

## Gay and lesbian criticism

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### Histories

Homosexuality in cinema has been there since the movies began. Homosexual characters could be glimpsed in films—as they still can today. However, their presence has characteristically been coded while homosexual characters have been taunted, ridiculed, silenced, pathologized, and more often than not killed off in the last reel. It is this rather sad history of homosexuality in cinema that Vito Russo wittily wrote down in his pioneering study *The Celluloid Closet* (1981) and which was subsequently turned into the film *The Celluloid Closet* (Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman, USA, 1996), in which the filmmakers loyally adhere to Russo's project. *The Celluloid Closet* was closely linked to the rise of the gay and lesbian movement, which prompted lesbians and gay men to look differently at film and film history. This 're-visionary' look resulted in the rediscovery of forgotten films, directors, script-writers, producers, and actors and actresses; precious findings which would often be shown on the gay and lesbian film festivals that came into existence at the time, first starting in San Francisco in 1976. Russo's book, therefore, was a timely historical survey that politicized an emerging field of film studies: gay and lesbian criticism.

Until the publication of *The Celluloid Closet* in 1981, only one other book had been dedicated to this field: Parker Tyler's *Screening the Sexes* (1973), a camp clas-

sic that makes curious reading because of its delirious language, streak of misogyny, and penchant for the avant-garde and art cinema at the expense of Hollywood films. However, its wit and unabashed lack of 'political correctness' are quite refreshing, while its pagan-Greek relish of the libidinal pleasures of the sexed body put it peculiarly close to the interests in perverse sexualities of today's queer theory. Whereas Tyler's book is written in a highly individualistic mode, *The Celluloid Closet* is invaluable not only for the political dimension that it gives to films, but also for writing a history of a hitherto oppressed group. The key term for Russo is 'visibility'. His project is to unveil the 'big lie' that lesbians and gay men do not exist and to expose the rampant homophobia that kept homosexuality in the closet both on and off the screen. His project is, therefore, an archaeological one of uncovering and exposing those moments where homosexuality becomes visible on the screen.

*The Celluloid Closet* has, however, been criticized for its unproblematic view of history (Medhurst 1977/1984). While Russo's book provided the gay and lesbian movement with a necessary history of cinema from the gay point of view, it could only do so by projecting a linear story of the representation of homosexuality in Hollywood cinema. Such a linear story presupposes a smooth history of progression, from taboo, censorship, and stereotypes to liberation, freedom, and positive images, only to be (temporarily?) disturbed by the backlash that

the AIDS crisis has induced. This progressive narrative denies the twists and turns as well as the ambivalences and contradictions of history. It also presupposes an undifferentiated notion of homosexuality, regardless of differences of gender, race, or class; Russo, indeed, has been reproached for his neglect of lesbians, and even for his 'bitchy misogyny' (Rich 1981/1984: 129 n. 30).

## Stereotypes

Russo's historical approach is akin to early feminist studies of the 1970s that describe the position of women in the movies. The feminist movement and the gay and lesbian movement share a concern with questions of gender and sexuality and both are committed to the linking of the personal and the political; indeed, most of the essays and books that I discuss in this chapter are marked by a distinctly personal tone in which the writer's homosexuality is brought to bear on cinema and theory. Like early feminist and black film criticism, early gay and lesbian criticism was mostly directed at stereotyping. Films, and especially those from Hollywood, were criticized for reproducing dominant stereotypes of homosexuals—such as the sissy, the sad young man, the gay psychopath, the seductive androgyne, the unnatural woman, or the lesbian vampire—and failing to represent 'real' gays and lesbians. For straight spectators, such stereotypes could confirm prejudice, while for gay and lesbian spectators they might encourage self-hatred. However, while anger at the unfavourable representation of homosexuality (and at the reduction of homosexuals to sexuality as the defining aspect of their character) is fully justified, a simple call for positive images is not the solution as images of gays and lesbians cannot simply be seen as 'true' or 'false'. Rather, it is necessary to understand how stereotypes function in both ideological and cinematic terms.

