

LESBIAN SPECIAL SECTION: INTRODUCTION

Feminist film criticism has developed new theoretical tools for analyzing cinematic structures and themes and has made major contributions to feminist thought as well as to cultural theory in general. Yet there's a vacuum even in feminist film criticism, which has not confronted lesbian issues. At this point, an attention paid to lesbian perspectives could both suggest new directions of thought and point up some of the inadequacies and mistakes of previous critical writing. It is particularly important to begin this work now, given the new appearance of lesbianism as a negative sign in Hollywood film, and the continuing space assigned to lesbians as a gratification of male fantasy in pornography and many male avant-garde films.

Human sexuality always takes on a determined historical form, as it is expressed personally between individuals and as it is enforced publically through institutions. While learned sexual models shape our relation to film, film's role in enforcing heterosexuality has hardly been challenged. JUMP CUT has analyzed film practice in our society and its role in reinforcing oppressions based on race, sex or class. Since we readily acknowledge connections between the individual psyche and the historical body politic, it is useful to examine film as a cultural institution which excessively promotes as a norm the single sexual option needed to maintain the division of labor.

Feminist film criticism has analyzed film texts and film reception to explicate women's place within male culture and hopefully to extricate us from it. Unfortunately, such criticism has too often accepted heterosexuality as its norm. The suppression of a lesbian perspective has warped film criticism as well as its larger intellectual context, including discussions of ideology, popular culture, and psychoanalysis. A lesbian perspective, however, can supply the missing link connecting our views of culture, fantasy, desire, and women's oppression--how these replicate a heterosexist power structure and how that, in turn, finds expression on the screen. The seemingly simple replacement of the subject "woman" with the subject "lesbian" radically redefines the parameters of feminist film criticism. When the topic is the "image of" the lesbian in film or the "function of" the lesbian in the text, then whole different issues have to be approached.

Lesbians are nearly invisible in mainstream cinematic history, except as evil or negative-example characters. There is the lesbian as villainess, exemplified in films such as WINDOWS and examined in its contemporary version by Winter/Charbonneau's discussion of the lesbian "threat" in recent Hollywood cinema (in this section). There is the lesbian as vampire, both metaphorically (as in Claude Chabrol's LES BICHES or Rosselini's OPEN CITY) and quite literally, as in the genre of lesbian vampire movies examined by Bonnie Zimmerman (in this section). There is the brutal bull dyke, a type identified by Richard Dyer in his "Gays in Film Noir" in JUMP CUT #16. This character ranges from the TOUCH OF EVIL dyke who just wants to watch the FAREWELL MY LVOELY dyke who insists on action. We should pay attention to these negative images as feminist critics because they are not only about lesbianism but, in fact, are about the containment of women's sexuality and independence.

Furthermore, negative stereotypes about lesbians have a lot to teach us about the limitations of any "positive image" approach to the depiction of women in film. Positive images are the reaction of an oppressed group, once they can make films, to their negative stereotypes as promulgated by the dominant culture. Therefore, positive images cannot be cut off from the societal pressures that created the original stereotypes or the conditions that (short of a revolution) continue to maintain them. The economic pressures of marketing and film production guarantee that, in a homophobic society, any authentic "positive image" will remain too great a risk ever to find direct expression. In a homophobic society, any depiction of a lesbian in film, no matter how intentionally positive, will be received as negative.

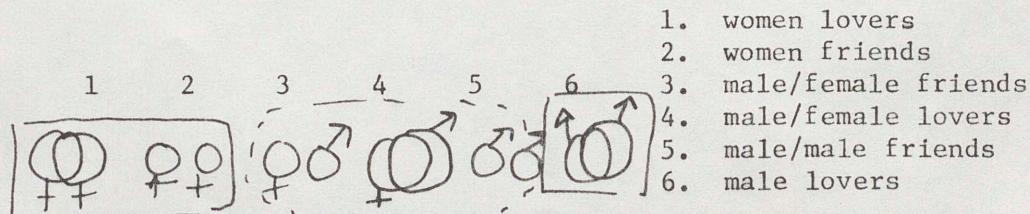
Dear CC,
The timing on this is much more critical than I thought. Can you send me or phone me
your responses within the next few days? Quite a study group eh?
P.S. The scribbles on p. 6 are mine.

