

She Would Change the Plot

(Script for Dry Kisses Only by Kaucyila Brooke and Jane Cottis)

We see the theory woman. She is wearing a vintage tailored 30's suit, her hair is slicked back into a french roll and her black framed half glasses are perched on the end of her nose. She is sitting in her office in front of a Secretary desk. She turns and faces the camera. Her spine is erect, her head held confidently and her elbow is resting securely on the arm of her chair. She speaks with authority. She has an American accent with no identifiable regional characteristics. Her words are clipped and clearly enunciated. One can imagine her attending private girls school and taking elocution. She takes a breath and speaks.

The subject of our investigation today will be the lesbian subplot within classic Hollywood (assumed to be) heterosexual cinema. As we look beyond the dominant narrative of many classic films we can find the unconscious logic of the film. This covert (rather than overt) narration can be read through the character's gestures which reveal the play of signs within the sexual logic of the films iconography. These homosexual subplots or in some cases subtexts (for some never achieve the legitimacy of actual subplot) function as a release for those repressed desires of the assumed heterosexual audience and cultural systems.

Here, she deliberately reaches for a marbled fountain pen and holds it firmly between two hands as she continues to speak. When she wants to emphasize a point she gestures aggressively towards the camera with the pen. The pen seems to be a power object for her another part of the apparatus of her authority.

It makes good sense for the dominant system to allow for some expression of the suppressed because providing an escape valve within the confines of the established structure can ultimately avoid an open revolt. The Catholic church has historically used this kind of "flexibility"

She draws this word o u t and makes the hand signal for quotes in the air between her body and the camera.

to incorporate diverse spiritual practices of the conquered under its hierarchical umbrella. Within the boundaries of these dominant systems these "other" cultures or, more pertinent to our subject,

She sets down the pen, removes her glasses and leans towards the camera conspiratorially.

the cinematic representations of "other" sexualities operate as disturbances which ultimately legitimate the status quo.

Sitting back in her chair the theory woman collapses her glasses and she begins gesturing with them in much the same manner that she had been utilizing the pen.

The happily-ever-after fate of most good (that is those characters who do not cross those dangerous gender lines) heterosexual couples at the conclusion of these films simultaneously excludes similar possibilities for the lesbian couple. The portrayal of lesbian sexuality in a sub-text or sub-plot reinforces the hetero-patriarchal systems of our culture.

She puts the glasses back on her nose and makes herself comfortable. She crosses her legs as if to say to the audience now we are into the swing of things, the meat of it, the heart of the matter, and that we should prepare for an extended argument. She is becoming secure with her position. She has no doubts about her role.

It has been said that in classic texts we receive our pleasure from the suspense created by the suspense created by

Another voice breaks through and begins reading the text. The theory woman is annoyed. The camera woman is interrupting her. This is terribly rude. She grimaces and picks up the fountain pen pretending to be interested in how the cap fits onto the body of the pen. She removes and replaces the cap several times as she stares at the pen she is holding between her hands. But she won't verbally acknowledge the interruption. Ill bred behavior does not justify an uncivilized response. That would be sinking to her level. The camera woman continues in a cockney accent.

the interruptions of the main plot. These disturbances of the (supposedly) primary heterosexual couple may take the form of a lover's quarrel, a love triangle, or they may be kept apart by a deviant character.

Theory woman seizes her opportunity and takes control over the text. Her attitude towards the camera is engaging, charming and informative. She speaks

a little too quickly as if to make certain this unpleasantness will not be repeated.

