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Elizabeth Anne Venell	Date

Queer Projections: Sexuality and Visibility Through the Avant-Garde Lens

By

Elizabeth Anne Venell
Doctor of Philosophy

Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies

Lynne Huffer, Ph.D.
Advisor

Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Ph.D.
Committee Member

Michele Schreiber, Ph.D.
Committee Member

Accepted:

Lisa A. Tedesco, Ph.D.
Dean of the James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies

Date

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Elizabeth Anne Venell
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Abstract

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As a point of connection between multiple conceptions of sexuality and its visible forms, "queer cinema" now constitutes one of the major modes through which sexual minorities access cultural visibility. This dissertation brings cinema and theory together in the representation and analysis of non-normative sexualities, with homosexuality as the definitional center. Rather than prioritizing Hollywood film, as previous studies have, this work produces a story of queer cinema by examining films within, and in relation to, the American avant-garde.

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Introduction: Queer Projections

Like the effect of the minoritizing/universalizing impasse, in short, that of the impasse of gender definition must be seen first of all in the creation of a field of intractable, highly structured discursive incoherence at a crucial node of social organization, in this case the node at which any gender is discriminated. I have no optimism at all about the availability of a standpoint of thought from which either question could be intelligibly, never mind efficaciously, adjudicated, given that the same yoking of contradictions has presided over all the thought on the subject, and all its violent and pregnant modern history, that has gone to form our own thought. Instead, the more promising project would seem to be a study of the incoherent dispensation itself, the indisseverable girdle of incongruities under whose discomfiting span, for most of a century, have unfolded both the most generative and the most murderous plots of our culture.

- Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 1990[1]

"Last week I almost laughed."

- Sadie Benning, 1990[2]

The above paragraph concludes the second chapter of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet*, in which she describes the persistence of two overlapping conceptions of homosexuality and their corresponding, and similarly contradictory, models of gender difference. The "minoritizing/universalizing impasse" characterizes a conceptual standoff between the general categories of definition that Sedgwick deems "separatist" and "integrative"/"transitive," respectively, which apply to definitions of sexuality as well as gender. That is, there are separatist and integrative conceptions of homosexuality, and separatist and integrative "tropes of gender."[3] By mapping that quadruple problematic, Sedgwick captures the totalizing incoherence of the two (times two) reigning conceptions of homosexuality and gender definition that function in

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[1] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 90.
[2] Sadie Benning, *If Every Girl Had a Diary*, in *The Videos of Sadie Benning*, VHS (Chicago: Video Data Bank, 1995).
[3] Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 87.

Western culture. In a text that roots queer theory, Sedgwick argues that although the coexistence of multiple definitions threatens to bring competing theories of gender and sexuality to a stalemate, the contradictory operations of the minoritizing and universalizing models have not stifled their overall administration of "the most generative and the most murderous plots of our culture."[4] Rather than argue the veracity of one conception over the other and force the competition between theories, she suggests, our attention would be better apportioned to projects that examine the incongruities and the cultural formations that emerge from under its "girdle."

In the fields of visual culture and representation studies, that the dueling conceptions of sexuality correspond with dueling conceptions of gender means that there is no single, visible model of homosexuality to locate and trace. Separatist and integrative models have the potential to produce very different representations of homosexuality. The former category, separatist, entails a conception of homosexuality as a historically persistent minority identification, one that develops its own group interests. Within the separatist model, the minoritizing conception of sexuality imagines that homosexuality is an inherent and relatively stable aspect of oneself, an identity that fixes one's erotic focus on one's own gender. Assuming the normative correspondence from sex to gender to sexuality, theories of gender separatism emerge from this model because there is no desire, literally, to cross the gender or sexual binary into the opposing category.

The universalizing conception of homosexuality imagines a greater fluidity in and across sexual and gender categories, and couples with an understanding of a spectrum of sexual and gendered behavior, desire, and visible expression. The universalizing

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[4] Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 90.

explanation tends to correspond with the integrative definition of gender, which Sedgwick describes as extending from a model of gender liminality to the more structured "trope of inversion."[5] This model allows that there are sexed subjects (bodies, essentially), capable of manifesting the non-normative gender qualities, so although they desire the same-sex body, their desire manifests across gender difference (e.g., a masculine woman in love with another woman is like a straight man trapped in a woman's body).