Richard Dyer was among the first to offer a more theoretical critique of stereotypes (1977a). Dyer argues that stereotypes have the function of ordering the world around us. Stereotyping works in society both to establish and to maintain the hegemony of the dominant group (heterosexual white men) and to marginalize and exclude other social groups (homosexuals, blacks, women, the working class). Stereotypes, then, produce sharp oppositions between social groups in order to maintain clear boundaries

between them. They are also normative. Stereotypes of gays and lesbians such as the queen and the dyke reproduce norms of gendered heterosexuality because they indicate that the homosexual man or woman falls short of the heterosexual norm: that they can never be a 'real' man or woman. The fashion queen Madame Lucy in *Irene* (USA, 1926), the dresser Diggs in *It's Love I'm After* (1937), the homosexual men in *La dolce vita* (Italy, 1960) or the black queen Lindy in *Car Wash* (USA, 1976) are just a few examples of 'sissies' who fail the norm of masculinity. If the queen is characteristically a source of comedy (*La Cage aux folles*, France, 1978), the dyke is mostly associated with violence. The lesbian Nazi in *Roma, città aperta* ('Rome, Open City' Italy, 1945), the communist butch in *From Russia with Love* (GB, 1963), or George-June in *The Killing of Sister George* (GB, 1969) are all examples of the dyke stereotyped as a predatory, sadistic, castrating bitch-but (Sheldon 1977; Hetze 1986).

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The stereotypes of the queen as the effeminate man and the dyke as the mannish woman are, therefore, informed by the structuring opposition of sexual difference. Within semiotics, narrative is also understood to be structured through oppositions (de Lauretis 1984), and it is easy to see how stereotypes contribute to this process. For example, stereotypes of decadent homosexuals can be used to contrast with the uncorrupted heterosexual male hero, as is the case with Peter Lorre and Humphrey Bogart respectively in *The Maltese Falcon* (USA, 1941). The implication of this is that a hero can rarely be other than heterosexual (and white) in Hollywood. Thus, in spite of biographical and historical evidence of his homosexuality, the hero Lawrence is made staunchly heterosexual in *Lawrence of Arabia* (USA, 1962), while homosexuality is delegated to the evil Turkish boy.

Stereotypes can also be introduced through iconography. Visual and aural details can be used to typify homosexuality immediately. For example, codes in dressing, certain gestures, stylistic decor, or extended looks can at a glance invoke the homosexuality of a character. As Dyer (1977a) points out, such stereotypical imagery makes homosexuality visible. In contrast to gender or ethnicity, homosexuality is not after all visible at first sight. Therefore, it has to be established visually, especially in the many films in which homosexuality remains closeted. Stereotyping through iconography, therefore, categorizes the gay or lesbian character as distinct from straight characters and maintains the boundaries between them.

The main problem with stereotypes is that they appear to be inevitable and 'natural'. Here, Barthes's notion of 'myth', introduced into film studies by Claire Johnston (1973), may explain how stereotypes become naturalized. The stereotype of the homosexual character functions as a structure, a code or convention. The sign 'homosexual' represents the ideological meaning that the homosexual has for heterosexuality, as the negative or the failure of the heterosexual norm. The realist conventions of classical cinema veil the ideological representation of the sign 'homosexual', (re)presenting the constructed images, the stereotypes, of gay men and lesbians as natural and realistic. Such a theoretical critique of stereotypes helps to explain the normative and normalizing effects of heterosexual hegemony. The question is therefore not how to get rid of stereotypes (as they are both efficient and resilient), nor how to replace them with positive images (which leave the heterosexist imperative intact), but how to achieve complexity, diversity, and self-definition (see Dyer 1977a). This has been the quest of gay and lesbian cinema, which I will discuss later.

## Authorship

The shift away from a sociological examination of the ways in which homosexuals have been represented on the screen to issues of ideology and sexual politics opens up a much wider and more complex field of inquiry for lesbian and gay film criticism, including a reassessment of theoretical frameworks from a gay perspective. Thus, Robin Wood (1977) returns to his earlier auteur criticism to bring questions of ideology and sexual politics to bear on the cinema of such

'auteurs' as Jean Renoir, Ingmar Bergman, and Howard Hawks. In doing so, he now finds an ambiguity in their films which indicate both a repression of homosexuality as well as the inevitable cracks in bourgeois heterosexuality.