The character Theo, the clairvoyant urbane lesbian, in **The Haunting** is lodged between the spiritualist naive spinster and her love interest the male doctor of parapsychology. Even though the spinster's interest in the Doctor is portrayed as a part of a pathetic need for an authority figure and the lesbian desire for her seems quite sincere and adult, the film makes clear that Theo's deviancy is an ugly truth to be thrown in her unnatural face by the natural albeit virginal woman . In **Pandora's Box** Lulu, the sexually active vamp, is so desirable that even female characters fall in love with her. One such character, the Countess, sacrifices any possibility of realizing her desire for LuLu because she, and the audience, understand that only heterosexual love and marriage will secure happiness for the femme fatale. Her true love far outweighs the motivation of her desire and she eventually assists Lulu in achieving that goal. With all the loose ends tied up

Her hands make gestures which illustrate this idea of a circle being completed. Theses circling hands are followed by open palms symmetrically balanced they move in unison to emphasize the uniformity of the filmic conclusions.

and everyone's fate decided the viewer can retire from the theater knowing the oppositional structure of gender construction has reasserted itself . The viewer's relationship to the film has been manipulated through the twists and turns of the plot while she sat secure in the knowledge that "normal" values would be reinstated at the end.

There is a scene change and we see the theory woman sitting on a pink ceramic toilet. Her skirt is hiked up around her hips and we can see the folded material of her pantyhose as it is gathered above her knees. This is particularly evident when she gestures with both hands while making her point clear. She is still sitting quite tall and confidently. Seemingly unaware of the undignified position that she is in, she is having difficulty getting started. Apparently the word "homophobia" is causing problems and she looks into the camera,

pauses too long and says:

homophobia

She then makes a fart sound with her lips as if this is a repulsive word to

her and begins the text again.

We might say that homophobia is an inability to accept one's own bisexuality. Freud's investigations lead him to believe that we are all innately bi-sexual, and that the homosexual side must be repressed in order to construct the successfully socialized adult.

Again she pauses for one uncomfortable second too long.

Homophobia,

She pauses again for a half second.

then, results when the transference to a heterosexual orientation is only partly achieved and one's homosexuality becomes a constant (if unconscious) threat.

Finally, we see the theory woman we have begun to rely on. Her confusion has disappeared. Her language is animated and moves quickly with that authority that we expect from her. We are able to relax and forget momentarily that she is speaking to us from the toilet.

Dreams, jokes, and fantasies are the external manifestations of this sexual phobia which we find embodied in the proverbial Hollywood faggot joke or (more relevant to our topic) the sexually objectified representation of lesbians that we see in the sex scenes of such films as *Personal Best* or *The Hunger*.

Now, this definition is problematic in its premise that there are categorical innate human characteristics. To be innately Bi-sexual or homosexual or heterosexual is similar to other essentialist ideas such as the binary structure of innate Good and Evil. To be innately Lesbian is innately Evil and conversely to be innately Heterosexual is to be innately Good. This kind of thinking obscures the possibility that a person may choose their sexual love object rather than being driven by unconscious desire.

She speaks these last four words as though she is spitting them out like broken teeth. Her voice becomes constrained, louder, faster and deeper all at once. We think she might be a

bit

mad. But then the fury subsides and her voice sweetens and becomes more rational - civilized.

Let us propose that one's sexuality is constructed not only by Social

Power Structures, such as Family, School and Church but also by Self Construction. Opening the closed system of Victorian morality based psychoanalytic theory could mean that the decision of who you love or desire can be seen as a personal and political choice. However, classic cinema can not engage this diverse approach

*Again her voice has become **too loud, booming** and she seems overly dramatic. As quickly as we saw a glimpse of the irrational the controlled voice of the academic reasserts itself.*

as other choices than Hetero-sexuality would upset the balance of good and evil. Clearly, we won't disappear. So the social deviants must be subtexted without the legitimacy of the classic linear narrative. It has been made perfectly clear that **WE MUST FOLLOW THE SCRIPT.**

For this last line the camera has cut to an extreme close up of her face and she enunciates each word separately. Her pacing

has

slowed

down.

She wants to make sure that what she is saying is indeed perfectly clear. The scene cuts away from the theory woman's face to the back porch of an older suburban home. We see the backdoor open and the theory woman emerges wearing the same suit but added to her costume are ankle high black galoshes. She is carrying gardening clippers and pulling pigskin work gloves onto her hands as she traverses the backyard towards red rose bushes. Her voice is laid over this image as the text continues.

