

“An Unrequited Desire for the Sublime: Looking at Lesbian Representation Across the Works of Abigail Child, Cecilia Dougherty and Su Friedrich” by Liz Kotz in *Queer Looks: Perspectives on Gay and Lesbian Film and Video*, edited by Martha Gever, John Greyson and Pratibha Parmar, Routledge Press, 1993, pp. 86-102.

**An Unrequited Desire for the Sublime:
Looking at Lesbian Representation Across the Works of
Abigail Child, Cecilia Dougherty, and Su Friedrich**

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In recent years, issues of lesbian representation and of the lesbian spectator have become nagging questions posed to feminist theories of film, which have become codified around semiotic and psychoanalytic discourses and, to a lesser extent, the study and critique of traditional narrative film. In many instances, this has represented a closed system, one open neither to new lines of analysis nor to works which don't fit the predominant theoretical models.¹ Now, however, both the rapid production of lesbian and gay media in the community, and the recent legitimation of lesbian and gay studies within the academy, have begun to shift these agendas for feminist film theory, as have, on other levels, the emergence of postcolonial cultural criticisms and Third World feminisms.²

Drawing on the contributions of postcolonial cultural theory to unravel some of the contradictions of contemporary North American lesbian experience, Martha Gever notes:

My experience has taught me a few things. Above all, it has taught me that to *be* a lesbian means engaging in a complex, often treacherous, system of cultural identities, representations and institutions, and a history of sexual regulation. This is not a unique status nor a form of privileged consciousness; everyone is implicated in these systems.³

As Gever's quote suggests, the terms within which we understand and discuss questions of lesbian representation have undergone a fundamental shift. Recent work on marginal sexual identities has focused on the process of their formation as *cultural* identities, located in specific social and representational histories.⁴ Challenging previous tendencies within feminist criticism and lesbian and gay studies, which theorized lesbian and gay experiences as somehow “outside of” or apart from the structures of the wider,

“patriarchal” culture, these contemporary analyses insist on the importance of understanding how lesbian and gay identities and cultural practices are articulated within and in relation to their cultural and historical contexts.

These contemporary approaches to gay media acknowledge cultural hybridity and syncretism as central processes in the formation of marginalized cultural forms. Therefore, they implicitly question models of lesbian representation which claim to articulate “autonomous” or “authentic” forms of lesbian sexuality or desire in relation to filmic discourse. Such an approach starts from an understanding that the “dominant culture” is never unitary or entirely monolithic, and suggests that what is dominant in a given context assumes different forms and offers a range of possibilities for subversion, resistance, or resignification.

Tendencies by lesbian and gay critics to posit heterosexuality as far more monolithic than it is, and “marginal sexualities” as far more “oppositional” than they may be, may actually reinforce dominant cultural beliefs in the inherent and essential separateness of lesbian and gay sexuality and desire, rather than challenging these dyadic terms.

Much recent critical work, for instance, has argued against such claims to autonomy or specificity, suggesting, instead, how a reading of the relationality of lesbian sexuality and desire could insist on their capacity to displace or dismantle hegemonic, heterosexual norms. Reflecting discomfort with the regulatory aspects of identity categories, these efforts explore how gay practices are structured in part by the very dominant heterosexual codes they resist and reinscribe, and suggest that models of reinscription and proliferation can offer provocative and necessary sites for lesbian cultural practices. As theorists such as Judith Butler have insisted, such *structuring* of identities never fully determines them, nor is such relationality or reinscription ever only one-directional.⁵ Instead, such models offer frameworks for considering how lesbian, gay, and other marginal sexual cultures themselves continually contest, inform, and reshape the dominant culture.

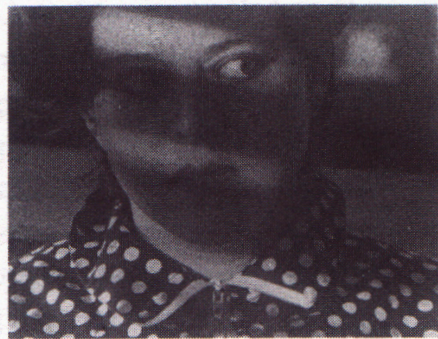
The current popularity of Butler’s project of resignification and reterritorialization suggests the extent to which it offers a theoretical articulation for a range of practices which have emerged since the early eighties. Clearly, such theoretical models do not come out of a vacuum. It’s in this context that I’d like to look at questions of lesbian representation in the experimental film and videomaking of three contemporary artists: Abigail Child, Cecilia Dougherty, and Su Friedrich. Working out of distinct aesthetic and formal traditions, their films and videos offer provocative ways of looking at lesbian representation which go beyond the boundaries of the still largely accepted agendas of “realist representation,” “positive images,” and highly codified forms of “explicit lesbian content.” Their work centrally interrogates mar-

ginal sexual identities not only as subject matter but also as *stance*, as a *process* of reinscription, as a way of situating oneself in relation to sets of images, experiences, and historical formations.