Mainstream cinema employs a dichotomy of positive/negative, using allegedly lesbian villainesses to punish those characters who deviate from the norms of domesticity or romantic love. Heterosexuality is the positive, lesbianism the negative.

Ironically, then, the most explicit vision of lesbianism has been left to pornography, where the lesbian loses her menace and becomes a turn-on. Men maintain control over women by creating the fantasy images of women that they need. Pornography "controls" and uses lesbianism by defining it purely in terms of genital sexuality, which in being watched can also be recouped. As long as lesbianism remains a component of pornography for a homophobic society, this limits any "positive image" of lesbianism possible. The extent to which any view of lesbian sexuality can be presented in film is limited by its inevitable reception, by most sectors of the dominant society, as pornography. The spectre of exploitative sexuality haunts cinematic choices. For instance, two films discussed in this section, MAEDCHEN IN UNIFORM and CELINE AND JULIE GO BOATING, both construct "positive" images of lesbian relationships while eschewing any explicit sexuality. As commercial films, both even omit an unambiguous definition of the two female characters as lovers.

It would seem logical then to look to cinematic portrayals of women's friendships as an alternative to the tabooed love relationship. However, female friendship is itself limited in cinema. In the multitude of buddy films, pairs of men get to act out their adventure fantasies. Women's friendships in film, on the other hand, bear comparison with the types of sisters in patriarchal literature as described by Louise Bernikow. Like those sisters, women friends are shown as either: trying to get "the man's something" and fighting over who gets it (ALL ABOUT EVE), turning against each other (THE WOMEN), sacrificing self to familial devotion (LITTLE WOMEN), or accepting the Judgment of Paris that splits women into narrowly defined "I'm This/ You're That" sets of roles (ONE SINGS, THE OTHER DOESN'T). In cinema, even women's friendships revolve around men. Just as the supposed visibility of "woman" and "lesbian" in film has turned out to be fraudulent, so cinematic friendships between women are equally illusory. None of the richness of women's real relations appear.

It is revealing to chart the pairings that are either acceptable or unacceptable in popular films.



Both extremes of the spectrum--authentic portrayals of lesbianism (#1) or gay male (#6) relations--fall out of bounds for the dominant cinema. In categories #2 and #5, we begin to see a discrepancy at work, idealizing male friendships and debasing female friendships. The only honorable categories left to the skewed middle of the chart are predictably male/female friendship (#3), male/male friendship (#5), and male/female coupling (#4). Women don't fare very well in these three categories. Women may appear as a momentary diversion in the buddy films (#5). Women have traditionally been kept in line through family ties and romantic love (#4). In the films which depict male/female friendship (#3), women form alliance with the man in tune with his needs (at the office, the saloon, the hospital) and at the expense of the friendships with women, whom he replaces (as in KRAMER VS. KRAMER). The suppression of categories #1 and #2 suggests the reality of the very continuum between lesbians and other women that the dominant cinema usually takes pains to deny. Indeed, the real taboo may not be sexuality between women--which after all is vulgarized and recouped through pornography, but the affirmation of any associations between women which are primary and not inclusive of men.

Off screen, in fact, such relations between women transpire all the time, with dual effects. On the one hand, women's communicating

to each other their skills and perceptions within the domestic sphere maintains the social fabric. On the other hand, even as contained, such communication always represents a subversive element under patriarchy. This world of women is banned from film, not only for sexual reasons but for the equally fundamental reason of camouflaging women's unpaid labor. Female associations not defined by sexuality could include women's intellectual relations, work relations, etc. Presumably lesbians are entitled to visibility in these contexts, but mainstream cinema makes that impossible by separating off the "lesbian" as a strictly sexual creature. Films don't show lesbians working together because that provides no voyeuristic interest for the male spectator. Other women working together provide just as little interest. Yet, the depiction of women (whose sexual practice is undefined) seen in primary association with each other is profoundly discomforting and likely to provoke the label "lesbian." Why is this? Because women are acting, not re-acting to men, as self-defined beings.

