

Girl Crazy

Lesbian Narratives in *She Must Be Seeing Things and Damned If You Don't*



In the final scene of Su Friedrich's *Damned If You Don't*, the nun sheds her habit, with the help of her seductive neighbor.

Courtesy filmmaker

Sheila McLaughlin began making films while living in London in the early seventies. In collaboration with Lynne Tillman, she co-wrote, directed, produced, and played the lead in *Committed* (1984), a narrative film based on the life of nonconformist and politically active actress Frances Farmer, who confronted but eventually was defeated by anti-Communist hysteria and the repressive psychiatric establishment of the late-forties. McLaughlin has also acted in a number of films, including several by West German filmmakers.

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I wouldn't care at all about Tama Janowitz if copies of her latest novel weren't stacked in prominent promotional piles at the front of my local book store, but since they are, since she has been hailed as the punk Jane Austen,¹ the bohemian voice of the eighties, and since I live where I do—New York City—I want to point out how, in the much-hyped *Slaves of New York*, she characterizes lesbians. Her sole lesbian appears late in the book, as an object of derision in a chapter entitled "Ode to a Heroine of the Future." The "heroine" in question is the sister of the male narrator. About a third of the way into the chapter, this woman, whose name is Amaretta, asks, "By

the way, did I tell you of my lesbian experience?" The question is addressed to the occupants of a table at a hip downtown bar, a bunch of drug dealers and musicians along with the artist-brother. The longish anecdote that follows is told for their entertainment as well as, presumably, that of the reader. Briefly, the "lesbian experience" Amaretta relates begins in a lesbian bar in a small town, populated by "not the choicest group of lesbians," most with short hair, dressed in men's clothing, with hard features, who eye her with crude sexual interest. She picks up a woman described as a classic bull dyke, goes home with her, and, after undressing this unwomanly woman, who is unaccustomed to being touched, suddenly burns her with a cigarette and flees. By accident, the next day she meets the pathetic old dyke, who meekly forgives her and continues to pursue her. End of story; her audience is greatly amused. The next day, the reader is informed, Amaretta jumped from a seventh floor window.

The significance of this vicious bit of fiction should not be overstated, since Janowitz' book as a whole indulges in the same sort of lurid exotica as a substitute for social acuity. But it stands as an example of the still operative concept of lesbian deviance: a sordid, humorless, depressing, grotesque, sexually inadequate condition that results from pathological

Martha Gever

This article is based on a paper delivered at the College Art Association's 1988 annual conference last February at a panel entitled "Discussing the Other, Possessing the Outsider." It was revised for a panel on "The Visual Construction of Sexual Difference," held in conjunction with "Sexism, Colonialism, Misrepresentation: A Corrective Film Series," sponsored by the Collective for Living Cinema in April and May 1988.

Because this text was conceived as a discussion of two particular films, information about other works by the filmmakers was omitted in the spoken versions and is difficult to integrate after the fact. Nevertheless, a sketch of their backgrounds in filmmaking seems relevant in *The Independent*. Su Friedrich's films were recently screened in a retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art. They range from her 1979 short film *Cool Hands, Warm Heart*, which symbolically renders rituals and interactions related to women's subordination and rebellion against it, to *The Ties That Bind*, which combines her mother's recollections about growing up in Nazi Germany with her own responses to this material.

Top: Friedrich introduces her story of a nun's erotic attraction with a fragmented synopsis of the 1946 melodrama *Black Narcissus*, which pits a "bad nun" against a "good nun."

Bottom: Signalling her interest in the nun, the secular woman stitches a tapestry depicting the Passion of Christ.