With the advent of post-structuralist theory, however, the notion of the auteur more or less disappeared from the theoretical agenda (see Crofts Part 2, Chapter 7). Neither feminists nor homosexuals deplored this 'death of the author', who was invariably a white, heterosexual male, and a genius at that. Such heroes were better buried. Yet, for feminists it mattered a great deal whether an author was female or not, and similarly for lesbians and gay men it was of paramount importance whether a text was the work of a homosexual. Medhurst (1991a: 198) reveals a double standard at work, in this respect: 'Authorship was bad, Gay Authorship was good.' The death of the author also signified a more general death of the subject, and hence of subjectivity and identity, which was now seen to be forever dispersed and disrupted. Many feminists, however, have been suspicious of the time loop involved in the death of the subject (Braidotti 1991; hooks 1990). At the historical moment when marginalized subjects—blacks, people of colour, post-colonial subjects, women, lesbians, and gay men—claim their subjectivity, the white, middle-class, heterosexual male declares that very subject to be over and out.

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Medhurst (1991a) reintroduces the question of authorship in relation to homosexuality in an article on the film *Brief Encounter* (GB, 1941). While he is aware of the pitfalls of an essentialist claim to homosexual identity in the case of a gay rereading of *Brief Encounter* (attributing that gay sensibility to the playwright Noel Coward), he still wants to maintain that marginal groups like gay people should hold on to authorship for political reasons. This does not mean a regression to a simplistic reading of authorial intentions in texts, but a construction of a



**Dorothy Arzner, 'the great exception'**

contradictory history of homosexual identity in a heterosexual culture.

Judith Mayne (1990) tackles the difficulties of female and lesbian authorship in classical cinema in a case-study of director Dorothy Arzner, who is generally considered as the great exception—the only woman director who made a career in Hollywood. Feminist attempts to theorize Arzner's authorship have claimed her as an auteur in the male pantheon and identified her films as a progressive critique of patriarchal cinema.

However, for Mayne, Arzner's authorial inscriptions can be situated in the problematization of (lesbian) pleasure: in the relations between and among women and in marginal lesbian gestures. She suggests that 'female authorship acquires its most significant contours in Arzner's work through relations between and among women', recognizing in the representations of those relations a complex form of irony (1990: 101). In dedicating a book to the life and work of Dorothy Arzner, Mayne (1994) therefore focuses on the issues of

secrecy, visibility, and lesbian representation involved in the writing of a history of a closeted lesbian filmmaker in Hollywood.

### Rereadings of Hollywood and spectatorship

The lesbian appeal of female Hollywood stars has also been commonly recognized. Weiss (1992) discusses the attraction of Hollywood stars like Marlene Dietrich, Greta Garbo, and Katharine Hepburn for lesbian spectators in the 1930s. Because the silver screen was often a place where dreams could be fulfilled at a time when gays were still socially isolated, she argues that the powerful image of these stars helped to shape the white urban lesbian subculture of the time. The androgynous appearances of Dietrich in *Morocco* (USA, 1930), Garbo in *Queen Christina* (USA, 1933), and Hepburn in *Sylvia Scarlett* (USA, 1935), in particular, were embraced as an image of sexual ambiguity which served as a point of identification outside conventional gender positions.

Gay male spectators performed similar kinds of oppositional reading. The homoerotic appeal of male stars like the young Marlon Brando and James Dean has been widely commented upon. Russo discovered a gay subtext in many a Hollywood film, from the display of male bodies and competition in *Ben Hur* (USA, 1926 and the 1959 remake) to the ritualized fights in westerns, such as that between Montgomery Clift and John Wayne in *Red River* (USA, 1948). The loving looks between Richard Barthelmess and Cary Grant in *Only Angels have Wings* (USA, 1939) or Dewey Martin and Kirk Douglas in *The Big Sky* (USA, 1952) also alerted the homosexual spectator to a gay subtext in the films of Howard Hawks (Russo 1981). But as Russo never tires of pointing out, homosexuality was still very much silenced and closeted in classical Hollywood films and a gay subtext was never more than a hidden text which could only be discovered by the spectator who was sensitized to the coded messages of homosexuality.

Such rereadings of Hollywood cinema have inevitably raised the issue of gay and lesbian spectatorship. Gay and lesbian criticism took most of its lead from feminist film studies and, until at least the mid-1980s, the dominant paradigm remained focused upon the organization of the look, the male gaze

and the female spectacle. Although productive for feminism, the heterosexual bias of this exclusive focus on sexual difference proved difficult for gay and lesbian studies. Indeed, feminist film theory—not unlike the Hollywood cinema it criticized so fiercely—seemed unable to conceive of representation outside heterosexuality. As Patricia White (1991) aptly remarks, the 'ghostly presence of lesbianism' haunts not only Hollywood Gothics but also feminist film theory. In its special issue *Lesbians and Film* (1981, 24–5: 17), the journal *Jump Cut* also claimed that: 'It sometimes seems to us that lesbianism is the hole in the heart of feminist film criticism.' Almost ten years later matters had apparently improved very little. Mayne (1990) complains that the denial of Arzner's lesbian identity points to a curious gap in feminist film theory, indeed to the 'structuring absence' of lesbianism (1990: 107).

