

Are There Any Lesbians in the film *Henry and June*?

by David Mertz

An interesting question, perhaps, is contained in the title; but then one may also ask, more precisely, "How many?" ~~We will quickly multiply the number of possible answers by at least a few hundred.~~ For a start, there are four — or better, five — candidates for being lesbian in the film. We will detail these, and their respective claims below. Next, there are at least several ways of saying what a lesbian is. Under some or most of these definitions, lesbians are said to be "women;" and again, under some or most of these definitions, their "lover(s)" are said to be "women." However, what a "woman" is is a rather tricky question. One can think of at least half of a dozen answers to this question which are each plausible and plausibly distinct from each other; but then, one can also think of many theories which give different answers on what it is to be a "woman" loving versus a "woman" loved. Cross-cutting all this, the word 'lover' which we have mentioned certainly lends itself to more than one definition.

In the original written version of this paper, a little parlor trick was done by multiplying these independent possibilities of definition together. Doing so was meant to show just how many thousands of different theoretical positions can be held at the nexus where gender and sexuality and artistic/cultural representation meet. The real point of my paper is to pull apart the several quite independent theoretical stances one may have regarding gender, sexuality, the function of representation, and such like matters — which so many feminist thinkers tend, rather cavalierly, to conflate. This paper takes the form of a film-analysis, an analysis of a particular film, but its real point could be made in indefinitely many other ways. What I find when I apply various theoretical frameworks to the analysis of one concrete bit of cultural production is not simply that each theory produces a different interpretation of the artifact, the film; or even simply that different theories legislate different political practices; but that different theories differ specifically by speaking **past**, rather than **to**, each other — even where the theories purport to theorize precisely the same matter. As a philosopher, the still more general conclusion I draw from this is the worthlessness of theory in general for informing political practice. But that conclusion exceeds this paper; so let me proceed to the actual film-analysis.

The Candidates.

The film *Henry and June* portrayed four significant “female” characters. I say this uneasily since, as will be discovered, I do not really understand what it is to be either *female* or a *character*. ~~For this presentation, we must skip over considering the purportedly “insignificant” characters. There are theoretical as well as practical reasons for doing so — but time does not permit a discussion of these reasons.~~

But Let us notice in advance, however, that certain of the theories which will be discussed will claim that there is something essentially gendered and/or essentially sexual about every representation; and, after all, nothing makes it on to the screen “accidentally.” If, for example, every gaze is a male gaze — if women use their eyes for something fundamentally different than what men use theirs for — then even those characters who are seen in only the most fleeting glimpse are nonetheless seen from a gendered perspective.

The four possible lesbians in the film are Anäis (Nin), June (Miller), the prostitute who looks like June, and the prostitute who looks like Anäis (neither of the latter two are given names in the film, which presents a problem: they shall be referred to according to whom they symbolically substitute for, i.e. ‘June’s alternate’). In addition, a possibility arises with the audience. ~~Perhaps it is possible that there is a lesbian in the audience. Of course, to be bluntly literal, if there is one lesbian in the audience of the film then there are probably several — but the question which really arises is of the possibility of there being any lesbians in the audience, not of the absolute or relative number of them.~~ A flat-footed listener could insist[^] what we all know, that there certainly are bound to be lesbians in the audience; ~~but I think this misses the point a bit.~~ ^a The point is that what constitutes a “woman” as a lesbian is perhaps very different from, or even opposite to, what constitutes her as a subjectivity which gazes. So we’re told, frequently enough.