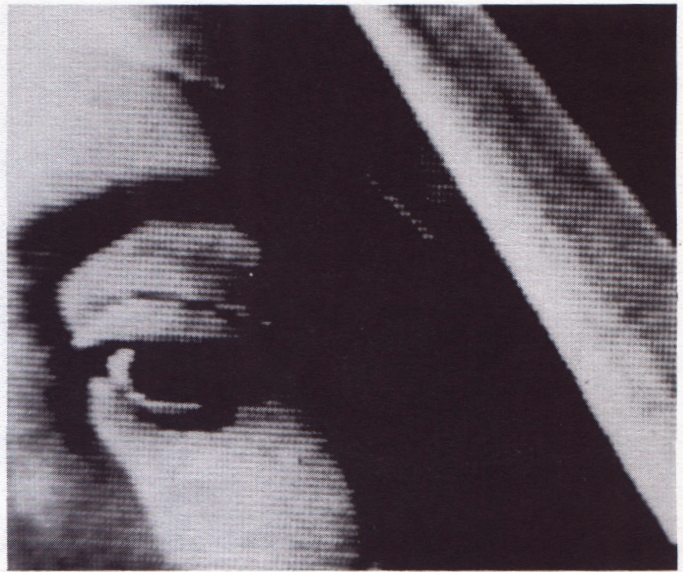
Both photos courtesy filmmaker

gender reversal—or inversion, as it was called in the sexological literature of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Despite the campaigns for gay rights and against such prejudices that date back to the last decade of the last century, butch lesbians and effeminate gay men still function uncritically as cultural freaks. In cinema, the equivalent of Janowitz' miserable lesbian is Sister George. And even Nola Darling, the sexually liberated protagonist in Spike Lee's celebrated and popular *She's Gotta Have It*, has to fend off the advances of a lascivious but unappealing lesbian reminiscent of the predatory Countess Geschwitz in *Pandora's Box*. Some see a corrective to such representations in Donna Deitch's *Desert Hearts*. But, as Mandy Merck has pointed out, this movie and another contemporary lesbian romance, John Sayles' *Lianna*, faithfully repeat conventions of "art" cinema that use "the figure of the woman to signify sexual pleasure, sexual problems, sex itself" and thus hardly depart from gendered codes so dear and central to patriarchal institutions.²

Although there is much to say about lesbians portrayed as deviants in relation to dominant heterosexual standards invented to enforce so-called normal female sexuality, this line of thought leads to an analysis that, at best, can only produce a commentary on the limits of masculine and feminine sexual identities. It's easy to cite myriad instances of how lesbians figure as negative elements in standard dramatizations of heterosexual romance or, in the more progressive works, as replications of well-worn complementary, active/passive couplings that underlie the ideology of masculine dominance. However, the purpose in sketching the outline of the enduring viability of lesbian caricatures in our culture is meant to establish a contrast and serve as a reminder of how homophobic dread saturates the narratives produced by the entertainment industry—literature as well as cinema—and by presumably more independent artists like Lee and Janowitz.

Neither Su Friedrich's *Damned If You Don't* nor Sheila McLaughlin's *She Must Be Seeing Things* requires a defense against homophobia, or misogyny for that matter. Still, that doesn't preclude questions of gender, since these inevitably arise in both films and in the minds of spectators. The complications of gender in lesbian narratives can be summarized as one broad question: What happens when socially designated sexual outlaws play with the codes of femininity and masculinity—and with the sexual tensions associated with these—as participants in a subculture that, partially, defines itself in opposition to straight norms and their hierarchies of masculinity and femininity?

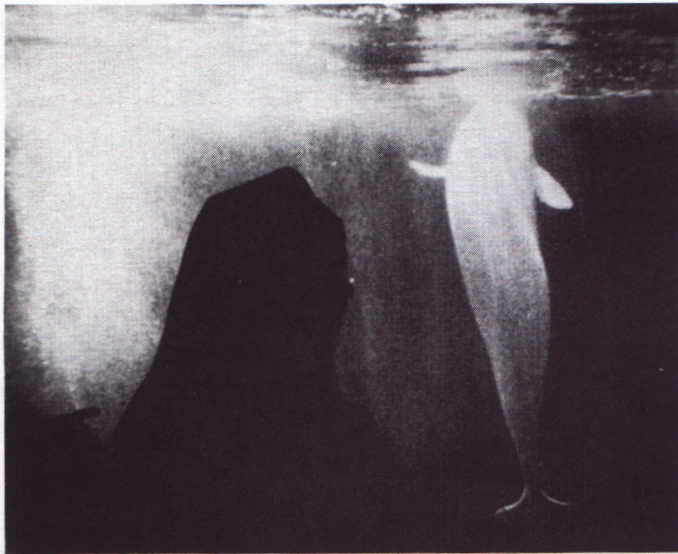
Both *Damned If You Don't* (1987) and *She Must Be Seeing Things* (1987) provide plentiful material for such an analysis and exhibit a number of overlapping interests, because—apart from their almost coincidental production within the New York City independent filmmaking scene—both exceed the analyses in much academic critical and theoretical work concerning sexual difference, narrative structures, voyeurism, cinema, and problems of representation in general. Without digressing into a lengthy explanation of the last decade and a half of debates about women and film,³ it should be noted that the most important and most influential developments in this area can be attributed to writers and filmmakers who apply psychoanalytic, semiotic, and deconstructive theoretical frameworks and methods, sometimes in conjunction with socialist or Marxist critiques.⁴ Despite the value of some of these contributions to feminist cultural criticism, very little has been written about the complications posed by lesbian sexuality and/or lesbian psychology, not to mention lesbian identities, histories, and social experiences, in relation to film. Indeed, much of



