

# ALL THAT LOVIN' STUFF: Sexuality and Sexual Representation in Some Recent Films By Women

by Kay Armatage

"There is no such thing as sexuality; what we have experienced and are experiencing is the fabrication of a 'sexuality,' the construction of something called 'sexuality' through a set of representations—images, discourses, ways of picturing and describing—that propose and confirm, that make up this sexuality to which we are then referred and held in our lives, a whole *sexual fix* precisely."

STEPHEN HEATH,  
*THE SEXUAL FIX*, 1983

AT THE 1987 MONTREAL Women's Film and Video Festival, *Frauen und Film* editor Gertrude Koch gave a seminar on sexual representation in women's cinema. She outlined a number of approaches ranging from the celebration of traditional and new symbolic representations of female anatomy to stylized treatments of female dominance. Touching on a number of theoretical positions, she emphasized the importance of a feminine alternative to conventional sexual representation in classic cinema as well as the risk of essentialism. She showed a videotape featuring a female torso (nipples offscreen) which, through the magic of video effects, split apart to

reveal images of nature, waterfalls and the like. In the discussion which followed her presentation, Berenice Reynaud added another category, that of the impossibility of representing feminine sexuality in cinema, citing Yvonne Rainer's *The Man Who Envied Women* (US, 1984) as a film in which the woman's body is virtually excised as a site of representation. Other audience members moved rapidly to the topic of pornography as a masculine regime, which Koch countered by citing international movements of women pornographers, notably in Holland, Germany, and the US.<sup>1</sup>

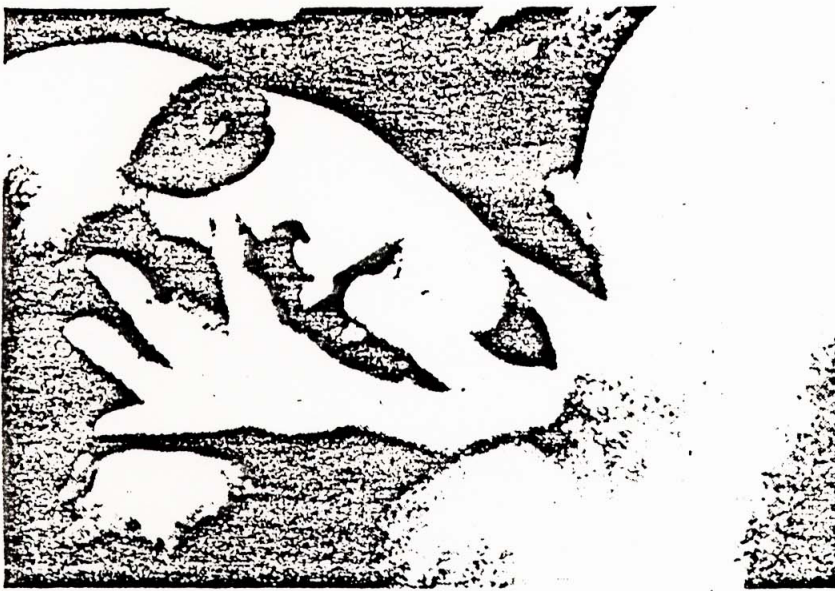
The gist of the Koch discussion was the opposite of Heath's statement above. Women filmmakers seem to be asserting the existence of a feminine sexuality which has hitherto remained unrepresented, which is struggling towards representation in difference.

What follows is a rather random review of some recent films by women, all of which have broached the representation of "all that lovin' stuff."<sup>2</sup>

Diane Kurys' *L'Homme Amoureux* (France, 1987) enjoyed a wide release this summer, touted as a mainstream art film in which sexual relations were pres-



Sheila McLaughlin's *She Must Be Seeing Things* (1987).



Nina Menkes' *Magdalena Viraga* (1986).

ented from a woman's point of view. Although the sex scenes between Peter Coyote and Greta Scaachi certainly present a contrast to the conventional humping man on top with trousers on, the main appeal of the film seemed to be a lot of kissing with an attractive man (Coyote, in the vainest performance I've seen in years). Oh yes, and a couple of alternative positions—notably the popular up-against-the-wall-with-twirling which increasingly seems to signify the height of reciprocal passion.<sup>3</sup>

The "difference" of the sexual relations in Kurys' film seems to be constituted not so much in degree of passion or emphasis on kisses, for in the history of cinema there are many memorable kisses from Valentino to Cary Grant.<sup>4</sup> Rather, the "difference" of *L'Homme Amoureux* seems to reside in the startling assumption of its title: that the fact of the man being in love, being obsessed and troubled by his desire, is the site of the rupture of convention. Kurys seems to be trading here on fairly well-worn clichés about male and female sexuality, notably woman as site of emotional love contrasting with rapacious male physicality—a cliché which in the film is not reversed but "equalized" in reciprocal emotional/physical passion.

