# LOOKING GOOD, FEELING QUEER

## QUEER THEORY AND LESBIAN REPRESENTATION

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Tessa Boffin and Jean Fraser (eds), *Stolen Glances: Lesbians Take Photographs*, Pandora Press, London 1991; £12.99 paper; and Teresa de Lauretis (ed), *Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities*, Differences, Volume 3, Summer 1991, Indiana University Press, Bloomington Indiana; £5.00 plus postage.

Tessa Boffin's collection of lesbian photography and essays, *Stolen Glances*, offers us a chance to take a good look at the politics of lesbian representation and desire, raising several central questions to do with how we look at images. Teresa de Lauretis's collection of essays *Queer Theory* presents a queer theorizing as an alternative way of understanding and articulating lesbian and gay subjectivity.

The essays included in *Queer Theory* are taken from a conference on theorizing lesbian and gay sexualities that was held at the University of California, Santa Cruz in February 1990. De Lauretis introduces this collection with a discussion about the possibilities for a queer theory. She claims that it exists as a term to problematize and transcend sexism in the umbrella term 'homosexual' and to problematize the elision of differences, which are ever implied but subsumed, in the term 'lesbian and gay'. Importantly she argues that race reframes the question of queer theory from different perspectives and in different terms and that gender and racial differences are a crucial area of concern for queer theory, in order to understand the specificity and partiality for respective histories and also, 'the strategies of some common struggles.' (p.xi)

Contributors to *Queer Theory* address a range of subjects including lesbian fetishism, HIV and AIDS discourses and black lesbian identity. One important theme this book takes issue with is that of the counter-cultural production of a gay male narrative. In his essay 'Scandalous Subjects', Earl Jackson Jr says that, ' "reading as a gay man" promises to neutralize further the hegemonic association of masculine authorship with a priori objectivity, while exposing the overdetermination in the social discourses of homophobia and recuperating the marginalization of lesbians and gay men as a polyvalent basis for a range of antagonistic identities and politically/vital counter-cultures.' (p112-3) He claims that the homosexual body is the antithesis of the ego-ideal and a non-self in the heterosexual imaginary and that gay male narrative thrives on the other side of the heterosexual aversion, operating within a social logic of scandal. He adds that in post-Stonewall literature, for example of Robert Glück, a ' "New Narrative" ' (p114) exemplifies the active identification of subjects with scandal itself.

Through Lacanian psychoanalytic theory Jackson advocates that the gay male body is an intersection of conflicting semiotic practices upon the circuit of meaning and value attributable to the body. Jackson attempts to undermine Lacanian psychoanalytic theory by using it to present Glück's narrative pleasure in receptively anal sex as radical. In understanding the heterosexual male ejaculation as a ' "loss-of-self" ', (p117) Jackson purports that in gay male sex what is lost is regained in a partner; however he maintains that a male fear of non-meaning must not imply a female body as a repository of male plentitude. In understanding a heterosexual male body as monocentric, Jackson understands a gay male body as polycentric, as a playground. For Jackson, narrative gay male bodily possibilities halt the transcendence of the phallus and the universalizing strategy of white male narrative.

Jackson argues here for a gay male counter-cultural production within a heterosexual male narrative canon to counter phallocentric compulsory heterosexuality. He says that the specificity of gay male narrative expression would oppose hegemonic definitions of masculinity and hierarchical binarisms of sexual difference. In Glück, Jackson sees a foregrounding of extremities of experience as distancing him from a heterosexual imaginary. Here, then, Jackson uses psychoanalytic theory to produce a counter-cultural queer subjectivity in order to undermine a phallocentric male heterosexual narrative.

Another important issue identified in this book is the cultural identity of Chicano gay men. Tomás Almaguer's essay in Chicano men explores differences between the experiences of Mexican and Latin American gay men and those of Euro-American gay men. In Euro-American culture sexuality is defined in terms of sexual object choice, whereas in Mexican and Latin American culture horror is accorded to certain passive sexual acts such as anally receptive sex among men; where penetrative men (regardless of the gender of a partner) are accorded an active and privileged status.