Given the absence of any real lesbian "image" on the screen, the lesbian audience over the years has had to make do by identifying with portrayals of strong woman characters and women's friendships (see the Judy Whitaker interviews in this section). It's often been a case of settling for crumbs. One viewing strategy has been to concentrate on the subtext, the "hidden" meaning, of commercial films. The notion of the lesbian subtext depends upon the knowledge, suspicion, or hope that some participants in the film (director, actress, screenwriter) were themselves lesbians, and that their perspective can be discerned in the film through its disguises. Subtexting, then, depends for its cues upon gossip.

Gossip provides the official unrecorded history of lesbian participation in film. Actresses and directors have had to hide their identity in order to preserve their careers in a homophobic society. For actresses, the star system has depended upon a vast public's fantasy identification with the glamorous woman; the knowledge that the star was a lesbian would have ended her career. With the advent of the sound film era and the massive industrialization of film production and distribution, a time when most women directors were drummed out of the field as a financial liability, being openly lesbian was obviously out of the question.

Knowing a director's sexual identity does not necessarily provide a formula for interpreting the work. A film by a lesbian director or screenwriter may or may not advance "positive" lesbian characters; it may have no lesbian content at all. On the other hand, not to know details of lesbian participation in film production is a problem in constructing any solid lesbian history. One example is the case of Dorothy Arzner, Hollywood's one woman career-director of the 20's through the 40's, whose style of dress and attention to independent woman characters in her films has prompted the search for a lesbian subtext in her work--despite the careful absence of any statements by Arzner herself that could encourage such an undertaking. In the case of directors whose work isn't specifically feminist, whose lives are strictly closeted, or in the case of lesbian actresses enacting prescribed roles, the burden of proof for a lesbian analysis frequently depends upon the interpretation of style. One example would be the silent film SALOME, produced by its star Alla Nazimova, an actress whose own sexuality has been discussed in Kenneth Anger's Hollywood Babylon. SALOME's mannered acting and Art Nouveau costume and set design have elicited an interpretation of exotic lesbian decadence.

Gossip feeds into audience expectation and interpretation. Long denigrated in our culture, gossip nevertheless serves a crucial purpose in the survival of subcultural identity in an oppressive society. 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. While gossip transpires at the private level of conversation, subtexting is the route by which dominant cultural products can be used to serve subcultural needs, by annexing a mass product (movies) alien to lesbian identity.

Because of a desperate need for validation and subcultural identification, much lesbian film viewing and criticism depends upon subtexting. Sometimes such readings are valuable and accurate. They can resolve ambiguities otherwise inexplicable in the film text, and can illuminate the psychosexual structuring of cultural production, with the particular clarity won by the outsider's experience. However, at other times, such readings can be dangerously erroneous. They may stray far from the text to create fantasy projections, often ignore a film's sexism in a wishful bid for satisfaction, and make little sense to others who've seen the film. Such lesbian readings have included seeing LITTLE DARLINGS as little dykes and praising LOOKING FOR MR. GOODBAR as an indictment of heterosexuality. Any critical reading put forward for a film must be proven with convincing evidence drawn from the film itself.

More recently, feminist filmmakers have rejected the rigid sexual roles presented in commercial and documentary film and shown a greater flexibility in depicting women's lives, desires and fantasies. While lesbianism may not be explicit, the weakened boundaries of sexual definition in these films mark an advance. Helke Sander's ALL AROUND REDUCED PERSONALITY--REDUPERS, devotes most of its screen time to women's involvement with each other on a photography project, and it relegates heterosexuality to minor scenes, in one of which, graphically, the heroine throws up in a gutter following the lecherous advances of a leftist male comrade. Occasionally, in documentary film as well, there has been a lessening of censorship regarding the lesbian presence. WE'RE ALIVE presents women prisoners collectively shaping their own films: and offering their combined left, lesbian and feminist analyses of their own condition; the film doesn't separate out the lesbian experience into a separate category. Such fluidity of sexual boundaries is an encouraging sign in feminist filmmaking. Still, most feminist films challenge male dominance without being self-conscious of their own suppression of lesbianism. It is to the lesbian filmmakers we must look for consistent lesbian visibility and the political and aesthetic questions such a visibility poses.

What is the context of production for these lesbian filmmakers? Independent lesbian filmmakers have problems that: (a) all independents have: money, equipment and distribution; (b) all women have: technical deprivation, access, accountability to feminist demands; (c) all lesbians have: content, risk of censorship, retaliation. As a result, few lesbian filmmakers are making films that treat lesbian subjects.

