MULTIPLE VOICES IN FEMINIST FILM CRITICISM

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

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"A Queer Feeling When I Look at You": Hollywood Stars and Lesbian Spectatorship in the 1930s

Andrea Weiss

Boldly claiming to "tell the facts and name the names," in July 1955 *Confidential Magazine* embarked on telling "the untold story of Marlene Dietrich." The exposé reads, "Dietrich going for dolls," and goes on to list among her many female lovers the "blonde Amazon" Claire Waldoff, writer Mercedes de Acosta (rumored to be Greta Garbo's lover as well), a notorious Parisian lesbian named Frede, and multimillionaire Jo Carstairs, whom *Confidential Magazine* dubs a "mannish maiden" and a "baritone babe."[1]

The scandal sheet may have shocked the general public by its disclosures, but for many lesbians it only confirmed what they had long suspected. Rumor and gossip constitute the unrecorded history of the gay subculture. In the introduction to *Jump Cut*'s 1981 Lesbian and Film issue, the editors begin to redeem gossip's lowly status: "If oral history is the history of those denied control of the printed record, then gossip is the history of those who cannot even speak in their own first-person voice."[2] Patricia Meyer Spacks in her book *Gossip* pushes this definition further, seeing it not only as symptomatic of oppression but actually as a tool that empowers oppressed groups: "[Gossip] embodies an alternative discourse to that of public life, and a discourse potentially challenging to public assumptions; it provides language for an alternative culture."[3] Spacks argues that through gossip those who are otherwise powerless can assign meanings and assume the power of representation. Her concept of gossip

as the reinterpreting of materials from the dominant culture into shared private values could also be a description of the process by which the gay subculture in the United States in the early twentieth century began to take form.

Something that, through gossip, is commonplace knowledge within the gay subculture is often completely unknown on the outside, and if not unknown, at least unspeakable. It is this insistence by the dominant culture on making homosexuality invisible and unspeakable that both requires and enables us to locate gay history in rumor, innuendo, fleeting gestures, and coded language—signs I will consider as historical sources in order to examine the importance of the cinema, and certain star images in particular, in the formation of lesbian identity in the 1930s.

By the time her "unspeakable" sexuality was spoken in *Confidential Magazine*, Marlene Dietrich was no longer a major star. She had not yet stopped making movies, but she was not a major box office draw in the United States, and would soon return to the European cabaret stage on which she began. The appeal of her sophistication, her foreign accent, and exotic, elusive manner had been replaced by a new, very different kind of star image, that of the 1950s all-American hometown girl, exemplified by Doris Day and Judy Holliday. Had the article been published in the 1930s when Dietrich was at her peak, it may well have cut her career short. The Hollywood studios went to great lengths to keep the star's image open to erotic contemplation by both men and women, not only requiring lesbian and gay male stars to remain in the closet for the sake of their careers, but also desperately creating the impression of heterosexual romance—as MGM did for Greta Garbo in the 1930s.[4]

But the public could be teased with the possibility of lesbianism, which provoked both curiosity and titillation. Hollywood marketed the suggestion of lesbianism, not because it intentionally sought to address lesbian audiences, but because it sought to address male voyeuristic interest in lesbianism. This use of innuendo, however, worked for a range of women spectators as well, enabling them to explore their own erotic gaze without giving it a name, and in the safety of their private fantasy in a darkened theater. Dietrich's rumored lesbianism had been exploited in this way by Paramount's publicity slogan for the release of *Morocco* (Josef von Sternberg, 1930): "Dietrich—the woman all women want to see."[5] This unnaming served to promote intrigue while preventing scandal. Lesbians may well have suspected, for example, that Mercedes de Acosta and Salka Viertel were great loves in Greta Garbo's life, but the "general public" only remembered that she once agreed to marry John Gilbert. Interestingly, Garbo used to answer Gilbert's many proposals of marriage with "you don't want to marry one of the fellows."