this work takes heterosexual, binary (masculine/feminine) sexual identity for granted, problematized surely, but fundamental nevertheless.⁵

Both films also contribute to debates about sexuality current among lesbians in Western culture outside academic contexts, that is, the highly politicized arguments about erotic fantasies, butch and femme roles, and variations of lesbian sexual practices that have taken place in feminist and lesbian forums, including the pages of the political feminist Washington, D.C.-based monthly newspaper *Off Our Backs* and its libertarian counterpart *On Our Backs*, a magazine that bills itself as "entertainment for the adventurous lesbian," published in San Francisco. Departing from the popular lesbian-feminist positions of the early-to-mid-seventies that proposed lesbian relationships as a utopian alternative to the oppressive sexual politics of patriarchy, these films acknowledge sexual desires that are in no way free from fantasies of seduction and possession but at the same time refuse to reduce such fantasies to easy dichotomies of male subjects and female objects. And, whereas Friedrich introduces a male character in order to exile him from her story, McLaughlin dramatizes what she has called "the ultimate lesbian horror, the fantasy of having sex with a man."⁶

In this comment, McLaughlin hints at her interest in reversals and complications of traditional realist narrative film conventions, where the possibility of sexual attraction between women—or between men—functions as the ultimate horror for a heterosexual romantic imagination. The reference to standard cinematic romance is also important in Friedrich's



During a visit to the aquarium at Coney Island, the nun contemplates the sensuous movements of a porpoise living in captivity.



Upon her return to the convent, the nun discovers the tapestry, which her neighbor hung in her room in her absence.

Both photos courtesy filmmaker

shorter and less realist film. *Damned If You Don't* begins with an eight-minute rephotographed condensation of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's 1946 film *Black Narcissus*, replayed as a TV movie watched by a nameless female character (Ela Troyano). Excerpts of the film on the TV screen, often shot as fragments of the full frame, are cut together to illustrate the words of an off-screen woman's voice. Speaking in English with a foreign accent, this narrator tells what could be called the film's repressed story—the story of passionate relationships between women within the film's male-centered narrative—by concentrating on the key moments in the rivalry between two female characters, a “good nun” and a “bad nun” assigned to a convent in India. The nuns' difficulties surviving in what is portrayed as an exotic but dangerous environment are both ameliorated and intensified by the presence of the secular, sexy Mr. Dean, who turns out to be the bad nun's fatal attraction.

The rest of *Damned If You Don't* plots an intrigue between the same woman who is the audience for *Black Narcissus* and a nun (Peggy Healy) who lives in a nearby convent in Manhattan's Lower East Side. The soundtrack intermixes readings from *Immodest Acts*, the biography of a seventeenth-century Italian lesbian abbess,⁷ and a conversation between Friedrich and a high school friend who recalls the influence of nun-schoolteachers on her early awareness of sexuality. Shots of the nun fretting over her attraction to her sensual neighbor, whose deliberate interest obviously upsets her, alternate with documentary footage of nuns in prosaic public places, jumpy shots of landscapes and ecclesiastical buildings, and more static images of various animals living in captivity—reptiles, fish, and

fowl—whose graceful movements are constrained by glass walls or iron fences. While the nun pays a visit to the porpoises in the aquarium at Coney Island, the other woman stitches in the eyes and mouth of a tapestry pattern depicting the Passion of Christ, which then appears on the wall of the nun's convent room. That does it. The good/bad nun goes directly to her seducer's room, and they make love. That is the film's finale. Contrary to *Black Narcissus*, where the bad nun falls from a high cliff to her death during a struggle with her rival, this nun's recognition of sexual attraction and its enactment is not punished.