Such a shift in perspective is reflected in my own choice of terms, which assumes a field of inquiry of “lesbian representation” and “lesbian media” which is considerably wider, less stable, and less clearly defined than a more realist-defined (and purely content-oriented) model of the “representation of gays and lesbians,” “images of lesbians,” and so on. Such a choice is strategic, aimed at opening up questions of lesbian representation within a wide range of works with greatly varying political, aesthetic, and representational agendas, many of which exceed or question our existing theoretical vocabularies. These works inevitably destabilize a category like “lesbian media,” suggesting that such a term can’t describe any stable unity, any body of work that is “out there”; instead, it offers us a different map of the vast activity of film and video, with new sets of fault lines, continuities, and lines of flight.

The work of New York-based experimental filmmaker Abigail Child⁶ excavates the ways Western cinematic forms figure masculinity and femininity, and artfully probes their subliminal articulation in an array of pop cultural artifacts. Her seven-part series *Is This What You Were Born For?*⁷ (1981–1989) combines found footage and recreated elements of film noir, pornography, soap opera, early cinema, and home movies, in its relentless interrogation of gesture and the body. Coming out of a tradition of structural filmmaking and cinematic minimalism, her work represents a feminist project located partially within the legacy of historically male, formalist practices,⁸ one which adapts their rigorous attention to structure and materiality, and reinscribes these from a conviction that the cultural meanings of images and materials *do* matter.

Child’s short, dense, and highly poetic films work to destabilize familiar images, sequences, and tableaux, insistently exploring the artifices which structure narrative, and probing them for moments of rupture and excess. Her focus is on the body, as visually and corporeally enacted (and gendered) through gait, gesture, rhythm, and repetition. Influenced by the strategies of language poetry and the musical work of John Zorn, Christian Marclay, and Zeena Parkins (all of whom have collaborated on her films), she uses found footage, reenactment, and multilayered sound cutting to reframe and reposition familiar sequences, images, and materials. Contrapuntally rechoreographing these fragments of action, gesture, and ritualized movement (“that array of corporeal theatrics understood as gender presentation”⁹), Child makes a kind of music out of this “noise.”



Mayhem, Abigail Child

Child's engagement with cinematic melodrama can be traced to her 1984 film, *Covert Action*. The short found-footage work is made from salvaged home movies of two heterosexual couples on holiday in the 1950s; the two sequences, with the same men but different women, appear to date from different years. In Child's film, the scenes are intercut and fragmented, suggesting a range of possible story lines. The focus is on questions of gesture, the formalized mating rituals and games that read as a form of dance, and the theatricalized roles of the men and women. Chipping away at the repetition and exaggeration within these home movie sequences, Child denaturalizes their heterosexual rituals, replaying them as what Butler has termed "an incessant and panicked imitation"¹⁰ of their own phantasmatic ideal, engaging a viewer who is alternately fascinated and horrified.

Child's 1987 film *Mayhem* most centrally explores questions of specifically

sexual roles and representations; along with *Both* (1989), it most explicitly engages questions of lesbian representation. Child describes the film as:

Perversely and equally inspired by de Sade's *Justine* and Vertov's sentences about the satiric detective advertisement, *Mayhem* is my attempt to create a film in which sound is the character, and to do so focusing on sexuality and the erotic. Not so much to undo the entrapment (we fear what we desire, we desire what we fear) but to frame fate, show up the rotation, upset the common and incline our contradictions towards satisfaction, albeit conscious.¹¹

The film opens with a classic noir scenario: a woman in forties' attire waits in a darkened room. Her face is barred by diagonal shadows, created by the light through a venetian blind. The music suggests fear, foreboding. She looks up, startled, awaiting an intrusion. The film then cuts to a scene of two men peering, menacingly, suggesting malice—except that the sequence is lifted from a postwar spy thriller. Veering between historical periods and locales, the film catalogues types of actions, codified gestures, ways of representing the body. Men and women shift positions constantly: watching, being watched, looking around, flight. Two men pursue a woman through an urban landscape; just when things threaten to get menacing, she turns around to glimpse them as they suddenly embrace, introducing slippages between hetero- and homosexual desire that reverberate through the film.

Yet simply describing sequences risks misreading the film, for *Mayhem* is a deeply kinetic work, one in which the images slip from the viewer's grasp before she or he can fully register them—a strategy which heightens their subliminal apprehension, their capacity for slippage and deferred action. As the film continually sets up and then redirects its melodramatic encounters, *Mayhem* plays on the fine line between threat and fascination. Rather than attempting to separate out pleasure and danger—or “lesbian” and “straight” fantasies—what is frightening or pathologized becomes reworked as sources of excitement and arousal. In this messy nexus of fear and desire, the film's densely layered and surgical editing strategies are designed to open up what is seamless, or, in Child's words, “to have the pleasure but be aware of the dynamics and origins of this pleasure.”¹²

