

TOWARD A QUEER GAZE: CINEMATIC REPRESENTATIONS OF QUEER FEMALE
SEXUALITY IN EXPERIMENTAL/AVANT-GARDE AND NARRATIVE FILM

By

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Cinematic representations of queer female sexuality prior to the 1970s relied on codes and innuendos to (mis)represent lesbian characters and emphasize their "Otherness," leaving the lesbian on-screen virtually non-existent. The 1970s saw an emergence of explicit lesbianism on screen in films by lesbian feminist avant-garde filmmakers, as well as the development of a new feminist film theory. This paper examines how experimental and narrative films from three decades (1970s, 1980s, 1990s) represent lesbian sexuality and work to reconceptualize the lesbian representation and spectatorship through destabilizing, reappropriating, or queering the gaze.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Feminist film theory emerged in the early-mid 1970s as an extension of second wave feminism, applying the politics and theories of feminism to film studies. Employing psychoanalytic approaches to film, feminist film theorists in the 1970s argued that cinematic portrayals of women objectify them for the purpose of appealing to the male spectator's desire, stripping them of agency and meaning outside of their significance as Other. A critique of "the gaze" was (and still is) central to feminist film theory. The cinematic male gaze, according to Laura Mulvey, positions male spectators as active voyeurs of the on-screen female image, which exists to fulfill a heterosexual male fantasy as object of desire (Mulvey 1975).

Mulvey's 1975 "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," arguably *the* foundational text for feminist film theory, employs psychoanalysis as a "political weapon" (6) in order to dismantle the overriding patriarchal and phallocentric nature of film. Upholding the place of signifier of the male other requires a silent image of woman in order to enable the fulfillment of male fantasy through cinema. Grounded in Lacanian psychoanalytic thought, Mulvey argues that the spectator's relationship to film is comparable to the relationship of the mirror to the child in Lacan's "mirror stage," at which point the child's ego and subjectivity are constituted through the misrecognition of the recognition of the familiar, yet different, image of self.

In the same essay Mulvey also establishes a male/active, female/passive dichotomy in which the position of the spectator assumes an active masculine gaze, which the on-screen image that provokes desire yet represents lack constitutes a passive feminine object. According to Mulvey, women—or rather feminine subjects—

are denied the agency in Classic Hollywood Cinema to actively look at and desire the female object on screen while maintaining their own identification as (feminine) woman. Later, in her 1989 essay, "Afterthoughts on Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Mulvey adds to and refines her argument from her original essay, recognizing the lack of discussion of the female spectator and ultimately allowing for two interpretations of female spectatorship: identification with the women on screen or trans-sex identification (transvestitism) in which the female spectator assumes a masculinist, active point of view (Mulvey 1989).

Indeed, Mulvey's essay transformed the field of film theory and created possibilities to explore the gaze and spectatorship for feminist film theory. She has, however, been critiqued for overemphasizing the male spectator and overlooking the possibility of diverse identities of spectators, including difference in race, ethnicity, and sexuality. While her critique of the gaze is specifically directed at Classic Hollywood Cinema (in her 1975 essay) and melodrama (in her 1989 essay), Mulvey suggests that alternative film forms (eg. experimental/ avant-garde) have both the potential and responsibility to "free the look of the camera into its materiality in time and space and the look of the audience into dialectics and passionate detachment" (1975, 53).

Early feminist film theory, which I consider to include the sociological/ideological approach of scholars such as Molly Haskell (*From Reverence to Rape*, 1974) as well as the psychoanalytic approach by scholars such as Laura Mulvey, Teresa de Lauretis, and Mary Ann Doane who emerged in 1970s and early 1980s, remains prevalent and influential in feminist film criticism today. Early psychoanalytic feminist film theory's focus on "the gaze" and spectatorship serves as a foundation for more recent feminist

and queer film criticism on cinematic representability. Recently, however, the very scholars who initially worked to propel feminist film theory in the 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s, including Mulvey, Doane, Linda Williams, and Judith Mayne, have challenged the usefulness and direction of early feminist film criticism on “the gaze,” for example in the Autumn 2004 issue of the feminist journal *Signs*, entitled “Roundtable Film Feminisms.”

The various essays in this issue of *Signs* acknowledge that societal conditions and social movements in the 1960s and 1970s allowed for the emergence of a feminist film theory, which challenged existing filmic discourse through a feminist appropriation of psychoanalysis and semiotics. The issue’s overriding theme, “Beyond the Gaze: Recent Approaches to Film Feminisms,” presumes that “the gaze” is an extensively (over) theorized early feminist film concept that may have overshadowed other relevant issues in film and media. It is therefore necessary to deviate and disembark from the singular focus on the theorization of “the gaze.” In this thesis I illustrate how feminist film theory on the gaze remains relevant today, arguing that feminist film theory, in correlation with elements of queer theory, can provide a unique analysis of lesbian representation in cinema. I argue that an analysis of lesbian cinema is not complete without a consideration of the gaze and spectatorship. While the gaze is certainly not the *only* significant area of analysis for lesbian cinematic representation, an exploration of lesbian representation cannot confidently overlook the contributions and influence of the gaze on representability.

Societal conditions and events prior to the 1970s sparked the emergence of the Women’s Liberation Movement, often referred to as Second Wave Feminism.

Feminism influenced film theory and film studies in ways that incited a new discourse of *feminist* film theory, challenging existing theorizations of women and film. It is out of this context that Mulvey's approach to the gaze and spectatorship emerged. Her conceptualization of "the male gaze" in Classic Hollywood Cinema uses Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, which relies on binaries of male/female, masculine/feminine that pathologize any deviation from this established and accepted hegemonic normativity. Mulvey theorizes the role of women and their limited agency within the structure of Hollywood narrative.

My overarching argument proposes that an exploration of "the gaze" in films that depict queer, or lesbian, sexuality allows us to outline the power relations invested in cinema, representation, and spectatorship that influence the cinematic portrayal of lesbian sexuality. In chapters two, three, and four I examine two films by different filmmakers who emerged during the same time period or decade and who share a similar filmmaking aesthetic or style (narrative, experimental/avant-garde).

Chapter two examines the work of filmmakers Chantal Akerman (*Je tu il elle*, 1974) and Su Friedrich (*Hide and Seek*, 1996). Their films, I argue, demonstrate avant-garde film's capacity to challenge traditional cinematic conventions (particularly the conventions of Classic Hollywood Cinema), thus releasing the gaze from a masculine/active, feminine/passive dichotomy. Neither Akerman nor Friedrich completely do away with narrative in their work. Rather, they manipulate the traditional narrative structure by interweaving non-narrative, "experimental," elements with narrative stories, thus challenging the necessity of the traditional narrative and cinematic structures. Akerman and Friedrich's work illustrates the complexity of lesbian

sexuality through a destabilization of the gaze addressing a spectator who is neither necessarily male nor masculine.

Chapter three considers the “bisexual midlife crisis film” that depicts lesbianism as an extension of female bonding and sexual indifference in two narrative films from the 1980s, *Lianna* (John Sayles, 1983) and *Desert Hearts* (Donna Deitch, 1985). In these films, lesbianism becomes a masquerade, which acts as a mask that can be worn and removed. This blurring of lesbian sexuality institutes a heteronormative gaze, in which female spectators may transition between a fetishization of the on-screen object, acting as voyeurs, or a narcissistic identification with the on screen image without questioning their own heterosexual identity. In these films, the (male) gaze is reappropriated into a (heteronormative) gaze.

In chapter four I engage with two New Queer Cinema films, *Go Fish* (Rose Troche, 1994) and *The Watermelon Woman* (Cheryl Dunye, 1996) to examine how these filmmakers work to queer the gaze through the manipulation of narrative and cinematic structure. These two films, I argue, promote the notion of a queer gaze as open to all spectators, regardless of their own identity. The filmmakers of these films work to displace the spectator, coercing him or her into seeing the social, narrative, and filmic constructions that are embedded in heteronormativity and influence lesbian representability. Hence, a queer gaze opens up possibilities for non-heteronormative viewing.

In the final chapter, the conclusion, I connect the preceding chapters to discuss how each analyzes a specific film form (narrative/experimental/avant-garde) from three consecutive decades (1970s, 1980s, 1990s) and examines the role of the gaze in

lesbian, or queer female, cinematic representation. My overarching argument throughout the thesis suggests that “the gaze,” film structure, and narrative, influence the conceptualization of lesbian sexuality and the representability of lesbian identity. Through the use of varying conceptualizations of lesbian identity, sexuality, and film forms, the examples of lesbian film discussed in this thesis work to reappropriate “the gaze,” which impacts their portrayals of lesbian sexuality and identity.

CHAPTER 2
AMBIGUITY AND AMBIVALENCE:
DESTABILIZING THE (MALE) GAZE IN FEMINIST LESBIAN AVANT-GARDE CINEMA

Early Feminist Film Theory and the Theoretical Development of the Gaze

This chapter examines the dismantling of the (male) gaze by two feminist lesbian avant-garde filmmakers, Chantal Akerman and Su Friedrich, who emerged in the 1970s. I use the description “feminist lesbian” to describe Akerman and Friedrich in order to emphasize both their feminist and lesbian agendas, their interest in feminist representations of lesbians, and to distinguish them from “lesbian-feminists,” whose political initiatives involved elements of separatism, By engaging the early theoretical arguments on the gaze, this chapter demonstrates how Akerman and Friedrich complicate the gaze by de-centralizing its location of the masculinist spectator position and by maintaining an ambiguity that does not assume an exclusively lesbian gaze. The feminist avant-garde that Mulvey presumed would dismantle the ideological and visual foundations of hegemonic cinema, I argue, has not necessarily fulfilled Mulvey’s expectations. Indeed, the feminist avant-garde challenges the dominant visual aesthetics that have restricted women’s cinematic representation, however, the filmmakers do no create an exclusively female, or lesbian, gaze.

Discussion of “the gaze” in feminist film theory originates with Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” Mulvey’s work, like that of many early psychoanalytic feminist film theorists, is firmly grounded in Lacanian psychoanalysis, and her interpretation of the gaze relies on a Lacanian interpretation of the gaze in the mirror stage. For feminist film theorists, “the gaze” became equated with “the *male* gaze,” which is not necessarily the case in Lacan’s work. Feminist film theory on “the gaze” returns to Lacan’s “mirror stage essay” (“The Mirror Stage as Formative of the /

Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience"). Lacan initially introduced the concept of "the mirror stage" in 1936 at the Fourteenth International Psychoanalytical Congress at Marienbad, and in the English translation of his 1949 essay, the term "the gaze" is not actually used. It is, however, the terminology that has been adopted by feminist film theorists and film studies scholars who study spectatorship.

Lacan's Influence on Psychoanalytic Feminist Film Theory

The mirror stage, Lacan explains, first occurs in young children, and connotes the child's entrance into the Imaginary order, constituting the child's formation of the Ego. Thus, it is through the mirror stage that the child formulates himself as subject (and enters the Symbolic order) when he assumes identification with (his own) reflected mirror image and associates that image with the ideal (and enters the Imaginary order) (Lacan 2007, 75). Early feminist film theorists relate the mirror stage to the cinematic viewing experience of the spectator. With this, Mulvey compares the spectator's relationship to film to the child's relationship to the mirror in the mirror stage.

When viewing a film, the (male) spectator enters into the Imaginary order, which is structured by the Symbolic order. This posits the woman on screen as the objectified Other. Mulvey describes how the position of the woman as signifier of the other in the Symbolic order, and the bearer of meaning, is manifested in Hollywood Cinema:

Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer, not maker, of meaning. (Mulvey 1975, 44)

The presence and positioning of the woman on screen allows for the fulfillment of male scopophilic desires where male spectators experience pleasure in objectifying the female image on screen through an active controlling gaze. However, this pleasurable

looking and narcissistic identification with the female image on screen can also be traumatic because the woman, as signifier of lack (of a penis), serves as constant reminder of the threat of castration (Mulvey 1975, 46). Thus, for Mulvey, “the male gaze” is that which propels and enables the objectification and simplification of women in film. Psychoanalytic theory, Mulvey argues, relies on a male/female binary essentialism that manifests itself on screen through the active/male and passive/female dichotomy:

The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. (Mulvey 1975, 47-48, her emphasis)

For Mulvey, cinema serves as a mirror for the male spectator who reacts to the images on screen through narcissistic identification and (mis)recognition in the pursuit of scopophilic pleasure. Hollywood film, and particularly Classic Hollywood Cinema, positions the spectator so that he is able to actively gaze at and objectify the female image—the “other”—on screen in order to satisfy the scopophilic desire for the other.