Curiously, *She Must Be Seeing Things* also incorporates a convent theme. For some contemporary lesbians, the image of the cloister has functioned as a metaphor for an idyllic female community, remote from the domain of male rule, but both Friedrich and McLaughlin fashion it as a prison. McLaughlin incorporates the Thomas de Quincy story of Catalina De Erauso, a seventeenth-century escapee from a convent, as a film-within-the-film, a filmmaking project undertaken by the character Jo (Lois Weaver). Snippets of her work-in-progress periodically occupy the screen, sometimes folded into narrative sequences of Jo at work, sometimes as daydreams. Since these fragments are never introduced by any of the familiar devices for signaling shifts between mental states—out-of-focus transitions, say, or tinted film—the historical disparity between the downtown Manhattan settings populated by contemporary characters whose lives provide the film's narrative and this mysterious, discontinuous costume drama heightens the irreality of the more naturalistic scenes.

Even within the film's main narrative of Agatha's (Sheila Dabney) suspicion of Jo's sexual infidelity with a variety of men, uncertainty about reality abounds. In the first scenes of the film, Jo engages in a flirtation with a man while attending an out-of-town screening of one of her films, establishing the credibility of Agatha's jealousy. Meanwhile Agatha discovers an old diary of Jo's, illustrated with photos of past male lovers. As the film continues, the overlap between “real life” and fantasy becomes increasingly evident, even as Agatha appears to move closer to a confrontation with Jo, whether justified or not, whether actual or not.

Like the nun and her neighbor in *Damned If You Don't*, each of the two main characters in *She Must Be Seeing Things*, then, is driven by desires—the things she *wants* to see—which take shape for Jo in her fantastic film while Agatha compulsively pursues her paranoid fantasies. From time to time, they meet as lovers, where the shared penchant for fantasy intensifies the sexual play between them. The enjoyment these two women find in their sexual encounters is central to the film, as is the difference between their sexual personalities, a recognition of each other's difference perhaps, but not a confirmation of immutable identities that allow one subjectivity at the expense of the other. For instance, Agatha's gift to Jo of a satiny piece of lingerie is a definite butch gesture. And Jo's campy, femme, teasing performance for Agatha in response provides the seductive come-on that lands them in bed, making love without the soft lighting and syrupy music of so-called “sensitive” lesbian sex à la *Lianna*, but with plenty of passion and some humor as well—and with Jo on top.

Here and elsewhere in the film, McLaughlin doesn't shy away from the difficult terrain that I alluded to earlier—the landscape of gendered symbolism that brings lesbian sexuality into relation with the social categories of male and female. So when, at the height of her anxiety about Jo's promiscuity, Agatha dresses in a traditional male uniform of suit and tie and slicks

Top right: Jo flirts with a man (Ed Bowes) she meets at an out-of-town screening in the opening sequence of *She Must Be Seeing Things*.

Photo: Chris Boas

Bottom right: While Jo is away on business, Agatha discovers and reads a diary she finds while straightening the bookshelves in Jo's apartment.

Photo: Anita Bartsch

back her hair, this impersonation of a man may be taken as a confirmation of her male identification—a typical “mannish lesbian.” But this view is myopic, determined by rigid gender conventions, and would necessarily consign her lover to a stock feminine role. Certainly, Jo sometimes wears skirts, heels, and make-up, whereas Agatha usually wears tailored shirts, trousers, no lipstick or nail polish. But as the film proceeds both characters act in ways that contradict strict femininity or masculinity.

