

The Sapphist and The Cinema: An Exploration of Lesbian Portrayal in Two Contemporary American Films

Abstract

This paper focuses on the areas of film that are solely about lesbianism and how it's portrayed in cinema, the correlation this has with compulsive heterosexuality, and the implications of voyeurism that are born out of the filmmaker's desires. As an audience, we are used to seeing heterosexual coupling on screen, from summer blockbuster romances to more serious arthouse films featuring a couple going through a painful divorce. In these films, we see sex on the silver screen, mostly between male and female co-stars, whereas sex between two women gets put in a different category entirely. How does one know where to look when consuming media surrounding queer or lesbian existence?

This article offers an alternative way of examining lesbian relationships in cinema and how it relates to pre-existing theories around compulsive heterosexuality (Rich, 1980), the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975), and directorial motivations behind why filmmaking takes a certain lens within lesbian narratives and the audience obsession with seeing eroticism in stories about two women; rather than love or other qualities. Stories of lesbian desire almost always entail an emphasis on the production of meaning via spectatorship rather than authorship (Foster, 1999), or for the audience's viewing pleasure: lesbians are a spectacle of erotic looking (Bradbury-Rance, 2021). This essay strives to provide a glimpse at what contemporary cinema has to say about lesbianism

and how it is portrayed on today's screens, as seen through the lens of two films in particular.

Introduction

In Western culture, only "illegitimate sexualities" are reduced to a question of personal preference (Hoogland, 1995), if not, they are seen as a spectacle, objects that get "othered" by the male gaze (Fisher, 2020). A lesbian character often gets lost between the inherent negativity of the female as absence to male presence and, on the other, the difficulty of homosexual difference (Bradbury-Rance, 2021), making her a complicated presence in of itself.

There seems to be a disconnect between the spectator and the spectacle itself, showing in many forms. The "male gaze" is a term coined by Laura Mulvey's feminist film theories presented in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975). She writes about men as projecting their desires onto female characters. Mulvey talks about examining this subject through the lens of psychoanalytic theory. She often links the cinema to Freud and her interpretation of his theories on voyeuristic pleasure; Scopophilia is the pleasure involved in looking at other people's bodies as (particularly, erotic) objects without being seen either by those on screen or by other members of the audience (Mulvey, 1975). Keeping in mind that her theory has been criticized due to lack of consideration for LGBTQ+ viewers, however, we can still examine the impact her theory has on contemporary cinema.

It has been argued that the woman on screen consents to our viewing her and therefore, the voyeurism is justified, Mulvey argues that it is instead the viewers' suppressed exhibitionism and projection onto the object of desire (the woman). This article will explore this projection and examine why a similar projection occurs, not with the woman, as Mulvey has already established, but rather with lesbians on screen.

By citing academic, peer-reviewed articles about niche concepts in lesbian cinema and using feminist film theory, I will theorize about the portrayal of these relationships on screen by analyzing different contemporary movies. I hope to be able to connect this back to articles like *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence* (1980), *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema* (1977) and others to support my theories surrounding the cinema of spectacle and lesbians. If there is no link between spectacle and the portrayal of lesbianism, I hope to analyze where the divide is in cinema, where do some movies succeed in beating this "to be looked at" theory and where do others fail? Is there any correlation between movies that portray these relationships as real and tangible, rather than audience eye candy.

The films I've selected to analyze are due to their difference in director's and intentionality behind the filmmaking and the way each film uniquely interacts with the theories presented. Also, due to constraints, this only covers American films, this is not a reflection of the worldview of lesbianism in cinema. To properly analyze the following two American films: *Black Swan* (2010) and *The Watermelon Woman* (1996), we first need to understand these theories that we are going to build the critique off of. The foundation of psychoanalytic theory being used in cinema, in this particular context,

looks to Laura Muvley and Christian Metz as the first scholars' to truly dig into this theory of the spectator in a way that concerns sexuality and active and passive desires, combined with Lacan's mirror theory and Freud's analyses of sexuality and voyeurism.