As film scholar Madeline Leskin has noted, “*Mayhem* meticulously employs the language of noir: the lighting, the camera angles, even the latent sadism, but takes noir to the next level by drawing the connections between sex and violence.”¹³ Using its found-footage materials as a very partial and idiosyncratic archeology of sexual scenarios, Child sets up erratic lines of flight and echoes within the text: a brief scene of a woman resisting a man's embrace reverberates off an earlier sound fragment, where a woman's voice stutters “no, not so close.” Later, another intones, “no no quiere,” as the

itly questions the production of sexual identities that are “stable, natural, and good”¹⁵—as well as questioning the privileged position of a feminist “critique” which seeks to authorize its own status as rational analysis, somehow outside such histories of distortion, entrapment, and desire. In contrast, it presents a kind of alternate map through its idiosyncratically assembled film history, offering a *proliferation* of sexual identities, pleasures, and dangers. It’s a strategy that locates lesbian desire *within* the romantic and voyeuristic interplays of cinematic representation, rather than claiming to articulate a new, distinct language or an autonomously defined lesbian sexuality. As such, it refuses to isolate or compartmentalize lesbian desire; it positions it as always already a part of these systems of desire, deviant and subversive, to be sure, but not separate.

A more pop-cultural approach to positioning the lesbian subject can be seen in the work of San Francisco-based videomaker and photographer Cecilia Dougherty.¹⁶ While Dougherty’s earlier videotapes addressed marginal and stigmatized aspects of lesbian experience, engaging in a project of demystification and self-definition, her later work has departed from this mode of direct contestation. In *Grapefruit* (1989), Dougherty takes a different, seminarrative tact, staging an all-female video reenactment of Yoko Ono’s account of life with John Lennon and the Beatles. Like *Mayhem*, it is a work that constructs a mode of lesbian representation based on stance and subversion—the entry into and impersonation of dominant cultural materials—rather than employing explicit content or straightforward representation. As Dougherty has described her project, her work “is not *about* lesbians, it *is* lesbian.”¹⁷

Dougherty has stated that this strategy resulted from her frustration with the reception of her previous videotapes, *Kathy* (1986) and *Claudia* (1987). Intended by the artist as statements about banality and the everyday, they were nonetheless often read—in art settings—as “transgressive,” due to the fact that both contain explicit depictions of lesbian sexual acts. (In lesbian and gay festival contexts, ironically, they were often read as unsuccessful porn—as not “erotic” enough.) This reception set up a “problem” for Dougherty: how to create lesbian visual representations that would not be immediately annexed into the category of the “transgressive”—and the very problematic duality between “normalcy” and “transgression” it reinforces.

Dougherty’s choice was a circuitous reengagement with popular memory, reworking seventies icons and contemporary nostalgia for them. Drawing on both mass culture and sixties-style Pop Art, *Grapefruit* intentionally confounds distinctions of “high” and “low,” of pop-cultural “original” and appropriated “copy.” The very couple John and Yoko (played by two women) becomes a sign for this marriage, of the aggressively heterosexual pop-cultural mythology of the Beatles, and the much campier, much queerer



Grapefruit, Cecilia Dougherty

art-historical mythology of Fluxus, Pop, and underground performance. As deeply steeped in these avant-garde traditions as in its ostensibly more rock-and-roll narrative, *Grapefruit* aggressively opens itself up to different, intersecting cultural histories. Lackadaisical and decompressed, the video aims to produce a Warhol-like mode of distracted attention; with its Day-Glow colors, horizonless visuals, and deadpan nonacting, the tape evokes Pop and the legacies of 1970s performance and conceptual art. These influences, encoded visually, also structure the viewing experience the video creates. For the most part it is plotless and intentionally “flat,” without clear hierarchies in meaning, inviting its viewer to focus in and out of attention or to seize on particular details or twists.

With its mix-and-match music, costumes, and performance styles, *Grapefruit* plays with the inevitable distance and disalignment between historical “truth” and contemporary “reenactment.” Working as a subversively lesbian parody of straight material, the video relates to the past by ignoring historical accuracy, and instead reinvesting historical figures from an idiosyncratic contemporary point of view—one which draws as much on art school as on mass culture. Rather than making any claim to realism or to some

more rationally grounded critique of pop culture, the tape locates itself within the realms of popular fantasy and the open-ended manipulation and reinterpretation of cultural history.

The cross-gender and cross-race casting further destabilizes any sense of conventional "realism," continually reinflecting the past with new, unanticipated twists and meanings, both cultural and personal. Lesbian writer Susie Bright plays Lennon to performance artist Shelley Cook's Ono. Malaysian-born videomaker Azian Nurudin, as the easternly mystic George Harrison, reads her lines off index cards with varying accents and inflections. The sequences are colorized with garish pseudo-psychedelic video effects. Historical scenes, such as the Lennon-Ono "bed-in," are recreated, songs are lip-synced, actors forget their lines. Off and on throughout the tape, Dougherty's voice is heard coaching the actors, or directing their loose improvisations. Constantly embracing artifice and distortion, simulation is not even an issue.