While Agatha becomes increasingly obsessed with fantasies and hallucinations, Jo demonstrates her self-confidence and competence as a film director—most notably in the scene where she confers with a member of her crew while Agatha spies on her wearing the masculine disguise, a gesture that underlines the cultural connotations of masculinity, dressed, as she is, in the power-suit. As McLaughlin has indicated, by such means Agatha may hope to defeat her imagined male rivals by taking on their appearance.⁸ Similarly, in Jo's movie *Catalina De Erauso* assumes men's clothing after running away from the convent, as a disguise and as a means to achieve the greater freedom allowed men. Most important in a *lesbian* narrative, though, symbols associated with sexual power carry *erotic* meanings not limited to maleness, annexing erotic power and even aggression for women in forms that, while perhaps disconcerting, are pleasurable, not malicious as in Janowitz' story.

There is yet another kind of social difference operating in *She Must Be Seeing Things* which, I think, is more idealistic and more problematic for the film than the variability and instability of sexual identities. Agatha is Black, a lawyer from a middle-class, Catholic, Brazilian family, whereas Jo is a WASP, North American artist. And, although the legacy of Agatha's Catholic upbringing and her identification with her father—also a lawyer—partially accounts for the course of her actions, the racial and cultural differences that the two women embody remain understated in the film. At one point, when Agatha confides in her co-worker and friend Julia about her doubts about Jo's fidelity, Julia voices a warning about relationships with women who have long histories of sexual involvement with men. What's odd here is that Julia, who is also Black, doesn't mention the potential



difficulties of relationships with white women, no matter what their sexual past. Instead, Agatha and Jo are assumed to inhabit a shared culture, which constitutes a utopia in light of the fact of racial inequity in U.S. society. Since much of the film avoids neat resolutions of conflict and contradiction—upsetting utopian impulses—the downplaying of the power relations entailed in racial differences seems simplistic in a work that deals so well with such dynamics in sexual terms.

But, counter to familiar cinematic caricatures, Jo and Agatha do not represent an opposition of white humanity versus black mystery and exoticism, or black abjection opposed to white triumph. Nor do they represent absolute opposites. Agatha's fastidious habits and her self-control are never presented as emotional limitations. Likewise, Jo's often irrational and impetuous behavior does not impede her ability to work or think seriously. And, as lovers, both women appear vulnerable as well as strong.

The vehicle for the characters' erotic entanglements in McLaughlin's film as well as in Friedrich's is the activity of pursuit—following, spying upon, putting herself in the path of the one desired. Friedrich's scant, but nevertheless distinct, narrative consists almost entirely of such moves by the seductive neighbor, followed by shots of the evasive, nervous nun. In a scene that counterpoints Agatha's donning of a mannish outfit in *She Must Be Seeing Things*—at the moment when the nun appears most perturbed by temptations of carnal pleasure—the neighbor puts on a revealing, super-femme dress before sallying out to the corner grocery, where she once again surprises the nun. The absence of sync sound in the film is taken to an extreme in this and other scenes of their various meetings, which occur without either character ever saying a word. Friedrich, however, cannot be judged adverse to language but, instead, intent on representing an “unspeakable” sexual attraction,⁹ a project of producing psychological meaning through the organization of sensual and cognitive cinematic elements, signalled by the reworking of *Black Narcissus* at the outset.

McLaughlin, too, engages with the tricky problems of voyeurism, exploiting the complicity of the camera. Vicariously partaking in the detective role, the audience watches over Agatha's shoulder as she pours over Jo's diaries, witnesses her hallucinations of Jo's rendez-vous with male lovers, and shares her B-movie style fantasies of Jo's violent murder. But she is continually frustrated by her mistaken visions, and the diaries never yield the required clues. Having been enticed into participating in Agatha's psychic insecurity, the audience also faces the contradictions that Jo's separate subjectivity poses. Agatha's doubts and fears eventually become divorced from the need to find justification in objective, impersonal “truth,” and her paranoia appears to defuse as she watches Jo direct a scene that enacts the thrilling dangers of both voyeurism and sexual desire: Catalina surreptitiously spies on a woman and man making love; a jealous husband intrudes and attacks the man with a knife while Catalina runs off with the woman. Agatha's understanding of the irrational factors that inform her emotional reality—and Jo's surprising dramatization of a fantasy along the same lines—assumes an importance typically represented in narrative





Top: A blind man (Charles Ludlam) is led by a young boy in a scene from Jo's film based on the story of Catalina De Erauso.