The sphere of independent filmmaking has been held up as an ideal for feminist film work. Yet this sphere has not proven hospitable. In the "political" camp, lesbianism has been rated a low, "personal" priority not high on the political agenda. In the "avant garde" camp, lesbianism has been part of the same male tradition dominating Hollywood and pornography (cp. Werner Nekes's T(WO)MEN, Steve Dwoskin's CHINESE CHECKERS, Jim Beening's 11 x 14, Mark Rappaport's IMPOSTERS). Because lesbian films don't fit into existing independent-film networks, a large body of lesbian work, particularly in Super-8 and Video, has yet to break out of its local audience into visible distribution, of the sort provided by Iris Films or Women Make Movies (see filmography at the end of this section).

The best known filmmakers, Barbara Hammer and Jan Oxenberg, have been able to make a number of films on lesbian themes despite exceptionally severe funding difficulties. Their work is discussed at length in this section (see articles by Citron, Weiss and Zita). The other key work is IN THE BEST INTERESTS OF THE CHILDREN, a documentary film made for use in custody battles by lesbian mothers to keep their children. (Filmmakers Liz Stevens and Frances Reid were interviewed and the film reviewed in JUMP CUT #19.) Obviously, these films shouldn't have to bear the weight of our entire expectations of what lesbian filmmaking might be; nor should we charge these filmmakers with all that lesbian filmmaking has yet to create.

There are a number of issues that we want to raise here concerning the nature of a lesbian film aesthetic and its potential relation, both to the work on film aesthetics already developed by feminist critics and to the substantial work on lesbian aesthetics, art and literature, already developed in the woman's press.

At this point, the paucity of lesbian visibility in film has made the presentation of a "positive" lesbian subject a serious priority. Affirmation is badly needed. At the same time, there is a tendency to downplay struggle or the acknowledgement of problems because such admissions could so easily contribute to backlash within larger culture. Unfortunately, characters without problems are not very convincing, nor do they narrow the gap between what's on the screen and the lesbian in the audience. Furthermore, committed to an already unacceptable subject, the filmmaker is likely to give up there, often leaving the choice of style unexamined. It is tempting to employ documentary style or surface realism to depict in traditionally accepted terms the happy lifestyle of the proud lesbian. In fact, this settling for pre-defined film forms short-circuits the larger lesbian goal of challenging oppressive structures. The film style itself should reveal the interlocking structures in its characters' lives and begin the creation of a non-oppressive approach to image-making and reception.

In this context, the cinematic depiction of sexuality poses a particular problem. It is important to name lesbianism for what it is sexually and to give positive models of lesbian sexuality for younger women coming out. But how can this be reconciled with the objectification of such sexuality in film and the visual arts (from Helmut Newton's high-class-porn photography to advertisements for Twin Sisters scotch)? The visualization of nonvoyeuristic, authentic lesbian lovemaking should be attempted, to counteract the debasements of pornography. But paradoxically, the continued existence of pornography still determines the codes by which films will be received.

In her early film JE, TU, IL, ELLE, Belgian filmmaker Chantal Akerman tried to construct a fresh, nonvoyeuristic image of lesbian lovemaking, even casting herself as one of the two women. Yet critics, on the whole, have only been able to discuss the film with pornography as their reference point. Aware of such problems, some women have sought to restrict screenings of films with lesbian lovemaking, like DYKETACTICS, to all-woman audiences. As if to confirm the suspicion that lesbian lovemaking will be received as pornography, Connie Beeson's HOLDING has been marketed in a package of "The Best of the N.Y. Erotic Film Festival." Yet it is still used in many women's studies classes as a "positive" depiction of lesbian lovemaking. Completing the confusion, the racist soft-core hit, EMMANUELLE, contained scenes of lesbian eroticism that were accepted as satisfying by many lesbian viewers.

At this point in our history, a lesbian audience may well receive as positive any half-way adequate scene of lesbian eroticism regardless of its style or the filmmaker's intent. At the same time, even the most carefully constructed and best intentioned lesbian film may well be received as pornography outside the confines of the woman's community.

