

THE INVISIBLE SCREEN: LESBIAN CINEMA

To be a lesbian is to be invisible unless one personally identifies herself by saying "I am a lesbian". As it is considered a detriment to professional work to be self-declared as a lesbian, as some people still consider it a disease or a psychological problem, as sexual preference outside of the standard heterosexual norm is generally not condoned it follows that many lesbians are invisible. To make a personal choice to self-declare can be a costly choice for a lifetime. Certainly one could not run for president as a self-declared lesbian. In fact, even within liberal circles the lesbian can be isolated and shunned due to her unique choice for a personally satisfying sexual practice. As it is much easier to live a life as a non-lesbian in this society why then should we consider anyone would identify herself as a lesbian unless she were naive, political or both. I know the choices I am setting up are not all inclusive. One could choose to declare her or his sexual preference for a variety of reasons, but the point is, unless spoken, written or imaged, the heterosexual assumption prevails.

Similarly, when an audience awaits the image on the screen it expects a heterosexual narrative to unfold and the problem I want to address is that the audience is not disappointed. Even if the characters are lesbian, the script dominates and projects lesbian characters within a heterosexual world of role-playing, love-making, and domestic and professional life. I say this because of the numerous recent films that suppose to be lesbian have failed to address me as a lesbian spectator. The romance, the on-screen gaze, the plot, the character

development are all situated within a heterosexual lifestyle or a Hollywood imaginative lifestyle made for the cinema. Certainly the women I have seen on the screen, their issues, the story, the mise en scene do not relate to the personal experiences I live and have lived as a lesbian woman for twenty eight years in the Western world. Lesbian cinema is on an invisible screen.

By the "The Invisible Screen" do you mean pictures drawn in lemon juice backwards that when heated can be read through a mirror? asked a friend. It has been almost that difficult to see lesbian representation in cinema. The lesbian imaginary is carried in a back pocket inscribed in invisible lines until heated ... by the projector lamp. This lamp, having not been lit, the secret drawing, the mysterious code, the invisible sign are hip pocket-bound: they are off-screen.¹

Teresa de Lauretis in Technologies of Gender writing about off-screen space as "a movement from the space represented by/in a representation, by/in a discourse, by/in a sex-gender system, to the space not represented yet implied (unseen) in them."² Off screen space implies that there is more to "screen reality" than the projected frame. Off screen space is a cinematic term that can be used as a metaphor for lesbian representation in cinema, that is, lesbian invisibility. The things that happen behind the locked door, the double resume, the hidden, the unsignified. The lesbian constituted within the hegemony of a heterosexist ideology ISN'T.

How could this be one asks in the age of DESERT HEARTS, LIANNA, PERSONAL BEST, SHE MUST BE SEEING THINGS as the on-screen space is filled with seeming "lesbian representation". But these films posit the lesbian inside the heterosexual discourse. There is no "lesbian" to deconstruct as the discourse of the gendered subject is within a heterosexist authority system. The lesbians act out heterosexual gender roles and positions rather than claiming any difference; even the sexual practice is situated in heterosexuality.

Monique Wittig writes that "The discourses of heterosexuality oppress us in the sense that they prevent us from speaking unless we speak in their terms".³ It is the discourses of heterosexuality whether they be Marxist, deconstructionist, Lacanian that oppress us as lesbians situated within the discourse that doesn't speak our name. Similarly in practice as well as theory, the lesbian actor in classical cinema enters into the heterosexual ideology and speaks a language, performs actions within heterosexual codes. Only the names are changed. The "innocent" are not protected. The innocent are those of us left outside the discourse solely because the discourse does not have a model that will yet include us. The lesbian as heterosexual, yes, the models exist; the lesbian as elsewhere, yes, she is off-screen and still invisible.

In an as yet unpublished lecture titled "The Social Contract" given at Columbia University in New York City in November of 1987, Monique Wittig analyzed the institution of heterosexuality as an unspoken assumption of Rousseau's contained within his theory of the social contract. Homosexuality, she said, is a dim, vague outline. As heterosexuality is always already there and as we cannot think

without it, Wittig challenges us by asking how we can consent to a social construct that reduces us to invisibility. She suggests that we run away, that we break off the heterosexual contract. She ended her presentation with the outspoken and daring words that "if a new social order exists only in one I will find it in myself."