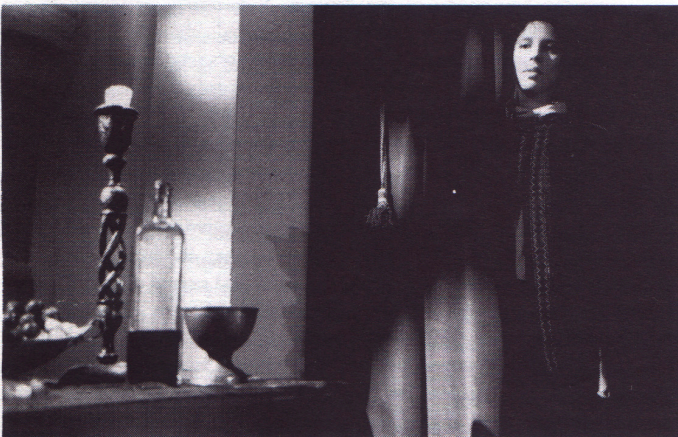
Photo: Chris Boas

Middle: Agatha spies on Jo's meeting with a member of her film crew.

Courtesy filmmaker

Bottom: Catalina peers from her hiding place as she watches the scene of adulterous lovemaking, which concludes with Catalina's rescue of the woman when her murderous husband intrudes.

Photo: Anita Bartsch



cinema by the detective-hero's rational restoration of social order. This refusal of conventional cultural integration is powerfully played at the film's end, when Jo shows Agatha a freshly edited piece of her movie—the rescue scene just described—without indicating the full context of this scene or its narrative function.

The variety of erotic projections elaborated in *She Must Be Seeing Things* and Friedrich's restaging of the *Black Narcissus* story as a seduction scenario, make it possible to articulate the dynamics of voyeurism and its inflections in lesbian terms. After seeing *Damned If You Don't* with several friends, I found myself doing just that. Leaving the theater, we became involved in an animated discussion about the final scene, where the sexy, secular woman carefully removes the intricate layers of the nun's habit. One friend was irritated, because she saw this as a repetition of male fantasies about possessing a virgin. Without much thought, I blurted out my interpretation: "When she took off that head band, I saw her as a dyke disguised as a nun."

NOTES

1. The back cover of *Slaves of New York* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1987) quotes a *Newsday* review: "Jane Austen goes punk... Welcome to bohemia, circa now."
2. Mandy Merck, "Dessert Hearts," *the Independent*, July 1987, pp. 15-17.
3. B. Ruby Rich's comment at a conference in 1986 comes to mind. She noted that feminist conferences and publications in the seventies often addressed "women and film," but, by the mid-eighties, the topic had been transformed into "gender and visual representation," the title of the event at which she made this remark. The phenomenon Rich cited historically coincided with the increasing respectability of feminism in academic film studies courses and the institutionalization of what has become known as "feminist film theory."
4. A number of feminist film critics and theorists have contributed to the growing literature on sexual difference. The benchmark for many who work in this vein is Laura Mulvey's 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," which employs psychoanalytic concepts to trace the operations of masculine desire in Hollywood narrative films. Two other central examples are textbooks published in the early eighties, Annette Kuhn's *Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982) and E. Ann Kaplan's *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera* (New York: Methuen, 1983), which likewise rely on Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theories in their analyses of work by women filmmakers.
5. See Mandy Merck, "Difference and Its Discontents," *Screen*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (Winter 1987), pp. 2-9.
6. Alison Butler, "She Must Be Seeing Things: An Interview with Sheila McLaughlin," *Screen*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (Autumn 1987), p. 22.
7. Judith C. Brown, *Immodest Acts: The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).
8. Butler, p. 23.
9. Gay/lesbian sex has been known euphemistically as "the love that has no name." The representation of "unspeakable" acts still shock audiences, as I was reminded at a recent screening of Sankofa's *The Passion of Remembrance* in New York City, where a man loudly exclaimed, "Oh, no!" at the moment when two men kissed on screen.

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