Theory

Mulvey's theories of the male gaze shaped a generation's way of thinking about the cinema and will shape the majority of our analyses for each movie. In her writings she argues that women are bound by symbolic order that allows man to live out his fantasies and obsessions by imposing them onto the image of the silent woman, who is there as the bearer of meaning, not the maker of it. Lack of female agency, for better words, is what Mulvey conveys as something detrimental to the cinema. She also states that Hollywood has managed to mainline film into something that portrays erotic pleasure, not as is, but rather as seen by the patriarchy. The cinema isn't something that is considered voyeuristic at a surface level; Mulvey explains that where one sits in the dark theater and the brilliance of shifting color and light on the screen further promote the illusion of voyeuristic separation. However, while we have charted, briefly, Mulvey's theory, there has been criticism as it does not directly take into account LGBTQ+ viewers or the "lesbian look" (McGoey, 2020); a more contemporary idea coming from queer theory. Keeping this in mind, we will try to balance out lack of LGBTQ+ perspective by involving Rich's theories of lesbianism into the mix to provide a framework of film and queer theory.

Metz's analyses of Lacan's theory of childhood and "the mirror" and how this relates to the cinema, allow readers to shape an awareness of the gaze. The Lacanian

theory goes into depth about a child realizing itself by looking into the mirror, a separate object from its mother and gives the mental representation of “I” and allows for the surfacing perception of selfhood. Metz’s argument is that this mirror stage exists in the cinema as well, with the audience being similar to the infant. However, the spectator identifies with himself, with himself as an act of pure perception (Metz, 1977). In addition to the self identification, the viewer also aligns with the camera, as the one releasing the film and receiving it at the same time. Metz argues that when one identifies with the camera, we become the all-seeing, all-knowing being that the camera becomes. As the camera, we pursue our passion of looking, looking at the characters on screen. He goes back to Freud and voyeurism, explaining that similar to sadism, the object (in cinema, the object to be looked at) is always kept separate from the source of the drive (the eye). Voyeurism, Metz argues, rests on a kind of fiction that creates *the fantasy of illusion of fullness of the object relation*: the idea that the object or person on screen can consent or is consenting to the act of being looked at and that there is “a state of desire which is not just imaginary”.

The final theory used to support the argument being made in this article is Adrienne Rich’s *Compulsory Heterosexuality and the Lesbian Existence* (1980), a revolutionary article in queer theory that illustrates the idea that heterosexuality is the default for women and that it may not always be how they feel, but find it imposed upon them. In a patriarchal society, the power of men forces women into these roles whether or not they feel connected to the identity of a heterosexual woman. She talks about the characteristics of male power include the power of men to: deny women [their own]

sexuality or to force it, commanding and exploiting their labor to control their produce, to control and rob them of their children, to confine them physically and prevent movement, to use them as objects in male transactions, to cramp their creativity and to withhold them from large areas of the society's knowledge and cultural attainments. These characteristics allow us to bridge the theories between film and lesbianism and offer insight into the artifacts of our choosing, i.e the films picked to watch today.

These three theories will be central to building a lens to look through when analyzing these movies: the gaze (Metz, 1977), more specifically the male gaze and visual pleasure (Mulvey, 1975) and Rich's theories around sexuality, allow us to watch the relationship between the audience and the characters in the movies.

Artifacts

I. Black Swan

The first movie that comes to mind when analyzing lesbian portrayal is a classic, renowned film released in 2010. The reason for viewing of this movie, in terms of lesbians, is due to the fact that the main plot doesn't center around a lesbian character and lesbianism is *not* the motivating force behind the film. Why take this into account when analyzing cinema about lesbians? Well, in order to get a well-rounded, versed opinion of portrayal, it makes sense to also take into consideration films that don't center around this topic, but rather lightly brush it. Bradbury-Rance argues that when representation of lesbians is granted, it is important which source we 'look' to in order to see the truest form of representation. She also brings up another question, citing an edited collection on

‘queer film and video’ published in 1991 by the collective reading group Bad Object Choices, containing essays by Mayne, Cindy Patton, Stuart Marshall, Richard Fung, Kobena Mercer and Teresa de Lauretis, “How Do I Look?”; applied to film and the cinema as how do I look in film / how do I look at film. “Who’s vision will we accept?” is the question posed for lesbian/gay communities, as well as communities of color.