What the public knew, or what the gay subculture knew, about these

stars' "real lives" cannot be separated from their star images. For this reason I am not concerned with whether the actresses considered here were actually lesbian or bisexual, but rather with how their star personas were perceived by lesbian audiences. This star persona was often ambiguous and paradoxical. Not only did the Hollywood star system create inconsistent images of femininity, but these images were further contradicted by the intervention of the actress herself into the process of star image production. Certain stars such as Katharine Hepburn, Marlene Dietrich, and Greta Garbo often asserted gestures and movements in their films that were inconsistent with the narrative and even posed an ideological threat within it.

In the famous scene from *Morocco*, Amy Jolly (Marlene Dietrich), dressed in top hat and tails, suddenly turns and kisses a woman on the lips. She then takes her flower and gives it to a man in the cabaret audience (Gary Cooper). This flirtation with a woman, only to give the flower to the man, is a flirtation with the lesbian spectator as well, and a microcosm of the film's entire narrative trajectory. The film historian Vito Russo has written of this scene, "Dietrich's intentions are clearly heterosexual; the brief hint of lesbianism she exhibits serves only to make her more exotic, to whet Gary Cooper's appetite for her and to further challenge his maleness."[6] But if we bring to the scene the privileged rumor of Dietrich's sexuality, shared by many lesbians when the film was first released but denied to the general public (until *Confidential* so generously supplied it in the 1950s), we may read the image differently: as Dietrich momentarily stepping out of her role as femme fatale and "acting out that rumored sexuality on the screen."[7]

Not only rumor but also the scene's cinematic structure allowed for lesbian spectators to reject the preferred reading (as described by Vito Russo above) in favor of a more satisfying homoerotic interpretation. Amy Jolly's performance—her singing a French song in Dietrich's inimitable voice and her slow, suave movements across the stage—is rendered in point-of-view shots intercut with the two contending male characters. Yet when her song is finished and she steps over the railing separating performer and audience, the image becomes a tableau. When Amy Jolly looks at the woman at the table, she quickly lowers her eyes to take in the entire body—to "look her over"; she then turns away and hesitates before looking at the woman again. The sexual impulses are strong in this gesture, impulses that are not diffused or choked by point-of-view or audience cutaway shots. Dietrich's gaze remains intact.

Furthermore, in the scene's concluding gesture of giving the flower to Tom Brown (Gary Cooper), she inverts the proper heterosexual order of seducer and seduced. Her costume, the tuxedo, is invested with power derived both from maleness and social class, a power that surpasses his,

Dietrich posed in a top hat and tails; her star persona was often ambiguous and paradoxical.

as represented by his uniform of a poor French legionnaire. While he is "fixed" in his class, she is able to transcend momentarily both class and gender. This fluidity and transcendence of limitations can be seductive for all viewers, male and female; for lesbian viewers it was an invitation to read their own desires for transcendence into the image. Richard Dyer has pointed out that "audiences cannot make media images mean anything they want to, but they can select from the complexity of the image the meanings and feelings, the variations, inflections and contradictions, that work for them."[8]

In the 1930s this process of selection was especially important for lesbian spectators because they rarely saw their desire given expression on the screen. By providing larger than life cultural models, Hollywood stars exercised a captivating power over the public; for lesbian spectators struggling to define their sexual identities and with virtually no other models within the ambient culture, this power must have been intensely persuasive and attractive. Aspects of certain star images were appropriated by the growing number of women who began to participate in the emerging urban gay subculture and played an influential role in defining the distinctive qualities of that subculture.

The early 1930s, of course, were the worst years of the Great Depression, and any discussion of the emergence of the gay subculture in this period must specify that it was largely metropolitan, middle class, and white. Antony James's claim in "Remembering the Thirties" that "it was a wonderful time to be in New York, to be young and to be gay" clearly didn't hold true for everyone.[9] But even individuals scraping by on shoestring budgets often saved for the Saturday matinee. And for those who could not afford the box office, the marquees, posters, and magazine covers made Hollywood stars into household images. Stars served as cultural models for a large spectrum of homosexuals across America, not just for those able to participate in the developing urban gay communities.