Pornography is the extreme case, yet it points to a widespread phenomenon: the difficulty of defining the terms of lesbian experience when these very terms may mean one thing inside the woman's community and something quite different in the gynophobic (woman-hating) society outside. Collective action, inside, is separatism outside; woman's anger, inside, is hysteria outside; autonomy, inside, is man-hating outside; choosing women, inside, is rejecting men outside. These contradictions cannot be avoided. They emerge whenever a period of struggle is in progress, whenever an oppressed people aggressively assumes the task of self-definition.

This is a particularly important time for the lesbian movement. In the past, lesbianism was rarely visible; moreover, when it was

shaped into a cultural force--as in the example of the Natalie Barney circle in Paris at the turn of the century--lesbianism tended to be manifested as an enclave, an upperclass salon of exceptional women. The persecution of lesbians has always been political. But only since the rise of the feminist movement and the Stonewall events of 197 _ has the response to that persecution been political as well.

Within feminism, the lesbian movement must still have its own orientation, defined by the lesbian experience. The development of this identity has been especially strong in art, poetry, literature and philosophy. In 1976-77, four major journals were founded which have contributed to, discussed, and shaped the renaissance in lesbian publishing: Conditions, "a magazine of writing by women with an emphasis on writing by lesbians;" Chrysalis, "a magazine of woman's culture; Heresies, "a feminist publication on art and politics;" and Sinister Wisdom, "a journal of words and pictures for the lesbian imagination in all women." Cultural organizations have been of great importance in combatting the pervasive oppression of lesbians in our society. The journals have provided a safe, supportive context within which to build a real culture, break new ground, carry on debate, and maintain a publishing space that is not beholden to homophobic institutions. Women's coffeehouses and concerts have provided a literal physical space, within which lesbians have been able to express responses and emotions without fear of retaliation. Finally, these spaces have provided a base from which a lesbian struggle could be mounted against the oppressive structures in society, from fighting discriminatory ordinances to combatting films like WINDOWS. There is a sense in which, though cultural, these spaces are also political. Without the journals, galleries, concerts, coffeehouses, bars, publishing houses... there would be no basis for collective awareness or action, no evidence that things could be otherwise for lesbians in a society of mandatory heterosexuality.

The discussion of lesbian aesthetics developed within the woman's press has been a major influence on our own development. JUMP CUT is different from most "woman's culture" publications both because men work on it and because its feminist perspective is combined with a leftist one. Given this context, we have developed a perspective with many points of difference from the "woman's culture" position. We can identify several pitfalls facing the lesbian filmmaker who bases her work on certain current assumptions.

(1) First Oppression Syndrome. The oppression of lesbians is posited as the greatest oppression, taking priority over those based on gender, race or class. Because working-class, black, and latina lesbians understand the institutional structures that enforce racism and class difference, they are unlikely to opt for sexuality as the primary cause of their oppression. Because it is white and middle-class women who are most willing to identify sexuality as their first oppression, the insistence on this position can easily become a racist one. Moreover, ^{most} many lesbians have complex political identities and commitments. Lesbians have played a major role, for instance, in the founding of shelters for battered women. We need films about the shelters that can show lesbians there, and we need films about particular community struggles that can show the place of lesbians there, also, combatting economic and racial oppression. *The problem is that in most community struggles, the lesbian as lesbian is a pariah.*

(2) Essentialism. Woman is supposed to have an intrinsic identity which is female, identified with nature and nurturing, her body parts elevated into symbols and her bodily functions into ritual. In the lesbian tradition, she is an amazon, the supreme womanly being. In the current French psychoanalytic tradition, she is the eternal "other," the refusal, the negation of all that is male. Art made in this tradition often retreats from the city into the meadow, from language into silence, from the present into the mythological past or utopian future. The flight into fantasy (i.e. the fantasy that woman is intrinsically complete) discourages work toward social change.

*Because hetero
helps them
they are
politically
valid.*

(3) The False Universal. All women are presumed to be sisters. Women's common oppression cannot be recognized at the expense of suppressing real differences based on race and class. Many women cling to class privilege, where operational, at the cost of oppressing other women. Too often there are films about abortion but none about forced sterilization, or films with black lesbians that omit any treatment of the specificity of their oppression as black. There has been a tendency to generalize from the experience of one group of women (white, usually middle class, of U.S. origin) sets of standards, priority of problems, shapes of fantasy, that are presumed universal for all women. That is a false sisterhood.