The indictment that Hollywood cinema was tailored to the pleasures of the male spectator raised questions about the position of the female spectator. In spite of the increasing focus on female spectatorship in feminist scholarship, the homosexual pleasures of the female spectator were largely ignored. The difficulties in theorizing the female spectator have led Jackie Stacey (1987) to exclaim that feminist film critics have written the darkest scenario possible for the female look as being male, masochistic, or marginal. In breaking open the restrictive dichotomies of feminist film theory, Stacey tries to create a space for the homosexual pleasures of spectatorship. A more complex model of cinematic spectatorship is needed in order to avoid a facile binarism that maps homosexuality onto an opposition of masculinity and femininity. Stacey suggests the need 'to separate gender identification from sexuality' which are 'too often conflated in the name of sexual difference' (1987: 53). When difference is no longer reduced to sexual difference but is also understood as difference among women, representation of an active female desire becomes possible, even in Hollywood films. In films like *All about Eve* (USA, 1950) or *Desperately Seeking Susan* (USA, 1984), narrative desire is produced by the difference between two women; by women wanting to become the idealized other. An interplay of difference and otherness prevents the collapse of that desire into identification, prompting Stacey to conclude that the rigid psychoanalytic distinction between desire and identification fails to address different constructions of desire.

De Lauretis (1988) has also drawn attention to the difficulties of imagining lesbian desire within a psychoanalytic discourse that predicates sexual difference on sexual indifference. She here follows Luce Irigaray's notion of the symbolic law representing only one and not two sexes: patriarchy is deeply 'hommo-sexual' as it erects the masculine to the one and only norm. Discussing the same problematic in a later essay, de Lauretis (1991: 252) observes that the institution of heterosexuality defines all sexuality to such an extent that 'the effort to represent a homosexual-lesbian desire is a subtle and difficult one'. She criticizes Stacey for conceiving of desire between women as 'woman-identified female bonding' and failing to see it as sexual. Here, and more extensively in her later book *The Practice of Love* (1994), de Lauretis returns to Freudian theory to account for the specificity of lesbian desire in terms of fetishism.

In answer to de Lauretis's criticism, Stacey (1994) argues in her study of female spectatorship that she is not concerned with a specifically lesbian audience but with a possible homoeroticism for all women in the audience. Her aim is to eroticize identification rather than de-eroticize desire. The female spectator is quite likely to encompass erotic components in her desiring look, while at the same time identifying with the woman-as-spectacle.

While these discussions of lesbian spectatorship are part of a wider movement in film studies to include the heterogeneity of the spectatorial situation, most discussions of spectatorship have been about white audiences. De Lauretis was criticized for not taking into account racial dynamics in the lesbian film *She must be Seeing Things* (USA, 1987) (see the discussion following de Lauretis's 1991 article). Little research is available about black audiences, although some critics have examined black female spectatorship in popular culture (e.g. Bobo 1995). The issue of black lesbian spectatorship, however, has hardly been raised.

## On masculinity

Male gay criticism has also been concerned to assess the implications of the binary ideology of sexual difference which gay and lesbian criticism inherited from feminist film theory. Just as the dominant paradigm of feminist film theory raised questions about the male look and the female spectacle, it also raised questions about the eroticization of the male body. What, it was

asked, if the male body is the object of the female gaze or of another male gaze; and how exactly does the male body become the signifier of the phallus? (Screen 1992). The discussion of the representation of masculinity in cinema took off in the early 1980s and almost immediately raised the issue of homosexual desire in two programmatic articles (Dyer 1982; Neale 1983).

The image of the male body as object of a look is fraught with ambivalences, repressions, and denials. Like the masquerade, the notion of spectacle has such strong feminine connotations that for a male performer to be put on display or to don a mask threatens his very masculinity. Because the phallus is a symbol and a signifier, no man can fully symbolize it. Although the patriarchal male subject has a privileged relation to the phallus, he will always fall short of the phallic ideal. Lacan notices this effect in his essay on the meaning of the phallus: 'the curious consequence of making virile display in the human being itself seems feminine' (1977: 291). Male spectacle, then, entails being put in a feminine position. The immanent feminization of male spectacle then brings about two possible dangers for the performing male: functioning as an object of desire he can easily become the object of ridicule, and within a heterosexist culture accusations of homosexuality can be launched against him (Neale 1983; Tasker 1993).