In *The Imaginary Signifier* (1986), Christian Metz challenges the notion that the cinematic experience of the spectator can be assimilated to that of the child in the mirror stage, yet he still associates the spectator’s cinematic viewing experience with the child’s mirror stage experience. Metz makes an effort to compare, yet distinguish between the two experiences, whereas Mulvey takes for granted that the two are essentially the same. For Metz, the cinematic screen is not the *same* as the primordial mirror, but rather it is a *screen* whose image is not a literal reflection of the self, but a reflection of the perception of the self and other.

[Film] is *like* the mirror. But it differs from the primordial mirror in one essential point: although, as in the latter, everything may come to be projected, there is one thing and one thing only that is never reflected in it: the spectator's own body. In a certain emplacement, the mirror suddenly becomes clear glass. (Metz 1986, 45, my emphasis)

As Metz explains, a film is *like* a mirror. The experience of the cinematic spectator is *like* that of the child in the mirror stage, but not the same, because the spectator's own body is never actually reflected. This absence of the spectator's own body on screen posits the order of the Symbolic where the spectator acknowledges his place as subject and, unlike the child in the mirror stage who has yet to grasp the dual relationship between ego and body, the adult spectator, due to his inability to recognize himself as object on screen (because his own image is never on screen), is only ever able to be the bearer of the gaze. For Metz, *looking* is the only action permitted of the spectator and, moreover, the spectators are *aware* that they are perceiving and not imagining (Metz 1986, 45).

Metz's conceptualization of the gaze does not deviate far from Mulvey's, aside from his emphasis on the distinction between the reflections in the primordial mirror and the cinematic screen. For Metz, the spectator is still the bearer of the gaze who is actively looking at ad objectifying images on screen, however, Metz does not specify the gender of the spectator, whereas Mulvey argues that the spectator position is inherently male and masculine. For Metz, it is the *position* of the cinematic spectator that requires one to act as bearer of the look, not the spectator's gender or masculinity, which implies that the bearer of the look *could be* female or male. Mulvey, on the other hand, argues that (Classic) Hollywood Cinema assumes the spectator position to be male, and reinforces this through cinematic structuring, framing, and editing that posits the male character on screen as the point of view of spectator and the female character as the

fetishized object of desire. With this, female spectators are only permitted in a masochistic identification with the woman on screen or a trans-sex identification with the masculinist position of the male spectator.

Other feminist film scholars have used the metaphor of the mirror to describe the screen's relationship to the spectator. In *And The Mirror Cracked: Feminist Cinema and Film Theory* (1998), Anneke Smelik argues "feminism has undone the mimetic mirror of masculinist culture" (185), using the mirror metaphor to convey cinema as a medium that reflects *masculinist* culture and excludes women's voices and perspectives. While Smelik emphasizes cinema as a mirror, for her it is a particular mirror which filters its reflection. Unlike Mulvey, who perhaps overemphasizes the potential of a feminist avant-garde cinema to transgress the restricting conventional structures in Classic Hollywood Cinema, Smelik asserts the potential of *feminism* to transgress these binding film forms and structures. "Feminism did crack the mirror." Smelik insists, "that gesture was necessary in order to open up the powerful camera eye to new fields of vision: to different angles, points of view, positions, images and representations" (6).

For Smelik, it is the socio-political project of feminism that has transformed cinema and incited an emergence of feminist (narrative) filmmakers who "represent the signs and significations of 'woman' and of 'femininity' differently from the codes and conventions of dominant cinema, while they still employ and deploy (rather than deconstruct) visual and narrative pleasure" (2) and "[process their] daily experience of belonging to the social and historical gendered category of women, so as to change mainstream cultural representation of sexual difference [and] female subjectivity" (3). Smelik departs from Mulvey when she insists on the potential of feminist narrative

filmmaking as a means through which female representation and subjectivity can weave together visual pleasure and politics. For Smelik, the demand for a feminist avant-garde and non-narrative cinema creates “an unfruitful and unnecessary opposition between politics and pleasure” (2) which takes for granted the possibilities of a feminist appropriation of narrative cinema to extend its capacity to convey visual pleasure.

Kaja Silverman, another feminist film scholar, uses the mirror metaphor in her book, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (1988). Using the 1960 film, *Peeping Tom*, as an example of the cinematic apparatus’s capacity to induce sadistic and voyeuristic pleasures, Silverman emphasizes that the film’s “remarkable structure suggests dominant cinema is indeed a mirror with a delayed reflection” (32). It is not a mirror, but an “acoustic mirror” which filters its images and content to appeal to the presumed male spectator.

In Mulvey’s 1981 essay, “Afterthoughts on ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,’” she addresses the main critiques of her original essay, which claimed she overlooked and simplified the male spectator, failing to recognize his complexity of sexual difference, and that she denied agency to the female spectator. Mulvey reformulates her initial male/active, female/passive dichotomy in light of the melodrama film genre, which she claims allows an active female viewing position, but not a *feminine* active viewing position. The spectator position remains masculine, and a female may only occupy that position through a trans-sex identification with the masculine male position. According to Mulvey, this trans-sex identification is a form of drag/transvestitism in which the female spectator must identify in opposition with their

presumed femininity in order to temporarily assume the required masculinity necessary for the active-viewing spectator.

Mulvey asserts that it is in the melodrama, also referred to as the “woman’s film,” where trans-sex identification for the female spectator is encouraged. This is because the melodrama (and specifically the “woman’s film” melodrama) places a female character at the center of the narrative and posits her in an opposition “between the deep blue sea of passive femininity and the devil of regressive masculinity” (2009, 32) so that she is unable to achieve a stable sexual identity. This inability to achieve a stable sexual identity, Mulvey suggests, “is echoed by the woman spectator’s masculine ‘point of view’” (32), and results from the central female character’s positioning as the “hero(ine)” of the narrative.

The conventional “narrative division of labour,” Mulvey describes, relies on Freudian active/masculine structure which posits the hero as masculine—and male—and positions the male character as the hero of the narrative who saves the victimized female character (34). Because the “grammar” of the narrative aligns the spectator with the hero, who is a masculinized figure, a female heroine must therefore work to balance between the masculinity required as hero of the narrative, and the femininity required as a female (35). If the “spell of fascination” for the female spectator is to remain in tact, she must then assume a trans-sex identification in order to account for the masculinization of the female (and feminine) hero (31).

In her discussion of *Duel in the Sun* (1946) Mulvey explains how the function of “marriage” in the Western “sublimates the erotic into a final, closing, social ritual,” which is “[sex-] specific, and the main rationale for any female presence in this strand of the

genre" (2009, 37). The woman signifies the erotic—the sexual—and cannot serve as the central figure in the narrative, only the "other" character. When the woman is the main character of the film, Mulvey argues, that her meaning is shifted and the film so that she does not serve as the signifier of sexuality, but rather the entire narrative is then *about* sexuality, and thus becomes a melodrama (37).

While Mulvey's two essays provide an analysis on female representation and spectatorship in Classic Hollywood Cinema, the Western, and the Melodrama, she still does not address other possibilities of spectatorship. Because she is trapped by the psychoanalytic polarization of essentialized heterosexual female femininity and heterosexual male masculinity, she is unable to address how, or if, a feminine female spectator may actively look at and desire a central male character, or hero, on screen, or how a female spectator may assume an active viewing position without trans-sex identification, or how a female spectator—whether feminine, masculine, heterosexual, homosexual, or queer—may actively look at other women on screen with desire, but not necessarily identifying with them. Even after Mulvey reexamines her own initial argument from her 1975 essay, she still leaves women with only two viewing options: to identify with the women on screen, or to take on a masculinist, active (male) point of view through trans-sex identification/transvestitism.

It is precisely at this point where the lens of psychoanalysis is limited. Its inability to escape essentialist notions of gender and sexuality and account for non-pathologized queer sexualities creates a barrier that hinders further exploration of lesbian spectatorship and the gaze. Nevertheless, it is necessary to ground a discussion of the gaze with Mulvey, whose argument is based on Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis,

because it explains the projection of desire in spectatorship and cinematic structure, and although it takes for granted that gender and sexuality are a reflection of biological sex, it describes the relation between film structure, narrative, representation, identification, and desire that provides a foundation from which to build a discussion of the gaze.

Since Mulvey's initial work on the gaze, an abundance of feminist film theorists have emerged with critiques of "the male gaze" as defined in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." E. Ann Kaplan, for example, challenges whether the gaze has to be male (and masculinist). Film can be structured, she argues, so that women can control the gaze too, without having to assume a masculinist position (Kaplan 1990). Teresa de Lauretis insists that the female spectator is constantly involved in a double-identification with active and passive subject positions (De Lauretis 1984). Likewise, Kaja Silverman suggests that the male/active and female/passive dichotomy does not always have to be in place, but rather, both male and female subjects (spectators) can act as bearer of the look, and that the spectator position is not necessarily masculine (Silverman 1992).

Mary Ann Doane critiques Mulvey for denying female spectators agency, and for limiting them to a position of victimization and failing to recognize that the power of the gaze works in more than one direction (Doane 1999). Doane proposes that women may choose to actively participate in "the masquerade" (excessive femininity) as objectified images-on-screen, because they may experience a narcissistic pleasure in being looked at. In her critique of Mulvey's oversimplification, Doane ultimately allows

the female spectator only two options: to over-identify with the women on screen (masochism), or to become their own objects of desire (narcissism).

While most feminist film criticism today is in agreement that Mulvey's male/active, female/passive dichotomy oversimplifies the spectator, another critique suggests that Mulvey's argument does not allow for an active *feminine*, or *feminist*, spectator. Spectatorship is still limited to the masculine, which is equated with active viewing. Mulvey does not address the possibility of a feminine, or feminist, heterosexual female spectator, or the potential for a queer, or lesbian, female spectator.

In their discussion of queer spectatorship, Caroline Evans and Lorraine Gamman challenge the heteronormative assumptions of most "gaze theory." In their essay they oscillate between Foucauldian and Lacanian (psychoanalytic) film theory's notions of the gaze, which emphasize the connection between power and knowledge, and gender and representation, respectively. Most discussion of the gaze, they argue, conflates the notion of "the look," which the authors associate with the eye, with "the gaze," which they associate with the phallus (15). The popularization of "the male gaze" as a metaphor for patriarchy or voyeurism without acknowledging the scholarship and its context, has transformed "the gaze" into a misunderstood cliché that excludes the possibility of a conceptualization of queer looking (15).

While Evans and Gamman recognize and discuss the limitations of a psychoanalytically-based understanding of the gaze, they also admit, as I also do in this paper, that it "provides a model to formulate questions about agency and desire" (20) that has not been done by other theories, and thus it remains useful to consider (but not exclusively rely on) psychoanalysis in any discussion of the gaze and spectatorship.

Mulvey's "gaze," they note, is incapable of conceptualizing the effects of queerness, race, or ethnicity on spectatorship. In agreement with a statement Judith Mayne makes about the insufficiency of any (current) theory of lesbian spectatorship, Evans and Gamman claim there is "no such thing as an essentially 'lesbian gaze'" (36), but rather "[lesbian] filmmakers and lesbian audiences bring different cultural competences to bear on the production and consumption of lesbian imagery" (36). The authors suggest "genderfuck," using June L. Reich's definition of the term as a process that involves "the destabilization of gender as an analytical category" (43), as a means through which one can convey the fluidity of identities and boundaries. "Genderfuck" challenges psychoanalytic conceptualizations of gender and sexual difference without retreating to a heteronormative, or heterosexist, presumption of sexuality. Evans and Gamman denounce the possibility of an essentially lesbian or gay gaze, claiming they "do not want to make the case for a 'queer gaze' either" (43), arguing instead for a conceptualization of "identifications which are multiple, contradictory, shifting, oscillating, inconsistent and fluid" (43).

In line with Evans and Gamman's refusal of an exclusively (essentializing) lesbian gaze, the goal of the filmmakers discussed in this chapter is not to create a lesbian or queer gaze, but to destabilize the male gaze. Akerman and Friedrich challenge the conventional Hollywood narrative structure, exposing the subversive potential of the avant-garde to destabilize conventional representations and notions of sexuality and queer female, or lesbian, representation. In working to destabilize the male gaze, the filmmakers actually impose an ambivalent—or ambiguous—gaze which works to portray the lesbian characters on screen as agents of their own sexuality without being

subjected as objects of desire (which occurs through fetishization, fragmentation of the female body). In these films, lesbian sexuality serves the purpose of providing visual representation of the previously unrepresentable, and, unlike women's role in (Classic) Hollywood Cinema, the queer female characters do not serve as signifiers of the erotic, but rather they become vehicles through which the erotic and queer are visualized.

***Je tu il elle* (1974)**

Akerman's *Je tu il elle* is arguably one of the first films to depict lesbian sex on screen, and therefore signals a shift in cinematic lesbian representation from coded, costumed, unspoken, and characterized, to more explicit via a sex act or speech act. The film is comprised of three main segments, which entail three different locations, although we never see Akerman, the main character and "je" ("I") in the film, transition from one location to the next.