Within the tape's layerings, manipulations, and subversions, the complex mapping of the lesbian subculture onto the heterosexual mythology may not be read by all viewers. The video is not explicitly "lesbian," in terms of realist representation or content. Instead, it functions more analogously to a form of "camp," working with impersonation and quasi-parodic imitation to reappropriate mass cultural figures and reinvest them with lesbian fantasies and desires. While the jokes about conceptual art (with Cook restaging Yoko Ono's Fluxus-like performances) may not register with everyone who watches the tape in the context of lesbian and gay film festivals, the quasi-Warholian play with subcultural celebrities, images, and interactions creates a range of openings and identifications, depending on the audience.

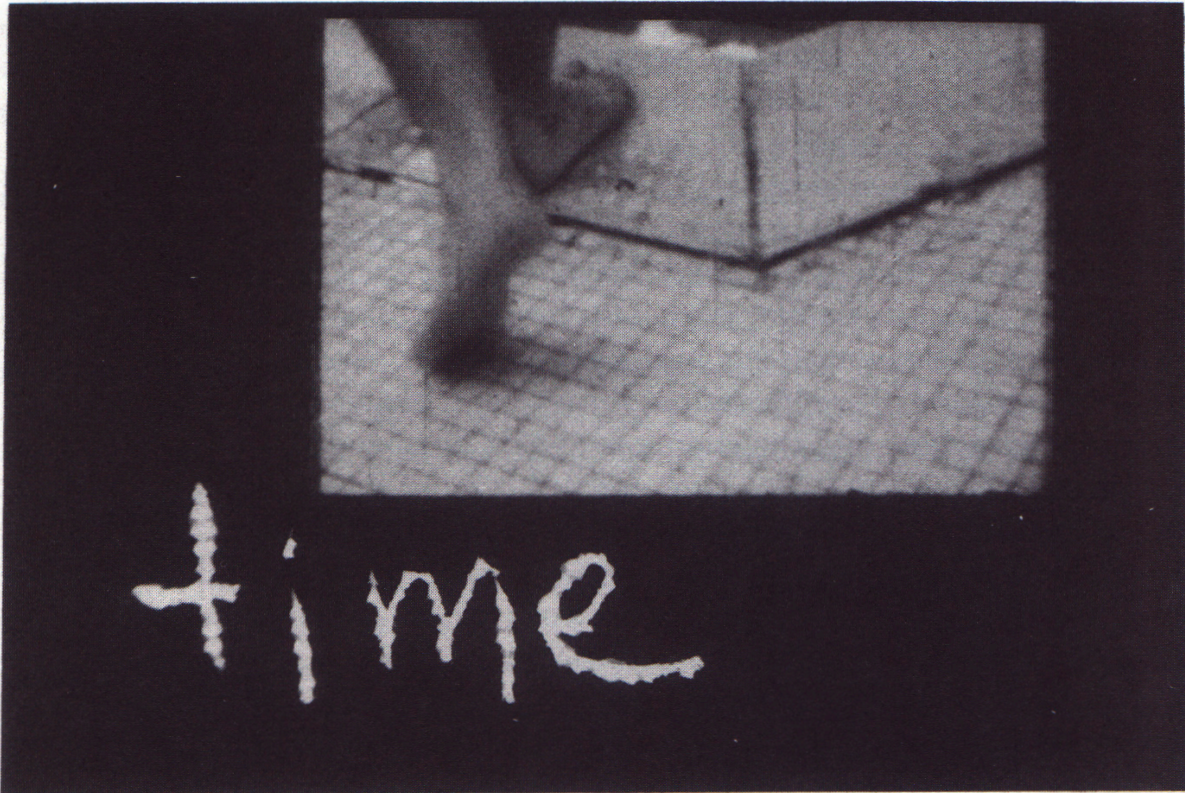
In lieu of a linear narrative, the video's involvement in a shared pop-cultural history serves to orchestrate these fragmented cultural references and allow them to play off one another. Its reinscription of the past grounds itself in the trashy discards of seventies pop culture and television. As the tape concludes, with a long scene of John and Yoko at home, talking, eating, and shooting up, it evokes a sense of the intertwined boredom and sadness of everyday life which is nonetheless quite moving. The sequence itself is aggressively banal, even boring, as *Grapefruit* works to simultaneously resituate its stars within the everyday, and restore banality to the hyped-up mythologies of pop-cultural history. Its innovation, I think, lies in its insistence on locating lesbian subjectivity within this popular sphere, setting up a *tension* between mass cultural and subcultural elements which is never allowed to resolve itself into a polarity or neatly compartmentalized division.