Most critics agree that the spectatorial look in mainstream cinema is implicitly male. While for Dyer this means that images of men do not automatically 'work' for women, according to Neale the erotic element in looking at the male body has to be repressed and disavowed so as to avoid any implications of male homosexuality. Yet, male homosexuality is always present as an undercurrent; it is Hollywood's symptom. The denial of the homoeroticism of looking at images of men constantly involves sado-masochistic themes, scenes, and fantasies; hence the highly ritualized scenes of male struggle which deflect the look away from the male body to the scene of the spectacular fight. Richard Meyer (1991) explores the more homely representations of Rock Hudson's body, which made him available as an object of erotic contemplation. Meyer argues that Hudson's image was produced for the female spectator, which was only possible as long as his homosexuality remained unspoken. With the public disclosure of Hudson as an AIDS victim in 1985, his now homosexualized body was imaged as the signifier of illness and death.

Kobena Mercer (1991a) problematizes the gay male look in his exploration of aesthetic ambivalence in visual representations of the black male nude. While Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs of black males can be seen as an objectification and fetishization of the nude male body, Mercer also sees a homoerotic subversive dimension to the pictures. The identification and involvement of Mapplethorpe with his models undermine a voyeuristic gaze. Here Mercer argues that the gay identity of the author and of the spectator are important to the process of interpretation. The context of a homosexual subculture enables Mercer to read the pictures as humorous and sensitive deconstructions of race and sexuality. By replacing the object of the conventional nude in Western culture, the white woman, by the black gay male, Mapplethorpe creates a subversive ambivalence. For Mercer, Mapplethorpe problematizes the white male subject in his visual work and he ends his essay with a call for a study of the construction of whiteness within gay and lesbian criticism.

Many studies on visual representations of masculinity refer to the homoeroticism of popular figures like Batman (Medhurst 1991b) or Pee-Wee Hermann (*Camera Obscura* 1988; Doty 1993). Most studies of masculinity point to the crisis in which the white male heterosexual subject finds himself, a crisis in which his masculinity is fragmented and denaturalized, in which the signifiers of 'man' and 'manly' seem to have lost all of their meaning and which makes Hollywood desperate to find a 'few good white men' (Easthope 1986; Kirkham and Thumin 1993; Tasker 1993; Jeffords 1994). Yet, what is a crisis to one (the dominant subject) may well mean a liberation, or at least an opening, to the other (the marginalized subjects). Therefore, the crisis in masculinity is welcomed by gay critics. In his book on male impersonators, Mark Simpson takes great pleasure in celebrating the deconstruction of 'masculinity's claim to authenticity, to naturalness, to coherence—to dominate' (1994: 7). He hopes that the crisis of masculinity signifies a desegregation of homosexuality and heterosexuality in popular culture, transforming both in the process.

## Camp

Gay studies of masculinity often border on camp readings of the male spectacle (Medhurst 1991b; Simpson 1994). Dyer (1986) addresses a different kind of homo-

sexual spectator identification in his discussion of Judy Garland's appeal for gay men. He suggests that the star image of Garland played a role in white urban male subculture because of two of her qualities: authenticity and theatricality. Garland embodied an intensity of emotional life which was recognized as truthful by gay men who themselves lived a life on the edge as homosexuals in a straight world. Yet, Garland's deep passion was inflected with an equally deep irony, which can be seen as a characteristic of gay sensibility. Like Garland, gay sensibility holds together the antithetical qualities of authenticity and theatricality, or, in the words of Dyer, 'a fierce assertion of extreme feeling with a deprecating sense of its absurdity' (1986: 154). Of course, we enter here the notion of camp and its relation to male gay subculture. Garland was experienced as being camp. She was over-the-top, ironic, excessive, and thus a grateful object of drag acts (for example, Craig Russell in *Outrageous!*, Canada, 1977). Camp, however, is not merely humour but also inflected with pathos. Dyer draws attention to the 'knife edge between camp and hurt' (1986: 180) in Garland's public pain and suffering, an edge that resonated deeply with her male gay audience.