(4) The Psychological Emphasis. Because of the private nature of sexuality and the pressures attendant to coming out, lesbian films have frequently focused on individual transformation. It is important to have psychological exploration as a component of art, particularly given the role of the personal in the political. It is crucial to consider sexuality, but not to the exclusion of other dimensions, social and economic, that shape a lesbian life. Confessional films, portraits of happy-ever-after lesbian couples, do not go far enough.

(5) Absence of Contradiction. Everyone has problems in their life; everybody's life is shaped by a whole variety of contradictory forces impinging upon any given moment; lesbians are no exception. Because of the risk of presenting any "adverse" information, however, a risk compounded by the tiny production output, lesbian films tend to minimize conflict. The risk of being exposed as less than ideal is too great in a homophobic society for many filmmakers to offer images of contradiction--between lovers, in families, and within oneself. Yet that contradiction is there; moreover, it is an indispensable component of growth. Filming super-lesbians in their super-relationships is an oversimplification, leading to the depiction of coming out as an end-of-the-line instead of the beginning of struggle. The suppression of contradiction produces a premature utopianism that can choke off the analysis, political struggle, and imaginative alternatives that might otherwise constitute the next phase of development.

Filmmakers face these pitfalls because enormous work still remains to be done in creating a lesbian politics and aesthetics. In films, satisfactory new forms are still in an evolutionary stage; documentary, cinema verite, dramatic narrative, all seem inadequate artistic structures by which to embody new complexities. Since lesbians are trying to live lives that reflect new value systems, there is a need for lesbian films that match those value systems, both stylistically and in the range of subject matter. In correspondence with us, filmmaker Liz Stevens has formulated the challenge facing the lesbian filmmaker at this time. Aware of the impossibility of writing about lesbian films without also considering lesbian lives and politics, she writes:

There is a need to make films about women and children from the unusual situation of the lesbian mother: she actually must choose every day to struggle for her children and know why she wants to raise them and how. Also, films about women who, as lesbians, choose to get pregnant and raise a child. How do those decisions get made? Are there traditional "maternal instinct" hooks that lead a woman to do this? Or does she have a concept of a new way to raise a child and a new way of perceiving herself within this patriarchal heterosexsystem?

I have been thinking a lot about new ways of thinking within the old system's culture. It's sort of like a colonized people's breakthrough of the colonizer's value system, in relationship self-perception but also total world perception. The colonized begin to redefine themselves, and not use the colonizer as measuring stick (you know, what we all talked about as women ten years ago). Well, a lot of that does not happen with lesbians. We end up either measuring by heterosexual standards, or by male standards, those things that we have known about ourselves, but been forced to forget.

Lesbian film criticism can give voice to "those things that we have known about ourselves" and, in so doing, point up the extent to which previous feminist film criticism may still be bound into "measuring by heterosexual...or male standards." A true recognition of lesbianism would seriously challenge the concept of women as inevitable objects of exchange between men, or as fixed in an eternal trap of "sexual difference." These theoretical frameworks exclude the lesbian experience, and may in fact diminish the experience of all women. Lesbians are not the real objects of any real male desire. Lesbian film theory, as demonstrated by many of the articles in this section, must dismantle some of the structures of current feminist film theory in order to build a more inclusive foundation.

By presenting this Lesbian Special Section within JUMP CUT, we are opening up a line of communication between the left and the lesbian press which has not previously been possible, due to a combination of self-selection and exclusion. While the Lesbian Special Section itself has been edited entirely by women, the political issues which it has raised have affected the editorial board in general. The editorial appearing at the end of this issue has been written by the male members of the editorial board, as an example of what progressive male support could mean for the lesbian struggle.

Taken together, our introduction, their editorial, and all the excellent articles in this Special Section, are the products of the long process that necessarily accompanied our project of publishing a lesbian section within a mixed publication. It is a process that has gone on for over two years, has put us in contact with women all over the country, and has influenced the inner workings of JUMP CUT on many levels. We don't claim to have invented any solution, but we've opened up enough routes of inquiry and fields of vision. This is just the beginning.