Same sex relationships , subtexted within the main plot may seem to have little importance to a heterosexual reading but often have more emotional power than the obligatory characters of

She clips a full red rose from the bush.

the boy meets girl romance.

The image cuts back to the theory woman talking to the camera standing by the roses and gesturing with either the clippers she holds in her right hand or the roses she holds in her left. She is still wearing her work gloves.

A perverse reading of the same text can acknowledge the primary nature of the relationships between the female characters. Lesbians can take an active role and retextualize the film narrative to provide discourse where there is an assumed absence. We can interpret

The camera cuts away from her again to show us a dalmation on the other side of the chain link fence behind a full bloomed red rose. The dog appears to be listening intently to her discussion of the "off screen space".

the off screen as well as the on screen space of the film. Removing ourselves from the passive position of seeing films where we are either neglected or mis-represented,

Again the camera cuts to the speaker.

we can play around with the cinematic images offered and bend the meaning to our own purpose.

She moves her gloved hands holding the clippers and the roses as though they are bending a line, following a meandering stream or moving up and down the curves of a roller coaster.

We can enjoy searching out the look,

She gestures toward the dog.

the confrontation

She puts the rose to her nose and takes a deep breath.

and the connotative language between women on screen. Sometimes the subtext of these films is intended by the Director, Writer, Producer or actor. A friend introduced the idea of a covert reading to me when she described playing heterosexual roles in stage plays with other lesbian and gay actors. They created relationships between same sex characters unknown to the audience and sometimes the director but very much a part of their motivation on stage. According to Vito Russo's account in his book *The Celluloid Closet*, Shirley McClaine said that director William Wyler ruined the authenticity of the story in the film production of **The Children's Hour** by minimalizing writer Lilian Hellman's examination of "one woman's personal growth in the area of falling in love with another woman", McClaine also said, Wyler "Thought that it would be too much for middle America to take. I thought he was wrong, and told him so, and Audrey Hepburn was right behind me". Besides the delightful idea of Audrey Hepburn being right behind McClaine, these experiences by an actor in a drama that specifically deals with lesbian sexuality show how even where we are not the subplot in the author's intention we can become euphemistically diminished in importance by Hollywood's leveling machine. Similarly we can not assume that every cinematic drama that deals with homosexuality directly has the informed involvement of its cast. Russo's research also revealed that when

Katherine Hepburn was performing in **Suddenly Last Summer** (a story about an aging mother's refusal to acknowledge the homosexuality of a recently dead son) it was necessary for Spencer Tracey and Joseph Mankiewicz, the director of the film, to explain homosexuality to her. Mankiewicz reported that she refused to believe "such people existed" and in later years she became a vocal opponent to Gay Liberation. Interestingly her strong women's roles in films from the thirties and early forties are a great favorite amongst many lesbian viewers and in some of these films her relationships with other female characters can be easily read against the grain of the heterosexual romance. While we may be pleasantly surprised to find an intended lesbian subplot where we perceived one, there is no reason in the axis of film viewer and film makers to look only at the author's intention to give authority to

She motions with the bundle of clippers and roses towards her chest.

our retextulization of the film's narrative.

The Theory Woman is seated in a comfortable lounge chair in a private living room and we hear the buzz of other people's conversations. She is holding a martini glass and leaning forward about to speak. Around her we see groups of adults in evening clothes, standing in small groups engaged in cocktail chatter. Theory woman looks the same except for the glass in her right hand. Ignoring her fellow party goers, she begins to speak.

Along with bending the meaning... Along with bending the meaning...

She realizes that she is being interrupted again by a voice that is saying the same words simultaneously. Her Words! Her Text! Her original Text! She does know that it is improper for two women to speak at the same time and becomes silenced by the other voice. We recognize the camera woman's voice but we also realize that she is in this scene, actually on screen. She too is ignoring the cocktail partiers and they seem oblivious to her voice as she speaks.

