

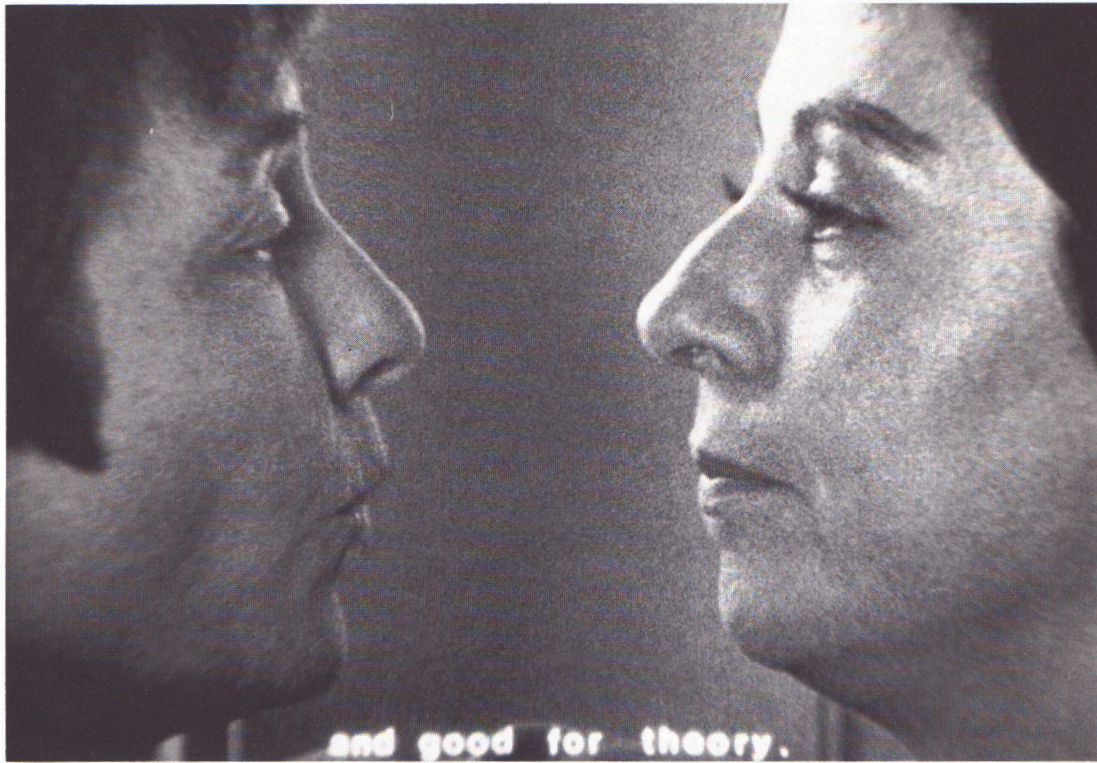
Transgressive Cinema: Lesbian Independent Film

Feminist language is complete. It reunites mind and body, intellect and reason to physical sensation and emotion . . . We are in a culture where expression of the heart and the senses are repressed. The heart of the film is the rapport between touch and sight.

This French lesson which concludes the film connects Hammer's articulation of her lesbian aesthetic to French feminism, especially suggesting Luce Irigaray's 'When Our Lips Speak Together' (1977), which also insists on the primacy of touch, not sight, in the construction of female sexuality, and which also connotes strong lesbian associations.

Sync Touch was the last film Barbara Hammer made before turning away from explicitly lesbian imagery to explore other visual concerns throughout the 1980s. As Claudia Gorbman has written of her work following *Sync Touch*, 'Her recent films . . . have virtually absented human forms; instead they focus on women's vision, a woman's vision, translating/interpreting/transforming the world.'²⁶ In *Sync Touch* Hammer's long association of visual and tactile senses continues but her previous focus on the lesbian body has changed. In the second section (a lecture on touch, filmed using a macro lens to create an extreme close-up of the speaker) she eroticizes the face; in the third section she obscures the body; in the fourth section she clothes the body and conveys an eroticism through ideas. This last section (the French lesson) visually pairs the two women. They are clothed similarly, both have short brown hair, wear long earrings, and are facing each other; then are facing the camera in a close-up on their eyebrows and eyes, again visually paired. This section continues a lesbian sensibility that was by 1981 rapidly changing – differences between women began to carry a far stronger erotic charge. But other changes occurring in lesbian representation are here: it is clear in the film that the representation of the lesbian body has become far more problematic than its celebration in her films from the 1970s ever implied; perhaps Hammer also felt the need to protect it from the fetishization and voyeurism now also the province of lesbians. In any case, the film takes a strong step toward 'displacing' the lesbian body with other kinds of imagery, foreshadowing the change to come, a change which Gorbman describes: 'the lesbian body has moved out of the frame to the camera's viewfinder.'²⁷

Su Friedrich's *Gently Down the Stream*, made the same year as *Sync Touch*, also involves a highly tactile approach to the filmmaking process and also deals with erotic content in a way which obscures rather than reveals women's bodies. The film is black and white and silent, and into



With *Sync Touch* (1981), Barbara Hammer reassessed the meaning of the lesbian body in patriarchal culture.