Almaguer argues that the recent emergence of the 'gay man' in Mexican culture has meant rifts between active and passive men because of the privileged status of masculine men. He goes on to examine how Chicano men in America are unwilling to adopt a primarily homosexual identity because of the loss of support against racism from family and Chicano culture. He cites an unpublished study by Carrillo and Maiorana on how gay Latino men in America fall into several distinct groups dependent on class, passivity/activity, and their relation to Euro-American gay culture. He argues, through a discussion of the work of Chicana lesbian writer Cherríe Moraga, how a feminist critique must be developed regarding Chicano male culture. Almaguer's work challenges a Euro-American dogma of sexual object choice which haunts a dominant western concept of sexuality. His essay raises the question of whether queer theory can release us from the shackles of a dominant western definition of sexuality and homosexuality which excludes a critical and productive reading of the relationship between racism and homophobia.

A subversive reading of a lesbian vampire is the subject of Sue Ellen Case's

essay called 'Tracking the Vampire'. Here she tracks the trope of the vampire *through* the mystical writings of John of the Cross, Rimbaud's poetry, Oscar Wilde's theatre and the recent choreopoems of Alexis DeVeaux. Case's theory of queer desire is built on the trope of the vampire in order to employ the subversive power of the unnatural, in the form of the 'other-than-living', (p4) to disrupt the Platonic world view and puncture the life/death, generative/destructive biopolarities enclosing a heterosexist notion of being.

Case conflates, through a reading of John, racial purity with sexual honour and argues how homophobia and racism are linked through the metaphor of contaminated blood; a link which has crucial relevance to AIDS oppression. She therefore claims that fascist discourse invented the vampire. Case's vampire is the trope of the double-she and she argues that a lesbian reading here does not reinscribe 'lesbian' within heterosexist categories of gender; 'for lesbian, in queer theory is a particular dynamic in the system of representation.' (p8) Thus Case's lesbian vampire ruptures the heterosexual generative basis of feminism and, she argues, its category of 'woman'. She explains how psychoanalytic theory disallows an imaginary of the queer; for example, Kaja Silverman, Case argues, deploys a heterosexist psychoanalytic to read Fassbinder's homosexual film *Querelle*. In her essay then, Case, in the words of de Lauretis, 'delineates at once a new discursive space and a performative discourse of queer subjectivity.' (pxii)

An essay in this collection which is particularly revealing of the possibilities for resistance is 'Theorizing Deviant Historiography' by Jennifer Terry. She elaborates Foucault's notion of 'effective history' which lays bare processes and operations which have produced elisions and constructed silences of the events and actors of a deviant subjectivity. Exploring the production of a counter-discursive 'deviant subjectivity', which is constructed in conflict with pathologising discourses, she claims to be an archivist of deviance. Citing Spivak, she notices problems with dominant historical accounts which rely on subaltern subjects for their definition, and so questions the establishment of dominant accounts as truthful and stable and containing subaltern definition.

Terry's project examines case histories through a survey of lesbians and gay men carried out in New York in the 1930s. She points to repeated leg-pulling of doctors and the undermining of pathological medical assumptions by participants. Her participants comply, for example, with an idea of masculinity and femininity co-existing in an individual, and confront doctors with a desire to be active one minute and passive the next. Black lesbians in the study, Terry argues, claim sexual power through a pathologising racist medical discourse which eroticizes black lesbian sexuality through the ownership of a large clitoris. The sexual power of such participants, Terry claims, threatened to render male sexuality insignificant. Terry says, importantly, that we must ask ourselves how pathologising discourses have created different homosexualities through subjectivizing lesbians and gay men according to race, class, age and ethnicity, and also ask what different forms of resistance have ensued.

Perhaps to understand the constitution of homosexualities through path-

ologizing discourses is to understand the constructedness of subjectivities. Crucially the resistance within and to these subjectivities through a queer theorizing, for example in this collection, could be considered politically perverse.