Let me describe The subtext, or subplot, of the film, around which ^{my question} these possibilities arise, is as follows. Whether this text is more or less important to the film as a whole than are other features is not a matter on which ^I this author holds any particular opinion. Henry comes to Paris. Anäis meets him and feels a sexual desire for him. June joins Henry in Paris. Anäis feels a sexual desire for her, which may be, in large part, an extension of her desire

toward Henry (she has one fantasy in which June has a penis). June leaves Paris. Henry and Anäis have many sexual acts together (~~this may or may not be incidental to the relevant subtext~~). Anäis visits, with her husband, the brothel where the prostitutes who look like her and June work; and June's alternate and Anäis' alternate put on a sexual "exhibition" for Anäis (with her husband watching also). After the alternates perform a variety of tribadic acts, in an apparently "heterosexual" style, Anäis tells June's alternate to "stop acting like a man." The alternates then have cunnilingus, with June's alternate (who is taller, and looks more "masculine") taking the "active" role and Anäis' alternate "receiving" the act. The words 'masculine', 'active' and 'receiving' are not quite right, of course, but they do carry the conventional meanings given to the sexual positions. We are meant to judge by their facial expressions that the alternates enjoy the latter act more. June comes back to Paris. Anäis and June start to sexually touch each other, but any further sexual acts are interrupted by facts external to this subtext. Then the film is over.

Pornography and the "male" gaze.

Here is a very peculiar fact: In the USA, most representations of women engaged in sexual acts with each other, or with themselves, are viewed for purposes of arousal (~~or listened to, read, etc.~~) more often by men than by women. The reason why this fact is peculiar is that processes of "identification" alone just cannot explain it. One can easily imagine that "heterosexual" men (whatever such things may be) would be able to see images of women engaged in "heterosexual" acts with other men and find an erotic identification in positing themselves as the man represented. Such an identification goes like this: "That man is engaged in that sexual act, and I, being, like him, a man, could similarly be engaged in that sexual act." Indeed, this is clearly an identificatory process which does occur. However, images of women engaged in sexual acts with other women are perhaps consumed by men, for erotic arousal, in as great a quantity than are those images of "heterosexual" acts which were mentioned. While it is by no means impossible, or even implausible, that essentially the same identificatory process occurs between these men and one or more of the women represented, this process simply cannot explain the commonness of this type of image. What makes this commonness paradoxical is that,

apparently, two (or more) women engaged in a sexual act “do not need a man” thereby — and hence there is no represented sexual relation in which a male viewer should be able to imagine himself having a place.

Several explanations for the “male” arousal in observing “lesbian” acts present themselves. According to a certain Freudian story, men (and women) come to see their mothers as lacking something; namely, the possession of mom’s object of desire. This mythic object (“the Phallus”) comes to be represented by a penis, which a male child sees himself as possessing (however tenuously). Through this process, the story goes, male sexual desire comes to be defined by the possibility of fulfilling mom’s desire with the use of a penis — or the desire of her later substitutes. Let us call this the ‘Freudian explanation’. An adult, sexual (and heterosexual) male sees a lack, an unfulfilled desire, when he sees a woman; and he wishes, through a sexual direction of the drive, to fulfill her unfulfilled desire through sexual intercourse with her, wherein she comes into temporary possession of his penis. In viewing an image of a woman, this man sees such a lack, and such a lack is simply accentuated by her portrayal as sexually aroused — and nothing could better demonstrate her sexual arousal than her actually engaging in a sexual act. However, if a man is portrayed in the same image, then the woman (or women) portrayed in the image are no longer lacking anything which the viewer might potentially fulfill, since the man portrayed is already filling this lack.

According to another story (not contradicting the first story!), there is a overwhelmingly prevalent convention in the media and arts to portray women when they portray (hetero)sexual acts. Let us call this the ‘empiricist explanation’. When heterosexual acts are portrayed in film and images (~~and also, largely, in literature and song~~), the portrayal is from a male point of view. Typically, the camera looks over a man’s shoulder on to a woman’s face — most particularly at the stylized “moment of climax” (~~a peculiar thing, unquestionably, that in film heterosexual couples always both have orgasms, and always at the same moment~~). According to the empiricist explanation, observers are able to perform an induction from the series of film and literary representations they view to the conclusion that all images of women aroused are, so to speak, “shot from over a man’s shoulder.” When an observer accustomed to seeing these androcentric

images sees an image directly portraying only women, she or he nonetheless inserts an imagined "male shoulder" into the frame of the picture. It must, not incidentally, under this theory, really be both men and women who take on, by empirical induction, an androcentric viewpoint. The empiricist explanation makes the claim that it cannot be a "lesbian" observing sexualized images of women.