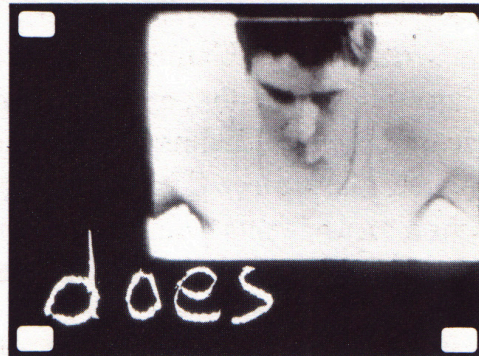
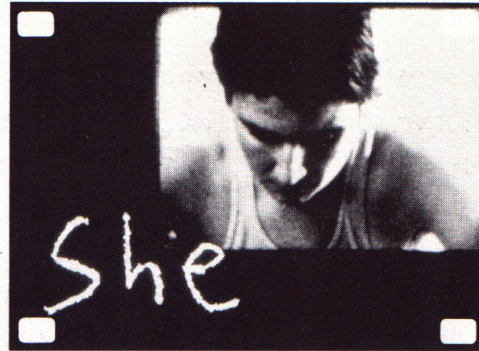
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black leader Friedrich has scratched words that, one at a time, construct a narrative which recounts the filmmaker's dreams. Although the words serve this narrative function, they work more prominently as a visual image themselves, and one which, as they scratch and disturb the film's emulsion, has strong tactile qualities. As with Hammer's optical printing of an erotic film in *Sync Touch*, the erotic potential of Friedrich's dreams is subjugated to the film's physical properties. The photographic images which intermittently appear have a dream-like association rather than literal relationship to these words.

In one of the dream narratives, we see in the upper right corner an image of a woman on a rowing machine, while we read that: 'A woman sits on a stage hunched over in the corner. She calls up a friend from the audience, asking her: [and at this point the image in the corner disappears, the words occupy full screen, one word at a time] come and make love to me. She does. I can't watch. [The screen goes black for a moment, then in big, full-screen scratched letters] Moans MOANS ROARS roars HOWLS.' This sequence effectively raises a double edged concern: that of the filmic representation of women's sexuality, which it problematizes by banishing the image of the woman from the screen, and that of women's position as film spectator (a position that invariably implicates women in the voyeuristic process), which is problematized by the words 'I can't watch', followed by a blackened screen. These concerns are ones Friedrich takes up again and develops more fully in *Damned If You Don't* (1984).

Damned If You Don't successfully avoids the two major traps in which lesbian independent cinema has so often been caught over the past two decades: the 'essentialist' trap, on the one hand, that imagines lesbianism to be completely outside of patriarchal definitions and, on the other hand, the trap that situates lesbianism so strictly within patriarchal definitions that it can't imagine any way out from them. In re-imagining lesbian desire, *Damned If You Don't* interrogates the sexual definitions and mandates of the dominant culture and its institutions (specifically the cinema and the Catholic Church) and ultimately dismantles them so that a different story can be told.

Four distinct narratives are interwoven, some spoken and some told visually, three referring to events in the (historical or fictional) past, and one taking place in the film's present. In the film's present, the narrative focuses on the nun (Peggy Healey) and her attractive neighbor (Ela Troyano) whom we met at the beginning of this chapter. This narrative, told visually in a black and white style that is at once impressionistic and



*Gently Down the
Stream*

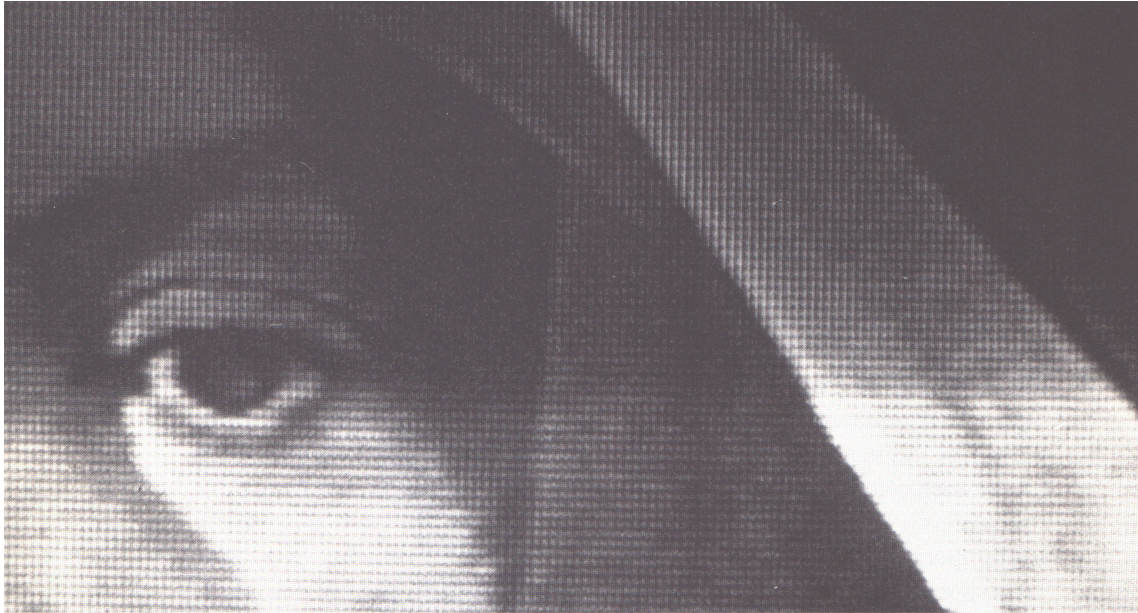
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documentary, moves from an exchange of looks, through a romantic pursuit, to the nun's discovery and reluctant acceptance of 'hitherto unsuspected emotions', to the seduction and lovemaking scene which ends the film.