Adding to the complexity of this cultural problematic is the fact that as we enact and populate the categories, they cross and bleed into one another, so practically any formation within the multiple, dueling conceptions can be made intelligible. That these two models of homosexuality exist simultaneously, and that contradictory models of gender, invoking such opposing poles as gender coalition and gender separatism, also exist simultaneously, is the grid of incoherence upon which queer theoretical investigations build. But beside theoretical analyses, it is also the grid of incoherence within which the modern sexual subjects of Western culture come into being—to live, relate, vote, shop, protest, make art, and go to the movies—ostensibly as coherent subjects.

In Sadie Benning's *If Every Girl Had A Diary* (1990), a short, avant-garde video that the artist made in her teenage bedroom, she addresses the camera in a series of deadpan non-sequiturs. Her lines are unanchored by a clear context, but cohere within the tone of a mock video diary: "Last week I almost laughed" complements "I guess it's not surprising, then, that I find myself here, talking to you." Benning, the daughter of

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[5] Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 87-89.

experimental filmmaker James Benning, captures the shrugging, droll commentary characteristic of Generation X. Having grown up in the Reagan era, Benning comes of age at the height of the AIDS epidemic in America. Young and already alienated by popular culture, Benning records budding self-realizations mixed in with critiques of hate crime. In her videos from the 1990s, her perspective oscillates from the fearful perspective of a child to the defiance of teenager, one as keenly aware of her sexuality as she is of the middle-American, white, heterosexual norms imposed upon her. Critics often describe Benning's video work as precocious, and although she does not offer up advanced theoretical analyses of contradictory conceptions of homosexuality, she does seem prematurely aware that the adult world she is entering rests on a grid of hopelessly irreconcilable contradictions. Adulthood does not hold answers, but presents an "indisseverable girdle of incongruities," which are nonetheless endlessly debated at the level of national culture and politics. That such uncanny wisdom issues from the mouth of a teenage lesbian, caught on tape with a camcorder designed for children's use, makes a queer sort of sense in the midst of the conjoined, double impasse that characterizes modern conceptions of homosexuality and its connection to gender.

I use the quotations from Sedgwick and Benning together not only because their commentary on modern sexuality in American culture makes for a humorous juxtaposition in tone and length, but also because their work spurs the theoretical and aesthetic investments of this dissertation project, in which I see their concerns as coextensive. The deep intellectual investigation and dense precision of language from the academic and theoretical perspective, and similarly incisive utterances from the visual realm of avant-garde film and video emerge in parallel, and at the very same time. As a

foundational queer theorist, Sedgwick is central to developing and enriching the line of queer theory I pursue here. As a queer video artist whose early work is a groundbreaking counterpart to queer and feminist cultural activism, immediately adaptable and persistently unincorporated into popular culture, Benning occupies the intersection between avant-garde cinema and queer representation that forms the corpus of this project. But the two quotations also implicate closely linked perspectives, both grim diagnoses of the total incoherence of a system nonetheless animating murderous cultural plots. Sedgwick reveals the stark incoherence at the center of two of the most pressing identity classifications of the modern subject, sexuality and gender; Benning brings together sarcasm and suffering in a single, pointed statement that elicits sympathy while simultaneously refusing it: "I almost laughed."

Throughout this dissertation, I bring cinema and theory together around the representation and analysis of non-normative sexualities, with homosexuality as the definitional center. I do so by examining films within, and intersecting with, the American avant-garde. I follow work in feminist and queer theory, and address my critique most specifically to the field of queer film studies. This project is about sexuality, but it is also about gender; it is about avant-garde cinema history, but it is also about mainstream film in the present; it leads up to an analysis of lesbian-feminist film and video, and it originates from the analytical framework of feminist queer theory. Throughout, my attention is on the generative and murderous plots—although most of the films I analyze eschew the narrative logic of plotlines—as well as on the incoherence that structures their production and reception.

Queer Cinema Now

Cinema and theory are two major channels for investigating the question, "What is queer cinema," the broad inquiry that motivates this project.[6] Although I am not intent on positing a single answer or a set of aesthetic principles, I do address why there are two distinct versions of "queer cinema" now: one popular, exemplified by successful, studio-backed films such as *Brokeback Mountain* (Ang Lee, 2005), and another that has ties with the art world, and seems perpetually marginal within film culture, despite claiming some of the most prolific and best known avant-garde filmmakers of the twentieth century. The origin of the terminology "queer cinema" is similarly bifurcated. It derives from a wave of independent films dubbed the "New Queer Cinema" in the early 1990s, a distinction with wide-reaching effects that I examine further in next section.

