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The "Lesbian on Display:” An Analysis of Representations of “Lesbian” Identities and Sexualities in Contemporary American Film

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THE “LESBIAN ON DISPLAY:”
An Analysis of Representations of “Lesbian” Identities and Sexualities in
Contemporary American Film

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ABSTRACT
This research consists of an analysis of “lesbian” identities and sexualities as represented
in a sample of contemporary American films. Through this analysis I explored 1) the
constructed “lesbian” identities and sexualities; 2) the displays of “lesbian” sexual interactions
and their perceived intended audiences; and 3) the differences of these depictions as affected by
the persons constructing these representations of “lesbian” identities and sexualities.

FORMULATING MY RESEARCH
For my Master’s Degree project, I researched female erotic dancers. More specifically, I
observed how through the dancers’ performances, representations of the heterosexual male’s
“ideal sexual female” were being constructed. Throughout my research, I noticed that while
typically the customer-dancer interactions consisted of a male customer, on more than a few
occasions these interactions were comprised of female customers and dancers. When interacting
with the relatively scarce female customers, a dancer would typically rub their breasts across the woman customer’s face. Also, simulation of receiving oral-genital stimulation was also very common among the dancers’ performances when interacting with female customers. To enact this simulation, a dancer would typically move to the edge of the stage and would place her legs over the customer’s shoulders so that her crotch was merely inches from the customer’s face; she would then undulate her pelvis toward the customer’s face, thus mimicking her pleasure in the simulated oral-genital contact.

These particular interactions were not limited to the female-to-female interactions; the dancers often enacted the same scenarios with male customers. However, I noticed that when a dancer was interacting with a female customer in this way, nearly all eyes of the male customers were riveted upon the particular customer-dancer interaction. Thus, it appeared that this female-to-female oral-genital simulation catered to the “lesbian fantasy” that many heterosexual men deem erotic (Shanor 1978; Dietz and Evans 1982).

Consequently, these observations within my research sparked my interest in analyzing the displays of female-to-female sexual interactions within contemporary American films. Through the viewing of several films containing female-to-female sexual scenes, I analyzed what audience the sexual scene was intended for: was the sexual scene constructed to appeal to a heterosexual male’s fantasies of a “leading role for himself in a little scenario a trois” (Kuhn 1985), or was the scene constructed to appeal to a “lesbian” audience, or, could the particular scene appeal to both audiences simultaneously?

Thus, at the onset of my film viewing, I planned to focus primarily upon exploring the sexual scenes’ audience intentions. However, as I watched these films, I realized that by limiting my focus to just these sexual scenes I was failing to recognize the importance that these
representations have for constructing lesbian identities and sexualities within our culture. From a social constructionist perspective on sexuality, which will be developed later in this paper, I interpreted these depictions as conveyors of what a lesbian “is”—thus operating as social constructions of lesbian identities and sexualities within American popular culture. Consequently, under the assumption that these displays can be understood as socially constructed representations of lesbian identities and sexualities, I was curious to see how and by whom these identities and sexualities were being constructed. Therefore, through an analysis of my interpretations of the films viewed, I deconstructed these representations of lesbian identities and sexualities—exploring the supposed “reality” of lesbian identities and sexualities within popular culture.

**SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF SEXUALITY**

Within the social constructionist perspective, it is assumed that gender and sexuality are social constructions, or “interactional accomplishments,” situated in and shaped by cultural myths as represented in popular culture (Denzin 1992). As Jackson (1996) states, “sexual behavior is in this sense ‘socially scripted’ in that it is a ‘part’ that is learned and acted out within a social context” (p. 62). Simon and Gagnon (1986) argue along similar lines for the social construction of sexuality, positing that “cultural scripts” which provide guidelines for sexuality and requirements for sexual roles are conveyed through societal structures such popular culture in the form of media representations. Thus, under the assumptions of the social constructionist perspective, gender and sexuality are not “real” entities but are products of social definitions and representations. Consequently, by analyzing representations of gender and sexuality in popular
media images, one can understand how these “scripts” construct and define sexuality within popular culture.

In the film *The Celluloid Closet* (1996), images of homosexuals were surveyed, exploring how gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgenders, heretofore connoted as GLBT, were depicted and often distorted throughout the history of American film. In essence, this film endeavored to deconstruct the sexualities and identities that were displayed in American-made media forms. A major theme of this film analysis was to reveal how, through these film images, the dominant culture depicted and thus constructed GLBT identities and sexualities in stereotypical ways. As Bornstein (1994) states,

> In just about any art form you can think of there have been portrayals of people who are ambiguously or differently-gendered, all drawn by people who were not us [gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgenders], all spoken in voices that were not ours…dominant cultures tend to colonize and control minorities through stereotyping…(P. 60).