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I do not want to discuss camp here as a phenomenon in itself. Rather than running the risk of being dead serious about something as quixotic as camp, I propose to discuss camp as a reading strategy for gay people. Camp can be seen as an oppositional reading of popular culture which offers identifications and pleasures that dominant culture denies to homosexuals. Jack Babuscio (1977) discusses camp as an expression of gay sensibility, by which he means a heightened awareness of one's social condition outside the mainstream. In this sense, camp is experiential and resists analytical discourse (Medhurst 1991b). According to Babuscio, the 'bitter-wit' of camp points to the transformation of pain into laughter, the chosen way of

dealing with the incongruous situation of gays in society.

As an oppositional reading, camp can be subversive for bringing out the cultural ambiguities and contradictions that usually remain sealed over by dominant ideology. This characteristic brings camp into the realm of postmodernism, which also celebrates ambivalence and heterogeneity. Subcultural camp and postmodern theory share a penchant for irony, play, and parody, for artificiality and performance, as well as for transgressing conventional meanings of gender. This queer alliance between camp and postmodernism has often been noted. Medhurst even claims provocatively that 'postmodernism is only heterosexuals catching up with camp' (1991a: 206). It is indeed an easy leap from Babuscio's understanding of camp as signifying performance rather than existence, to Judith Butler's notion of gender signifying performance rather than identity. Just as Babuscio claims that the emphasis on style, surface, and the spectacle results in incongruities between 'what a thing or person is to what it looks like' (1977/1984: 44), Butler (1990) asserts that the stress on performativity allows us to see gender as enacting a set of discontinuous if not parodic performances. In the context of gay and lesbian criticism, it is important to realize that both camp and postmodernism denaturalize femininity and masculinity.

Camp is very much the prerogative of gay male, mostly white, subculture (although Mercer (1991b) points to the camp element in the soul tradition of black musicians, long before white pop stars began to exploit such imagery). In its deconstruction of heterosexual male authority and its expression of a displaced subjectivity within dominant culture, camp might be considered an attractive framework for lesbians. Paula Graham (1995), however, expresses her doubts about camp as a possible paradigm for lesbian readings. She argues that camp allows gay men to identify with feminine excess, that is with the phallic female star, precisely as a threat to or parody of male authority (Judy Garland, Joan Crawford, Bette Davis). For lesbians, such an identification with femininity would 'mark a subordination to masculine authority, and not a form of resistance to it' (1995: 178). This does not mean that lesbians do not enjoy camp films or the spectacle of sexual excess, but rather that gay men and lesbians do not share the same 'canon' of camp. Lesbians characteristically prefer a display of strong, masculinized, active female stars such as

Sigourney Weaver as Ripley in the first *Alien* movie (USA, 1979), Linda Hamilton in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (USA, 1991), and, yes, even Sharon Stone in *Basic Instinct* (USA, 1991). Such a lesbian appropriation of subject positions may be disruptive and transgressive, but not camp.

It is significant that in the 1990s the notion of 'camp' is often replaced by the term 'queer'. Camp is historically more associated with the closeted homosexuality of the 1950s and only came to the surface in the 1960s and 1970s. Postmodernism of the 1980s and 1990s brought campy strategies into the mainstream. Now, lesbians and gay men identify their oppositional reading strategies as 'queer'. Away from the notions of oppression and liberation of earlier gay and lesbian criticism, queerness is associated with the playful self-definition of a homosexuality in non-essentialist terms. Not unlike camp, but more self-assertive, queer readings are fully inflected with irony, transgressive gender parody, and deconstructed subjectivities.

## Gay and lesbian filmmaking

Alongside rereadings of Hollywood films, gay and lesbian criticism has also turned to the few films made by lesbians and gay men and with gay subject-matter, although these critical explorations are relatively few and did not appear until the late 1980s (see Gever *et al.* 1993). European art cinema has provided a tradition in which the representation of gay and lesbian subject-matter is not a priori foreclosed. *Mädchen in Uniform* ('Girls in Uniform', Germany, 1931) was one of the earliest films to be rediscovered from a lesbian perspective. The film had always been praised for its stylistic qualities, as well as for its anti-fascism, but its explicit theme of lesbianism was long subject to silence and censorship. Rich (1981) argues that the anti-fascist politics of *Mädchen in Uniform* is interconnected with its lesbian theme and its struggle against authoritarian structures and sexual repression. Rich places the film in the historical context of Weimar with its vibrant lesbian subculture, especially in Berlin. Dyer (1990) too discusses the film within the German context of Weimar culture, its general openness about sexuality, and its public discussions of the notion of a third sex as introduced by Max Hirschfeld and his Institute of Sexual Science. The open lesbianism, the plea for sexual freedom, and the revolt against patriarchy have made





**Mädchen in Uniform (1931)—'open lesbianism' and a 'plea for sexual freedom'**

*Mädchen in Uniform* a popular classic that still moves and delights lesbian audiences today.