Doris Dorrie's *Paradise* (W. Germany, 1986) takes a related inversion quite a bit farther. Here the hapless man is consumed and destroyed by his obsessive desire for the strange, amoral woman who would be perfectly happy in simple lust—another cliché, to be sure, but a rather more interesting one in an age of feminist social purity. The lurid combination of the red-lights of the sex trade district and votive lights

around the shrine in her room is a compatible setting for the prayers-and-curses psychology of the enchantingly lumpen Katharina Thalbach, and the efforts of the 'man in love' to rescue her from depravity serve only to drive all three characters further into spiralling reversals, mayhem, and murder. It is an apocalyptic vision of a sexual "paradise" which turns to hell because the characters base their actions on conventional and complacent assumptions and expectations of desire, love, morality and relationships, and none of those assumptions proves out. The film also shakes up some spectatorial expectations, beginning as a brittle social comedy, a simple reversal of Dorrie's immensely popular *Men* (W. Germany, 1985), but soon breaking apart, shifting style, tone, narrative direction and aesthetic boundaries for a darkly obsessive un-pleasure.

Nina Menkes' *Magdalena Viraga* (USA, 1986) treats her prostitute protagonist's view of male sexuality with a Dworkinesque fury: "I am never angry enough to die. I am angry enough to kill." Menkes calls not only on the writings of Mary Daly, Anne Sexton and Gertrude Stein, but on the cinematic conventions of the cine-feminist avant-garde of the last decade. She employs a stylized dialogue which quotes evocatively from Stein ("Look at me now and here I am"; "they were two sisters who were not sisters") and which is delivered in an enddistanced, uninflected voice-off reminiscent of Mulvey/Wollen's *Riddles of the Sphinx* and Jan Worth's *Taking A Part and Doll's Eye*. The long, static plan-sequences are remarkable in the murky wideshots of the two women sit-

ting together in the red light of the hotel, and even more painfully obsessive in the repeated close-ups in the sex scenes. These are the crucial scenes, not only for this discussion but for the film as well, for these static C-U's, held for what seems like minutes at a time and repeated nine times in the film, are the central moments of the film's thesis about heterosexuality and provide the basis for the institutional assumptions about the crime for which Ida<sup>5</sup> is imprisoned. In these scenes, each with a different anonymous man whose shoulders and back-of-head only are visible, Ida's blank gaze never intersects with the camera's as she is jostled rhythmically back and forth by the passionless humping. In this bleak vision, we find neither Diane Kurys' romantic reciprocity of love and physical passion nor Doris Dorrie's apocalyptic reversal of the emotional economy of heterosexual libido. Surprisingly, neither do we find the alternative to Menkes' miserable heterosexuality which can be found in the writings of Gertrude Stein. In Stein's texts, it is well known, the idiosyncratic syntax and sometimes incomprehensible use of names and nouns not only perform radical literary experiments, but also construct a discourse of codes and ciphers which allowed Stein to celebrate lesbian passions in a time when such relations were either unspoken, pornographic, or represented tragically (as in Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, 1928). Stein's "As A Wife Has A Cow: A Love Story" is only incomprehensible until one knows that "cow" was Stein's pet term or code for "vulva," at which point the meditation becomes a graphically erotic celebration of female anatomy and lesbian sexual relations. Stein's "two sisters who are not sisters" takes on a charge of nurturance, power and passion which—although disguised—is not suppressed in her texts. Menkes' "two sisters who are not sisters" find some kind of sustenance in each other's company, for they are sisters under a heterosexual economy of female oppression as well as blood sisters (spilled menstrual blood, the bloody marks of violent revenge, and finally the blood of the martyr), but their potential erotic release from heterosexual oppression is radically suppressed in Menkes' text. That suppression is marked by the grainy texture of the available-light wide-shots as well as by the physical isolation of the women: they sit side by side, neither touching nor looking at each other; their dialogue—"never let me be what he said"—becomes overlapping monologues as both repeat the line over and over in rhythmic syncopa-

tion, their isolation reinforced by abstraction.

Female sexuality then is defined in absence: "Pussy is just pussy as far as I know." There is no female libidinal economy possible within the dominant heterosexist order. Clearly, however, feminist identity is not only possible within that order, but it is defined by its difference from and isolation within heterosexism: "my female self is that private thing locked up inside, inside myself." The film offers a range of female identities: whore, witch, angel, mother, martyr, murderer. These identities are all presented with a Mary Dalyish writing across traditional conceptions, but a redefinition of a specifically erotic femininity is not among them.

By contrast, in Patricia Rozema's *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* (Canada, 1987) we find a truly Edenic vision of lesbian sexuality. The protagonist is a young, awkward, grungy and more or less beautiful naif who has innocent dreams of flying and who delights in self-conscious voyeurism, hero worship, and art for art's sake. Her sexual awakening dawns very gradually, and is conflated with a hard-won understanding of art and the art-world as symbolic spectacle and internecine economy. The interweaving of art as passionate activity, economy and spectacle with sexuality and the process of achieving identity is the core of the film. The pivotal visual object of the movement of narrative, signifying system, and sexual identity is a sculpture in the form of a female body, the head of which is replaced by a rotating video camera. The "woman's look" is thus technological, aesthetic, knowledge producing, and functional in the protagonist's self-revelation. Stolen and installed in her home, it becomes the means by which she tells the tale, producing the narrative of the film as well as her own subjectivity. Her discovery, effected also by the video sculpture, of the lesbian relationship of her employer and the young artist, a sexual relation in turn imbricated in the production of art and the perpetration of an art fraud, is the moment which frees up not only her own sexual awareness but her creative commitment as well.