Dougherty's question, in more ways than one, is how to locate lesbian subjectivity within the larger culture. In her most recent work, *Coal Miner's Granddaughter* (1991), Dougherty uses a semiautobiographical narrative to replay the "coming-out" story form. The feature-length video, shot mainly

on a Fisher-Price toy camera, depicts a young woman's coming-of-age in the late 1960s and early seventies. Starring video artist Leslie Singer, the tape focuses on the violence and rebellion at the center of a working-class American family. Like *Grapefruit*, *Coal Miner's Granddaughter* aims more for emotional truths than historical ones; casually acted, it plays on anachronistic details and historical slippage. Yet its coming-out narrative both is, and is not, conventional; the heroine leaves the repressive constraints of the home, but, except for a first exuberant brush with sexuality, the tone is far from upbeat. The women she meets as she moves West (to San Francisco, the promised land of gay liberation) form a series of awkward and sometimes painful encounters, and the ending is at best open-ended.

A step away from "video art" toward a more direct engagement with narrative, *Coal Miner's Granddaughter* uses more familiar formal structures, but continues to inflect them with a deeply personal, and culturally marginal, perspective. The strategy Dougherty's work offers—to place lesbian experiences within popular cultural landscapes—has certain parallels with the Pop Art and punk-inspired work of such fellow San Francisco-based artists as Singer and Nurudin, or the gay rereadings of popular narratives performed in Robert and Donald Kinney's recent videos. With their cross-gender and cross-race drag, celebrity impersonations, pop cultural references, and adulterated genres, these artists, like Dougherty, locate marginal experiences within the discards of contemporary mass culture, questioning both the implied boundaries between "marginal" and "mainstream" and those between "true" reproduction and "distortion."¹⁸

The New York based filmmaker Su Friedrich¹⁹ has the longest involvement in the development of lesbian media. Coming from a background in photography and avant-garde filmmaking, in recent years Friedrich has shifted from the silent, nonnarrative strategies of *Cool Hands*, *Warm Heart* (1979) and *Gently Down the Stream* (1981), to incorporate dramatization, narrative, and documentary techniques in her films *The Ties That Bind* (1984), *Damned If You Don't* (1987), and *Sink or Swim* (1990). Working to reopen and expand the traditions of American avant-garde filmmaking, Friedrich's work has brought a poetic and deeply lyrical style to questions of female identity and lesbian desire. Situated in the interpenetration of personal family history and public events, Friedrich's films probe her relation to the legacies of Catholicism, German fascism, and postwar destabilization, through her own experiences and those of her parents. While often loosely autobiographical, Friedrich refuses to fetishize "the personal" as the locus of meaning in the heavily codified manner of much American "personal filmmaking" of the 1960s and 1970s. Instead, her films locate the individual in a web of intersecting histories and narratives, chance events, and fantasies, in which forces of empowerment and entrapment cannot be fully separated.



Gently Down the Stream, Su Friedrich

Gently Down the Stream uses hand-scratched texts and rephotographed imagery to intercut memorylike shards of sexual conflict, troubled relationships, and Catholic guilt. Based on dreams Friedrich recorded in her journal over a number of years, the film meditates on moments of anxiety, doubt, and everyday trauma. The texts are scratched word by word into the emulsion, leaving the spectator in a state of waiting and uncertainty: "I/wake/her/She/is/angry/Smears/spermicidal/jelly/on/my/lips/No!" "I/draw/a/man/ Take/his/skin/Get/excited/Mount/it/ IT'S/LIKE/BEING/IN/LOVE/WITH/A/ STRAIGHT/WOMAN." As the film progresses, the anxieties take shape, offering different glimpses of Friedrich's psyche and identity. The ambiguous trauma of the first sentence, for instance, is illuminated by and reverberates through the second text. The images are also offered like glimpses—feet walking, water from a boat, figures of the virgin and Christ, a woman rowing. Enigmatic and richly suggestive, the film's disconcerting impact proceeds by this back-and-forth movement of ellipsis and illumination, as clear pictures form, change shape and dissolve, both conceptually through the text, and visually through the rephotographed and reframed images.

The film's form is itself fractured and disturbed; bits of white leader and punched-out holes insist on the vulnerability and incompleteness of the material substrata. Series of images shift from full-frame to reframed presentations in irregular patterns and rhythms; their relation to the text is not

illustrative but more suggestive and oblique, intersecting erratically to create new sets of associations or subjective impressions. The structure of *Gently Down the Stream* is highly permeable, allowing a sense of random and unpredictable encounters that approximate a kind of dream logic, as the film proceeds in a stream-of-consciousness flow with constant interruptions and eruptions of unprocessed, sometimes obscure, dream material.

If *Gently Down the Stream* situates the conflicts between lesbianism, heterosexuality, and Catholicism within the realm of interior psychic experiences, *Damned If You Don't* restages these as a narrative story between two characters, "the nun" and "the other woman." Like Friedrich's previous films, its quiet and acutely nuanced flow combines elements of dream structure, private fantasy, and personal memory. But it expands on these to engage with more traditional narrative forms, drawing in sequences from the 1947 Powell-Pressburger film *Black Narcissus*, and texts from Judith C. Brown's *Immodest Acts: The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy*. Collaging scraps of documentary and narrative materials, personal testimony, and enigmatic images of Catholic rituals and vestments, the film performs an informal, loosely historical investigation of nuns as embodiments of suppressed and displaced female desires. Friedrich weaves in and out of secular and religious worlds to create poetic associations between contemporary and historical narratives. Her selective samplings focus the viewer's attention as much on the artifice and excesses of their baroque and frequently melodramatic forms as on the tales they tell.