The first film we ‘look’ to for representation comes from the 2010 film *Black Swan*, following the story of Nina Sayers (Natalie Portman), a ballerina who wishes to play the leading role of Odette/Odile in the ballet of Swan Lake. The lesbian portion of the film comes from a mental breakdown of the lead character, egged on by her counterpart Odile (Mila Kunis) after a night out of drinking and defiance of the norms that Nina faces back at home from her oppressive mother. The intimate scene between these two characters takes place as an act of defiance against Sayers’ mother, a character who desires to control her every move and keep her as her little girl forever. Lesbianism borne out of nothing but Nina’s mental illness, as alluded to throughout the film, and her desire to defy her mother; two tropes that are often used as plot points in portrayal of these relationships. To put it in more exact terms, lesbian sexuality functions at once as the indigestible and indispensable plotspace in this male fantasy, as simultaneously the *sine qua non* of the narrative and its vanishing point (Hoogland, 1995). Nina’s defiance leads to her acting on her sexual agency and sleeping with her female friend, the ultimate betrayal and defiance of her mother and total rejection of their relationship. However, there is no “fade to black” assumption that the two sleep together, instead the audience gets a visual 2-minute scene of the pair undressing each other and engaging in sex. The

scene itself begs the question: to what end is this a necessity in the story? Does a graphic scene depicting a lesbian sexual encounter evoke further storyline for the viewer or is it simply playing on the assumed desire of the gaze? Is the audience so identifying with the camera that we need to be present for a fantasy such as this?

The mythos of a graphic sex scene between two women becomes a commonality from film to film when lesbianism is present. *Black Swan* is no exception to this rule, nor are any of the films examined in this paper, yet intimacy between two characters can be felt in many different ways, as we will address when putting these films next to each other. While one could argue that Nina's outburst could be fueled by Rich's theory of compulsory heterosexuality and what happens when heterosexuality is forced onto women, the way this lesbian scene is forced into the narrative reads more as a personal director fantasy. What creates a monster is the simple matter of being defined by someone else's gaze; to be othered and defined by that difference (Fisher, 2020); an argument that can be applied to *Black Swan*'s portrayal of a lesbian encounter. Aronofsky, a straight-male director, often is critiqued for his portrayal of women and his misogynistic undertones throughout his films; including the 2017 film *mother!*, for its portrayal of abuse towards women and unnecessary violence. The keyword being unnecessary, often sex or violence is found in excess in the cinema, seeping out of every plotpoint or montage the director can stuff it into. Metz references "the fetish"; the fetish as representation of the penis and the substitution of the penis, whether metonymically or not. This scene in the film could be categorized as this sort of substitution, as established, it reads more as director fetishization than characters' pleasure. Odile represents the

substitution in question in the metaphorical sense, she is the sexual aggressor and the rival of Nina. Later in the film, one could argue that she even emotionally castrates Nina about this sexual encounter, saying that it never happened and teasing her for having any sort of lesbian fantasies in the first place. .

This encounter in *Black Swan* would also be a great example of Mulvey's split between active/male and passive/female scenario; the director projects his fantasy onto the female figures and they are styled accordingly. The intimate scenes in the film feel more like the lesbian lifestyle that Hoogland critiques as "a rather mild disease, nothing medicine will not cure, and that happens to be easily available in the therapeutic sexual powers of (fortunately omnipresent) straight men." So where does this critique of lesbianism as a visual pleasure end and where does it begin?