*Mädchen in Uniform*, however, does not stand alone, but is part of a tradition of gay and lesbian filmmaking within early cinema (see Dyer 1990; Weiss 1992). Some films are explicitly gay, like *Anders als die Andern* ('Different from the Others', Germany, 1919), an ambivalent film in which the gay main character commits suicide despite the affirmative lectures given by Hirschfeld himself within the film. Other films were made by gay or lesbian filmmakers, like the surrealist shorts of Germaine Dulac which have been read as critiques of heterosexuality. Fantasy plays an important role in these experimental films. In *La Souriante Madame Beudet* ('The Smiling Mme Beudet', France, 1923) a woman fantasizes murdering her bully of a husband and escaping from her bourgeois marriage, and *La Coquille et le clergyman* ('The Seashell and the Clergyman', France, 1927) exposes Oedipal male fantasies about the mystery of 'woman'. Yet other films featured lesbian or gay characters, like the Countess Geschwitz in *Die Büchse der Pandora* ('Pandora's Box', Germany, 1928) or the male prisoner in *Geslecht in Fesseln* ('Sex in Bondage', Germany, 1928).

Jean Genet's prison film *Un chant d'amour* ('A Song of Love', France, 1950) is another classic which

has become enormously popular with gay audiences until today and which also has influenced gay filmmakers. Dyer (1990) places this short erotic fantasy in the prestigious tradition of French literature by the 'poètes maudits', the 'accursed poets' like de Sade, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Verlaine, and Cocteau; a literature which intertwines the elements of evil, criminality, and (homo)sexuality. In his detailed analysis of the narrative structure, imagery, and ways of looking in *Un chant d'amour*, Dyer discusses the film's eroticism in terms of the tension between politics and pleasure. While some gay critics have reprimanded the film for its 'oppression' of gay men or were disturbed by its 'homophobic' representation of erotic pleasures, others took a more permissive or even celebratory attitude to the sado-masochism of the film. Dyer argues that the renewed political interest in perverse sexualities opened a Foucauldian reading of the film's eroticism in terms of the social and historical relation between sexuality and power.

The play of power and desire has become the theme of some gay and lesbian films in the 1980s, which Dyer calls a 'Genetesque' tradition. The high artificiality of Fassbinder's last film, *Querelle* (Germany, 1982, based on Genet's 1947 novel), places the story firmly within the realm of fantasy and desire. For Dyer (1990: 91), the

film is 'an abstraction of the erotics of power'. The same ritualization of desire and power can be found in the sadean theatre of *Verführung: Die grausame Frau* ('Seduction: The Cruel Woman', Germany, 1985) by Elfi Mikesch and Monika Treut. This highly formalized and aestheticized exploration of sado-masochism was one of the first films to bring female desire and lesbian sexuality within the domain of power and violence. Similarly, the fantasmatic films of Ulrike Ottinger—from *Madame X—eine absolute Herrscherin* ('Madame X—an Absolute Ruler', Germany, 1977) to *Johanna D'Arc of Mongolia* (Germany, 1989)—humorously deconstruct traditional femininity and celebrate nomadic lesbian subjectivities (White 1987; Longfellow 1993).

### Gay activism and identity politics

The art-house tradition of filmmaking, with its investment in fantasy as well as in the exploration of 'perverse' sexualities, is obviously related to gay and lesbian subcultures, but could not be further removed from the activist movies which came out of the gay and lesbian movement. The difference lies not so much in style (some activist movies have also used experimental forms, like the films of Barbara Hammer) as in the emphasis on the affirmation of gay identity. This kind of identity politics is quite adverse to the subversion and deconstruction of gay identity found in art-house films. Diana Fuss describes identity politics as 'the tendency to base one's politics on a sense of personal identity—as gay, as Jewish, as Black, as female' (1989: 97). In order to be able to build a political community, gay men and lesbians felt the need to consolidate a unified and visible identity. Strategies of consciousness-raising and coming out helped them to stimulate personal awareness and political action. Film was an excellent medium to lend visibility to gays and lesbians. Between 1970 and 1980 alone, the movement produced over forty affirmative documentaries, of which *Word is Out* (USA, 1977) is no doubt the most famous (see Dyer 1990). Documentary was the privileged genre, because it was considered to record reality, i.e. to document the so far unwritten and invisible history of gays and lesbians.