The highly compressed presentation of *Black Narcissus* flattens the film into a comic duel between moral absolutes, accentuating the codes of cinematic melodrama and the repressive sexual politics of the original. Friedrich condenses the story into a conflict between the "good" nun, played by Deborah Kerr, and the "bad" nun, who descends into the world of lust and men. Stylized and aggressively "amateur," with its rolling scan lines and black-and-white TV reproduction, the appropriation delights in the melodramatic excess of the original, while intimating an unstated erotic bond between the two women. The convent becomes an almost allegorical site of repressed desire, with death as the punishment for transgression. In Friedrich's own narrative, of course, this scenario is replaced by the temptations of other women—and the outcome is reversed. As the sexy "other woman" silently pursues the tortured nun, Friedrich weaves in fantastic tales from the seventeenth century trial of Sister Benedetta (recorded in Brown's *Immodest Acts*) and a friend's reminiscences of a Catholic school girlhood. The pleasures of voyeurism and the intrigue of concealed sexuality play a hide-and-seek game within the film, which slowly reveals its own narrative progression. Friedrich describes the contradictory legacies of Catholicism embedded in the film:

With *Damed If You Don't*, I found myself wanting to tell a story, and again one which I thought of as a moral tale. I was ready, I thought, to crucify once and for all the Catholic Church, and rescue a poor nun from its clutches. But I found myself unable to be as censorious as I'd imagined; I wanted some of the characters and places and objects to function as a tribute to certain sensual aspects of Catholicism. . . . I had to admit that there were some experiences growing up Catholic which I still valued.

Perhaps the most subtle manifestation of that is simply in the way the film is shot and edited. It isn't easy for me to articulate how it works, but I'm convinced that my upbringing, with all its repression, idealism and sense of an unrequited desire for the sublime, has had a direct effect on my way of shooting and editing.²⁰

Turning the tables on the symbols and structures of institutionalized repression, the film gently eroticizes the religious vestments as covers hiding potential pleasure and abandonment, as played out in its final seduction scene. Lyrically composed and sensuously edited, Friedrich's enigmatic visual images serve as indirect projections of the repressed desires and longings acted out in the narrative. Sensuality and physical pleasure seep into the film at every turn, as the nun is unable to escape her desires; for example, she flees her pursuer to visit to an aquarium, only to be confronted by a pair of beautiful white whales twisting through the water. Throughout the film, the implicit sensuality and perversity of the baroque Catholic iconography is used against itself to create an erotic fascination with concealment and repression. The other woman finally accomplishes her seduction through a gift, a small needlepoint image of Christ with only the mouth embroidered, which she leaves in the nun's room—an eroticized *detournment* of the religious icon.

The underlying strategy of the film revolves around recovering—for pleasure, for suspense, for fantasy—the mechanisms, anxieties, and twisted representations of the oppressive culture. Rather than questioning the “truth” of its assembled documents—the exoticized intrigues of *Black Narcissus*, the wildly fantastic testimony of Sister Benedetta's accuser—Friedrich probes their pathologized narratives as sources of both history *and* fascination, documents whose aesthetic excesses and ambiguous powers can be undermined and resituated in a modern tale of girl gets girl. The very structure of the film works to appropriate filmic clichés—voyeuristic pleasure, female sexuality, happy endings—into its highly personal and even humorous meditation on lesbian erotic pursuit and guilt-drenched lust. Rather than using its fragments to create a new fiction of the “natural” or the “true,” the film plays itself out on the level of suggestion and allegory. Perhaps more than anything, it is about fantasy, and the processes by which repressive experiences and traumas are replayed and transformed into turn-ons. Like the

dream structure of *Gently Down the Stream*, *Damned If You Don't* explores the subjective processes of memory, anxiety, fantasy, and desire.

In this alternation between critical and almost nostalgic stances, Friedrich's film explores how a modern lesbian subject is positioned in relation to these representations. Like *Mayhem* and *Grapefruit*, Friedrich's film seems to revolve around the possibilities for creating pleasure in the discards of a repressive and highly constrained past, and of moving beyond feminist critique to selectively reinvest these images and memories with private and erotic meanings. With its sensual and suggestive intercutting, *Damned If You Don't* probes the complex interplays of voyeurism and identification, guilt, pleasure, and shame, at work in their cautious reappropriation. As Scott MacDonald notes in his discussion of Friedrich's films:

Damned If You Don't . . . energizes feminist deconstruction by locating it within a context of at least two forms of (redirected) film pleasure: the excitement of the melodramatic narrative and the sensuous enjoyment of cinematic texture, rhythm and structure. Friedrich's decision not only to include a representation of female sexuality but to use it as the triumphant conclusion of the film is central to her new direction. Friedrich has cinematically appropriated the pleasure of women for women.²¹

In these films and videos from the past several years, Child, Dougherty, and Friedrich offer strategies for situating the lesbian subject within and against the narratives of the past, within and against the inherited materials of the dominant culture. It's an ambiguous position—situated within the culture, structured in part by it, and yet deviant. There is perhaps a danger involved, of loss of identity and loss of autonomy, in abandoning the codified cultural practices of a more ghettoized community. Yet this tension, this troubled and troubling instability that comes from engagement with the codes and artifices of the wider culture, is also a potent source of pleasure. These works offer their viewers, not the pleasures of a well-consolidated lesbian subject position, reassuring in its stability and autonomy, but something else: the pleasures of *exploring* cinematic pleasure, of challenging and unsettling our relations to these materials. Actively engaging with this ongoing process of repetition and reinscription, such work opens a space for exploring the imprecise boundaries of contemporary sexual identities.

Needless to say, many of these strategies no longer seem as controversial or as disturbing as they once did. And perhaps, as they lose their power to shock, they may also lose a certain intensity of impact, as viewers and practitioners alike develop critical languages to describe and in a sense defuse their disruptive reworkings of familiar images, materials, and cultural memories. From the time this article was first drafted, in the spring of 1990, to the time of its publication three years later, a major shift in theoretical

discourses and critical expectations has indeed taken place. Concepts of “parodic imitation” and “subversive repetition” have proliferated, to the extent that even Judith Butler, with whose work such terms are most closely associated, has come to question and problematize their blanket usage. Clearly, not all forms of parody are subversive or disruptive. As a number of recent works attest, parodic strategies can serve to reiterate, consolidate, and renaturalize normative relations of power and sexuality in some contexts, and work to destabilize and disrupt them in others. What constitutes effective reterritorialization is always open to question, challenge, and reappraisal.

Yet this expanded field of critical discourses with which we understand lesbian media, and feminist cultural practices more generally, is crucial. Work such as Child’s, which was long marginalized for its “failure” to align with stable or identifiable identity categories, or to produce an unambiguously “affirmative” or “critical” position towards its assembled materials, now appears almost prescient. And with a renewed attention towards aesthetic strategies, including those from avant-garde and experimental traditions, such work refreshingly and productively challenges the straightforward and often deeply reductive focus on “content” that plagued much feminist and gay media criticism of the past decade.

Indeed, the strategies evident both in contemporary lesbian media and critical theory could be conceived “simply” as lesbian reengagement with some of the most classic avant-garde and poststructuralist practices—a series of intersections with a long, if often suppressed, history, one which is anything but simple. Without calling for any kind of renewed formalism, I’d like to propose that works such as those of Child, Dougherty, and Friedrich suggest the reopening of questions which have long been marginalized from media criticism and the world of professional film studies, centering around issues of aesthetics, formal strategies, and what works as “art.” These questions may have far more relevance than we expect to ongoing discussions of lesbian subjectivity, feminist media, and political complexity and effectiveness.²²

Notes

1. The implicit closure of many psychoanalytically-based feminist theories can be seen, for example, in Constance Penley, ed., *Feminism and Film Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1988), Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), and in some of the earlier work of Teresa de Lauretis in *Alice Doesn’t: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984). Subsequent efforts to open feminist theories of film to questions of lesbian representation can be found in de Lauretis’s *Technologies of Gender* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), and