In the first shot of the film, we see Akerman as the main character Julie, clothed and slouching in a chair with her back to the camera. In a small apartment furnished with a bed, tiny dresser, and chair, Julie proceeds to gradually strip her apartment of its furniture and remove her clothing for nearly thirty minutes, and narrates in a displaced voice-over as if reading diary entries. With long takes and wide shots, we watch as Akerman writes a love letter, eats grain sugar from a bag, and lingers in her room, occasionally staring into the camera. Next, we see a high-angle wide shot of multi-lane highway with cars traveling across and Akerman on the side attempting to hitchhike. A male truck driver picks her up and they eat in a restaurant without speaking to one another, stop to drink and smoke at several different bars, and listen to the radio in the car. At one point, the truck driver asks Akerman for a hand job, to which she complies, and during this the camera focuses on the truck driver's face without showing the actual

action on Akerman's part, only his reaction. For the third segment, we see Akerman arrive at the apartment of a former female lover who feeds her sandwiches and wine but tells her she cannot stay, however, after eating, Akerman and the other woman have sex. Lasting nearly fifteen minutes, the sex scene is divided into three segments: a wide shot, an eye level medium shot, and an off-center medium shot. The film culminates in a final shot of the lover sleeping in bed, after Akerman wakes up and leaves.

The pronouns in the film's title ("I, You, He, She") refer to Julie ("je"), the truck driver ("il"), and Julie's former lover ("elle"). The "tu" in the title has been debated (see Mayne 1990; Margulies 1996; Turim 2003), but generally has been considered a reference to the script/letter that Julie is writing, or a reference to the film's spectator, in which case Akerman is intentionally working to force the spectator to realize their position and power as spectator and voyeur of the film. Akerman incorporates the spectator *into* the film, as opposed to outside of the film, by creating a subject position for them in the film's title, serving as a consistent reminder of the spectator's presence within the film.

The film's structure creates a circular narrative that traces Julie's journey from isolation to sexual gratification. The first two segments end abruptly with no transition into the next scene or location, and we do not see where Julie goes after she leaves the apartment in the final scene. In *The Woman At The Keyhole: Feminism and Women's Cinema* (1990), Judith Mayne emphasizes the lack of linearity in the film and how the narrative does not simply progress from part one to part three, lacking any smooth transitions. The segments are not connected to each other (we do not see any visual

transitions from scene to scene), yet the segments are nevertheless *in dialogue* with each other (Mayne 1990, 132). Extending Mayne's analysis, Maureen Turim, in an essay on the film, discusses how the artificial stagings of the film are often misleadingly described as cinema-vérité realism, when in fact, the acting and staging is meticulously calculated and enacted (Turim 2003, 14). Turim notes that the film's minimalist abstraction and artificiality constantly flirts with autobiography, however, like many of Su Friedrich's films which are similarly interpreted as autobiographical (and some are confirmed autobiographical by the filmmaker herself), autobiography is constantly blurred as the filmmaker distances herself from the film through use of third person narrators and different names for the main characters.

Both Mayne and Turim discuss the role of lesbian authorship in Akerman's film and the potential contradictions that surface when restricting *Je tu il elle*'s categorization as a "lesbian film." Mayne praises Akerman for consciously avoiding the "trap" of lesbian triumphalism and "reversing the duality without questioning it" (Mayne 1990, 132-33). Instead, Mayne argues, Akerman conveys the complexity of (female) sexuality and engages critically with the "heterosexual formula of cinematic representation" (132) without replacing it with an equally problematic heterosexual = bad / lesbian = good dichotomy that is reminiscent of lesbian-separatist rhetoric from the 1970s. Indeed, Akerman avoids the glorification of lesbianism which simplifies, rather than complicates, female sexuality. Nevertheless, Akerman is susceptible to critiques of de-specifying lesbian sexuality and reproducing a cinematic representation of compulsory heterosexuality and the lesbian continuum à la Adrienne Rich.

Rich, in her 1980 essay, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” suggests that lesbianism does not constitute a sexual identity, but rather, a feminist *political* identity and a refusal of patriarchy. The “lesbian continuum,” Rich argues, describes the connection (not necessarily erotic) among all women, and alludes to the bond women share when they unite against patriarchy. This essay, published during the peak of the Women’s Liberation Movement, is perhaps most critiques for its destabilization of the sexual category “lesbian,” which lesbian (separatist) feminists worked to establish as a distinct, political and sexual category in the 1970s. By presuming that *all* relationships between women have the potential for lesbianism, Rich blurs the distinction between female-female friendship bonding and female-female sexual bonding and erotic desire. While Akerman successfully avoids the trap of lesbian glorification, she quite possibility falls into another—one in which female sexuality is presumably fluid so that sexual orientation and desire are not exclusive (not exclusively heterosexual or homosexual), but rather exist on a continuum of sexual desire. Although *Je tu il elle* does not insist on a compulsory heterosexuality, it does reveal sexuality to be a non-gender-specific continuum of desire.

The frequent long moments of silence in the film signify an unfulfilled sexual longing and desire, which is compensated by excessive food consumption, drinking, and writing. During these moments of silence the camera rarely moves and we are forced to closely observe Akerman as spectacle whose presence and (in)action on screen reminds the spectator of their lack of visual fulfillment due to lack of action, normative narrative sequence, or visual pleasure (objectification). In the culminating sex scene between the two women, the spectator expects to receive gratification. The

spectator expects to be fulfilled through filming conventions used in sex scenes (whether in Hollywood cinema, independent cinema, or pornography) that relies on codes used in pornographic depictions of lovemaking, or sex, that cut from subject to object, and isolating body parts as fetishized objects (Mayne 1990, 129). In *Je tu il elle* the spectator is denied this expected fulfillment of desire as the three shots of the sex scene resist fragmentation or isolation of body parts, showing the two women's entire bodies from a distance (aside from the second shot in which the women's heads are in clear and closer focus, and their bodies, while still in the shot, are more out of focus).

The sex scene in the film is hardly edited; the camera remains distant, zooming in only slightly, in order to see the intensity of the facial expressions of the two women. The character's movements are awkwardly rough and jagged, but meticulously and rhythmically coordinated. Although both women are nude, their bodies are not displayed as spectacle, as disengaged, fragmented objects to be looked at and fetishized. In fact, the typically fetishized female body parts (breasts, legs, lips) are hardly distinguishable; the distinction between the two women's bodies is blurred as they awkwardly, yet passionately, engage in a restless, wrestling embrace. Akerman resists typical filmic conventions structured around the desire of the male voyeur. The film denies the spectator the pleasure derived from, and supported by, the fragmentation and editing cuts from subject to object that foster the male gaze. Hence, Akerman equates transgression of the male gaze with the dislocation of male pleasure and female objectification on screen, and through a refusal to depict the visualization of male sexual gratification on screen, Akerman destabilizes the male gaze.

Even the hand job scene, in which the truck driver responds to the hand job Julie is performing off screen, the film withholds the image of the female in its depiction of male sexual gratification. During this scene the sexual act is not shown on screen and Akerman's voiceover is temporarily halted. Instead, we see a close-up of the trucker's face, and hear his verbal instructions and reactions to Akerman's actions off screen. As Turim observes, the truck driver must direct Julie's actions and supply her with specific instructions in order to experience pleasure; he does not trust Julie to successfully do this on her own, without direction (Turim 2003, 16). On the other hand, Julie and her former lover do not need to direct each other's actions; they already know how to induce pleasure for the other. Whereas most films depicting sex scenes on screen tend to focus the shot on the woman's face at the height of male-induced sexual pleasure, *Je tu il elle* positions the camera on a close-up of the truck driver's face while Julie is performing the hand job off screen, and during the sex scene between Julie and her former lover, the film does not offer an equivalent close-up reaction of the women's faces. This is perhaps because Akerman is more invested in destabilizing the male gaze via a refusal of cinematic and narrative conventions, than in manifesting a specifically lesbian gaze. Julie's sexuality in the film challenges lesbian-feminist essentializations of female-female sexuality and the specificity of an exclusively lesbian identity.

On-Screen Sex Acts and Lesbian Representability

Je tu il elle is recognized as one of the first films to depict an explicit representation of lesbian sex on screen. Although pre-code and Code Era Hollywood Cinema prohibited the depiction of homosexuality on screen, this "invisibility" incited attempts at queer female representation via characterization, clothing, "looks," and

subtle use of lesbian subcultural codes (see Patricia White 1999). The coinciding feminist, civil rights, and gay liberation movements in the 1960s and 1970s, as well as the abolition of the Motion Picture Production Code in 1968, allowed for—and to an extent even demanded—that queer female representation manifest itself on different terms. It is beginning with *Je tu il elle*, I argue, that a shift from “coded” lesbian representation to lesbian representation via a sex act or speech act, occurs. With this, it would seem that post-1970s representation in film is not lesbian until the sex act or speech act (pronouncement of one’s queer sexuality) is depicted on screen. In the case of *Je tu il elle*, the sex serves to validate Julie’s sexuality and reaffirms her identity as queer, or lesbian. Thus, Julie’s sexuality remains assumedly heterosexual to the spectator until she engages in sex on screen with her former lover.

The majority of contemporary (post-1970s) films categorized as “lesbian films” depict lesbian sex on screen (that is, sex between two women), whereas older, pre-1970s films did not, due to The Code and Hollywood restrictions on depictions of homosexuality and perverse sexuality, among other things. The feminist avant-garde film, or rather the feminist lesbian avant-garde cinema of which Akerman and Friedrich are a part, in which the first lesbian sex scene was depicted outside of pornography, liberated the lesbian character and enabled a different kind of representation—a more explicit representation—which no longer needed, or wanted, to rely on codes and innuendos to represent queer female sexuality. It would seem then that the combination of self-representation (lesbian-identified filmmakers portraying lesbians) and an increasing number of films depicting lesbian sex on screen will incite “better” representation, that is, a less objectified, less stereotyped and stigmatized, self-

portrayal. This misconception of “better representation,” however, takes for granted that self-representation is not also influenced by societal conceptualizations of lesbian sexuality, and assumes that simply *showing* lesbian sex on screen will create “better representation” for lesbians.

In Volume I of *The History of Sexuality* (1978), Michel Foucault explains that the notion that sexuality has been repressed in Western society since the 17th Century is not accurate. Society was in fact preoccupied with sexuality, Foucault insists, and developed different ways to talk about it (*ars erotica* and *scientia sexualis*). Foucault critiques the notion of the repressive hypothesis and Freudian psychoanalysis’s insistence on confession and disclosing one’s sexual desire and fantasies as a means of liberation. Thus, for Foucault, simply talking more openly and more frequently about sex does not free it from the power relations and constraints that bind it. Likewise, simply showing lesbian sex more explicitly and more frequently does not alleviate it from the power (and cinematic) structures that initially attempted to repress it.

***Hide and Seek* (1996)**

Su Friedrich, another prominent feminist and lesbian-identified avant-garde filmmaker whose career emerged concurrent with other eminent feminist avant-garde filmmakers, began making films in the late 1970s. In her films, Friedrich incorporates techniques of narrative, documentary, and experimental film to create a uniquely experimental, avant-garde style similar to that of other lesbian-identified feminist experimental filmmakers such as Barbara Hammer and Cheryl Dunye. Not all of Friedrich’s films focus explicitly on lesbian sexuality and desire: some of her more recent films focus on her personal struggle with cancer (*The Odds of Recovery*, 2002) and coffee works in the global economy (*From the Ground Up*, 2007). She has

produced several significant films which contribute generously to the exploration of lesbian sexuality and desire (*Gently Down the Stream*, 1983; *Damned If You Don't*, 1987; *Sink or Swim*, 1990).

Friedrich's film *Hide and Seek*, while produced in 1996, is classified as feminist avant-garde for the purposes of this paper because Friedrich's filmmaking style is aesthetically comparable to that of other feminist avant-gardists. Friedrich first began making films in the 1970s and early 1980s, when the feminist avant-garde was the "dominant" feminist cinema. *Hide and Seek* intertwines a narrative set in the 1960s with present-day interviews (conducted by the filmmakers, although we do not see her interviewing, we can often hear her asking the questions), and archival documentary footage of sex education videos from the mid-twentieth century.

The narrative plot focuses on Lou, a pre-teen tomboy on the onset of puberty who is beginning to feel societal pressure and peer pressure to "be a girl," and to conform to gender-prescribed activities and behavior. Lou enjoys time with her girl friends at sleepovers, at school, and in her tree house; however, she also enjoys the more adventurous outdoor activities she is able to do with her friends who are boys. Classroom scenes where Lou and her friends distractedly suffer through the ridiculously conservative 1960s sex education videos that warn against unnaturally close behavior between two girls are juxtaposed with the present-day interviewees' (and self-described lesbians') recollections of how and what they first learned about sex. The interviewees answer various questions about how they first learned about sex, whether they feel they were "born gay" or "became gay," and whether they feel they had a "gay childhood." While we see the faces of the interviewees on screen, their commentaries are often

juxtaposed with childhood photographs and home videos of young girls. Although we do not know whether these childhood pictures are of the women being interviewed, we are invited to look for evidence of lesbianism—of queerness—in these pictures, which in turn forces us to question what such evidence would look like, because the proof is not there on screen.