Sexuality, its representation, and aesthetic representation per se are thus dealt with in one clever conceit. This conceit is eclipsed only by that of the ending of the film—the final, really final ending. Polly is about to show the two other women "lots more" of her photographs. She opens a door in her miserable flat, and magically, they enter, hand in hand, a golden, sun-dappled forest, a

paradisal power of egalitarian bliss. Polly turns and smiles at the camera. The movement is thus through representation to a vision of feminine sexuality in full possession of its own knowledge.

Sheila McLaughlin's *She Must Be Seeing Things* (USA, 1987) is the closest we come this year to a sophisticated understanding of the multiple forms of female sexuality, heterosexual and lesbian. McLaughlin is something of an icon of the darker side of female sexuality. In Monika Treut/Elfi Mikesch's *Seduction: The Cruel Woman* (W. Germany, 1984) she played Justine, the passive, *saftig* blonde who was subdued and humiliated by the svelte, dark dominatrix of the title. In Mikesch's *Hyena's Breakfast* (W. Germany, 1983) she acted out another sado-masochistic fantasy, flaying herself with whips and cladding herself in a variety of fetishistic paraphernalia as an anonymous man secretly peered through the doorway. In her own *Committed* (USA, 1983), she played Frances Farmer, victim of her own sexual desires, her mother, the Hollywood star system, political intrigue, and finally the grotesque punishments of '50s institutional psychiatry. In all of these films, the overtly sado-masochistic sexuality is played out through strategically stylized narrative and cinematic forms which partake of avant-garde conventions.

*She Must Be Seeing Things* offers a striking combination of the formulaic conventions of commercial cinema in the principal narrative (continuity editing, economically developed parallel narratives, glossy lighting, mood-enhancing music, fast-paced cutting) and elements of the avant-garde in the film-within-the-film (fragmented narrative, monumental and symbolic expressionistic settings, chiaroscuro lighting, the surrealistic kinkiness of little girls in white nightgowns, disciplinary nuns, rapacious priests, and all sorts of Deren-esque Freudianism). These conventions are deployed in the service of a narrative which deals with sexual fantasy, paranoia and desire, and which finds time along the way for masquerade, performance, cross-dressing, black stockings, bondage, judy dolls, up-against-the-wall-twirling, role-playing, and old-fashioned giggling hand-holding. All of the representations of sexuality, straight and gay, are energetic and steamy and somehow good-hearted for that. Even the well-drawn social critiques (the drunken heterosexual seduction/capitulation and the hilarious sex shop scene) are carried out without the distortions

of bitter defeatism or cynical archness.

Heath: "It is not that the Victorians, as is so often said, repress the topic of sexuality; it is, on the contrary, that they produce it, that with them the sexual becomes a problem which thus needs to be faced" (*The Sexual Fix*, 1983). For the women of *She Must Be Seeing Things*, "the sexual" is a vector of immense energy which can make trouble when combined with a volatile emotion like jealousy, but the relational problem produced by paranoid sexual fantasy can be resolved by a willfully positivist personal decision. Sexuality itself, in all its myriad forms, is not the problem. Neither is its representation, for a variety of formal strategies can be and are enlisted with a sophisticated and easy-going assurance.

The representation of sexuality as a topic for discussion is widely current these days, from Heath to Koch, from *Newsweek* (24 Aug. 1987) to *Jump-Cut* (#32), to mention only those few which have grazed my view in the past few months. From most of these discussions, which deal prominently with commercial films by men, women and female sexuality don't seem to be well off. In films by women, however, we find a somewhat different movement.

We are, as far as I can read history, the only generation of women who have enjoyed sexual freedom in any measure. In films by men and some by women, the signs of the struggle over sexuality are still very much with us. But in women's cinema, in fictional representations at least, so are the signs of its joyful attainment. □

## FOOTNOTES

1. Basically, from the evidence of *Jump-Cut* #32 at least, pornography is "feminized" by the fleshing out of narrative—an interesting twist on feminist film theory of the last decade.
2. "I'm hoping for someone who'll like me for my own self, aside from all that lovin' stuff"—Marilyn Monroe, *Bus Stop*.
3. Ironically—in this context—the nadir/zenith of such scenes must be the complexly problematic embrace in Brian de Palma's *Obsession*, in which the camera swirls in delirious 360 degree arcs around the rotating heterosexual/incestuous couple.
4. Betty Ferguson's *Kisses* (Canada, 1976) is a great pre-semiotic compendium of the conventions of the exchange of lips in classic cinema. Available from the Canadian Filmmakers' Distribution Centre, 416-593-1808.
5. *Ida*, the protagonist, is named after Gertrude Stein's novel *Ida*.