Along with bending the meaning of women's relationships in Het. romance films, we can also reclaim some films that have included negative lesbian stereotypes. Although we may reject the overall moral of the homophobic plot some of these films are more substantial and have greater complexity than we first acknowledge. While the "positive image" films like **Desert Hearts** and **Lianna** leave out the complexities of everyday work and long term relationships in **The Killing of Sister George**, directed by Robert Aldrich, a lesbian couple in an established relationship struggle with unresolved issues accumulated from their years together.

Theory woman swirls her martini in the glass looking into the glass as if fascinated by the movement of the liquid inside.

Although the character George is a stereotypically older, tweedy and mannish and her lover is a younger femme babydoll pajama wearing blonde, it is significant that their relationship has not come about as a reaction to the trials of heterosexuality. It is also unusual in its emphasis on a middle aged woman's identity crisis as related to her career.

As the camera woman gets to this part of the text the theory woman begins to listen with interest. She seems to enjoy listening and find great meaning in what the other woman is saying. Her faces shows signs of recognition of the subject matter.

We see her fight and rebel humorously and powerfully against the limits in her job in TV , When the struggles in the abusive relationship reach the point of driving the younger woman away she does go in the arms of another woman which is unlike the traditional Hollywood return to heterosexuality.

The camera woman's insistent intonation meets with theory woman's approval. Yes, she too has observed this about the film. This is a good point. She is nodding her head, enjoying considering the camera woman's perceptions. She has discovered a another way to retain her position of authorit. Merely by demonstrating her approval, she suggests the possibility of the reverse. The camera woman continues:

The positive image films focus on the romance of coming out stories and the initiation and inevitable dissolution of the love affair programmatically includes the ever present male character. Oddly in portraying the seamy underside of lesbian culture this film gives it more validity as an independent complex world than liberal films which try so desperately to be politically correct.

As the camera woman pauses for a breath the theory woman seems temporarily involved in thinking about the irony of the last idea presented. There is a wry smirk playing across her lips. She takes a sip of her martini and realizes that the

gap

in

the

text

is

too

long

and leans forward towards the camera to take it up again.

Let us take a moment to

The camera woman jumps up from her chair and runs towards the camera yelling "No!" with her open palm moving to cover the camera lens. She loses her step but recovers herself and quickly the screen goes dark. We cut to another camera angle of the cocktail party and a more tightly framed image of the theory woman. Again she takes a sip of her drink and begins.

Let us take a moment to identify the cultural stereotypes about lesbians that crop up repeatedly in films where we find lesbian subplots. There is the smart or intellectual lesbian

Here her eyebrows lift with innuendo. She wants to make sure that the viewers pick up the connection between her and the text. This is a self portrait. But the overdone acting makes us wonder if we shouldn't also be reading against the grain of her text. The theory woman is a stereotype and she is talking about the stereotype.

who is driven by her thirst for knowledge or desire for professional power. She is seen as the "independent" woman (a heterosexist concept ignoring her bonds with other women). Her knowledge of the world is seen by other characters in the film as somehow unnatural and making her claim to femininity questionable. In **Johnny Guitar**, **Three Secrets**, and **Young Man with a Horn** female characters' genders are questioned by castrated male characters or through self examination as we see in Margo Channing's monologue about her career in **All About Eve**. Personal isolation and lovelessness punish the woman who has placed too much importance in the non feminine sphere. In **Christopher Strong**, Lady Cynthia Darrington's desire to fly obscures her "natural" desire for a male lover, and because of her tardiness to pursue romance she must settle for the lonely position of the other woman. We can sometimes recognize these quasi lesbian characters by their clothing. Exotic animal fur such as leopard skin on Phylis's (or the more masculine Phil, as she is sometimes called) collar in **Three Secrets**, Theo's coat in **The Haunting** or the large lizard pin on Miriam's lapel in the **The Hunger**, let the viewer know that this woman is somehow other than your domestic variety female. Certainly, male fantasies of exotic lesbian

sexual practices are being constructed here but they can also cue the lesbian viewer to the existence of a subplot. Let us not forget Lulu in **Pandora's Box**, a woman who is so sexually attractive that neither men nor women can resist her. Sister George is shown as a woman who knows and acknowledges her sexual pleasure when she teases a group of nuns in the back of a cab and when she describes her pleasure at having a motorbike "throbbing between" her legs.