The other three narratives consist of a condensed, rephotographed version of the 1946 Powell-Pressburger film, *Black Narcissus*, watched on a poor quality black and white television set by the neighbor/seductress (with an added female voice narrating the plot for us); a woman's off-screen, spoken recollections of nuns in Catholic high school and their importance to the awakening of her sexuality; and the reading aloud from the testimony of Sister Mea Crivelli regarding her 'immodest acts' with Sister Benedetta during the Renaissance. The situating of these three narratives in the near or far, historical or fictional past – 17th century, high school memories, a movie from the Forties with a foregone, unchangeable conclusion – enables us to view the film's present narrative as a sort of contemporary remake of these (hi)stories, with the possibility of a more satisfying resolution, in which desire can be rewarded instead of punished.

The original, color Powell-Pressburger film, *Black Narcissus* – although itself not exactly 'mainstream' in its use of cinema conventions – upholds the mainstream cinema's strict codification of Woman as good/bad, moral/immoral. But the way it is used here, as the film-within-the-film, in its condensed black and white silent version on a television with a female voice-over narration, challenges the dominant cinema's construction of sexual difference and its reliance on cultural binarism. Breaking the narrative into fragments on a TV screen and providing a voice-over narration completely alters our relation to the events of the film. First, the poor quality of the image disturbs rather than creates visual pleasure, and directs the viewer more strongly toward the spoken narration – narration which clearly spells out, and thereby deconstructs, the good nun/bad nun polarization, a process which is further assisted by the film's conversion from its original color to the more oppositional black and white. The dark gray horizontal bands which pass over the TV screen, at times forming a kind of black-out bar over the 'bad' nun's eyes to signify illicit behavior, serve this same purpose of exposing the ideological apparatus.

Second, by playing the film as a TV movie being watched by the nun's neighbor, *Damned If You Don't* inscribes the position of the lesbian spectator within the character of this unnamed woman. Her interest wanes during the course of *Black Narcissus*, perhaps due to the inevitability of the plot (the 'bad' nun is punished for her sexual desire, and in a struggle with the 'good' nun, falls over a cliff). By the film-within-a-film's end, the



Su Friedrich's *Damned If You Don't*: Identifying with the wrong character in *Black Narcissus*.



Violating the taboo: A woman seduces a nun in Su Friedrich's *Damned If You Don't*.

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'bad' nun is dead and the unnamed woman is asleep, her identification with the 'wrong' character, the 'bad' nun, firmly established in a shot of her sleeping, surrounded by burning candles, which could possibly also be read as a shot of the 'bad' nun laid out for her funeral.

The two verbally revealed narratives in *Damned If You Don't* challenge the ideological construction and regulation of women's sexuality on another front besides the cinema – here, *Damned If You Don't* takes on the Catholic Church. In conversation with the filmmaker, a woman recalls her fascination with the eroticism with which Catholicism is imbued; her comments underscore Michel Foucault's position that sexual repression, far from subduing desire, fuels its obsession. In the readings from *Immodest Acts: The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy*, the testimony of Sister Mea Crivelli, used to indict and imprison Sister Benedetta for the rest of her life (some thirty years), veils explicitly sexual content in moral language ('she corrupted herself, she corrupted me . . .'), which has the effect of doubling as confessional pornography. The linkage of the testimony against the lesbian nun with confessional pornography exposes the hypocrisy of the moral/immoral binary which could cast Sister Crivelli as the 'good' nun and Sister Benedetta as the 'bad' nun of this history. The reading of this testimony, interspersed with silence, over images of the nun (of the film's present) riding the subway and visiting Coney Island further breaks down this polarization which is central to the regulation of sexuality. The nun's initial exploration of desire involves looking through symbolic barriers: out of the train window, through sunglasses, through glass aquarium walls, and finally through the vertical convent bars behind which she is imprisoned – she watches the woman who first watched her.

The slow building to the seduction scene, the silence of the women's interaction, and the tension of the taboo being violated all contribute to the eroticism of the final scene in *Damned If You Don't*. The complicated removal of the nun's habit, in itself a liberating metaphor, sustains the eroticism by postponing its enactment. The women start to make love, and shortly after that the film ends, the suggestion all the more powerful for its not being culminated on the screen.