Let us consider the claim just mentioned: every pornographic image of a woman (or of a man, perhaps) is an image which supposes a male viewer. Furthermore, according to those who make this claim, any such image cannot really be an image of a "lesbian" act because it always has immanent within it a lack which demands for its fulfillment that a man enter the frame. Those who make this claim — let us call it the "essential androcentrism of pornography" claim — often find theoretical support in one or both of the two explanations which were sketched above. As is obvious, this claim entails that the conclusion of this paper be, "there are no, and could be no, lesbians in the film *Henry and June*, neither on screen nor in the audience."

Other uses for eyes.

Let us focus, again, on the Freudian explanation. If men (or someone) see by seeing a lack, then those who are their abstract negation must see by seeing presence. Several comments on seeing presences. First, this is not far from certain anti-porn ideologies which claim that what lesbians do is somehow not "objectify" their "lovers." According to this faith, lesbians/^{see}their lovers as whole persons, and not as single sexual aspects. 'Objectify' as used here has a somewhat special sense which is not entirely clear, but which clearly has something to do with conceptions or stereotypes about sex. However, if we take the notion of seeing presences fully into account, we will also take 'objectify' in a fully Kantian sense. Those whom we do not objectify we do not view as objects in the world having such "hidden" lacks as causal connections to the world and substantial existence. This is not quite meant as a *reductio ad absurdum*, however, as a second point will, perhaps illustrate.

Second, all representational art is an art of lacks or absences. For example, any painting showing perspective brings a viewer mentally to insert a dimensionality into the

painting which she knows is “lacking” in the two-dimensional frame; and any portrait showing a right profile brings a viewer to imagine the left profile which is only an absence within the portrait. What is represented in realism is represented as inadequate and lacking — at least as we are taught to see these things. Certain non-representational art may not be an art of absences. Abstract-expressionism would be a bad example, since one is taught to see in it artists’ emotions; but perhaps Jackson Pollock paintings are an adequate example. Or perhaps, in a very different way, Vassily Kandinsky is not a painter of absences. ~~We cannot discuss herein these particular artists, but let us allow that~~ ^{here} ~~at least a possibility is presented by them~~ of another way of seeing which does not see absences.

What is a lesbian, anyway?

As we all know, letting the word ‘lesbian’ simply describe one who engages in certain sexual acts is at once both too much and not enough. On the one hand, even “women” who do not engage in “lesbian” sexual acts may be “lesbians” in the common sense manner of having sexual desires exclusively for “women.” On the other hand, “women” who do engage in sexual acts with each other may do so in a manner which only is meaningfully a “sexual act” in relation to a male scopophile — even if they do so in private, and not in front of a camera. Still, we have the feeling that a lesbian is, in some sense or another, a woman who loves women.

Well then, what is a woman?

Several theories come to mind, and theories, like many things, carry deceptive proper names; so I name my theories after my friends. Many more theories than are presented could be, and no claim is made that these are the best, the most representative, the most popularly held, or even the most interesting.

THE JULIE SIMPSON THEORY. Genders are clusters of traits. Genders are assigned on the basis of biological sex, which is determined, at least socially, by outward genitalia. Having had gender determined at birth (or before) by naive empiricists (i.e. their parents who look at their genitals), women or men get certain sexual and economic roles and

behaviors regularly prescribed differentially, and hence get different self-conceptions about these roles and behaviors. ~~Although the particular roles assigned to gendered persons are completely socially contingent,~~ genders must be two in number since that is, ~~after all,~~ the number of biological sexes out of which we can form gender classifications. Besides, every society has a need for a normative heterosexuality in order to reproduce itself biologically; and the binary categories of gender are necessary for this imperative to make sense. The relation between genders, once removed from their basis in sex, is not structural, and is theoretically symmetrical. That is, each gender is a positive pole around which traits cluster. Although the terms 'man' and 'woman' are often taken as antonyms, the actual traits each referent takes on are not opposites, but simply different. To this theory, a lesbian is not anything in particular, merely someone with the feminine cluster of traits who loves someone near the same cluster. Of course, given the heterosexual norm around which the genders are formed, a lesbian is a relatively unlikely thing — but this is a question of probability only, not of logic.