There are, then, some interesting points being made in this collection on behalf of a queer subjectivity, which have relevance to current debates around the outdated nature of lesbian and gay theory. De Lauretis has put together a collection to exemplify queer theory, and the book asks us to consider implications of this theory through diverse and innovative subject matter.

Tessa Boffin and Jean Fraser's collection *Stolen Glances* contains photographic and theoretical work by lesbians. Subjects range from fetishism and psychoanalytic theory, lesbian nuns, sadomasochism, racism in lesbian and gay activism, through to autobiographical juxtaposition of image and text, appropriated 1950s and 1960s lesbian novel covers, the montaging of lesbians onto filmstills and advertisements and a lesbian comic strip.

This collection brings to our attention the debate around an active audience and the production and consumption of meaning. If meaning, according to recent theory, is never stable, is produced in the relation of text to audience knowledges and furthermore never a constant property of an image, then some of the work in this book could be considered confusing. The editors refer to an inversion of the meanings of 'mainstream, heterosexual imagery.' (p9); however Angela Partington writes in relation to feminism, as early as 1987: 'there is no feminist art ... there is only art which can be read as feminist.'[1] The work collected here raises the important question of whether an image of a lesbian is subversive *per se* (and of what), or whether the way in which we *read* images has potential to construct and produce sub-cultural meanings.

1. Partington, Angela, 'Feminist Art and Avant-gardism' in Robinson, Hilary (ed) *Visibly Female* Camden Press,London1987,p288.

In terms of resistance it is also worth considering whether tampering with photographic techniques is subversive in itself of 'dominant' images. Nina Levitt, in this collection, presents a series of images of pulp lesbian novel covers of the 1950s and the 1960s. Implying that subversion (here of the negative imaging of lesbianism) occurs in clever photographic techniques, and not in the production of sub-cultural readings through sub-cultural signification and parody, she uses negative prints of the novel covers, superimposing photographic images of underwear to allude to Freudian concepts of fetishism. Perhaps we could examine how far Levitt's work requires essential pre-knowledge of Freudian psychoanalytic theory in order to facilitate a reading, and how far her work's success is dependent on a reading of a negative print as subversive of hegemonic values *per se*.

How can we consider how meanings are created and contested in Molnar and Thornburg's work who montage a kissing lesbian couple onto mainstream advertising imagery? One advert they use is for American Express and shows two women; one is wearing a tailored tweed jacket and the other is more 'feminine' in dress. They draw plans on a restaurant table with lipsticks and the caption reads, 'The American Express Card. It's part of a lot of interesting

lives.' (p122) The artists have montaged the kissing couple onto the background of the scene. Originally I had suspected the 'masculine' woman to have been added in place of a man. However when I realized that she was part of the original advert I found that the background of kissing lesbians could be interpreted as rather superfluous. If we understand that however 'dominant' an image may seem, 'meaning' is always and only ever produced depending on who sees it, when and where, then perhaps the original advert could stand in this collection as a parody, without needing a montage. Once realizing that meaning is never stable, then perhaps the possibilities expand for John Tagg's 'social confrontation whose object is not the recovery of a pristine "truth" but the effective displacement of the status of truth and the economic and political role it plays.'[2]

The inclusion in this collection of a Jill Posner photograph depicting a graffitied advertisement exemplifies the view that meanings are reader dependent. The advert is for Rest Assured Beds; a naked woman draped in a sheet lays across a bed, the caption above reads 'We can improve your nightlife.' Below sprawls the graffiti 'JOIN LESBIANS UNITED'.(p203) This photograph shows how lesbians construct readings of 'mainstream' imagery in a way which undermines a modernist belief in a stable and unified meaning and thus illuminates problems with hegemonic cultural production and the attempted portrayal of a universal heterosexuality. Posner's 'Dirty Girls' Guide to London', in this collection, along with Morgan Gwenwald's 'Butch/Fem Picnic' advocating, through photography, lascivious lesbian behaviour in public places, for me challenges a mediated relation between heterosexual romance and large cities.