This fledgling gay subculture of the 1930s consisted of people who as yet lacked enough self-consciousness to see themselves as belonging to a minority group. Unlike racial and ethnic minorities, they grew up in households where their parents not only didn't share their lifestyle but actively fought it with the help of the law, psychology, religion, and sometimes violence. For a people who were striving toward self-knowledge, Hollywood stars became important models in the formation of gay identity.[10] The subtexts of films also provided the opportunity to see in certain gestures and movements an affirmation of lesbian experience—something that, however fleeting, was elsewhere rarely to be found, and certainly not in such a popular medium. This affirmation served to give greater validity to women's personal experience as a resource to be trusted and drawn upon in the process of creating a lesbian identity. Richard Dyer summarizes this

process by claiming that "gays have had a special relationship to the cinema," because of isolation and an intensified need to use the movies as escapism, because the need to "pass for straight" elevated illusion to an art form, or because the silver screen was often the only place our dreams would ever be fulfilled.[11]

As Vito Russo points out in *The Celluloid Closet*, the film *Queen Christina* (Rouben Mamoulian, 1933) has met in the past some of these needs even though the lesbianism of the real-life queen is not overtly depicted. He writes, "In *Queen Christina*, Garbo tells Gilbert that 'it is possible . . . to feel nostalgia for a place one has never seen.' Similarly, the film *Queen Christina* created in gay people a nostalgia for something they had never seen onscreen."[12] Greto Garbo herself complained that the Hollywood version of Christina was too glamorous and that Swedes who saw the film would expect a more realistic depiction. But despite Swedish audiences' expectations or Garbo's protests, her director insisted that Christina be glamorous and fall in love with a man.[13] Through her performance, however, Garbo was able to compensate for what was omitted from the script, giving her portrayal sufficient sexual ambiguity so that her movements, voice, and manner became codes for lesbian spectators.

The scene in which Queen Christina kisses Countess Ebba on the lips obviously expresses sexuality, but there are other visual clues here that also allow for a lesbian reading. For example, the process of getting dressed into male attire seems to be a daily ritual for Queen Christina and her manservant, their movements are so coordinated. Because of this, the scene doesn't appear as a transvestite reversal, in which a woman transforms herself into a man, but rather that of remaining a woman while rejecting the dominant codes of femininity, a process "naturalized" by the ease with which it is done. Within this scene, Christina's little story about Molière, who says that marriage is shocking, reverses the sentiment thus far spoken in the film that the queen's not marrying is shocking. For viewers privy to the gossip about Garbo's relationship with the film's screenwriter, Salka Viertel, the inclusion of Molière's comment about enduring the idea of sleeping with a man in the room can easily be seen as a lesbian joke. Finally, the interaction between Queen Christina and Countess Ebba relies on sexual innuendo within their dialogue and gestures, revealing the desire of the two women for each other and their frustration in having duty and responsibility interfere with that desire.

In another key scene, the chancellor tries to impress upon Christina the importance of marriage as a duty. After she responds by saying, "I do not wish to marry, and they can't force me," there is a long silent take of her face, and she resumes with, "The snow is like a wild sea. One can go out and be lost in it, and forget the world, and oneself." This famous close-up on Garbo's face encourages the viewer to identify with the character's

longing, as Andrew Britton pointed out, "to make the spectator's experience of Garbo's face the analog of Christina's experience of the landscape."[14] In addition to this erotic contemplation of Garbo's face, her romantic choice of desire over duty could have special resonance for lesbians who were struggling to make a similar choice in their own lives. When the chancellor warns her that "you cannot die an old maid," her response is ironic but with serious overtones: "I have no intention to, Chancellor; I shall die a bachelor." In this final statement she is no longer pleading to be understood, but has closed the debate by appropriating male language in the way she has appropriated male clothing to claim her power.

Such an act had far different meaning in the 1930s than it would have today: appropriating male language or values was not male-identified antifeminist, but rather the opposite. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, describing the New Woman of the 1930s, writes: "They wished to free themselves completely from the considerations of gender, to be autonomous and powerful individuals, to enter the world as if they were men. Hence they spoke with male metaphors and images."[15] When viewed in this historical context, one finds that although its director attempted to purge the story of Queen Christina from the taint of lesbianism, the subtext left itself wide open to possible lesbian readings.