Judith Mayne emphasizes the ambiguity in Friedrich's work, since "the figures that recur in her films [...] open up spaces for contemplation [and] for reflection on both the specificity of lesbian desire and the impossibility of fixing that desire to one specific image or narrative" (Mayne 2000, 208). Friedrich thus presents a seemingly more "truthful" portrayal of lesbians because she allows them to represent and "explain" themselves, recounting their own stories. As Mulvey emphasizes in her essay, "Feminism, Film, and the Avant-Garde," the main goal of the feminist avant-garde is to attack sexism by confronting the overriding oppressive dominant patriarchal ideology. They means through which to do this, Mulvey argues, is self-representation (2009, 115-131).

It would seem that Friedrich's goal is to convey that there is no one unifying lesbian experience, that there is no unifying lesbian childhood that explains one's queer sexuality. Through her juxtaposition of childhood photographs with the interviews, Friedrich demonstrates a social constructionist view of sexuality. The intertwining narrative of Lou encourages the spectator to question the social constructionist perspective when considering why Lou, who is immersed in the same environment as her feminine (and presumably heterosexual) sister and friends, would express her gender differently and desire, or be attracted to, her girl friend instead of a boy. Lou's

disavowal of her femininity is perhaps most explicit when, during a truth-or-dare game at a friend's sleepover, the girls ask her if she already has her period, and Lou, embarrassed and defensive, replies "no," although we have already witnessed that she in fact has. As Mayne notes, the film "offers a tale of growing up that is 'not necessarily' lesbian, but by situating that tale within the narratives of lesbian identity told by lesbians, the film traces a narrative of lesbian desire" (Mayne 2000, 193).

Through the juxtaposition of a 1960s coming-of-age narrative with 1960s sex education films and present-day interviews, Friedrich is able to convey the social construction of sexuality on screen. The filmmaker destabilizes what the sex education videos are attempting to instill in children: that same-sex desire is unnatural and homosexuality is a menace to society. In showing the spectator the tools of societal indoctrination (sex education videos, teachers, media) from which spawn the notions of queer sexuality as perverse and harmful, Friedrich alludes to the "real life" testimonies of self-identified lesbians as evidence to the contrary.

Unlike Akerman's *Je tu il elle*, *Hide and Seek* offers no visualization of lesbian sex on screen, which then requires that sexual identity be affirmed via speech act or verbal affirmation. In the film's present-day interviews, the women affirm their lesbian sexuality in their commentary, so their sexual orientation is not ambiguous. Rather, what is ambiguous is the category "lesbian." By illustrating the ambiguity of lesbian representation, Akerman and Friedrich work to *destabilize* the gaze, which relies on a stability of identity for both the on-screen characters and the spectators in order to function as the "male gaze" conceptualized by Mulvey. The next chapter examines

several films from the 1980s to show how two filmmakers reappropriate the male gaze within the structures of narrative film.

CHAPTER 3

BLURRING (IN)DIFFERENCE IN THE (BI) SEXUAL MID LIFE CRISIS FILM

While the 1970s saw an emergence of films by feminist and lesbian feminist avant-garde filmmakers who worked to destabilize the dominant male gaze prevalent in Classic Hollywood Cinema, the 1980s saw an influx of narrative films about middle-aged (heterosexual) women who become involved in sexual relationships with other women and are forced to deal with the personal and societal consequences of their lesbianism and (bi)sexuality. The main female character in these films turns to lesbianism as an outlet from the restraints and discontent of unsatisfying heterosexuality (and normativity). The “crisis” to which I refer in these films reflects the central characters’ conflicting emotions, desires, and sexuality, as they are suddenly displaced from their “stable” sexuality and forced to reconcile their blurred lesbian (in)difference within a heteronormative environment.

Relying on traditional narrative structure and plotlines, these films attempt to assimilate lesbian representation into existing narratives and cinematic conventions of the melodrama and “Woman’s Film.” These “bisexual midlife crisis” films of the 80s reappropriate Hollywood narrative conventions and reaffirm the heteronormativity of the hegemonic spectator position. Through the possibility of a “masquerade” of lesbianism for the female spectator, blurred with the (in)difference of lesbian sexuality of the central characters on screen, these films challenge the “male gaze,” but ultimately reassert a heteronormative gaze.

For the male gaze to successfully suture the spectator into the filmic fantasy, the identity of the spectator is expected to be male, or masculine, and the on screen object of desire is assumed to be female, or feminine. Through this blurring of lesbian

(in)difference, a concept that will be further addressed later in the chapter, these films resist an essentialization of lesbian sexuality, which would mean to represent lesbian sexuality as inborn. With this, the filmmakers avoid appropriating the (male) gaze into an exclusively “lesbian gaze,” which would require a stability of the identity category “lesbian.” Instead, the films institute a *heteronormative* gaze in which there is no exclusivity to any non-heterosexuality. Rather all lesbian sexuality is, to use Luce Irigaray’s term, *hommo-sexuality* (see further explanation in De Lauretis 1988, 156). In preventing the possibility of an explicitly “lesbian gaze” (because their representation of lesbian sexuality is de-specified and universalized) the female spectator is invited to wear lesbianism as a “mask,” which may be conveniently put on and removed so that the female viewer may identify with the main character as protagonist, or identify with the other female character as object-of-desire. This depiction of lesbian sexuality as (in)difference lends itself to the representation of female (friendship) bonding rather than an account of distinct and specific sexuality.

In “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Mulvey asserts that the spectator-subject position is an exclusively masculine position (Mulvey 1975), which women can only access through trans-sex identification with the masculinist position (transvestitism). Years later in “Afterthoughts on ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,’” Mulvey rethinks her original argument and allows for one other viewing option for the female spectator: identification with the female characters on screen (Mulvey 1999), which is provoked through film genres such as the melodrama, romantic comedy, and “women’s film.” Doane, as well several other psychoanalytic feminist film theorists in the 1980s, acknowledges the limitations of Mulvey’s argument and its

implications for female spectators, and proposes another viewing option for the female spectator, asserting the necessity of spatial distance for active spectatorship:

The supportive binary opposition at work here is not only that utilized by Laura Mulvey—an opposition between passivity and activity, but perhaps more importantly, an opposition between proximity and distance in relation to the image. It is in this sense that the very logic behind the structure of the gaze demands a sexual division. While the distance between the image and signified (or even referent) is theorized as minimal, if non-existent, that between the film and the spectator must be maintained, even measured. (Doane 1991, 21).

Doane refers to Christian Metz's assertion that the voyeuristic spectator position requires a distance between the spectator and the image, which then becomes a sort of "meta-desire" (Doane 1991, 21). The female spectator lacks this necessary distance from the image because of her identification as a (feminine) woman. The female spectator is thus unable to fetishize or assume a voyeuristic spectator position without first engaging in trans-sex identification. Doane ultimately allows the female spectator two viewing options: a masochistic over-identification with the woman on screen or to become their own object of desire, which results in narcissism (31). The latter is only possible through the "masquerade," which flaunts femininity as a mask, creating distance between the female spectator and the female on screen. Through this destabilization of the image, Doane insists, "the masquerade confounds [the] masculine structure of the look" (26).

In *Desert Hearts* (Donna Deitch, 1985) and *Lianna* (John Sayles, 1983), the filmmakers use the cinematic conventions of the melodrama genre into which they insert the story of (bi)sexual mid-life crisis and lesbian sexual (in)difference. Because these two bisexual midlife crisis narrative films reinstate the hegemonic heteronormativity of Mulvey's male gaze, they are unable to represent queer female

desire outside of notions of female friendship and normative sexuality. These films are unable to portray lesbian desire and sexuality as distinct from heteronormative sexuality. Instead, they present lesbianism as an extreme, exaggerated form of female friendship so that “lesbian” is not a distinct sexuality, but a form of female bonding that remains within the constraints of hegemonic heteronormativity.

Laura Mulvey and Teresa De Lauretis propose that narrative (Hollywood) cinema is incapable of representing the difference and specificity of lesbian sexuality and desire. Mulvey contests that only a feminist avant-garde which is structurally and historically distinct from Classic Hollywood Cinema is equipped to evade the objectification of women on screen (Mulvey 2009). Similarly, De Lauretis argues that mainstream (Hollywood) narrative film is unable to represent the specificity of lesbian desire because it is restricted by a cinematic apparatus whose purpose is to promote and perpetuate systems of patriarchy and heterosexuality (De Lauretis 1994). Thus, narrative (Hollywood) cinema, whose cinematic and narrative conventions are derived from Classic Hollywood, is problematic for lesbian representation because its conventions are rooted in a systematic structure that aims to fulfill (heterosexual) male desire through the objectification and fetishization of women. Critiques that charge narrative (Hollywood) cinema with being unable to portray lesbian difference take for granted that lesbian, and even further, that *all* lesbian desire and sexuality is inherently different than male and heterosexual desire and sexuality.

In her 1988 essay “Sexual Indifference and Lesbian Representation,” Teresa De Lauretis posits that through feminism and a rereading of psychoanalysis and Western discourse on love and sexuality, “[in] the very act of assuming and speaking from the

position of subject, a woman could concurrently recognize women as subjects *and* as objects of female desire" (1988, 155). De Lauretis compares the "liberal ideology of pluralism" to the "separate but equal" rhetoric in racist and class-biased practices. The rhetoric of "separate but equal," she argues, offers a false illusion of equality, recognition, and representation while it requires people to be simultaneously the same yet different, so that, as De Lauretis notes, "social difference is also, at the same time, social indifference" (1988, 155). De Lauretis writes:

It thus appears that "sexual difference" is the term of a conceptual paradox corresponding to what is in effect a real contradiction in women's lives: the term, at once, of a sexual *difference* (women are, or want, something different from men) and of a sexual *indifference* (women are, or want, the same as men). (1988, 155, her emphasis)

It is this fluctuation between difference and indifference, specificity and sameness that problematizes the identity category "lesbian" and, in turn, affects lesbian representation. De Lauretis uses the term *(in)difference* to describe Luce Irigaray's concept of homomsexuality:

'The object choice of the homosexual woman is [understood to be] determined by a *masculine* desire and tropism' –that is, precisely, the turn of so-called sexual difference into sexual indifference, a single practice and representation of the sexual. (as quoted in De Lauretis 1988, 156)

Desert Hearts and *Lianna* exhibit a similar *(in)difference* in their representation of "lesbianism," wherein the "(bi)sexual midlife crisis" is a result of discontent with heterosexuality that is solved through erotic female friendship bonding, as opposed to the revelation of a distinctly lesbian sexuality. I rely on this notion of "*(in)difference*" when I discuss the *(in)difference* of the characters' (lesbian) sexuality in *Desert Hearts* and *Lianna*. I write the word as *(in)difference* in order to retain its meaning as a simultaneous difference and indifference. In agreement with De Lauretis (1988), I

suggest that lesbian representation cannot rely exclusively on depictions of queer female sexuality as sexual difference or sexual indifference, but rather, manifestations of both conceptualizations are necessary in order to extend representation of “lesbian” to include a wider spectrum of possibilities. De Lauretis explains,

Lesbian representation, or rather its condition of possibility, depends on separating out the two contrary undertows that constitute the paradox of sexual (in)difference, on isolating but maintaining the two senses of homosexuality and hommo-sexuality. (1988, 159)

Thus, the goal of lesbian representation should not be to convey lesbian sexuality as exclusively homosexual or exclusively hommo-sexual (which, as De Lauretis explains, is essentially heterosexual); however, it should also not conflate the two as the same.

