the women, on how to kiss Lucie. The inexperienced boy reinforces the 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 Helene who is sensitive to Lucie's pacing and is manipulating her desire. The boy is an intermediary. Helene's vicarious engagement, however, is confined to the realm of desire. The actual kiss excludes her.

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 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 upon 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 lesbian-



In *Voyage en Douce*, the actual kiss excludes Helene and confines her to the realm of desire.

In *Voyage en Douce* 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 undetermined by heterosexual framing in early and late scenes with Helene's male partner. Another interpretation of this framing device, however, sends conclusions in a different direction. Early in the film, Lucie crouches outside Helene's door. Helene sees Lucie through the railing under the banister as she climbs the stairs to her apartment. When Lucie declares that she is leaving her male partner, Helene takes her into her apartment, where they plan a vacation together. At the film's conclusion, the two women return to Helene's apartment. Then Lucie decides to go back to her husband, but Helene decides to leave hers again. Inadvertently, Helene locks herself out of the apartment without her suitcase. Instead of ringing the doorbell, she crouches in Lucie's earlier position as the camera moves down the stairs to observe her through the railing. One can read this shot as portraying the prison of heterosexuality or domesticity—as a cul-de-sac.

Or one can read this pattern as indicating a cyclic structure. Helene's display of lesbian desire throughout *Voyage en Douce* qualifies her as a hypothetical lesbian heroine as much as the women in *Entre Nous*.

Ultimately, these characters' lesbianism remains hypothetical and illusory because of their isolation. The acknowledgment of lesbian desire does not, in either film, acknowledge the *condition* of lesbianism within culture.

To summarize, *Voyage en Douce* and *Entre Nous* are narrative films that exist by right of a language informed by heterosexuality. However, because they are about women's relationships, they also challenge the conventions of this language. The contradictions that result from their use of a heterosexual system for nonheterosexual narratives give rise to innovations that interact with audience expectations to create multiple and ambivalent interpretations. The focus on two women together threatens to establish both asexuality and homosexuality, both of which are outside the heterosexual desire that drives mainstream film and narrative. Therefore, simultaneous actions take place in the text to eroticize the women's interactions and to abort the resulting homoerotics. These very contradictions and opposing intentions cause the gaps and ambiguous figurations that allow lesbian readings.

I have demonstrated three such figurations: the erotic exchange of glances, which contrasts with the unidirectional, hierarchical male gaze articulated by Mulvey; eroticized female bonding, which utilizes the feminine masquerade to achieve closeness, contrasting the use and purpose of the masquerade described by Doane; and the oppositely sexed intermediary who both separates and connects the same-sexed couple, accomplishing both heterosexuality and homosexuality within the contradictory text. These structures neither replace nor compromise the heterosexual film text and event recognized and analyzed in previous feminist film theory, but rather offer additions and alternatives to account for homosexual viewership and desire.

Revising Binary Sexual Ideology

As a woman, the lesbian is defined and situated in culture as opposite to man, as a lack. The lesbian's physical/sexual interactions, however, insist on a different presence that operates outside male determination. It is her womanness, not her lesbianism, that confines her within the patriarchal formation of femininity. Therefore, were lesbians able to situate themselves as another sex, that is, as nonwomen (and women), they could theoretically create a defining model to which men are irrelevant.⁹

In his introduction to *Herculine Barbin: Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century French Hermaphrodite*, Michel Foucault contrasts the allowance of free choice and the coexistence of sexes within one body in the Middle Ages, to the medical/legal relegation of the hermaphrodite to a single "true" sex in the eighteenth century:

Do we *truly* need a *true* sex? With a persistence that borders on stubbornness, modern Western societies have answered in the affirmative. They have obstinately brought into play this question of a "true sex" in an order of things where one might have imagined that all that counted was the reality of the body and the intensity of its pleasures.

For a long time, however, such a demand was not made, as is proven by the history of the status which medicine and law have granted to hermaphrodites. Indeed it was a very long time before the postulate that a hermaphrodite must have a sex—a single, true sex—was formulated. . . .

Biological theories of sexuality, juridical conceptions of the individual, forms of administrative control in modern nations, led little by little to rejecting the idea of a mixture of the two sexes in a single body and consequently to limiting the free choice of indeterminate individuals. Henceforth, everybody was to have one and only one sex. Everybody was to have his or her primary, profound, determined and determining sexual identity; as for the elements of the other sex that might appear, they could only be accidental, superficial, or even quite simply illusory.¹⁰

Foucault's insights challenge the very "obvious" criteria used not only to delineate the sexes but to limit their number to two. By denying evidence of sexual continuums and conceptually precluding a more complex sexual variance in favor of a system of binary opposition, arbitrary and enforced standards for assignment of both sex and sexual behavior are made to seem adequate, primary, and natural.

No attempt to delineate clearly between two "true" sexes has been successful. The exceptions and ambiguities in anatomical and physiological assignments become even more pervasive when considering secondary sex characteristics, hormones, chromosome patterns, and behaviors. Erasing the hermaphrodite 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 sub-

jectivity 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 determinant 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 an historical investment in and enforcement of a system of two sexes as well as two genders. This consistent maintenance of an historical construct explains the overloaded significance of the question "Where is the man?" in response to relationships between women and/or lesbians. It raises the ultimate importance of investigating lesbian aesthetics.

Notes

1. See Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), especially the "Desire in Narrative" chapter.
2. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16 (Autumn 1975): 17.
3. Laura Mulvey, "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' Inspired by *Duel in the Sun* (King Vidor, 1946)," *Fromework* 15-17 (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 Doane's "Masquerade Reconsidered: Further Thoughts on the Female Spectator," also in *Femmes Fatales*.
5. *Ibid.*, 80.
6. *Ibid.*, 87.
7. Such an investigation was called for more than a decade ago by Michelle Citron, Julia Lesage, Judith Mayne, B. Ruby Rich, and Anna Marie Taylor. See their discussion in "Women and Film: A Discussion of Feminist Aesthetics," *New German Critique* 13 (Winter 1978): 83-107.
8. See Lucie Arbutnot and Gail Seneca, "Pre-text and Text in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*," *Film Reader* 5 (Evanston, Ill.: Film Division/School of Speech,

Northwestern University, 1982): 13-23. Arbutnot and Seneca describe the pleasure afforded the lesbian viewer by such framing-together of women characters.

9. Although my own position differs from hers on some points, Monique Wittig is the foremost contemporary theorizer of a lesbian "third sex." See her "One Is Not Born a Woman," *Feminist Issues* 1 (Winter 1981), and "The Category of Sex," *Feminist Issues* 2 (Fall 1982), for her arguments that oppression constructs sex, that the concept of lesbian is beyond the categories of sex, and therefore that "lesbians are not women." For a useful discussion of Wittig's antiessentialist materialism, see Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature, and Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 39-53.

10. Michel Foucault, introduction to *Herzliane Barbin: Being the Recently Discovers Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century French Hermaphrodite*, trans. Richard McDougall (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), vii-viii.