THE KAREN ADKINS THEORY. To be is, firstly, to be a man. A man is a person, *sui generis*, and being woman is simply a derivative way of being. It is not a question of the psychological centrality of the category of Otherness around which the concept of woman is formed, and into which each of us inserts herself either on the side of presence or that of absence. It is instead a question of social fringes. Just as there could not be slaves without masters, there could not be women without men. In explaining the gender of sexuality, the Adkins theory reverses the Freudian thing. Rather than explaining the essential feminine genderedness of sexual objects (*vis-a-vis* their "lack"), we are given an essential masculine genderedness of sexual subjects. Since it is social persons who have sexual desires and act sexual acts, it is those who "assume the male position" who do so. For this theory, a lesbian is an impossible thing, at least if it refers to anything beyond genitalia. Since at least one person in every sexual act must be acting as a man does, there can be no sexual act between "women."

THE JEREMY BARRIS THESIS: LACAN'S BIG THING. Desire always involves the posit of a lack — a lack of something, the Phallus, which was a fraud to start with, but a lack, nonetheless. This lack can be posited on either side of the sexual act; or rather, it must

be posited simultaneously on both sides, but in different ways. Sexual desire contains a lack which is actually the lack of a lack. Mom lacks the object of her desire, and in order to imagine we can fulfill it we must imagine we lack this lack, for we could not have the object she lacks if we too lack it. From the “masculine” side we find that the something which we have which is the lack of a lack is the Phallus — or a penis (which is not a vagina). Then, having found and named our masculine lack of a lack we must find a desire which lacks what we have, since, after all, our lack of a lack was found in order to fulfill a lack which lacks our lack of a lack. *Ipsa Facto*, goes the masculine deduction, a woman must be a person who lacks our lack of a lack — for who else could it be. From the “feminine” side we find that what we have is a lack which is the lack of a lack of a lack (a vagina), since according to those who tell us what we have, that presence (which is a lack) which men have which mom lacks is a lack we lack.

We can first notice, that a sexuality which saw presences which were not actually those absences which were the absences of absences could not be a sexuality which saw genders — at least not those two old genders: female and male. Those two genders which are so familiar are the genders of those who lack a lack, or who lack this lack of a lack. ~~Not that such a sexuality of presences might not be an awfully good thing, but it certainly could not be a “lesbian” sexuality if our definition of a lesbian (“A woman who loves women”) can still be accepted.~~ It may be that the viewer of “lesbian” images thinks he has that lack of a lack (the Phallus) which the “women” in the image lack — and indeed there surely are such viewer who have penises, but also there are such viewers who have vaginas. Both “men” and “women” may stand in this “masculine” relation to “lesbian” images, since what made sexuality possible for either was an original positing of a lack of a lack of what mom lacks. Just because “women” are later told that they lack this lack of a lack does not mean that they do not also lack mom’s lack — there are just simply other ways of lacking a lack than having a penis. This is still a “masculine” relation to the images, however. A more subversive relation would be one where a viewer takes a “lesbian” image to show the basic fraud to the idea that what a “woman’s” lack lacks is that “masculine” lack of a lack: the Phallus which is the penis. Instead, a subversive “woman” simply lacks as she likes, lacks what she wishes to lack. There are

as many lesbians in the film as there are subversives who show the fraud of the Phallus.

THE ALISON BROWN PROVOCATION. Gender is transvestism. It is a fraud we put on by wearing certain clothes, adopting certain facial expressions, walking certain ways, etc. Let us make a distinction within transvestism, however, between “simple transvestism” and “transsexuality.” Let us say that “simple” transvestites put on a fraud which is formally deceptive; while transsexuals put on a fraud which is formally “truthful.” In any case there is no possible representational or causal connection between form of appearance and the “truth” of gender. Every form of appearance (whether voluntary, such as makeup and dress; semi-voluntary, such as physical build; or involuntary, such as genitalia) makes a specious, and completely fraudulent claim to “represent” gender. But some of us believe that the claim made by our outward appearance is “true,” though this truth is in no way indicated or represented, nor is the true “truth’s” claim made, by outward appearance; and some of us believe the claim is false. While some of us gain our greatest pleasure in that most delicate joy, deception, others of us gain our pleasure from that most rarified form of deception called “truthfulness.”