- Judith Mayne's *The Woman at the Keyhole* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), as well as in articles by Chris Straayer, Martha Gever, Patricia White, and others.
2. Although very differently located, such approaches share a common grounding: the questioning of the unity of the category of "women" and the adequacies of analysis based solely on gender.
 3. Martha Gever, "The Names We Give Ourselves," in Russell Ferguson, et al., eds., *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures* (Cambridge/New York: MIT Press and the New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1990), p. 191.
 4. As British writer Stuart Hall suggests, in relation to the representation of postcolonial ethnic identity: "Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished historical fact, which the new cinematic discourses then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a "production," which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation. But this view problematizes the very authority and authenticity to which the term, 'cultural identity', lays claim." Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation," *Framework* no. 36 (1989), p. 69.
 5. See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990), and "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," in Diana Fuss, ed., *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories* (New York: Routledge, 1991). See also Liz Kotz, "Interview with Judith Butler," *Artforum*, (November 1992).
 6. Critical writings on Child include Marjorie Keller, "Is This What You Were Born For?" and Charles Bernstein, "Interview with Abigail Child," *X-Dream* (Autumn, 1987); Maureen Turim, "Childhood Memories and Household Events in the Feminist Avant-garde," *Journal of Film and Video* no. 38 (Summer/Fall 1986); Barbara Hammer, "The Invisible Screen: Lesbian Cinema," *Center Quarterly* (Spring, 1988); and Dennis Barone, "Abigail Child," *Arts Magazine* (September, 1990); as well as Child's book of experimental writings, *A Motive for Mayhem* (Hartford: Potes & Poets Press, 1989). Child's 16mm films are distributed by Filmmaker's Cooperative and the American Federation for the Arts in New York City, Canyon Cinema in San Francisco, Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Center, and the London Film Co-op. *Mayhem* is also distributed on video from the Video Data Bank and the Kitchen.
 7. The title is an inversion of that of the Goya etching "This Is What You Were Born For," part of the *Disasters of War* series.
 8. Analogously to classic minimalism in art history, structural filmmaking has, in progressive analyses, often come to represent the epitome of a straight, white, male aesthetic, deriving from a reading of minimalist practices as based on the denial of subjectivity, the suppression of cultural associations, and the evisceration of content. A classic articulation of this position can be found in Anna C. Chave, "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power," *Arts Magazine* (January, 1990) pp. 44–63. Such a reading of minimalism of structural film is clearly complicated by the current proliferation of feminist, gay, ethnic, and postcolonial work reappropriating and reinflecting classic minimalist strategies. See, for instance, Kathryn Hixson, "The Subject Is the Object: Legacies of Minimalism," *New Art Examiner* (May, 1991) and ". . . and the Object Is the Body," *New Art Examiner* (October, 1991); Laura Cottingham, "Interview with Adrian Piper," *Journal of Contemporary Art*, vol. 5, no. 1 (Spring, 1992); and my own "Complicity," on work by Abigail Child and Lutz Bacher, in Roma Gibson and Pamela Church Gibson, eds., *Dirty Looks: Women, Power, Pornography* (London: British Film Institute, 1993).
 9. Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," p. 28.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 23. Butler's work offers a number of concepts that are quite provocative in relation to Child's films, particularly her conception of heterosexuality as a compulsive and compulsory repetition, a panicked imitation of its own phantasmatic ideal, which can potentially be destabilized by the parodic and imitative effects of gay identities, as well as her notion of "subversive repetition," of exploring the moments of rupture within heterosexual repetition, as potentially productive strategies for lesbian and gay cultural practice.
11. Abigail Child, "Program Notes: *Is This What You Were Born For?*" San Francisco Cinematheque (February 22, 1990).
12. Madeline Leskin, "Interview with Abigail Child," *Motion Picture* vol. 3, no. 1/2 (Winter, 1989–90). Reprinted from *Skop* (West Berlin, February, 1988).
13. *Ibid.*, p. 39.
14. Matias Viegner, "Gay Fanzines: There's Trouble in That Body," *Afterimage* (January, 1991). Expanded and republished as "Kinky Escapes, Bedroom Techniques, Unbridled Passion and Secret Sex Codes," in David Bergman, ed., *Camp Grounds* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993).
15. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
16. Critical writings on Dougherty's work include Valerie Soe, "Cecilia Dougherty/*Grapefruit*," *Cinematograph* no. 4 (1991) and Liz Kotz "Interrogating the Boundaries of Women's Art: New Work in Video by Four Women," *High Performance*, no. 48 (Winter, 1989). Dougherty's tapes are distributed by the Video Data Bank (*Grapefruit* and *Coal Miner's Granddaughter*) and Frameline (*Sick, Kathy*).
17. Interview with the artist, San Francisco, January, 1991.
18. Coming from a younger generation of videomakers, most of whom were directly or indirectly influenced by the punk movement, this rejection of liberal and gay-assimilationist mandates for "realist" representation has parallels with the cultural scavenging and anti-aesthetic disruption of the gay fanzine circuit. See Viegner, "Gay Fanzines: There's Trouble in That Body," and his essay in this volume.
19. Critical writings and interviews on Friedrich's work include Scott MacDonald's "Interview with Su Friedrich," *The Independent* (December, 1990); Martha Gever, "Girl Crazy: Lesbian Narratives in *She Must Be Seeing Things* and *Damned If You Don't*," *The Independent* (July, 1988); Scott MacDonald, "Reappropriations," *Film Quarterly* (Winter, 1987/88); Bruce Jenkins, "Gently Down the Stream," *Millennium Film Journal*, nos. 16/17/18 (Summer, 1986); Stephanie Beroes, "Interviews with New York Filmmakers," *Cinematograph* no. 2 (1986); Barbara Kruger, "The Ties That Bind," *Artforum* (October, 1984); and Lindley Hanlon, "Female Rage: The Films of Su Friedrich," *Millennium Film Journal* no. 12 (Fall–Winter 1982–83). Friedrich's films are distributed by Film-makers Cooperative, Women Make Movies, and the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, Canyon Cinema in San Francisco, and the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Center.
20. Su Friedrich, statement from the panel, "Does Radical Content Deserve Radical Form?" *Millennium Film Journal* no. 22 (Winter/Spring 1989–90) pp. 122–123.
21. Scott MacDonald, "Su Friedrich: Reappropriations," pp. 41–42.
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