Theory woman crosses her legs deliberately on this last line and looks at the camera conspiratorially and becomes a sexualized version of herself. We notice the camera woman circulating amongst the guests with an hors d'oeuvres platter. She offers the tray to the theory woman who selects a ham roll on a toothpick. She gives her a grateful and flirtatious smile. She continues speaking and holding her martini in her right hand while gesturing with the ham roll in her left.

Inversely we see the sexual avarice of those devouring femme fatales

She takes a greedy lascivious bite of her ham roll.

who can never be satisfied and are driven to the perverse pleasures of taking female lovers. Marlene Deitrich in the famous kiss from the cabaret scene in **Morocco**, Miriam in **The Hunger**, and Lauren Bacall in **Young Man with a Horn** are character's whose sexual appetites serve the dark dreams of the peeping Tom's of the cinema but who can be reappropriated for OUR daytime desires.

A new scene appears on the screen. It is the theory woman sitting in a canopy bed. From the foot of the bed we see that she has exchanged her costume for a Victorian flannel nightgown. We see that she wears her professional theory jacket over the gown. We wonder about this woman who is so engaged in her own thinking that she carries it into the bedroom. There is a baby in her lap. The baby is a perfectly animated smiling gurgling thing. The baby is more fascinating than anything in the scene. As the theory woman speaks the camera slowly zooms in.

There are numerous plots lines from which to play out these stereotypes. We have the stories of the older experienced lesbians who capture or enslave or seduce the virginal younger and naive women. This one is the prevailing scenario that we see in **The Haunting, The Killing Of Sister George, Personal Best, Maedchen In Uniform, Christopher Strong, Morocco** and **All About Eve**. Sometimes the experienced woman is a bad mother perversely playing with her child's innocence as in **Mädchen in Uniform** or the reverse that we see in **The Bad Seed** where the mother seeks intimacy from other adult female characters because her innocence is manipulated by the evil child desires.

The child in theory woman's lap is a laughing angel. She interrupts the flow of the language by her little noises and laughter.

The absence of the male character can allow the lesbian or primary emotional relationships between women to blossom as in **The Bad Seed** and **The Great Lie**. Hollywood morality tells us that these complicated crises wouldn't have developed if there had been a man around and clearly the over involvement of the female characters with one another is more than a contributing factor to the family problems that develop. Let us not ignore the films about female rivalry such as **Johnny Guitar**, **All About Eve** or **The Great Lie** in which the lie in fact is that the great rivalry is only a cover for a passionately strong attraction between the female characters which can only express its intensity through the thinly veiled pretense of undying enmity.

As she leans forward to confront the camera we notice that the child has grabbed theory woman's little fingers in her little fists. Theory woman continues to gesture with the babies hands attached to her's.

We thinks though dost protest too much. As the cowboy says at the end of **Johnny Guitar**, "It was their fight from the beginning". Finally
Finally

She is once again interrupted by the camera woman but at this point she doesn't even seem to notice. It gives her more time to play with the baby. As the camera woman continues the text the theory woman makes kissing faces at the baby and laughs along with the child's antics. The camera woman continues:

Finally there is, of course, the SUBTEXT of Hollywood itself, as it attempts to represent ourselves to ourselves. Hollywood has a history of routing out the "UN-American" influences from its community. The sexual censorship of the Motion Picture Production Code of 1930 survived until the late 60's ensuring the depiction of what was GOOD and what was RIGHT in American Culture. Left with no visibility in popular films we look for the lesbian subtext of Hollywood. Which lesbians have had their faces lifted by the same studio image production system that married Rock Hudson and Liberace off in fake marriages? As we whisper and compare notes about their sexual identities off screen, we are searching out the twisted and unbalanced narratives.