Mary Ann Doane discusses how a “claustrophobic closeness” to the image on screen requires that theories of female spectatorship consider transvestitism and a fluctuation between masculine and feminine viewing positions. This limited agency is both grounded in and perpetuated by cinematic narrative structures. According to Doane, “identification with the active hero necessarily entails an acceptance of what Laura Mulvey refers to as a certain “masculinization” of spectatorship” (Doane 1991 24). Doane suggests a possibility for transgressing Mulvey’s “masculinization” of spectatorship: the (feminine) masquerade. The masquerade posits femininity as a mask, a mask of excessive femininity which conceals the “non-identity” of the woman (1999, 25). Masquerade allows a distancing of femininity, which prohibits the spatial proximity that is typical for the female spectator, ultimately allowing the female spectator to escape the masculinization of spectatorship. Doane explains:

The masquerade, in flaunting femininity, holds it at a distance. Womanliness is a mask which can be worn or removed. The masquerade’s resistance to patriarchal positioning would therefore lie in its denial of the production of femininity as closeness, as presence-to-itself, as, precisely,

imagistic. The transvestite adopts the sexuality of the other—the woman becomes a man in order to attain the necessary distance from the image. Masquerade, on the other hand, involves a realignment of femininity, the recovery, or more accurately, simulation, of the missing gap or distance. To masquerade is to manufacture a lack in the form of a certain distance between oneself and one's image. (Doane 25-26)

This is of relevance for the films in this chapter because they demonstrate the capacity for a similar masquerade—a feminine *lesbian* masquerade—that allows the female spectator to wear lesbianism as a mask in order to distance herself from the lesbianism on screen.

The filmmakers simultaneously distance the female characters via lesbian sexuality and (in)difference, while also portraying on-screen sex shot in a manner consistent with Hollywood Cinema so that spectators may also fetishize the female body and participate as voyeurs through the familiar, and thus accessible, cinematic structuring of desire and sexuality. Thus, for non-lesbian-identified female spectators, it is possible to assume a narcissistic spectator position that does not threaten their own identity as heterosexual because of the (in)difference of female homosexuality and homosociality on screen. The lesbian masquerade serves a similar function to Doane's masquerade; it is a mask of that can be taken on and off by the female spectator so they may either identify with the character on screen without "desiring" the other female character, or they may participate as voyeurs as they desire the female character.

Lesbian film scholars observe that narrative lesbian films are often well received by lesbian audiences (Hollinger 1998), presumably because only a limited number of queer female representations exist. Lesbian audiences flock to them because they are thirsty for representation, whether or not their representation despecifies or specifies lesbian sexuality. Then is it possible that lesbian sexuality and desire *can exist* within

the heterosexual/male model of desire and sexuality? If all lesbian desire and sexuality is in fact distinctly different and unique from heterosexuality and heterosexual desire, then a cinematic structure created to project heterosexual male desire cannot accommodate a distinct lesbian on-screen desire or spectator. The question lies in the location of desire, and whether desire stems from the recognition (assumption) on the part of the spectator, or from the on-screen desire of the characters on screen that is then recognized by the spectator? Karen Hollinger states that

The subversive potential of the lesbian coupled subject position, as de Lauretis has theorized it, resides ultimately in its evocation of the lesbian look and in the investment of this look in two desiring women, the coupled lesbian protagonysis of the film, each of whom is simultaneously both subject and object of the look and consequently of female desire. (Hollinger 1998, 12)

In her discussion of “Women’s Cinema,” De Lauretis argues that an appropriation of existing “formal processes of meaning production, including the production of narrative, visual pleasure, and subject positions” is not enough to transform the perception and representation of women. De Lauretis contends that

[To] ask whether there is a feminine or female aesthetic, or a specific language of women’s cinema, is to remain caught in the master’s house and there, as Audre Lorde’s suggestive metaphor warns us, to legitimate the hidden agendas of a culture we badly need to change. (De Lauretis 1994, 144)

De Lauretis continues to propose that an analysis and experimentation of these established formal processes is still necessary, however, that it is the role of feminist theory and feminist filmmakers to “engage precisely in the redefinition of aesthetic and formal knowledges, much as women’s cinema has been engaged in the transformation of vision” (144). Thus, it is through a restructuring and redefining of aesthetic and formal knowledges, that a transgression of hegemonic (mis)representation is possible

and most likely. It is not possible to drastically change representation or spectators' reactions to lesbianism by simply inserting lesbian characters into traditional storylines or narrative structures; the representation is still bound by the cinematic narrative conventions that are embedded and invested in a perpetuation of patriarchy and heteronormativity. This is not to say that the integration of marginalized identities into mainstream indie and Hollywood films is not significant, however, it is necessary to recognize that traditional narrative cinema alone will not substantially change lesbian representation because it is embedded in a history of misrepresentation that has stigmatized marginalized groups through the use of certain cinematic techniques and conventions which are still used today.

Critiques of films like *Desert Hearts* and *Lianna*, as well as several films from the late 1990s and early 2000s, such as *Chasing Amy* (1997) and *Kissing Jessica Stein* (2001), contest that the ambiguity of the characters' sexuality (that most of the characters have been in heterosexual relationships) and the assimilation of their representation into existing conventional narrative structures and genres fosters a lesbian representation that is devoid of any specificity and appropriated to stimulate and satisfy the desire of (heterosexual) male and heterosexual and lesbian spectators.

It is important to note that the (in)different sexuality of the main female characters in these bisexual midlife crisis films is different from the ambiguity and ambivalence in the lesbian feminist avant-garde films discussed in chapter one. The former's ambivalence lies in the sexual ambiguity of the "lesbian" characters, while the latter instills an ambivalent gaze as a result of its representation of lesbian sexuality as (in)difference. Thus, bisexual midlife crisis narratives reproduce an appropriated

heteronormative gaze that denies the possibility of a distinctly lesbian gaze and universalizes, or rather blurs, lesbian sexuality and desire, so that (heterosexual) women can participate as spectators. With this, both male and female spectators are able to assume an active viewing position that is not necessarily masculine. Hollinger further describes how the “ambiguous lesbian film” affects lesbian representation:

The ambiguous lesbian film can, in fact, be seen as having both negative and positive effects on lesbian viewers...[ambiguous] portrayals of homosexuality construct ‘homosexual subjects doubtful of the validity and even of the reality of their desire.’ Ambiguous lesbian films tell their audience that what appears to be lesbianism is really only female friendship, thus seeming to deny the very existence of lesbian identity. At the same time, however, they also arguably possess certain lesbian affirmative qualities...[they] at least avoid the overt homophobia that has for so long characterized mainstream representations of homosexuality.
(Hollinger 1998, 7)

While Hollinger acknowledges that there are both positive and negative effects of ambiguous lesbian representation, she does not discuss how an ambiguous film in which characters are not necessarily explicitly identified as lesbian can be affirming. Hollinger claims that ambiguous lesbian films “at least avoid the overt homophobia that has for so long characterized mainstream representations of homosexuality” (7). However, Hollinger takes for granted that lesbian spectators will interpret the female characters’ relationship as lesbian and that heterosexual female spectators will interpret the relationship as friendship/bonding, so that “ambiguous” interpretation simply means that spectators will interpret the film in accordance with their own identity.

Hollinger also discusses how ambiguous (or (in)different) lesbian films do not necessarily avoid homophobia. Earlier mainstream representations of homosexuality convey homophobia through stigmatization of homosexuals as villains, criminals, social deviants, or as mentally ill so that the spectator would not be likely to identify with the

homosexual character. Thus, homophobia in ambiguous lesbian films is shifted to an internalized homophobia on the part of the homosexual character, who is punished, either by herself or by society, for her deviant non-normative sexual desire.

Lianna (1983)

Lianna (1983), directed by John Sayles, is one of various films from the 1980s and 1990s to offer lesbian representation embedded in a hegemonic heteronormative discourse [see *Personal Best* (1982), *Chasing Amy* (1997), *Kissing Jessica Stein* (2001)]. *Lianna* tells the story of Lianna, a late twenties/early thirties wife of a English and film professor and mother of two who falls in love with her older female professor, leaves her husband, and embarks on a new life as a lesbian. Dissatisfied with her role as stay-at-home mother and housewife of a cheating Film Studies professor husband, Lianna decides to take a child psychology night class with her friend and fellow professor's wife, Sandy. Lianna begins spending more time with Ruth, her child psychology professor, and develops a crush on her.

Lianna's marriage to Dick becomes distant after she discovers his affair with one of his students, and she seeks solace in her time with Ruth. One night, when Dick is out of town, Lianna agrees to have dinner with Ruth, after which she goes back to Ruth's house. After describing a childhood crush and sexual play with a childhood friend, Lianna reveals that she met Dick as a student and began an affair with him, eventually dropping out of school to get married. Ruth initiates a kiss and the two eventually have sex, with Lianna revealing it is her first time sleeping with a woman. Lianna admits to Dick that she is having an affair with a woman, to which Dick responds amusedly and tells her to end it.

After a tumultuous fight, Lianna leaves Dick and moves out into her own apartment. Ruth eventually reveals that she is in a long-term, long-distance relationship with another woman and has to decide between that woman and Lianna. Ruth chooses to end her relationship with Lianna, and Lianna repairs her friendship with homophobic Sandy and begins to date other women and frequent a lesbian bar, but ultimately remains unpartnered and living alone. The film depicts Lianna's newly embraced "lesbian" sexuality as a cry for affection. After arguing with Lianna about not having enough time to fulfill his requests for research assistance, Dick awkwardly initiates sex with his wife to which Lianna begrudgingly complies by agreeing to go "put the thing in," as if agreeing to perform her wifely sexual duties to compensate for not fulfilling secretarial wifely duties. Lianna's "crisis" as an unfulfilled and unsatisfied housewife is temporarily solved by her newfound lesbian sexuality.

Female-female sex in *Lianna* is an extreme form of female bonding and a search for sexual and emotional fulfillment. The film's sex scenes depict Lianna with Ruth and other women talking and embracing and gently kissing before, during, and after sex. For instance, when Ruth and Lianna have sex for the first time at Ruth's house, the scene is slow and drawn out, with long takes, soft lighting, and an overriding quiet whisper of a woman's voice in indecipherable French. Their sex scene is preceded by a heart-to-heart discussion of Lianna's marriage, unfulfilled aspirations, and stories of childhood girl crushes and queer sexual play meant to imitate heterosexual sex with childhood girl friends. Ruth and Lianna gently kiss one another and pause to hug and embrace each other and look one another in the eyes.

In the dvd commentary track for the film, Sayles discusses his decision to begin and end each take in the sex scene with one of the characters' faces. The purpose for this, Sayles claims, was to emphasize the sex scene as an emotional love scene that was not intended to objectify the female body with close-up shots of fetishized female body parts. While each take does begin and end with a close-up of one of the characters' faces, there are various close-ups of female body parts, and the scene is filmed with a similar structure and pattern that is utilized in Hollywood Cinema to objectify, fetishize, and commodify the (segmented) female body. Such shots without a woman's face work to fragment the female body so that the object of desire is the body part and the spectator's desire is stimulated by a faceless, interchangeable, and dispensable female body part.

After Lianna and Ruth have sex, they lay in bed talking. Lianna reveals that it is her first time having sex with a woman, to which Ruth replies it is not her first time but that she really wanted Lianna. Lianna and Ruth continue their affair. However, Lianna's intense desire for Ruth, which is embedded in Lianna's desire to be wanted, is not reciprocated, as Ruth remains distant and disengaged. Ruth ultimately ends her relationship with Lianna and returns to her long-distance, long-term lover. *Lianna* ultimately works to blur lesbian sexual specificity so that Lianna's relationship with Ruth is not based so much on a sexual desire for women, but rather a longing for attention and compassionate friendship. Heterosexual female spectators are allowed the possibility to identify with Lianna because her lesbianism is not *really* lesbianism; it is the result of an unsatisfying (and possibly abusive) heterosexual relationship and a desire for friendship and attention. Lesbian spectators may assume a voyeuristic

spectator position and/or fetishize the on screen image through the familiar cinematic structure and shots, particularly during the sex scene. Thus, Lianna is able to serve as that which the female spectator can identify as well as that which the female spectator can desire and fetishize because of her blurred sexuality and lesbian (in)difference enabled through her lesbian masquerade.

In her 1989 “Afterthoughts on ‘Visual Pleasure’” essay, Mulvey examines the effects of the melodrama and how a narrative centered on a female character influences spectator identification and female spectatorship. However, the melodrama Mulvey explores, is a particular melodrama, one in which the central character is female (female hero) who is “unable to achieve a stable sexual identity, torn between the deep blue sea of passive femininity and the devil of regressive masculinity” (2009, 32). Mulvey explains that “the ‘grammar’ of the story [in popular narrative] places the reader, listener or spectator *with* the hero,” and relates that “popular cinema inherited traditions of storytelling that are common to other forms of folk and mass culture, with attendant fascinations other than those of the look” (2009, 34, her emphasis).

In *Lianna*, as well as *Desert Hearts*, the film narrative and structure (the point of view shots, shots of the main character (“heroine”) alone and contemplating) encourage a gaze in which the spectator will identify with the female character (Lianna in *Lianna* and Vivian in *Desert Hearts*). In her discussion of the melodrama, Susan Hayward describes the (melodrama) genre’s ability to “[play] out forbidden longings, symptomatic illness and renunciation” (Hayward 2006, 240). She explains that psychoanalytic thought was later reflected in the melodrama, explaining the female character’s behavior through psychology (241). The melodrama is often set in a small-town with

confining structures and spaces that suffocate the character, a slow progression of time, and mise-en-scene that functions as symbolic of characters' emotions and struggles (242). In female melodramas, or "women's films," there is a privileging of a "mise-en-scene of female desire" where there is a privileging of the female perspective via the main female character, although female desire is ultimately repressed as the character must retreat to her designated role as "reproducer and nurturer" (244).