Similarly, the commentary throughout *The Celluloid Closet* (1996) emphasized how images of GLBTs throughout the history of American film were not being constructed by these groups; they were being defined by a dominant culture that tended to depict these images in stereotypical forms.

Thus, it becomes apparent that those who control the image construction of GLBT identities and sexualities consequently have a large amount of political power. In the words of Foucault (1980), these film images can be understood as politically fueled constructions that serve to “form specific mechanisms of knowledge and power centering on sex” (p. 103). Therefore, as implied in *The Celluloid Closet* (1996), through these stereotypical representations of GLBT identities and sexualities, those constructing these images succeeded in defining the “homosexual” as the deviant “other” while consequently constructing heterosexuality as the “normal”—thus reaffirming and maintaining the status inequalities that popular culture reifies.
Consequently, it may be assumed that if the “power” to construct GLBT identities and sexualities were in the hands of the GLBT communities or those sensitive to issues of their representations, the subsequent constructions of these identities and sexualities would be more representative of the “actual” (although still constructed) GLBT communities’ sense of identity. Thus, through a comparison of representations of GLBT identities and sexualities as constructed by dominant culture and by the minority homosexual culture, one can explore the multiplicity and power differentials as expressed through these images.

Furthermore, it is not only important to analyze how and who is constructing these GLBT identities and sexualities within American film; likewise, the intended audience for whom these images are being depicted has an influential impact on how the representations are constructed. As was mentioned earlier, my interest in this research was sparked by the recognition of a heterosexual male’s “lesbian fantasy” being enacted within some exotic dancers’ performances. In the following statement, Kuhn (1985) offers an explanation as to why the heterosexual man revels in this fantasy of female-on-female sexual contact:

Lesbian pornographic [images]...function not so much to celebrate women’s mutual pleasure as to place it on display for a masculine spectator...the spectator, constructed as masculine, may then fantasize a leading role for himself in a little scenario a trios (P. 33).

Thus, the image of “lesbian” sexual interactions fulfills a heterosexual male’s fantasy of engaging in sexual relations with two women. However, one must question whether any depiction of “lesbian” sexual interactions will invoke the heterosexual male’s “lesbian fantasy,” or whether this is contingent upon the particular constructed imagery of the sexual encounter. In other words, which displays of “lesbian” identities and sexualities will cater to this heterosexual male fantasy and which will not? Thus, through my analysis I compared how particular scenes
METHODS OF ANALYSIS

My research consisted of a media analysis of a sample of seven contemporary American films that contained female-to-female sexual interaction scenes and/or contained a centralized theme of displaying “lesbian” identities and sexualities. Due to my initial research question, these particular films were chosen primarily for the female-to-female sexual scenes they contained; this sample was further analyzed in regards to the research foci subsequently developed.

The films I chose were Basic Instinct (1992), Wild Things (1998), Bound (1996), Erotique (1995), Go Fish (1994), The Incredibly True Adventures of Two girls in Love (1995), and Wild Side (1995). As was mentioned before, in viewing these films I explored: 1) the constructed “lesbian” identities and sexualities; 2) the displays of “lesbian” sexual interactions and their perceived intended audiences; and 3) the differences of these depictions as affected by the persons constructing these representations of “lesbian” identities and sexualities.

CONSTRUCTIONS OF LESBIAN IDENTITIES AND SEXUALITIES

For organizational purposes, I will give brief synopses of each of the films viewed. I then will address my interpretations as sensitized by the three research foci I have delineated.

“EVIL LESBIANS” and the MALE “LESBIAN FANTASY”

In Basic Instinct (1992) a male police officer is leading an investigation of a murder case in which the key suspect is a woman involved in numerous casual sexual relationships mostly
with men but also with some women. The main female character is depicted as a “bisexual” woman. However, it is interesting to note that this “bisexual” woman is also constructed as neurotic, psychotic, manipulative, and hyper-sexualized. Likewise, her interest in women as sexual object choices seems to take a backseat to her sexual exploits with men. Furthermore, within this movie her sexual interactions with women always occur before the audience of a man. For instance, in a particular nightclub scene the woman is sensually dancing with and kissing another woman; however, during most of the scene she is seductively looking directly at the police officer that is watching her attentively, obviously aroused by this scenario. Observing his arousal, she begins to dance with him, ultimately seduces him, and at the film’s culmination it is implied that she abandons her “bisexual” activities to remain within a relationship with the man.