II. The Watermelon Woman

To begin thinking about ownership of visual pleasure, is to begin with movies made by lesbians, for lesbians. Yes, anyone can fetishsize intimacy between two women, but the power of a male director behind it taints films like *Black Swan* due to the patriarchal lens we know a director looks through. The 'perceiving drive' (Metz, 1977) is the concrete representation of the absence of the object of desire and this is where filmmaking and the context of *who* becomes important. We could look at the film, *The Watermelon Woman* (1996) for a guiding light out of the tunnel that is Aronofsky's misled ballerina feature. What happens when "Woman as Image, Man as Bearer of the Look " (Mulvey, 1975) removes the 'man' as the viewer; or the one to bear the look. The

audience gets a refreshing take with *The Watermelon Woman*, directed by a black lesbian; Cheryl Duane, who is also the star of the film. She addresses topics in the queer community head-on and without the excess padding of queerness for the sake of it. What is meant by that- the characters have relationships, engage in sex, do things that everybody does but the lens of fetishization or the man as the onlooker is gone. The film depicts real relationships without the stylization of a male director, which Muevley theorizes about in her writings. However, now is the time to nod to the fact that Muevley's theory did not account for lesbian or gay "looks", there is an absence of lesbian sexuality in some early feminist theory; the presence of "lesbian" representations in some recent products of the cultural "malestream." (Hoogland, 1995). LA Weekly wrote, "The sort of film Spike Lee would make if he were both smarter and a dyke.", in the context of what this means for representation, the director of a movie being involved in queerness matters. The intimate scene that takes place between Cheryl and Diana (Guinevere Turner) does show nudity, but it isn't nudity for nudity sake. The relationship between these characters has a backdrop and makes sense in the overall narrative. This bleeds into the long conflict of sex and the relationship the patriarchy has with it and its display on film, as touched on in *Black Swan*; The most injurious message relayed by pornography is that women are natural sexual prey to men and love it; that sexuality and violence have some sort of relationship with each other; and that for women sex is essentially masochistic, humiliation pleasurable, physical abuse erotic (Rich, 1980).

During the intimate scenes in *The Watermelon Woman*, the scenes feel almost intrusive, like the audience is getting an inside look at a couple's time together. The

spectator is the unwanted presence, lingering a little too long with eager eyes, but Duyne doesn't validate this desire like Aronofsky does. Bradbury-Rance cites Mandy Merck's theories on 'the love scene', using it as stake in the notion that this type of scene holds a 'particularly symbolic function: the ability to represent "lesbian experience"'. The documentation of a sexual encounter with two women documented by a woman-loving woman versus a heterosexual man captures this lesbian experience in two entirely different ways. One encounter borders on commentary on mental-illness, as well as fetishization and humiliation after the fact, the other has roots in a budding relationship and context in the place of the story, not to mention the visuals are nowhere near as graphic as the other.

Conclusion

In this day and age, when films are being released and produced with diversity and representation in mind, it is more important than ever to be critical of the media consumed and designed for queer audiences. The audience has to be careful when gleaning what counts as meaningful representation versus what does not; we might not recognise what others are now allowed to see of us, or what we now see of ourselves. (Bradbury-Rance, 2021) Just because a movie features lesbian existence, does not mean it functions in a way that uplifts queer communities or destigmatizes lesbianism in general. There is a strong dichotomy between the messages that *Black Swan* and *The Watermelon Woman* present with their narratives, so which does an audience look for when it comes to representation? What does contemporary cinema have to say about lesbian

representation? As the two intimate scenes were broken down in the films, the question of representation really falls into where one looks. Sure, *Black Swan* isn't propagating hate speech towards queer communities, but that doesn't mean that what's depicted in the film qualifies as an upstanding piece of representation either. Contemporary cinema needs to look to films like *The Watermelon Woman* for self-wielded storytelling and positive portrayals of lesbian encounters and relationships, rather than inserting a lesbian narrative for the sake of it.

“The destruction of records and memorabilia and letters documenting the realities of lesbian existence must be taken very seriously as a means of keeping heterosexuality compulsory for women, since what has been kept from our knowledge is joy, sensuality, courage, and community, as well as guilt, self-betrayal, and pain.” (Adrienne Rich, 1980)

In the context of this argument, *The Watermelon Woman* would be one of those records of the realities of lesbian existence that we must hold onto in order not to be kept from the knowledge of these feelings, but also in order to explore authentic representation.

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