In *Lianna* we see Lianna in nurturing roles as mother, caregiver, housewife, and lover. The slow progression of time throughout the narrative, the quiet and solemn soundtrack, and the numerous shots of Lianna walking alone outside and alone in her apartment, which provides an overriding emotional sense of isolation, curiosity, and instability. Her sexual desire is presented as conflicting with her role as mother, so that active female (lesbian) desire becomes an impediment for her role as mother.

Hayward cautions that a film's woman's point-of-view does not necessarily indicate a representation of female fantasy or desire on screen, but rather, in citing Mary Ann Doane's scholarship on female spectatorship and the woman's film, Hayward asserts that "two-way 'gazing' cancels out real agency [of the woman]," resisting representation of female desire, and instead enacting male fantasy (245). The woman's film, Hayward asserts, ultimately exemplifies "Hollywood's capacity to produce a female subjectivity and then destroy it" (245). Initially, Lianna's newfound (lesbian) sexuality is depicted as liberation from her unsatisfying marriage and her unfulfilling role as mother and housewife. Her non-normative sexuality seemingly allows her to live outside the constraints of heteronormativity which repress her sexually. Ultimately, however, Lianna's sexual (in)difference on screen allows for a lesbian masquerade in which the

female spectator may assume and remove the “mask” of “lesbian” that accords a distance between herself and the lesbianism represented on screen. This distance, which is similar to the distance described by Mary Ann Doane in her discussion of the “feminine masquerade” (see Doane 1991), functions as an alternative to trans-sex identification. However in Lianna and Desert Hearts, the blurring of lesbian sexual (in)difference encourages a heteronormative gaze in which the spectator may oscillate between the mask of the “lesbian masquerade” (so that the female spectator may desire the main character), and narcissistic identification (with Lianna/Vivian). The main characters’ sexual (in)difference simultaneously accords the female spectator the necessary distance or closeness with the main character necessary to either desire, or identify with the character. The following discussion of Desert Hearts will provide an analysis of how another bisexual midlife crisis melodrama depicts lesbian sexuality, providing an ending for the central character different from Lianna’s.

Desert Hearts (1985)

Deserts Hearts (1985), directed by Donna Deitch, is set in 1959 rural Nevada and tells the story of Vivian, a 35-year-old literature professor who moves to Nevada for six weeks to establish residency in order to file divorce from her professor husband of twelve years. Vivian stays on a ranch in Frances’s house, where she meets Cay, the daughter of Frances’s deceased male partner (Frances was never married to Cay’s father, but has a son, Walter, by him). For several weeks, Vivian is distant and remains cooped up in her room reading and preparing her lesson plans for the next school semester. One day Vivian offers to take Cay’s mail to her house and while inside admiring her collection of self-made sculptures and pottery collection, she is greeted by another woman, naked, in Cay’s bed in the other room. Vivian quickly leaves and

remains distant in the car with Cay and Gwen on the way to her lawyer's office. Vivian and Cay start to spend more time together and form a bond that is fueled by their difference from others at the ranch. Cay's unspoken yet assumed lesbian sexuality distances herself from everyone at the ranch and at the casino, and Vivian's education, career, and higher socio-economic status creates a divide between her and other women at the ranch and in the casino.

After Vivian and Cay run off together from Silver's engagement party, Frances forces Vivian to leave the ranch, because of her and Cay's "not normal" behavior and closeness that has "caused talk" in the town. After Vivian leaves, Cay argues with Frances, telling her that wanting something without loving it is greed, and that she knew Vivian meant something to her and forced her to leave because of that. Cay eventually visits Vivian at her hotel room, where the two have sex and seclude themselves for several days. At the end of Vivian's six-week stay in Nevada, Cay brings Vivian to the train station and the two talk about visiting each other. As the train begins to depart, Vivian proposes that Cay come with her, to which Cay first responds with reluctance, but ultimately decides to hop on the train and stay with Vivian.

Desert Hearts, similar to *Lianna*, depicts lesbianism as an extension, or extreme form, of female bonding. Cay, like Ruth, has a more stable albeit (in)different lesbian sexuality because, unlike with Vivian and Lianna, we do not know about Cay and Ruth's past relationships. The relationships between Ruth and Lianna, and Cay and Vivian exist on a continuum of female bonding because of the instability of the central characters' (Lianna and Vivian's) lesbian sexuality. In her discussion of the film, Karen

Hollinger suggests that Donna Deitch's attempt to lure a crossover audience influences the film's engagement with spectators (1998, 156). Hollinger explains:

Although this strategy of spectatorial engagement fails to cast light on the specific difference that constitute lesbianism, it contains the advantage of being able to offer the image of a desiring female subjectivity, not just to lesbian but to all viewers. Homosexual and heterosexual female spectators alike are offered the 'coupled lesbian subject position' that the film creates, and they are granted the 'discursive consent' to adopt it. (1998, 156)

The bathtub scene with Cay and Silver allows for the ambiguous lesbian reading described by Karen Hollinger, but the sex scene between Cay and Vivian disrupts the ambiguous reading and makes the lesbianism in the film explicit. There are various scenes in which female homosociality and homosexuality are blurred. Vivian's (bi)sexual midlife crisis, like Lianna's, is more influenced by unfulfilling and dissatisfying heterosexual relationships and a desire for "friendship" and "bonding" than a specificity in sexual orientation or desire. I refer to this as a "(bi)sexual midlife crisis" because the central characters, who have lived their lives as presumably heterosexual, bond with women who have had relationships with other women, thus experiencing a crisis in their own sexuality and a questioning of their sexual desire.

In the "bathtub scene," for instance, Cay and her friend—fellow casino employee and recently engaged Silver—are in Silver's bathtub together talking about Cay's future and her attraction to Vivian. The shot-reverse-shot of Cay and Silver then reveals a two shot of Silver and Cay together in the tub, presumably naked. Silver's fiancée, Joe, then walks in the bathroom and after an initial pause, he laughs, sitting down next to the tub, and jokes about the two beautiful women in the tub, reaching his hand over in a gesture to stroke Cay's cheek. The presence of Cay and Silver in the tub together might otherwise imply a sexual attraction (or possible sexual relationship) between the

two women, however, the scene is interrupted by Joe's walking into the bathroom, and his casual and comedic conversation that follows impels the spectator to resist such a reading.

The sex scene between Cay and Vivian in Vivian's hotel room near the end of the film is shot similarly to the sex scene between Ruth and Lianna in *Lianna*. There are close-ups and shots of segmented female body parts with added two shots and close-ups of the character's sweaty faces and dripping saliva as they babble whispers, kiss, and embrace. The scene simultaneously allows for the female spectator to adopt either the role of voyeur, or to assume a narcissistic identification with Vivian through a blurring of homosexuality and homosociality (female bonding), so that the film's explicitly lesbian sex scene is ultimately a reflection of lesbian sexual (in)difference.

In her discussion of the film, Karen Hollinger suggests that the film "preserves the norms of masculine dominance and feminine submission associated with heterosexual sexuality" (1998, 154), because Cay is coded as the more butch character who actively pursues and initiates a sexual relationship with Vivian, who is coded as more passive and feminine (154). The coded active/passive relationship between Cay and Vivian, Hollinger explains, has been read as both "decidedly lesbian" because of its butch/femme lesbian implications, and as a representation of heterosexual sexuality (155). The lovemaking scene is shot and enacted in a manner described by critics as "hygienic," "painfully naïve," "sentimental," and "reactionary" (155). Thus, the relationship between the characters is conveyed more as a passionate friendship and emotional bond than a sexualized relationship.

While Lianna is left alone and unpartnered at the end of the *Lianna*, Vivian and Cay leave Reno together on a train heading for New York. Cay is reluctant at first, but ultimately decides to jump on the moving train to explore the possibility of a relationship with Vivian and a chance to pursue her artistic endeavors in New York. The difference between Vivian and Lianna's fate reflects not only Cay and Ruth's different reactions to their lovers' (in)difference, but also their age and career status. Ruth, a middle-aged and well-respected professor, has career security and, as we later learn in the film, she has a long-distance lover—another academic—with whom she has been in a relationship for many years. In contrast, Cay works at a casino and aspires to attend art school, which is unfathomable, if not impossible, for her to do in Reno (or at least while she is still living at the ranch).

Hollinger argues that the conclusion of *Desert Hearts* “is a victory for its female characters not only because it is implied that they choose to be with each other, but because their relationship seems to be leading them to greater personal development and self-fulfillment” (1998, 156). Reno does not foster an environment livable for Vivian as an academic, nor is the ranch suitable for Cay as an aspiring artist. Thus, Vivian suggests Cay join her in New York, where they can also maintain the relationship they have developed during Vivian’s short stay, and Cay can pursue her artistic endeavors.

After the train already begins moving, Cay decides to accept Vivian’s offer to go to New York—or at least to the next train station. *Desert Hearts* thus ends on an optimistic and positive note, whereas in *Lianna*, Ruth ends her relationship with Lianna and Lianna is forced to navigate her life and sexuality on her own. Ultimately, Cay and Vivian have more to gain from their relationship with each other, which provides

personal fulfillment for both women. As Hollinger explains, "Like so many female friendship films, *Desert Hearts* is ultimately about female affirmation. In spite of its flaws, it offers its viewers, both lesbian and heterosexual, much to attract them to its evocation of female connection as a means of personal development" (1998, 158). While the film's ending elicits a positive representation of lesbianism and an optimistic future for the characters, its depiction of lesbian sexuality as (in)difference blurs the distinction between homosexuality and homosociality (female friendship).

Desert Hearts and *Lianna* exhibit how Sayles and Deitch work within the narrative and melodrama to appropriate the (male) gaze and represent lesbian sexuality as (in)difference. In chapter four I will examine how two New Queer Cinema films work to queer the gaze through a manipulation of conventional narrative and a portrayal of lesbian sexuality via explicitly queer lesbian characters.

CHAPTER 4

QUEERING THE GAZE THROUGH THE LESBIAN QUEER NEW WAVE

This chapter focuses on two films by lesbian filmmakers that I categorize as “New Queer Cinema” chronologically and aesthetically, in that they were both made in the 1990s, involve explicitly queer characters and utilize a “queer” cinematic style that deviates from a traditional narrative structure. This chapter also addresses how these two filmmakers queer the heteronormative gaze through lesbian representation. The previous two chapters focused primarily on the destabilization of the gaze, with the first chapter discussing the *destabilization* of the hegemonic male gaze in the representation of queer female sexuality in lesbian feminist avant-garde cinema, and the second chapter addressing the reappropriation of the male gaze as heteronormative gaze, albeit in narratives about lesbian characters. This chapter examines the *queering* of the gaze and the deliberate manipulation of the hegemonic heteronormative gaze by openly queer-identified, lesbian experimental filmmakers through the deconstruction of the traditional cinematic narrative and structural conventions.

Arguably one of the first films of the Queer New Wave to focus exclusively on lesbians, *Go Fish* (1994) is directed by Rose Troche, stars Guinevere Turner, and is written and produced by both Troche and Turner. *The Watermelon Woman* (1996) stars Cheryl Dunye, who also wrote and directed the film, which is recognized as the first full-length film by a black lesbian filmmaker. Both *Go Fish* and *The Watermelon Woman* address hegemonic cinematic norms, as they disrupt conventions of the Hollywood narrative by incorporating characters’ self-reflectivity into the films, interrupting the film narrative with conversations that analyze the characters, deconstruct the plot, and challenge heteronormative and racial stereotypes in the

lesbian community. Both films also act as political and educational tools that work to create cinematic visibility for lesbians and to educate both the lesbian and non-queer community about issues of race, identity, and sexuality.

New Queer Cinema

Unlike the films discussed in chapters one and two, the films I focus on in this chapter are considered part of the Queer New Wave. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, an influx of independent films that were being produced by openly queer filmmakers about queer characters began to appear at film festivals (see Rich 1992; Benshoff and Griffin 2005; Wallenberg 2004; Aaron 2004). B. Ruby Rich first coined the term “New Queer Cinema” in her 1992 essay, “New Queer Cinema,” in which she discusses the LGBT/queer films at the 1991-92 Toronto, Amsterdam, and Sundance Film Festivals. These films, Rich claims, are united by a common style that is “irreverent, energetic, alternatively minimalist and excessive” (Rich 2004, 16).