In exploring the concept of queer cinema through films as well as theory, I argue that there are two stories to tell, not simply narrative film versus experimental, or industry film versus independent, as the binaries have manifest in the past. These stories detail two

[6] A note on terms: "queer" remains, endearingly, a slippery term, but I try to keep my use of queer versus LGBTQ stable and meaningful in this project. In general, I use "LGBTQ" to designate a conception of sexuality as an identity and to refer to subjects who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and/or queer. When "queer" operates as an identification, it works as either an umbrella term for the spectrum of sexual identifications, or for individuals, where it functions intelligibly as a sexual identification in its own right—albeit one that communicates a refusal to identify as singularly lesbian, gay, bisexual, or trans, and positions itself instead against the prevailing conventions of heteronormative culture. I use queer, in the context of film, history, and images, and as a verb, to denote images, sequences, and films that challenge, corrupt, resist, or refuse incorporation into a paradigm of visibility in which seeing is knowing. Thus, I reserve "queer" for the things that are both demographically queer as well as weird, strange, peculiar, in short: non- or anti-normative.

different approaches to representation, which continue to divide advocates of LGBTQ[7] visibility in film across politics, ideals, and sensibilities. Although these two different approaches look like disagreements over what constitutes representation, or which representations count toward visibility, they are primarily different approaches to the function of representation: what it is *for*, and what it can or should *do*.

The first approach to representation is based on a hegemonic model of visibility that I associate with mainstream, commercial film, and the conventions of classical Hollywood cinema. The mainstream, Hollywood line of queer cinema is more than a body of films, then; it designates a particular approach to representation and its relationship with cultural visibility. Within this understanding of queer cinema, recent films such as *Milk* (Gus Van Sant, 2008) and *The Kids Are All Right* (Lisa Cholodenko, 2010) advance cultural awareness of homosexuality. This model of queer cinema follows a narrative of historical progress that aligns with gay liberation, as I detail in the first chapter. Within this narrative, gay visibility is a major aspect of gay liberation, and representation in film, for example, is a corrective to a long history of homosexual repression. The separatist conception of homosexuality guides analyses of representation, wherein practitioners of this approach assume homosexuality to be present and legible, though perhaps taking distorted forms, throughout the history of visual culture. The progress narrative of gay visibility corresponds with the mainstream model of queer cinema, a model that emphasizes the increasing number and depth of LGBTQ characters

[7] The acronym, *LGBTQ*, signifies a spectrum of sexual identification, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer. Although the acronym is more explicitly inclusive than the term "gay," the latter is also used as an umbrella term, especially designating issues that stem from the late twentieth century homosexual liberation movement, for example, "gay visibility."

and themes. As a crucial aspect of gay liberation, advocates strongly associate the Hollywood, or mainstream, approach with both positive imagery and realism in homosexual representation.

The second approach to representation, which I consider the avant-garde approach, concerns itself with the processes through which filmmakers achieve visibility and make representation meaningful. Purveyors of this approach are avant-garde defenders, mostly filmmakers themselves, who are as concerned with the process of constructing a representation as with the representation itself. The avant-garde does not, by definition, reflect mainstream art, politics, or cultural forms; it follows that visibility issuing from the avant-garde does not equate with mainstream visibility. The avant-garde also calls attention to the constructedness of sexuality by foregrounding the apparatus of its production of visibility. The films of queer cinema that advance this approach to sexual representation—for example, the early works of Barbara Hammer—strike a relationship with the mainstream approach to visibility (and, thus, mainstream visibility itself) that is oblique at best.[8] Advocates of this approach to representation produce analyses that align better with the integrative, or universalizing conceptions of homosexuality. They are unlikely to argue, for example, that the presence of homosexuality in film history always takes stable and legible forms in fixed relation with gender and its larger context.

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[8] Before Barbara Hammer produced a series of films in the 1990s that directly and explicitly engage queer activism, she made many abstract, lesbian-themed films in the 1970s and 1980s. Her early films thematize lesbianism and precede the wave of New Queer Cinema films from the 1990s, but largely remain not only unrecognized, but *unrecognizable* as a critically queer challenge to the paradigm of mainstream visibility.

Where avant-garde cinema does intersect with the mainstream model of visibility, it is because particular films cross into mainstream cultural awareness. That crossover is usually the effect of legal or political controversy, not widespread popularity. In those cases—such as the fate of Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures* (1963), subject to a Supreme Court ruling on obscenity and still banned in the state of New York—the films are less known for their avant-garde elements than for aspects of sexual representation that supporters and opponents fragment from the whole text: nudity, cross-dressing, implicit homosexual acts, sacrilegious iconography; the mainstream model of gay visibility turns avant-garde films into itemized lists of the taboos and transgressions featured within.