What is a lesbian? A lesbian is someone with any of many different sexual choices and gender identities — the exact combinatorics of these possibilities will have to be reconstructed from my rather brief preceding remarks. How many lesbians are there in the film under discussion? We may say there are more than five, and perhaps many more. At least the five candidates are lesbians, though most may be several. The audience, certainly, according to this provocation, contains not one, but many kinds of lesbians. But within the frame several different lesbians are often seen within the same character. For example, Anäis, when she first imagines herself having sex with June, is a “woman” who loves a woman who fraudulently wears a female body in order to “represent” a male gender. The rarified deception of the imagined June is her male gender — she has a penis. However, in order to represent this “truth,” June must wear a female body. However, later — after Anäis has seen through the particular fraud which was involved in the “exhibition” she watched — Anäis is a “woman” who loves a woman who wears a female body either in order to “represent” or in order not to “represent” a *female* gender. Further, we have not said with what purpose Anäis wears her own female body,

or whether this purpose changes within the film. ~~Our point is simply that the film under discussion represents many different lesbians in many different ways.~~

The Conclusions.

This paper has at least three conclusions. For example, we can conclude that there are no lesbians in *Henry and June*; that only those characters, unlike Anäis, who are gazed at but do not themselves gaze are truly lesbians; or that only Anäis, who constructs her own desire, is a lesbian. Each of these three contradictory conclusions are equally convincing to me at a “theoretical” level — though I think I have some fairly specific commitments politically as to which conclusion I desire to reach. I also believe that each of these three conclusions follow equally well, not only from the preceding discussion taken as a whole, but from each individual theory discussed. The overall moral to be drawn, I think, is that *desire*, or *politics*, always intervenes, not only in the choice of theoretical description of sexuality, but also in the insertion^{of}/chosen theoretical means back into the practice it informs. Let me try to sketch, briefly, the epistemic “inevitableness” of every one of the three contradictory conclusions I have mentioned.

First Conclusion

As we have shown, there really are no lesbians in the film *Henry and June*, despite the film-makers’ best attempts to put them into the film. The film-makers’ consciousness of the dilemma of the essential androcentrism of pornography is not in itself sufficient to overcome such an essential bias in film representation. As we have mentioned, the brothel scene where an “exhibition” is put on is an obvious effort to overcome the androcentrism mentioned. By having Anäis recognize the androcentrism of the exhibition — in which women are presented as possibly sexual only in relation to men, even if the men may be only vicariously present — the film-makers attempted to overcome this androcentrism. However, the level at which the film-makers (and perhaps Anäis Nin herself, in her book of the same title as the film) make this critique is far too superficial. They suppose that it is simply the particular sexual acts and positions involved in androcentric pornography which makes it androcentric. At a certain naive level this criticism is correct — women portrayed in pornography are typically placed in

“heterosexual” positions — but it supposes that androcentrism is confined to certain arrangements of limbs, and does not extend to the basic psychic composition of sexualized and gendered beings. Of course, after Anäis tells the prostitute to, “stop acting like a man,” the latter changes sexual acts — and engages in one that is, perhaps, statistically more frequent among lesbian than heterosexual lovers. But the prostitutes’ “lesbian” sexual act is still an act which is observed, and which is performed to be observed. This act — existing to be observed — still contains implicit within it an essential lack of the symbolic Phallus. ~~Since these women depend on an observer who socially represents the Lacanian “law of the father,” they are not, and cannot be, represented as whole sexual beings, but only as beings lacking something they can not supply themselves.~~ Physiologically Anäis may also not have a penis (^{as} and some of the audience does not), but as an observer she claims to be able to fulfill a sexuality which women by themselves cannot fulfill. Indeed, insofar as women are ever “exhibited” it is always in the context of this of this same implicit androcentric claim, and is not as lesbians.