Thus, Basic Instinct (1992) constructs a severe image of the “lesbian” identity and sexuality. According to this representation, a “bisexual” woman is a neurotic, maladjusted, murderous woman who appears to be experimenting with women but finds true fulfillment with a man. Likewise, the actresses that play these “bisexual” women are clearly employed to attract the heterosexual male audience; they exude femininity with their voluptuous bodies, tight dresses, long hair and make-upped faces. Furthermore, the sexual interactions between the women are always interacted before a male audience, both within the movie and without. Thus, as Kuhn (1985) stated, these “lesbian” images as depicted in Basic Instinct (1992) “function not so much to celebrate women’s mutual pleasure as to place it on display for a masculine spectator…” (p. 33).

A very similar representation of “bisexual” women is depicted in a thriller entitled Wild Things (1998). The plot of this movie revolves around a teenage woman who manipulates and
then kills several friends and lovers in order to gain an enormous amount of money.

Concurrently, she has a “bisexual” relationship with her friend who she then has killed.

Thus, once again in *Wild Things* (1998) the “bisexual” woman is depicted as a murderous *femme fatale*. Likewise, the two female-to-female sexual encounters depicted within the film are clearly geared toward a heterosexual male audience. The first scene involves a threesome between a man well over the age of majority and the two adolescent girls. The scene portrays the women passionately kissing, but the majority of the scene consists of the women attentively pleasing the man involved. Once again, the women are traditionally feminine and attractive according to the heterosexual male’s standards. Thus, in this particular scene the sexual scenario centers on the man’s enjoyment. Likewise, in a subsequent female-to-female sexual scene, the women engage in sexual acts while presumably being alone; however, a male police officer is hiding in some nearby bushes unnoticed and thoroughly enjoys the sexual display. Therefore, once again the scene is obviously constructed with the intentions of fulfilling the male’s voyeuristic fantasy, thus reaffirming his subjective role in female sexuality construction: “The principal protagonist…is, after all, the male-spectator-owner for whom the whole performance has been arranged” (Finn 1985:93).

The plot of *Bound* (1996) revolves around two women who are lovers that decide to steal a large sum of money from one of the woman’s live-in male partner. However, contrary to the fore-mentioned films, this couple is not constructed as two essentially heterosexual women engaging in same-sex sexual acts to arouse a male spectator. For instance, a “butch/femme” (Amory 1996) identity construction is depicted in this particular relationship. One of the women is portrayed as more masculine partner, engaging in societally defined masculine activities such as plumbing, aggressive in presence toward the males she encounters, and even dressing in male
underwear. Contrarily, the other woman is depicted as much more feminine in action and appearance, appearing more frightened of her male partner, as a victim of male abuse, and dresses in frilly lingerie and skirts.

Thus, this particular construction of a “lesbian” relationship is more conducive to a “butch/femme” lesbian identity construction rather than a construction that is geared toward a heterosexual male’s “lesbian fantasy.” Likewise, the sexual scenes between these women are not displayed for a male spectator within the film; the sexual acts appear to be performed solely for the women’s enjoyment. However, the film may still be viewed by a heterosexual male audience and thus appropriated to its “lesbian fantasy.” Likewise, within a particular scene the other woman is stimulating the “butch” woman by what appears to be manual penetration. Consequently, the “butch’s” reactions to this stimulation show a pleasure response to this penetration that a male spectator may fantasize as displaced pleasure in penile penetration. Thus, although the identities and sexualities depicted within this film might closer approach a presumed “reality” of a “lesbian” identity, they still may be construed as catering to the heterosexual male’s “lesbian fantasy.”

The plot of *Wild Side* (1995) is similar to *Bound* (1996) in that it involves two women lovers who plot to steal a large amount of money from the husband of one of the women. Also similar is the depiction of these women suffering abuse by males (one as being continuously manipulated by her husband, the other as a prostitute and thus victim of male exploitation) that subsequently pushes them into an intimate relationship with each other. Thus, this representation could be interpreted as constructing a “lesbian” relationship as the necessary result of failed heterosexual relationships. Likewise, the sexual scenes between the two women are depicted as
engaged in solely for the women’s pleasure *within* the film. However, once again, the heterosexual male audience may appropriate the scene.