As another runaway from the political regime of heterosexuality, I and other lesbian filmmakers began to construct a lesbian cinema in the early seventies.⁴ Visibility was the central concern for lesbian women making cinema at this time for the simple and profoundly sad reason that there were few or no pictures, images, representations available. The screen space, on and off, was blank. Not just marginalized, but not there. There was no cinema to deconstruct. There was no gaze to analyze. Lesbian image-makers in the seventies were forced by critics into the "camp of essentialists" because of the extreme urgency of their need to make lesbian representation. A marginalized and oppressed group must make a mark first, define a form, make a statement that they exist. As we made films of lesbian representation we were categorized by the emerging feminist semioticians and theorists newly-emerged themselves from French studies with Christian Metz as "essentialists". Because we had represented lesbian women the assumption that we inhabited these representations with biological, essential "meaningness" separate from ideology or social construction was falsely made.

I, for one, as a lesbian cineaste, take a more eclectic and I hope eccentric view of the lesbian representations I made in the seventies. The lesbian women I imaged in film were constructed by their society, the general and dominant society as well as the marginal society of the lesbian community. As well, we

discovered who we were as we stepped into the void, the invisible, the blank screen, and named ourselves "lesbian". That was the first step. There could be no semiotics if there were no sign. The lack we felt as we began this early naming process was not the lack of a phallus but the singular and significant lack of representation. The image did not exist, the picture was not made, the word scarcely heard in discourse nor seen in text.

Until recently the dominant discourse of feminist criticism has not addressed this issue but has continued to ignore and by doing so support the invisibility and therefore repression of lesbian cinema. To dismiss the early naming and identity films with the highly-charged and emotive term "essentialist" further removes the opportunity for discourse in a climate where deconstruction, Marxist, psychoanalytic and Lacanian theories prevail.

Martha Gever and Nathalie Magnan in their important article "Lesbian Representation" close their historical tracing of naming, sexual difference and psychoanalytic theory by reiterating Monique Wittig's statement that "lesbians are not women".⁵ They are not women, Gever and Magnan state, when they are in struggle with the patriarchal institutions of heterosexuality, representation and ideology. They suggest that it is "lesbian experience" we must rely on for our theory-making outside the Lacanian model of sexual difference, masculine or feminine, as the social division.

It has been from my lesbian experiences that I have made my films. It was my mother's breasts I desired, not a phallus. I noticed a lack, but it was of my own undeveloped breasts. It was her breasts that fascinated me for how well I

had known them as an infant, how familiar yet unfamiliar. This presence, not this lack seems to be a centering sexual difference. The breast(s) wielded no power over but the power of continuance; no economic strength, but necessity. I noted my mother's difference from yet at the same time sameness from/of me and I think this was more profound than the distinct and original difference of my father with whom I found little congruity or similarity.

When I make love with a woman, the "genital definition of lesbian", I feel the sameness of body structure, the breasts, the mound, the genitalia, the clitoris, the buttocks, the slight body hair, the smoothness of skin.⁶ This reinforcement of presence through lesbian sexuality is quite different from a sense of "lack". I find it to be identity reaffirming, strengthening in self-sense---this lesbian-making, this love-making we women do with one another.

This is not a statement of essentialism although some may call it so. It is an eclectic stance I prefer to take. This reidentification of lesbian self through lesbian sexual experience is but one part of lesbian representation. There are many parts and practices of lesbian experience to be represented. In physics, light can be understood through wave and particle theories at the same time. So too there can be multiple, co-existing and different theories and understandings of "lesbianisms" through a variety of readings.

One of these readings is experimental cinema. There is an on-screen space, a lesbian on-screen, but it is in the marginalized cinema of the avant-garde. The cinema made by and for the social order of one. The cinema that makes its own construct where form and content are inseparable. I don't think one can make a

lesbian film using a patriarchal and heterosexist mode such as the narrative. Plot points are male points. We are radically-changing people and we can't reproduce that radicality using conventional forms.

I conclude with a quote from Teresa De Lauretis writing of the contradictory spaces of theory and practice.

Thus, to inhabit both kinds of spaces at once is to live the contradiction which, I have suggested, is the condition of feminism here and now: the tension of a two fold pull in contrary directions . . . the critical negativity of its theory, and the affirmative positivity of its politics...is both the historical condition of existence of feminism and its theoretical condition of possibility.⁷

In writing this paper I have been compelled to write in two voices, the voice of "critical negative theory" and the voice of the affirmative, politic, the voice of the practicing artist. The tension that is unreconciled between these voices is the off-screen space De Lauretis notes. For me today this is the space where

things can happen. This tension, this contradiction, this unreconciliation is the space for the lesbian voice of difference in avant-garde film.