In terms of reader-relations the inaccessibility of images to a black lesbian audience is something which (white) lesbian photography often promotes. Posner's 'JOIN LESBIANS UNITED' for example could not read 'JOIN BLACK LESBIANS UNITED' without extending a racist construction of an anarchic black sexuality. Thus we should consider under what circumstances lesbians can be accused of reproducing racist stereotypes. Anna Marie Smith discusses in her essay here, entitled 'Which One's the Pretender?', about Section 28, pre-censorship lesbian feminism's denial of different lesbian sexualities. She includes an illustration of a 1990 *Dykes to Watch Out For* cartoon by Alison Bechdel (p129) which stereotypes Afro-American and Asian lesbians as civil rights campaigners and spiritualists respectively. Does this cartoon confuse Smith's belief that pro-censorship feminism obliterates lesbian sexuality where stereotypical depictions of black lesbians clearly obliterate and are ignorant of black lesbian sexuality?

Also in this collection Mumtaz Karimjee explores her Asian lesbian identity through photography. Karimjee's 'In Search of an Image' presents needed evidence of Asian lesbianism, and she ironically casts herself as a stereotypical 'exotic Eastern', lying provocatively in her salwar kameez with agarbatti. She includes a poignant quote from Gloria Anzaldua about having to create her own culture.

2. Tagg, John, *The Burden of Representation*, Macmillan Education, London 1988, p95.

Karimjee's work is important because it illuminates and foregrounds racism and stereotyping in white lesbian culture.

Della Grace's much published series of photographs, *The Ceremony*, depicting two SM lesbians indulging in rooftop wedding arrangements appears in this collection, and gives rise to pertinent questions in terms of the consumption of imagery. Although her work teaches us that lesbians don't all have to be the same and that sexual fantasy is a real option for us, this set of images causes a dilemma. An attempt to assail the pro-censorship New Right among lesbian feminists by using Old Right imagery, with its accompanying racist associations, must sit in relation to renewed activism on the part of the National Front in Europe, and political implications of the Asylum Bill for example. Perhaps we should ask how the depiction of lesbian sexual fantasy alongside Nazi symbolism rests in a cultural climate where the appropriated imagery refers not only to Hitler's Germany but a much more recent climate of renewed racial abuse and legislatory oppression. Such oppression has repercussions for white gay men and lesbians as well; after all homosexuality lives high on the hitlist of a fascist politics.

Jackie Goldsby in her essay 'What it Means to be Coloured Me', sees a lesbian trend in politicizing race in searching to deny hierarchy within differences as mystifying the facts of black lesbian identity and subjectivity. Citing racial objectification in Robert Mapplethorpe's erotic photographs of black men, Goldsby argues that stereotypical representations of black lesbians and gay men preempt narrative possibility so that objective truths remain unvoiced. Noticing that lesbian erotica is white in its ideologies, narratives and icons, she says that we must look at how black sexuality has been constructed in order to understand how it is that its representation in porn is always racist. She argues that racism continues in lesbian and gay activism, and where lesbians politicize race, gay men eroticize it. Goldsby therefore urges gay politics not to rip off black politics (growing as it did, at one level, from the civil rights movement), and urges black critics to take up issues in gay activism.

A timely set of questions raised by two essays in this collection are those relating to viewing lesbian desire or sexuality as transgressive and subversive of dominant sexuality. Cindy Patton writes of the repressive nature of pro-censorship lesbian feminism in her essay, 'Unmediated Lust?', claiming that gay men subvert heterosexuality by making male-to-male sex, for example in porn cinemas, overtly masculine and thus refuting the proscription of the emasculated male. Claiming that a lesbian usage of the dildo counteracts the absence of the phallus in women, Patton argues that the production of images of lesbian desire would 'rip and tear at the foundations of hegemonic heterosexuality' and claims that, 'lesbian desire always and insistently subverts dominant sexuality.'(p239)