Yet, it is interesting to note that the female-to-female sexual scenes within this movie were portrayed somewhat differently than the fore-mentioned films in that they involved much more soft and slow touching and kissing rather than the more intense and overtly sexual encounters depicted in the previous films. Likewise, although through most of the film both of the women dress particularly femininely, at the end of the film one woman adorns a tailored shirt, tie, vest, and fedora while the other remains in a red evening dress accompanied by a red feather boa. Thus, this film also alludes to a “butch/femme” style of “lesbian” identity construction (Amory 1996).

*Erotique* (1995), a short film written and directed by a woman and intended for a female audience, offers the most extreme and somewhat surprising construction of “lesbian” identities and sexualities as of yet discussed. The plot of this film involves a “femme/femme” couple plotting to lure a “strictly hetero” man to their home in order to have a threesome with him. On the bus ride to their home, the three kiss and caress each other with many male onlookers and also a couple of passengers joining in on the group sexual encounter. Thus, within the film and without the scene is constructed with a heterosexual male audience in mind. Upon arriving at the “lesbian” couple’s home, it appears that a subsequent sexual scene will be played out to cater to the heterosexual male’s “lesbian fantasy.” However, as the man is having sexual intercourse with one woman, the other adorns a synthetic phallus and proceeds to anally penetrate the man. Noticeably humbled and perturbed by this experience, the man retreats to his car that explodes upon ignition—apparently rigged to do so by the “lesbian” couple. Thus, the *femme fatale* image of lesbian couples is carried to an extreme within this film. These women are portrayed as
conniving and murderous “lesbian” lovers who revel in humiliating and then killing heterosexual men. Consequently, this representation constructs a lesbian identity and sexuality as anti-man and thus a dangerous threat to the heterosexual male.

I believe that the representations of “lesbian” identities and sexualities as depicted in the films *Basic Instinct* (1992), *Wild Things* (1998), *Bound* (1996), *Wild Side* (1995), and *Erotique* (1995) are very similar in nature. The “lesbian” identities in these films were constructed as both evil and murderous or victims of male exploitation and abuse. Likewise, the female-to-female sexual scenes were typically directly geared towards fulfilling a heterosexual male’s “lesbian fantasy” or could easily be appropriated toward that fantasy. Thus, through these films a construction of the so-called “reality” of “lesbian” identities and sexualities is conveyed. Consequently, these depictions fail to recognize the multiplicity of “lesbian” identities and sexualities within our culture. Furthermore, I feel that these representations offer a narrow-minded construction of “lesbian” identities and sexualities, thus furthering the distortion homosexual images in film that was criticized in *The Celluloid Closet* (1996).

**BY “LESBIANS,” FOR “LESBIANS”**

It becomes apparent when viewing films specifically geared toward a lesbian-sensitive community, such as *Go Fish* (1994) and *The Incredibly True Adventures of Two Girls in Love* (1995), the construction of “lesbian” identities and sexualities differ greatly from these mainstream constructions of the lesbian “reality.”

*The Incredibly True Adventures of Two Girls in Love* (1995) explores the developing intimate relationship of two adolescent women. The film follows the women’s interactions from a budding friendship to a romantic relationship, exploring the trials and adversity the women face as they “come out” to their friends and family. The film does appear to adhere to a
“butch/femme” identity construction of “lesbian” relationships, with one woman appearing more masculine in appearance while the other more effeminate. However, this dichotomy is not distorted to near caricature extremes as was done in *Bound* (1996). Likewise, when viewing the sexual scene within this film, it is apparent that the scene is not readily geared toward a heterosexual male audience. The scene consists of soft and slow caresses and kissing rather than overt sexual depictions that characterized the intended “lesbian fantasy” fulfillment of the heterosexual male audiences. Furthermore, due to the general plot line of the movie, a heterosexual male audience is likely to find no interest in the movie and thus would not appropriate this scene as a “lesbian fantasy” fulfiller. Thus, within this film a strikingly different construction of lesbian identities and sexualities is offered to the viewer as compared to the fore-mentioned film.

In the movie *Go Fish* (1994), an African-American lesbian poses the following question to a white lesbian friend:

What would you rather our collective lesbian image be? A hot passionate say-yes-to-sex dyke or touchy-feely soft focus sister of the woodlands?

This film explores the everyday lives of a group of “lesbian” friends, intermingling political commentary and poetry that addresses lesbian/bisexual issues and concerns. The film employs a documentary-style, giving the viewer the feeling that they are seeing the real lives of an actual group of “lesbian” friends. From dealing with adversity from friends and society in regards to their identities and sexualities to laughing over dating fiascoes and adventures, *Go Fish* (1994) appears to provide an accurate story of what it “is” to be a “lesbian” in this community. Likewise, as alluded to in the quoted statement, the film portrays “lesbian” identities and sexualities as consisting of diversity and multiplicity across races and ethnicity. Issues such as the “butch/femme” identities are even discussed, with one character expressing
her feelings that this dichotomy is “oppressive.” Furthermore, the film shows that “lesbians”
come in all shapes and sizes – from the “say-yes-to-sex dyke” to the “soft focus sister of the
woodlands.” Subsequently, the movie constructs differing “lesbian” sexualities by exploring
long-term committed relationships and more casual sexual acquaintances.