Maria Pramaggiore describes the political aspects of the movement: “New Queer Cinema rejects both ‘humanist’ and ‘identity politics’ in favor of a social constructionist view” (1997). Pramaggiore defines New Queer Cinema as a political and aesthetic movement, emphasizing the economic and financial factors that both influence and hinder the production of queer films, and compares Rich’s “New Queer Cinema” label to that of Jonas Mekas’s categorization of “New American Cinema” in the 1960s (1997). This juxtaposition, Pramaggiore argues, “illuminates some important issues regarding the politics of film representation, and, more specifically, brings to light the way that the history and economics of independent filmmaking inform the aesthetic and political strategies of New Queer Cinema” (1997, 60).

Also referred to as the “Queer New Wave” (I use the terms interchangeably), the films of this movement signal a shift in queer filmic representation from invisibility through assimilation and stigmatization to explicit visibility in which characters are “out and proud” articulated in direct confession to the camera, other characters, or through sex acts on screen. In order to construct a loose description around New Queer Cinema in attempt to define individual films, there are several characteristics that are present in most of the films that help unify the movement and outline a genre. In general, the films are directed by LGBT or queer-identified filmmakers, their plots center around queer characters, they confront issues regarding the HIV/AIDS crisis, queer visibility, coming out, queer youth, and other issues within the queer community in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

As Rich notes in her essay, the Queer New Wave is almost exclusively euro- and androcentric, with most of the earlier films being produced by white gay male filmmakers (with the exception of filmmakers such as Gregg Araki, Isaac Julien, Marlon Riggs, Rose Troche, and Cheryl Dunye). Some of the prominent and most recognizable films include Gregg Araki’s *The Living End* (1992), *Totally Fucked Up* (1993), *The Doom Generation* (1995), and *Nowhere* (1997), Isaac Julien’s *Looking for Langston* (1989), Marlon Riggs’s *Tongues Untied* (1989), Gus Van Sant’s *Mala Noche* (1985) and *My Own Private Idaho* (1991), Rose Troche’s *Go Fish* (1994), and Cheryl Dunye’s *The Watermelon Woman* (1996). The New Queer Cinema films by lesbians and gay black men are significant in that they weave together multiple film styles, fusing documentary with narrative, experimental, and autobiography to create a uniquely experimental style that challenges the spectator to acknowledge the traditional

normative cinematic conventions through their manipulation in these films (for example, *Tongues Untied*, *Go Fish*, *The Watermelon Woman*).

Scholars have argued that New Queer Cinema is directly linked to, and is a product of, the HIV/AIDS pandemic. In *A Queer Time and Place*, Judith Halberstam discusses the impact of the HIV/AIDS crisis on the queer community and how it has created an emphasis on living for “now” (Halberstam 2005). For Halberstam, “queer time” and queer temporality emphasize the “now” and revolve around different rites of passages. New Queer Cinema reflects this notion of “queer time,” working to challenge heteronormative temporality and show the spectator how traditional narrative film is rooted in heteronormative assumptions about notions of time and place.

Monica Pearl compares the narrative and cinematic construction of many New Queer Cinema films and the non-normative progression of the AIDS virus, which had a horrific impact on the queer community in the late 1980s and early 1990s. She situates New Queer Cinema films during the AIDS crisis and AIDS activism, arguing, “New Queer Cinema is AIDS Cinema” (Pearl 2004). Regardless of whether or not the films are explicitly about AIDS, Pearl asserts that their queer characters are influenced by AIDS and AIDS activism (whether or not they have the disease) and that the disrupted narrative style reflects how queer conceptions of time have been influenced by AIDS and its non-normative progression.

In her article on lesbian independent film as transgressive cinema, Andrea Weiss differentiates between radical feminism and cultural feminism in lesbian film, arguing that “radical feminists emphasized the importance of ‘woman-identified-woman’ as a threat to patriarchy and as an antidote to male power, [whereas] cultural feminists

moved away from immediate political concerns to explore ancient matriarchies and female forms of power" (Weiss 2004, 44). Weiss problematizes lesbian films that assume a cultural feminist position, such as the early films of Barbara Hammer, because they ultimately work to essentialize a biologically-influenced female sexuality, taking for granted that all women are inherently feminine and implying that gender expression is a reflection of biological sex.

Weiss also praises the work of experimental filmmakers like Su Friedrich for "[imagining] lesbian desire outside of the pornographic parameters of the dominant cinema" (Weiss 2004, 43). Experimental and avant-garde film, Weiss argues, "[are] able to circumvent both the historical problems of documentary film and the repression of lesbianism by classical narrative film conventions, which has insidiously found its way into independent narratives as well" (Weiss 2004, 48). Because of their experimental approach, *Go Fish* and *The Watermelon Woman* are able to challenge heteronormativity by transgressing hegemonic cinematic conventions in which lesbian representation has typically been invisible, negative and demonized, or fetishized.

Go Fish and *The Watermelon Woman* are significant in that they are not coming-of-age or coming-out narratives, as are many New Queer Cinema films and earlier lesbian films, but rather they are stories *about* representation, "out" lesbian relationships that challenge norms. Because the films begin from the position of already being "out," they are able to further explore issues that complicate lesbian identity and utilize establish a queer gaze, signaling a shift from a destabilization of the male gaze to the establishment of a queer gaze that challenges heteronormative spectatorship debates

and problematizes early feminist film theory as well as radical and cultural feminist assumptions.

Queering the Gaze

The lesbian feminist avant-garde films by Akerman and Friedrich destabilize the “male gaze,” creating an ambivalent and ambiguous relationship between the spectator and on-screen image. In contrast, these two New Queer Cinema films are able to queer the gaze, which forces the spectator to look at and acknowledge the narrative filmic conventions and norms we take for granted. In order to discuss how these filmmakers queer the gaze through the destabilization of the hegemonic heteronormative male gaze, it is necessary to first discuss the foundations of gaze and spectatorship theory that have allowed assumptions of heteronormativity to continue in discussions of the gaze without being challenged. It is equally important to acknowledge the social and political conditions during the late 1980s and early 1990s that incited filmmakers like Troche and Dunye to queer the gaze through identity politics and theory. A new queer discourse and theory emerged in the late 80s/early 90s. In the 1980s the HIV/AIDS crisis incited LGBT activism, which provoked an uprising of LGBT individuals to come out of the closet and publicly declare their gay sexual orientation.

The motivation behind this mass “outing” was that a substantial number of gay individuals (particularly gay men) were succumbing to AIDS and receiving little help or recognition from society as a result of the silence around the virus as well as the invisibility of the closeted gay population. Direct action groups such as the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) were established and advocated for the outing of closeted gays in attempt to create a collective and visible LGBT community that could create awareness and demand representation and protection of the LGBT community.

The shift from “gay” to “queer” reflected an attempt on behalf of the LGBT community to be more inclusive and establish a more united front and bridge divides between gay men and lesbians and other queer identities.

The early 90s saw an extension and re-examination of the feminist theory and politics of the 1970s with the emergence of a queer theory by the work of theorists Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Judith Butler. While Sedgwick’s work emphasizes the critical analysis of the homo/heterosexual definition, Butler’s oeuvre theorizes the social construction and performativity of gender. Queer theory deconstructs heteronormative binary interpretations of sexuality to destabilize existing notions of identity categories. Queer identity politics emphasizes the collective identity and public affirmation of one’s (sexual) identity (often essentialized), whereas queer theory destabilizes and resists collective classification and stability of identity categories. While these two approaches to “queerness” appear contradictory, I treat them as complimentary to each other because one cannot exist without the other. In applying this paradoxical pair to queer film and a queering of the gaze, it is useful to apply the queer identity politics discourse and queer theory rhetoric to Troche and Dunye’s films, suggesting that the films attempt a negotiation between the two dominant positions in queer discourse. The films unveil the heteronormativity taken for granted in mainstream film, while simultaneously working to create on screen lesbian representation that relies on a collective notion of the category “lesbian.”

Early feminist film theory rooted in an interpretation of Lacanian psychoanalysis draws from Mulvey’s assertion that the male gaze dominates Classic Hollywood narrative cinema. Critiques of Mulvey emphasize her lack of consideration or

discussion of race, non-heteronormative sexuality, and socio-economic class. Queer film studies was only able to emerge after queer identity political discourse and AIDS activism established “queer” as a collective identity, and after poststructuralist queer theory established a discourse that challenged hegemonic notions of gender by proposing that gender was not a natural reflection of one’s biological sex, but rather a social construction that is performed. With the emergence of queer film studies, scholarship challenged Mulvey’s notion of the male gaze (see Benshoff and Griffin, 2005; Evans and Gammon, 1995; Halberstam, 2005; McHugh, 2007; Pick, 2004; Pearl, 2004; Weiss, 2004). Thus, the notion of the queer gaze is rooted in queer identity politics and queer theory which both problematize hegemonic notions of heteronormativity, yet propose different ways to conceptualize queer identity and notions of gender and sexuality.

For this chapter, I interpret the notion of the queer gaze as an oppositional (queer) reading of heteronormativity in cinema, in which case a queer gaze reads actively against heteronormative assumptions in film. In this case, it is the combined efforts of the filmmaker and the spectator that produce and allow for a queer gaze. The filmmaker manipulates and deconstructs the traditional cinematic narrative structure and style that fosters the promotion of heteronormativity and enables the spectator to see the construction of traditional narrative and assume a queer viewing position. For this interpretation of the queer gaze, which is exemplified by the films in this chapter, “queer” is fluid and denotes non-normative queer subjectivity. The queer gaze as an oppositional anti-normative reading assumes that gender and sexuality are social

constructions and implies an integrative definition (à la Sedgwick) of homo/hetero sexual definition and gender definition.

I posit this interpretation of the queer gaze in opposition to notions of queer viewing which, like conceptions of a “lesbian gaze,” or “gay gaze,” rely on a stability, exclusivity, and often an essentialization of the category “lesbian,” “gay,” or “queer.” Contemporary mainstream indie lesbian films, that is, narrative films that are often independently produced but utilize mainstream narrative and cinematic conventions, work to create a “lesbian gaze” by positing lesbian identity and sexuality as stable. Examples of such films include *D.E.B.S.* (Angela Robinson, 2004), *Itty Bitty Titty Committee* (Jamie Babbit, 2007), and the short and feature-length films produced by the non-profit organization *POWER UP*. To evoke a “lesbian gaze” these films rely on the assumption that the lesbian spectator possesses a unique, exclusively non-heterosexual, inherent positionality, from which a lesbian perspective is the “normative” viewing position. In this sense, spectatorship becomes a fixed position determined by sexual orientation. Unlike the notion of the “queer gaze” I describe, it is not necessarily the efforts of the filmmaker, but rather the positionality and identity of the spectator that enables a queer gaze. This essentialized queer gaze model assumes a biological essentialist notion of sexual orientation and, to again use Sedgwick’s classifications, a separatist notion of homo/hetero sexual definition and gender definition.

The first interpretation, the queer gaze as an oppositional reading-strategy enabled by the filmmaker, implies that we as spectators are initially instilled with a heteronormative reading of the film and that to gaze queerly requires an intentional, active counter-reading that defies normative viewing practices. With this, the queer

gaze depends on the hegemony of the normative gaze because the (hetero)normative viewing practices establish that to which queer viewing takes place in opposition. In the second interpretation, the queer gaze presumes a natural and inherent positionality. The spectator's queer subject position is essentialized so that queer identity is just another "natural" identity like heterosexuality that predetermines the spectator's gaze. Thus, with the second model, the queer gaze is only possible for queer spectators.

In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Sedgwick argues that discourse on sexuality relies on the heterosexual/homosexual binary that only allows for an either/or. Through a queering of this dichotomy and an exploration of non-normative sexuality, Sedgwick suggests that we will arrive at a more complex understanding of human sexuality (Sedgwick 1990). Applying this to film, I suggest a queering of the straight/gay spectator dichotomy (and it should be noted that "queering" in this sense denotes a destabilization and complexity) enables a queer gaze. Thus, a queer gaze is not synonymous with "gay gaze," but rather, it is an *active* and *deliberate* reading-against-the-grain that intentionally challenges normative viewing and hegemonic representation. Therefore, a queer gaze does not necessarily require homosexual spectators or homosexual characters on screen (because homosexual is not synonymous with queer). Films that do incite a queer gaze, like *Go Fish* and *The Watermelon Woman*, often include queer characters and address queer issues. However, queer content does not create a stable and coherent queer gaze. Instead, it provokes a queer and counter-hegemonic reading.