Martha Gever and Nathalie Magnan in their essay 'The Same Difference' follow Monique Wittig's argument contesting and destabilizing 'lesbian' as a concept. They argue that in psychoanalytic theory feminism remains tied to femininity and that heterosexual difference remains the basis for all sexual

difference. Arguing that lesbianism troubles heterosexuality, they claim that 'woman' as a concept only has meaning in heterosexual systems of thought and thus they present the subversive nature of lesbian desire. This position differs from that of Judith Butler[3] who, by contrast, argues that Wittig's lesbian, who is not a woman, confirms rather than contests normative humanist ideals premised on a metaphysics of substance, through a defence of the pre-gendered person. What are the implications of an argument purporting the subversive potential of lesbian desire? How can this view motivate clearer understandings of power relations? And to what extent does this belief confirm repressive ideologies? The questions raised in *Stolen Glances* have pertinent significance in relation to the queer theory developed through work such as that in de Lauretis's collection *Queer Theory*. An important issue linking these two collections is contestation of the subversive nature of lesbian desire. In trying to escape one set of ideas around the inter-dependence of homosexuality and heterosexuality there is perhaps a risk of falling into another set of proscriptions around humanism's pre-gendered person and the normative ramifications that this involves. Does Sue Ellen Case's vampire in *Queer Theory* challenge dominant cultural categories of 'woman'? If so, how can this be articulated in relation to Butler's challenge to Wittig? In conclusion the essays in *Queer Theory* move towards identifying a new and radical queer subjectivity. They claim an alternative reading of theoretical models such as psychoanalytic theory and they offer queer notions of culture. The essays also confront the relation of homophobia and racism, leaving us to consider the implications of this for theory and political activism. Overall I think it is important to question to what extent *Stolen Glances* could have benefitted from the new approaches being developed in *Queer Theory*. Problems that I have raised regarding some of the pieces of work in *Stolen Glances*, such as racism and a misunderstanding of the consumption of imagery, seem to have been elucidated here through an awareness of the implications of a queer theory. In my view *Queer Theory* foregrounds confusions and conflictions in *Stolen Glances* through making theoretical links between homophobia and racism, and through its regard for discrete cultural positionalities which inform ideas of an active audience, therefore opening avenues of resistance.

3. Butler, Judith, *Gender Trouble*, Routledge, London 1990.

# PAINTING AS PHILOSOPHY

*Sandra Kemp*

Andrew Benjamin, *Art, Mimesis and the Avant-garde*, Routledge 1991, 217pp; £40 cloth £12.99 paper.

Andrew Benjamin sees paintings as a philosopher. This has two consequences. First, he asks questions that go beyond the immediate experience of art to the issue of how that experience is possible. As his subtle readings of R.B. Kitaj's *If Not, Not* and *The Jewish School (Drawing of a Golem)* show, he is perfectly capable of making specific interpretations of specific works, but here that is not his concern. He is in pursuit of what it means to 'interpret' a painting in the first place; he is interested in the ways in which philosophy is implicated in art. For a non-philosopher the result is a series of scattered but stimulating questions: what does it mean to paint a mirror? To name a picture? What is the difference between seeing an object and seeing what it is? What is its 'whatness'? Behind all such questions is the central aesthetic issue: the relationship between experience and interpretation.

Second though, the questions Benjamin asks are not just designed to make sense of art. They are also driven by the need to philosophize. The insistent call of the philosopher's 'task' is the refrain that runs through the twelve essays collected here, and Benjamin defines this as not so much to clarify art through philosophy as to challenge philosophy through art. These essays have an embattled quality; the battleground is the history of philosophical aesthetics. Early on Benjamin refers to 'Nietzsche's task, that is the overturning of Platonism.' It is a task Benjamin also takes on:

> Overturning Platonism does in this instance amount to a projected resistance to viewing mimesis as that which provides the means by which the work of art (or the generalised object of interpretation) are themselves to be interpreted. (p27)

Further, Benjamin is always conscious of himself as a philosopher (rather than as someone just looking at paintings). In discussing how tradition and the present link experience and meaning, for example, he defines the present as 'the "time" of the self-conception of the philosophical task.'(p52) In using the term avant-garde, he explains that 'I am not referring to either a genre or a specific historical location. What is at stake here is the possibility and hence the actuality of a philosophical conception of the avant-garde.'(p104) For a non-philosopher, Benjamin's arguments are, then, in detail rather opaque: their abstraction seems inappropriate to their object.