Film theorist Mary Ann Doane defines the position assigned to the female spectator by the cinema as a "certain over-presence of the image–she *is* the image."[16] This female spectator position lacks sufficient distance from either voyeurism or fetishism, the two forms of looking on which visual pleasure is based, according to contemporary film theory. The notion of a feminine "overpresence" draws on the Freudian argument that women do not go through the castration scenario that demands the construction of a distance between men and the female image. To simplify a complex argument, Doane finds that the theoretical female spectator's pleasure in the cinema can take the form of masochism in overidentification with the image, or of narcissism in becoming one's own object of desire, or it may be possible, by reinserting the necessary distance, for the woman's gaze to master the image. This distance can be achieved through two kinds of transformation, which Doane identifies as transvestism and masquerade. Female transvestism involves adopting the masculine spectatorial position; female masquerade involves an excess of femininity, the use of femininity as a mask, which simulates the distance necessary for the pleasure of looking.[17]

Whether or not one accepts the psychoanalytic model, alone it cannot account for the different cultural positioning of lesbians at once outside of and negotiating within the dominant patriarchal modes of identification. Since the psychoanalytic approach can see lesbian desire only as a function of assuming a masculine heterosexual position, I believe that other, nonpsychoanalytic models of identification must be called upon that could account for the distance that makes possible the pleasure the female image offers the lesbian spectator.

The Motion Picture Code of 1934 prohibited references to homosexuality in the cinema, resulting in a dearth of images that can be considered lesbian. Since lesbian images have been chronically absent from the screen, and were even prior to the reign of the code, it is questionable whether lesbians would enter into the spectatorial position of "overpresence," of overidentification with either a virtually nonexistent lesbian image or a pervasive heterosexual female one. When a star or her character *can* be considered lesbian, she is usually exoticized, made "extraordinary" either by the star quality of the actress or by the power given to the character (or in the case of *Queen Christina*, both). In this way the star system often served to distance lesbian spectators from the "lesbian" star or character. Identification involves both conscious and unconscious processes and cannot be reduced to a psychoanalytic model that sees sexual desire only in terms of the binary opposition of heterosexual masculinity and femininity; instead it involves varying degrees of subjectivity and distance depending upon race, class, and sexual differences. For white working-class lesbians in the 1930s, for example, across huge gulfs of experience, glamorous upper-class white heterosexual star images often held tremendous appeal. For women of color, spectatorship was further problematized by the central role assigned to whiteness in standards of femininity and glamour, but it is possible that racial difference worked to create erotic fascination while also hindering identification with the star image.[18] Although not much evidence exists to clarify fully these questions, it is clear that for a lesbian who perceived herself as "butch," identification did not require what film theorist Laura Mulvey has called a "masculinization of spectatorship" in order to connect with the male star, he who controls the action and has a power that for two hours and thirty-five cents she could appropriate.[19] For a "femme" the problem of spectatorship was also complex and remains largely a matter of speculation.

An identification process thus complicated by different cultural and psychosexual positioning places lesbians outside of conventional gender definitions, as a gender in-between, which partially explains the attraction to certain androgynous qualities in the cinema. Lesbians who were fascinated with *Morocco* and *Queen Christina* when these films were first released spoke endlessly of the allure of their "ambiguity," a quality that carries great appeal among people who are forced to live a secret life.[20]

The sexually ambiguous, androgynous qualities that Marlene Dietrich and Greta Garbo embody found expression in the emerging gay subculture of the 1930s. Garbo and Dietrich were part of the aristocratic, interna-

tional lesbian set that was this subculture's most visible and influential component; as such they played a role in defining the meaning of androgyny for the small, underground communities of lesbians across the country who saw their films and heard about them through rumor. Writing about the use of androgyny in images by lesbian artists and writers of the period, Flavia Rando has observed, "In an atmosphere heavy with repressive theories, androgyny offered women struggling to create a lesbian identity a possible alternative framework for self-definition."[21] Rando has found that for lesbians Romaine Brooks and Natalie Barney, androgyny represented a spiritual transcendence of human limitations.