Both *Go Fish* and *The Watermelon Woman* are minoritizing (using Eve Sedgwick's categorizations in *The Epistemology of the Closet*), in that they portray lesbian sexuality

as distinct from heterosexuality. They do not, however, essentialize or naturalize homosexuality; rather, they assume a social constructionist position that is conveyed through self-reflexive analysis and interrogation. *Go Fish* and *The Watermelon Woman* are films that recognize the lack of lesbian representation and work to increase awareness and visibility of lesbians on screen through their films. Both films incorporate “street scenes” in which the characters walk on city streets. Reminiscent of Agnes Varda’s *Cléo From 5 to 7* (1962) in which the main character Cléo roams the city streets of Paris, Cheryl walks (and even dances in) the city streets around Philadelphia in *The Watermelon Woman*, and the characters in *Go Fish* roam the streets of Chicago, claiming public urban space for themselves and forcing lesbian visibility out of the closet and into the public sphere.

***Go Fish* (1994)**

Go Fish is one of the few, and perhaps one of the most recognized, Queer New Wave lesbian films. Written by Rose Troche and Guinevere Turner who also directed the film, *Go Fish*’s experimental narrative structure and its emphasis on queer characters is reminiscent of other Queer New Wave films. The film opens with a discussion in Kia’s Women’s Studies class about lesbians in history. Because of the lack of evidence about their personal lives and about lesbian relationships, Kia explains that “we begin to want to change history.” We see names of famous actresses and public figures on the chalkboard as we hear Kia ask her students for names of famous lesbians in history. The students’ responses are almost entirely based on speculation, which Kia explains is a reflection of historical lesbian invisibility. Thus, *Go Fish* is itself an active attempt to contribute to lesbian history as an openly visible representation of lesbians on screen. Much like the juxtaposition of childhood pictures with clips of adult

lesbian interviewees in Su Friedrich's *Hide and Seek, Go Fish* thrusts the spectator into a film about lesbian community and visibility by foregrounding the narrative with a dialogue on the difficulty of constructing a lesbian history because of the reliance on codes and unverified assumptions as opposed to concrete and explicit evidence of lesbians in history.

As Kia explains, it is because of this silence and inexplicit visibility that we begin to want to change history and create a history of visibility. In attempt to make visible and self-represent the lesbian community, the film focuses on lesbian relationships and the various expressions of lesbian identity and sexuality in the early 1990s, serving as a sort of "lesbian relationship primer" for the newly out or uninformed lesbian. Thus, the purpose of this film is to create explicit lesbian visibility while educating the audience about the lesbian community, and addressing the debates about sexuality and gender that divide the lesbian and greater queer community.

The main character Max is a young single "dykeish" lesbian who wears her baseball hat backwards, dresses in baggy clothes, and writes in her journal about her desire for a "real" relationship. Kia, Max's roommate is a Women's Studies professor, and in a monogamous relationship with Evy, a Hispanic nurse whose family disapproves of her lesbianism. Kia tries to set Max up with Ely, an "old school" lesbian who is in a long-distance, long-term relationship with another woman. Max initially labels Ely a "hippie" and criticizes her for her unstylish plain clothes and old school hair. After unknowingly being set up by Kia, Max and Ely attend a film by an out queer filmmaker and in their discussion of the film afterward, they debate the responsibility of an out queer filmmaker, and whether or not they are responsible for portraying the

queer community in a positive light. Time passes, and Ely decides to cut her hair. Max later encounters Ely in a bookstore with her newly shorn hair and tells her it looks good, but that it looks “butch.” Max, Kia, Evy, Ely, Ely’s roommate Daria, and their friends have dinner at Ely and Daria’s apartment and play a game of “I Never,” in which the incestuous nature of the film’s lesbian community is revealed, and Max asserts that she has not slept with Daria, the group’s lesbian lothario. Subsequently, Max and Ely begin talking on the phone and make plans to go on a date. When Ely arrives at Max’s apartment before going out, Max makes a comment about Max’s lengthy fingernails, brings out a nail clipper, and begins to cut them. The two kiss and eventually have sex (although we do not see Ely and Max have sex on screen, we see Kia and Evy questioning Max about the date and Ely recounting the story to Daria). The film ends with scenes of Max and Ely holding hands and kissing in public around town.

In the opening scene we see Max take out her notebook (presumably a journal or diary) and begin writing. It is when Max is writing that we hear the first of her several “The Girl Is Out There” voiceovers throughout the film. Max’s voiceovers serve several purposes: (1) they function as a sort of spoken word that informs the spectator what Max is writing in; (2) they serve as transitions between different scenes throughout the film; (3) they work to deconstruct and demystify the conventions of the traditional narrative. This third purpose is most significant with Max’s first voiceover at the beginning of the film. The poem “The Girl is Out There” is reiterated several times throughout *Go Fish*, and we first hear it when Max is writing in her journal. The poem demystifies the traditional love story narrative and the “first meeting” between two love interests. Max’s voiceovers as well as the “four heads” (Kia + Evy + Daria + Daria’s

girlfriend at the time) serve as commentaries that interrupt the film at different points in order to analyze the previous scene and contemplate a prediction for the next.

The “trial scene,” in which Daria is interrogated in the street on her way home from having sex with a man by members of the lesbian community, begins with Daria being “kidnapped” and the sound of a gavel striking resonating as the “trial” begins. The lesbians interrogate Daria and question whether or not she can call herself a lesbian after having sex with a man, to which Daria responds that she loves women and still identifies as a lesbian after having sex with a man. This scene is reminiscent of the numerous hate crimes in which queer people have been attacked on the street when the attackers are incited to strike because they feel “threatened” by the sexuality of the victim, because it does not fit into the existing heteronormative box, and because the victim’s sexuality incites the attacker to question and reflect upon their own sexuality.

For the lesbians who interrogate Daria, her having sex with a man challenges the definition of “lesbian” and disrupts the security they feel as lesbians if they sleep with someone who has also slept with men. Similar to the attackers in gay hate crimes who feel emasculated if a gay man is attracted to them (with the faulty notion of “gay by association”), or feel their sexuality and masculinity is threatened if a woman chooses to sleep with another woman, the lesbian interrogators fear that Daria’s sleeping with a man would threaten the stability of ‘lesbian’ as an identity category.

This scene in *Go Fish* articulates the fluid and constructionist notion of gender and sexuality. Because Daria still claims her identity as lesbian after sleeping with a man, the category and identity “lesbian” in the film is not about the actual act of engaging in same-sex sex. Rather “lesbian” in the film constitutes an identity that is non-normative

and actively resists hegemonic heteronormativity, not an essential inevitable sexual orientation. The film's active resistance to hegemonic heterosexual norms and conventions is further demonstrated in the “wedding dress scene” in which through a voiceover, Max considers the notion of lesbianism as a “phase” and contemplates the fluidity of sexuality and the necessary active resistance to prevalent hegemonic heteronormative conventions in order to live as a lesbian in society.

The Watermelon Woman (1996)

In *The Watermelon Woman*, Cheryl Dunye wants the spectator to see *how* the viewer looks. She wants to show us that how we look is always limited by what the camera allows us to see, that what we see on screen in film is not necessarily the “truth” or reality, but rather it is one version of reality. History as depicted in film, Dunye demonstrates, has misrepresented and/or excluded marginalized groups. In *The Watermelon Woman* Dunye is specifically concerned with the lack of visibility and negative stereotypical roles for black (and queer black) women in film. Dunye, arguably the first black lesbian feature-length filmmaker, earned an MFA from Rutgers University, and made several short narrative and experimental documentary films in the early 1990s. Her 1994 short film, *Greetings From Africa*, garnished attention that allowed for the funding of *The Watermelon Woman* in 1996.

The Watermelon Woman's narrative revolves around the character Cheryl, a 25-year-old black lesbian filmmaker played by Dunye. Cheryl works at a video rental store with her black lesbian porn-watching, sex-obsessed friend Tamara who also works with her on the side as a wedding videographer. Cheryl, a struggling filmmaker searching for a topic for her next film, discovers the films of Fae Richards, a black actress from the 1930s and 40s who is credited only as “The Watermelon Woman” in 1930s mammy and

black films. Cheryl decides to embark on an investigation to learn more about Fae and document her findings on film. Cheryl discovers that Fae was a “Sapphic sister” and romantically involved with Martha Page, a white female director with a striking resemblance to director Dorothy Arzner. After this discovery, Cheryl’s romantic life starts to parallel that of Fae’s, as she becomes involved with Diana, a white yuppie-type lesbian. After an interview with Fae’s black lesbian lover falls through, the film ends with Cheryl’s statement that Fae Richards and “The Watermelon Woman” are completely fictionalized. Dunye confesses that she fabricated “The Watermelon Woman” because she wanted to see someone like herself on screen. With this, these words about (re)writing history appear on the screen: “Sometimes you have to create your own history. The Watermelon Woman is fiction. –Cheryl Dunye, 1996.”

The film’s conclusion and Dunye’s powerful final statement illustrate how people, and particularly marginalized people, are thirsty for on screen representation; they want to see themselves, or a version of themselves, on screen. Mammy roles and black superwoman representations provide representation, but the question should no longer be whether *any* representation is better than *no* representation. *Any* representation that involves negative stereotypes to the exclusion of more positive, “real,” or self-representation is problematic. While what constitutes “positive” and “real” is relative, and self-representation does not necessarily equate with “real” or “positive” representation, films that consistently typecast marginalized groups to the exclusion of any non-typecast role or representation do not improve representation. They perpetuate the existing societal stereotypes that influenced the typecast role in the first place, continuing a vicious cycle of discrimination, misrepresentation, and stereotypes.

Dunye's response to whether any representation is better than no representation is that while all representation is significant, it remains necessary for marginalized groups to self-represent and that for lesbians naming is vital. Dunye does not denounce or discredit early black films or mammy characters in film; rather, she uses them as justification for the need to self-represent and the need to name oneself in order to represent oneself.

Dunye's work and filmic style is comparable to that of other lesbian experimental filmmakers, including Su Friedrich, who also incorporates confessional-style direct address to the camera, voiceovers intertwined with historical footage, and a fusion of documentary, narrative, and semi-autobiographical genres. Both Dunye and Friedrich emphasize the significance of naming as key to improved representation because the lack of "out" lesbians is viewed as the reason for past misrepresentations. Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman* and Friedrich's *Hide and Seek*, which were both released in 1996, utilize a displaced auto-biographical technique in which the main characters (Cheryl for Dunye's film and Lou for Friedrich's) are strikingly similar to the directors, yet not explicitly intended to be the directors. Through this indirect "displacement" of Cheryl and Lou, Dunye and Friedrich distance themselves from traditional autobiography, which allows them to be self-reflexive and challenge the spectator to engage past the initial assumption that the film is an autobiography simply telling and showing the "truth." For Troche and Dunye, queering the gaze implies a deliberate manipulation of the spectator position and requires a deconstruction of traditional cinematic narrative structure.

CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION

I began the research for this thesis with an overriding argument in mind: “the gaze” influences lesbian cinematic representation. As I worked to refine my argument, I realized that I had to acknowledge that “the gaze” and spectatorship are neither the only perspective of analysis from which to evaluate queer female sexuality in film, nor the only lens through which to examine cinematic representations of lesbianism. Despite my insight that “the gaze” does not always provide the most insightful or perceptive approach to questions of sexuality on the screen, I propose that it is nearly impossible to thoroughly discuss filmic representation of lesbian sexuality *without* a consideration of the gaze. Thus, the gaze, the relationship between the spectator and the characters on screen, cinematic and narrative structure offers us insight into how lesbian sexuality is conceptualized and portrayed in film.

In this thesis I explored how filmmakers utilized different cinematic styles and forms—avant-garde, experimental, narrative—to represent non-normative queer female, or lesbian, sexuality in different ways. Furthermore, my overarching argument that emerges from the sum of the individual chapters—“the gaze” is destabilized by Akerman and Friedrich in chapter two, appropriated by John Sayles and Donna Deitch in chapter three, and queered by Rose Troche and Cheryl Dunye in chapter four—is not indicative of some natural progression from destabilizing to appropriating to queering. Instead, my overarching argument reflects the differences between the films’ representations and how filmmakers working within different cinematic styles diverge from “the gaze” in Classic Hollywood Cinema, as conceptualized by Laura Mulvey, in order to depict a more visible lesbian sexuality. A return to Mulvey’s influential essay

“Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” and her notion of “the male gaze” enables an account of how feminism has influenced theorizations of the cinematic spectator. The limitations of Mulvey’s analysis, which focused on Classic Hollywood Cinema, encourage further exploration of how spectatorship are conceived through different film forms and genres in light of an emerging discourse on lesbian sexuality and identity.

Further investigation into contemporary mainstream indie lesbian cinema, as well as lesbian representation in modern Hollywood Cinema, would allow for a continued exploration as to how the identity category “lesbian” has developed in the past decade and how this has affected filmic representation and contributed to existing notions of lesbian cinema. In considering the influence of social movements and socio-political climates on theorizations of women and lesbians in cinema, an analysis of lesbian filmic representation in the late 1990s and 2000s could reveal the effects of globalization and global capitalism on the commodification of a hegemonic lesbianism in cinema.

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