Benjamin's starting point is that philosophy brings to art an interpretative strategy, a set of expectations about mimesis and representation, that no longer

makes sense of what art (and the experience of art) may be. Indeed, art is now the source of a philosophy – an argument about interpretation – *that challenges* philosophical tradition, and one purpose of Benjamin's work is to 'rethink' terms like 'tradition, mimesis, affirmation, interpretation and the avant-garde' in studies of 'specific paintings by Kitaj, Freud, Kiefer and Malevich, the architecture of Peter Eisenman and the writings of Roger Laporte.'(p3) The constant move between abstract framework and material work is a necessary aspect of Benjamin's argument; the book is itself (this is one of its strengths) interpreting as well as being about interpretation.

Benjamin's initial target, aesthetic 'tradition', is rooted in Plato's account of Mimesis, in the development of an analytic mode in which to interpret is to relate interpretation to interpreted, either through a direct relation of similarity and homology, or through a mediated, allegorical relationship, a relation guaranteed by the artist's intention. Either way what is involved is a belief in origin: the meaning of a painting can be traced back to its original 'object', the object that gives the work its unity, its meaning. Modernism, as Benjamin suggests, marked a crisis in this aesthetic but did not overturn it. The impossibility of unity – of stable objects – meant both regret for what had been but also an impossible attempt to recapture it; art became a matter of futile repetition. Benjamin explores these themes in two good essays on Walter Benjamin, concluding that:

> The philosophical challenge at the present – indeed of the present – is to map the interarticulation of the desire for unity with the necessity for differential plurality. The limiting element in Benjamin's conception of the interplay between tradition and experience is that it is unable to meet this challenge. The location of this limit is at the hinge separating the modern and the post-modern.(p172)

Andrew Benjamin writes as a postmodernist (drawing on Lyotard and Derrida), but his call for an approach to art that recognises its 'anoriginal heterogenity,' his rethinking of the avant-garde not in terms of its negation of tradition but as an account of the *active* impossibility of representation, is derived from an older and more complex argument about art, about interpretation, drawn from Heidegger. The object of interpretation, Benjamin suggests, is an aspect *of* interpretation, and can't exist apart from it. This does not just open up art as the plural object of plural readings, nor simply make clear that the object of interpretation cannot have 'origins' outside of the interpretative act. More importantly, it redefines the art-object as a temporal matter, a *becoming-object* rather than a *being-object*. Interpretation is always a process of *bringing-into-being*. The space of art (and architecture) becomes the 'space of process'; interpretation is no longer predictable, is no longer the result of an approach that guarantees in advance the discovery (or absence) of an original object. Benjamin thus brings to the fine arts issues that are central to the performing arts: music and dance have always had to be grasped as becoming-objects.

Benjamin opens this book by suggesting that it contains a particular *topos*, 'the attempt to rework and thereby to readdress the philosophical task in terms of the centrality of ontology.' But running through it too is a second, implicit *topos*, the theme of difficulty. Art becomes a problem for traditional aesthetics, that is, when it becomes difficult to read; modernism thus drew attention to its own difficulty as a matter of aesthetic strategy. It is difficulty that both challenges interpretation and makes interpretation a challenge, and part of Benjamin's purpose here is to take on the argument that their difficulty is precisely why such works aren't art. His response is to rethink – to rework – art, to free it from traditional aesthetic restraint. It is, then, not surprising that Benjamin's own prose is difficult – compare his clotted abstractions with the lucid extracts from Plato, Descartes and Hume. In short, if Andrew Benjamin sees paintings as a philosopher, this means, on his own account, seeing them with difficulty. Difficulty, like plurality, is a necessary part of his new – philosophical – way of seeing.