Second Conclusion

Our critique of the male gaze allows us to separate out those women in the film who are lesbians from those who, though engaging in sexual acts with women, engage in acts from a fundamentally masculine perspective. In particular, Anäis and the audience both stand on the side of the essentially male viewer, whatever their physiological “sex.” The other characters, June, the two prostitutes — ~~and June’s NYC lover, by the same token~~ — although being drawn into a system of male (hetero)sexuality when they become objectified by representation, are in themselves, and in their sexual relations to each other, lesbians. ~~As Lacan has observed, the origin of signification comes with the mythological “transcendental signifier,” the Phallus.~~ Anyone claiming the power to understand signification is, at heart, assuming a male power. ~~A relation to an image can only be mistaken for a relation to a thing (if indirect) if one assumes the “truth” of the Phallus; that is, if one assumes one has the Phallus, and hence the power of signification.~~ Although persons of both biological “sexes” sometimes claim this mastery, it is only in the structural role of the male gender that they make this claim. *JH*

↪ It is exactly this claim mentioned above which differentiates Anäis and the women

in the audience from the other women in the film. Anäis {and the audience} claims such mastery, the rest do not. Anäis has sexual fantasies which are shown to us in terms of full visual and audial images, where the rest of the women characters act out their sexual passions solely through sexual actions (~~including, for example, facial expressions~~). A representation of sex, however, makes a claim to mastery of signification which a mere (non-representational) action does not. Every women other than Anäis (and the audience who think they are in a position to understand) makes no such claim, in any form, to be able to *re-present* sexual acts — they merely engage in them without representation. Only these other women are truly “lesbian.”

Third Conclusion

Anäis is the character in the film *Henry and June* who most clearly indicates the possibility of a truly lesbian sexuality. ~~While we cannot claim *tout court* that all the other candidates mentioned are still constrained within a heterosexist sexual norm, neither can we show that any of them have completely escaped it.~~ In brief, the “masculine” relation to sexuality which Anäis escapes is, ~~as we have discussed,~~ one which constructs the lack within feminine desire as a lack of that particular lack which is represented by the penis. Desire, insofar as it is constructed in a female subject must have followed this particular phallic etiology. Most women, probably, do not ever develop a desire which goes beyond a desire in relation to the Phallus — except in the most trivial way of psychically following a linear series of displacements from the Phallus to objects which serve in every way as the substitute for the Phallus. Even women who have sex with other women do not necessarily do so in a manner which takes their partner for anything but another representation of the phallic principle. A true “lesbian” sexuality, however, would be one which completely severed the linear series of displacements from the Phallus, and inserted a completely new object of desire with no connection to the series of phallic substitutes. ~~To write language which has been written in this paper previously: A~~ “lesbian” sexuality would involve a transvaluation of values rather than a mere re-evaluation of particular objects.

Anäis carries out just the kind of transvaluation necessary to create a “lesbian” sexuality in the course of her character’s development within the film — indeed, this very

exodus is the main story told in the film. While the film does not preclude the possibility that other characters have carried out such a transvaluation, neither does it actually show them carry it out. At first, Anäis is clearly governed by “the phallic law” — she does, after all, only imagine sex possible with June if June is imagined with a penis. However, Anäis’ comment to the prostitutes at their “exhibition” to “stop acting like a man” shows that she has conceived of the possibility of rupturing the series of displacements from the Phallus, and of inserting whatever lack one wishes. When she later has sex with June we are to assume that she has chosen June as the lack she wishes to insert as object of her sexual desire, not because of some unconscious displacement, but freely and voluntarily. The scene in which she has sex with her friend, Eduard, further shows this new sexuality of voluntary choice — though Eduard is a man, she chooses him, not as belonging to the male gender, but as a singular sexual partner. This is precisely what a “lesbian” sexuality is: a sexuality of singularities rather than of gendered types.