But while sexual androgyny was embraced as a liberating image by some (especially more privileged) lesbians, it came to have a different, less positive meaning within the dominant culture. Androgyny began to be associated in the early twentieth century with the "mannish lesbian," a concept developed by sexologists, particularly the Austrian Richard von Krafft-Ebing, as an expression of sexual and social deviance, of degeneration and pathology. The historian Carroll Smith-Rosenberg has described this "mannish lesbian" image as that of "a sexually atavistic and ungovernable woman, associated with the 1920s bar culture and with European decadence."[22] Certainly Dietrich and Garbo on some level evoked this, Dietrich in her films and Garbo in the mystique that surrounded her personal life.

Dietrich's image is virtually inseparable from the bar culture setting or from the decadent cabaret stage; even the film *Blonde Venus*, a radical departure for her in that she plays a poor, devoted, and selfless mother rather than an independent woman, has her performing some of her most outrageous cabaret acts to support her poor son. Although as a cabaret singer in *Blonde Venus* Dietrich gives many performances, she appears in male attire—a white tuxedo—for the act only once: immediately after she has been rejected by her husband and has had her son taken away from her. Because she has been portrayed as an unfit mother, and is now without husband or child, her status as an unnatural woman is confirmed by her cross-dressing.

Garbo in *Queen Christina* and Dietrich in *Morocco* and *Blonde Venus* each evoke aspects of Smith-Rosenberg's description of the "mannish lesbian" of the 1920s and 1930s as "sexually powerful, yet ultimately defeated and impotent."[23] Yet their androgynous qualities held a sexual appeal that the "mannish lesbian" did not. Although they function within the narrative as a sexual threat that must be contained, their appropriation of male clothing (while retaining female identity), their aloof and inscrutable manners, and their aggressive independence provided an alternative model upon which lesbian spectators could draw. This model was an appealing

departure both from heterosexual images of femininity and from the images of deviance that pervaded the medical texts.

Other Hollywood films of the 1930s also utilized this double-edged image that was at once subversive and confirming of the social order: the 1933 film *Blood Money* features Sandra Shaw in tuxedo with monocle, a contemporary lesbian fashion; Katharine Hepburn dons male attire and assumes the independence and privilege of men in both *Christopher Strong* (1933) and *Sylvia Scarlett* (1936); and the original German film, *Viktor and Viktoria* (1933) was closely followed by its British version, *First a Girl* (1935), both of which featured a woman who "passed" as a homosexual man while projecting an image with lesbian overtones. Such recurring appearances in the early 1930s of this cross-dressing image are not mere coincidences, but embody crucial historical debates that had begun to move from the pages of scientific journals and women's private diaries into public discourse. The 1920s had seen the publication of Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, the censorship of which "caused great upheavals in the American judicial system, spilling out into the newspapers and becoming a topic of conversation for people across America."[24] The lesbian-themed play *The Captive* created a sensation on Broadway. The debates over changing definitions of gender and sexuality in the early twentieth century were now fought out over the terrain of popular culture.

The cinema as the most widespread and powerful form of popular entertainment became an especially important battleground. The films addressed here are those that are stretched and pulled by struggles between images of powerlessness and power, between the dominant cinema's metaphor of sexual deviance and the inverting of this metaphor by female stars—who brought to it a strong sexual appeal that the "mannish lesbian" lacked, and by lesbian spectators—who appropriated cinematic moments and read into them their own fantasies. And particular images generate meanings that are in conflict with their function within the narrative; poignant lesbian moments are constricted by the demands of heterosexual narrative closure. Thus, while the endings of both *Morocco* and *Queen Christina* can be viewed as affirming the heterosexual contract, it is also possible that lesbians found pleasure in these resolutions, partly because the endings are relatively open, permitting a range of interpretations, and partly because the heterosexual relationships they promote are still considered unacceptable (for reasons of class and status); they are not the socially sanctioned relationships that the characters have been encouraged to choose.

The endings of both *Morocco* and *Queen Christina* are complex and ambiguous. The romantic image of Amy Jolly following her man into the desert does not necessarily affirm the heterosexual social order. Queen Christina's choice to relinquish the throne in order to marry the Spanish

Garbo's inscrutable face contradicts the aims of narrative closure.