Identity politics, however, runs the risk of essentialism: of seeing identity as the hidden essence of one's being. Although gay activism needed this view of iden-

tity for its organization and politics, this very notion of sexual identity as eternal, ahistorical, and unchanging is paradoxically at odds with the demands for political transformation. The debate here is between essentialism and constructionism. In this respect, the influence of Foucault's discourse theory on gay and lesbian studies cannot be overestimated (although Foucault was more influential in gay studies than in lesbian studies; see Fuss 1989). His efforts to de-essentialize sexuality and to historicize homosexuality dealt a blow to any simplistic notion of homosexuality as a unified, coherent, and fixed category as well as to any claim to an unproblematic authenticity and truth. From a constructionist point of view, sexuality is not a given of nature but a construct of culture. Thus, the debate shifts from realizing a shared essence to understanding homosexuality as a product of social forces. (Dyer 1990: 275). The question then becomes how homosexuality has been shaped, defined, and regulated by dominant culture throughout history.

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Psychoanalytic theories have also added to a more complex understanding of identity. Especially within Lacanian psychoanalysis, identity is seen as fundamentally unstable and fictitious. The unconscious workings of the psyche constantly destabilize a coherent identity. Identity is therefore never a finished product, but rather always in process (see de Lauretis 1984, 1994). Such an understanding of identity does not mean that there is no identity at all; as Fuss points out 'fictions of identity, importantly, are no less powerful for being fictions' (1989: 104). Nevertheless, the Foucauldian and psychoanalytic views of identity and sexuality have together created a post-structuralist climate in which assertions of an uncomplicated gay and lesbian identity have become rather suspect.

Essentialist identity politics seeks to smooth over differences. If homosexual identity is understood as a

homogeneous and shared essence, both differences *within* identity as well as differences *between* identities are ignored. As a result, gay activism had difficulties dealing with differences between gay men and lesbians, let alone accounting for differences of class and ethnicity. However, if post-structuralist theory opened up questions of identity and difference within gay and lesbian criticism (Doan 1994), it presented the problem of how different kinds of social identity relate to one another. Adding age to class to sexuality to ethnicity and so on simply results in divisive and mutually exclusive categories which fight for a position within a hierarchy of oppressions. As Kobena Mercer has argued, the rhetorical invocation of the 'race, class, gender mantra' obscures the way in which these social categories intersect (1993: 239). Mercer pleads for a hybridized understanding of identity. A hybrid identity negotiates between a plurality of different positions, which opens up the recognition of 'unity-in-diversity' (240).

The films *Looking for Langston* by Isaac Julien (GB, 1989) and *Tongues Untied* by Marlon Riggs (USA, 1990) are examples of hybridized cultural practice by black gay filmmakers. For Mercer, the foregrounding of autobiographical voices in *Tongues Untied* produces a multilayered 'dialogic voicing', which is fully aware of the multidimensional character of politics. The dialogic strategy becomes subversive in its use of playfulness and parody. These two elements, the dialogic voicing and the humour, are embedded in the oral tradition of African American culture.

Mercer reads the stylistic formalism of *Looking for Langston* as a deconstructive appropriation and rearticulation of dominant signifiers of racial and sexual representation. While the film offers an archaeology of black modernism in its 'promiscuous intertextuality' (1993: 251), it is also an allegory of black gay desire. Through the key motif of looks and looking the film explores the role of fantasy within desire. Mercer concludes his analysis of the two films with a brief discussion of authorship. The notion of hybridized identity does not foreclose the importance of an authorial signature. As Mercer argues, in so far as 'identity is not what you are so much as what you do' (240), he can claim that 'these rich, provocative, and important works do indeed "make a difference" not because of who or what the filmmakers are, but because of what they do, and above all because of the freaky way they do it' (255). It is also this proliferation of multiple voices

within gay and lesbian filmmaking and criticism which testifies to the liveliness of this political field within the study of film and popular culture.

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