Thus, it is apparent that the film is geared toward a lesbian/bisexual-sensitive audience.
Consequently, the two sexual scenes in the movie would appeal to a lesbian/bisexual audience
rather than a heterosexual male audience. Likewise, similar to The Incredibly True Adventures
of Two Girls in Love (1995) due to the subject matter of the movie, the latter audience would
most likely never view this film. Unlike the adolescent awkwardness portrayed within the sexual
scene in The Incredibly True Adventures of Two Girls in Love (1995), the sexual scenes are
constructed as more sexual and involving adult women more mature and confident within their
sexuality. Likewise, a particular sexual scene involves two women that at face value are
constructed as a “butch/femme” pair. However, when exploring their identities, it is evidenced
that neither woman specifically adheres to such dichotomous identities, but rather they exhibit
more fluidity in personality. Thus, this film does not become trapped in stereotypical depictions
of “lesbian” identities and sexualities but offers representations that are more inclusive of the
diversity and multiplicity of these lesbian women.

Thus, it becomes apparent when viewing Go Fish (1994) and The Incredibly True Adventures
of Two Girls in Love (1995), the construction of “lesbian” identities and sexualities
differ greatly from these mainstream constructions of the “lesbian reality.” Unlike the
mainstream, the “lesbian on display” does not manifest itself in a construction of an evil,
murderous, man-hating woman whose sexuality is displayed for a heterosexual male audience to
coop for his own sexual fantasy fulfillment. Rather, the “lesbian on display” is constructed as
an everyday “woman” facing relationship adventures but also facing the adversity and “othering” accompanying a lifestyle that is discriminated against by the heterosexual hegemony within popular culture. As implied in The Celluloid Closet (1996) through dominant popular culture’s stereotypical representations of GLBT identities and sexualities as evidenced in the films Basic Instinct (1992), Wild Things (1998) Bound (1996), Wild Side (1995) and Erotique (1995), the “lesbian on display” was accorded a distorted and limited constructed identity and sexuality. However, in the films Go Fish (1994) and The Incredibly True Adventures of Two Girls in Love (1995), the “power” to depict lesbian identities and sexualities was in the hands of the GLBT communities or those sensitive to their issues of representations. Consequently, the subsequent constructions of these identities and sexualities appeared to be more representative of the “actual” (although still constructed) “lesbian” communities’ sense of identity.

CONCLUSIONS

Upon exploring the “lesbian on display” within a sample of contemporary American films, I have gained some insight into how the “lesbian” identities and sexualities were constructed through these films, the effect the intended audience has upon the construction of these lesbian identities and sexualities, and to what degree these depictions are affected by those that hold the “power” of constructing these representations of “lesbian” identities and sexualities. In summary, as noted in the film The Celluloid Closet (1996), the mainstream constructions of “lesbian” identities and sexualities typically appear to adhere to stereotyped views of what a “lesbian” “is” or “should be.” In contrast, constructions of “lesbian” identities and sexualities intended for a “GLBT-sensitive” audience appear to be more diverse, fluid, and “realistic” in representation. Thus, it becomes apparent that those who hold the power to create the “lesbian”
within our culture subsequently have the power to impute their particular version of the “lesbian reality” within American society. As Griggers (1992) states,

Let’s face it; lesbian bodies…are going broadcast, they’re going techno-culture, and they’re going mainstream…in the process of mainstreaming, in which minoritarian and majority significations intermingle…the lesbian is as fantasmatic a construct as the woman (P. 3).

Consequently, as the “lesbian on display” continues to proliferate in media representation, differing constructions of the “lesbian reality” will be offered to its viewers. Therefore, the viewers should be sensitive to the fact that these representations are socially constructed definitions, not hard-core factual representations of “the way things are.” Subsequently, under the assumption that these images are socially constructed, we must understand that such representations are political in nature because they are strongly influenced by those who construct them. Thus, when absorbing the “lesbian on display,” the viewer must take into account who is presenting this representation, what audience is intended to see and accept this representation as “real,” and what agenda is being serviced by this construction.

REFERENCES


**FILMS**