Ambassador can be viewed more as an action to escape the narrow confines of her life of duty than as a heterosexual triumph. Moreover, since the Ambassador dies before they are united, Christina is left alone to search for something she has not yet known. Amy Jolly and Queen Christina actually become more liminal and marginal in the films' conclusions, rejecting their past, their nationality, and their social position. Although each character can be viewed as having made the ultimate sacrifice in favor of a man, in doing so they've moved outside of the culture in which the heterosexual contract is constructed and maintained. In *Morocco*, Amy Jolly moves through the city's gate into the expanse of the desert, leaving her shoes behind in the sand, strong visual symbols for this departure from her culture. Queen Christina leaves on a ship, standing alone as its figurehead, her inscrutable Garbo face contradicting the aims of narrative closure. While heterosexual viewers might have found an affirmation of heterosexuality in the films' resolutions, lesbians could perceive the scenes as moving away from and rejecting the heterosexual social order.

Film theorist E. Ann Kaplan has argued that "to appropriate Hollywood images to ourselves, taking them out of the context of the total structure in which they appear, will not get us very far."[25] We need to understand how the discourse of the dominant cinema works to contain the most threatening aspects of women's sexuality by using lesbianism as its boundary. The moments in *Queen Christina* and *Morocco* that have poignancy for lesbians are only fleeting, transitory moments; they simply suggest what might be and then are snatched away by their incorporation into and co-optation by the discourse of the dominant cinema. Still, historical lesbian spectators have been able to appropriate these cinematic moments that seem to offer resistance to the dominant patriarchal ideology and to use these points of resistance and the shared language of gossip and rumor to, in some measure, define and empower themselves. As such, the cinema's contribution toward the formation of lesbian identity in the early twentieth century should not be underestimated.

In *The Celluloid Closet*, Vito Russo quotes the *Herald Tribune* review of *Queen Christina* when it first appeared: "What do facts and theories matter? Christina, to all those who see Garbo's film, will always be the lovely girl who fell in love with the Spanish Ambassador in the snow, and no amount of professional research will ever change her."[26] For lesbian spectators who saw Garbo's film in the early 1930s, however, Queen Christina will always be the lovely girl who dressed in male attire and refused to marry, and no amount of heterosexual cover will ever change her.

Notes

An earlier version of this essay appears in my book, *Vampires and Violets*, and is reprinted here with the permission of the publisher, Jonathan Cape Ltd. The original essay includes an analysis of Katharine Hepburn's title role in *Sylvia Scarlett* (1936).

1. Kenneth G. McLain, "The Untold Story of Marlene Dietrich," *Confidential Magazine* 3 (July 1955): 22.
2. Edith Becker, Michelle Citron, Julia Lesage, and B. Ruby Rich, "Lesbians and Film: Introduction," *Jump Cut*, nos. 24–25 (March 1981): 18.
3. Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Gossip* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), 46.
4. Andrew Britton, *Katharine Hepburn: The Thirties and After* (Newcastle upon Tyne, England: Tyneside Cinema, 1984), 16.
5. Cited in the "Morocco" program notes of the D. W. Griffith Film Center screening, May 13, 1976.
6. Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), 14.
7. Becker et al., "Lesbians and Film," 18.
8. Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 5.
9. Antony James, "Remembering the Thirties," in *The Yellow Book*, 7. On file at the Lesbian Herstory Archives, New York City.
10. This experience of living a "double life" in the 1930s was a common theme expressed in a series of interviews conducted by the *Before Stonewall* Film Project, on file at the Lesbian Herstory Archives, New York City.
11. Richard Dyer, ed., *Gays and Film* (London: British Film Institute, 1977), 1.

12. Russo, *Celluloid Closet*, 65.
13. Rebecca Louise Bell-Metereau, *Hollywood Androgyny* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 74.
14. Britton, *Katharine 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."
19. Laura Mulvey, "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' Inspired by *Duel in the Sun* (King Vidor, 1946)," *Framework*, nos. 15–17 (1981): 12.
20. Unpublished interviews with (Ms.) Christopher Sitwell and Karl Bissinger, on gay life in the 1930s, May 1988.
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.
26. Russo, *Celluloid Closet*, 66.

The Hypothetical Lesbian Heroine in Narrative Feature Film

Chris Straayer

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.