However, clusters of films within American, non-commercial cinema from the past century engage questions of sexual identity, and produce representations of sexual and gender minorities from outside the progress narrative of gay, or more inclusively, LGBTQ visibility. The incorporation of those non-commercial films into the progress narrative not only frames them within binary models, such as repressed or liberated, regressive or progressive, invisible or visible. It also puts them to work as evidence of a mainstream model of queer cinema, a deployment that obscures major differences from Hollywood cinema in their artistic and political engagements, as well as in their overall conditions of production. In order to contest the total incorporation of avant-garde films into the mainstream narrative, I relocate avant-garde trends into the definitional center of queer cinema, generating a distinct corpus of queer cinema from within the avant-garde's alternative paradigm of representation.

By juxtaposing mainstream, commercial film with the avant-garde, I risk reinscribing an opposition that not only has exceptions, but also ignores the interplay

between the two film worlds. However, the study of representations of homosexuality in American film history instantiates the binary between industrial and avant-garde film better than any other axis of representation. From the 1930s through 1960s, the industry's Production Code, a system of internal content regulation, shaped Hollywood representations of sexuality in accordance with broad, conservative mores. The existence of requirements that apply exclusively to the industry underwrites the binary logic of Hollywood and avant-garde histories. Yet the Code affects both film worlds, shaping the corresponding models of representation through which mainstream and avant-garde films image homosexuality. Although Code regulations only monitored the film industry's representations of sexuality, the historical presence of the Code pervades visual culture and American culture at large, informing, challenging, and undermining the varied conceptions of homosexuality within which avant-garde representations also come into view. Thus, the binary between Hollywood and avant-garde histories of homosexual representation, hinging on the influence of the Production Code, indicates a blurring of the very boundaries it sets up.

Further, the history of the Production Code in relation to homosexuality influences the manner in which we conduct research on representations, always seeking out the ways in which they are a product of compromise between demographic accuracy, authorial intent, and a prohibitive regulating force, be it industrial, economic, or legal. The Production Code is integral to the mainstream model of visibility, but part of my goal of rethinking queer cinema from the avant-garde approach is to show how queer film studies misapplies the logic of mainstream visibility—a logic stemming from the prohibitionary operations of the Production Code—onto the history of avant-garde film.

While scholars rarely mistake the reach of the Production Code into the avant-garde (on the contrary, they sometimes consider the avant-garde to be comparatively unregulated in its sexual representations), I argue that our prevailing ways of interpreting representations of homosexuality draw too much on the model of mainstream visibility that derives from the effects of the Code. Additionally, mainstream modes of interpretation only reflect a partial understanding of the effects of the Code. In short, the bifurcated history of representations of homosexuality between industrial and avant-garde film splits the present day conception of queer cinema into rather incompatible fields of film production.

Perhaps I should say *splinters* the present day conception of queer cinema, as it has become quite broad. The mainstream, popular definition of the term makes queer cinema practically synonymous with designations such as LGBTQ or gay and lesbian film. In that sense, queer cinema broadly references any film that addresses lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, or queer-identified characters and themes. There is also work within queer film studies, in the tradition of Alexander Doty's *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture*, that argues for the viewer's ultimate ability to "queer" their reading of popular texts. Doty's intervention unmoors queer cinema from a specific or stable referent on screen, and puts thematizing LGBTQ subject matter into the domain of reception. Thus, even in areas of queer film scholarship, queer cinema is a broad category that can mean practically anything the viewer desires. The explosion of queer cinema into cultural awareness is impressive, but in its mainstream conception, hegemonic films—narrative, studio-made, and in widespread distribution—will always occupy the definitional center. When independent, avant-garde, and mainstream films come together

in the same classification, popularity and mainstream access are not evenly distributed. Recent films with better funding and distribution channels contribute disproportionately to popular conceptions of queer cinema as a genre, and historical, avant-garde contributions function as examples of queer cinema's distant, obscure past, nullified by their incorporation into a progress narrative that crystallizes them in history.

Nullifying the radical potential of past avant-garde films is one major effect of queer cinema's expansion, but there are others. In the realm of visual culture, sexuality often invokes representations of non-normative gender, such that gender non-normativity often signifies queer figures, and vice-versa. Gender and sexuality, already bound together in the body, are often bound up in storylines involving desire, erotic confusion, and deception. This is as true of the classic cross-dressing farces, from *Sylvia Scarlett* (George Cukor, 1935) to *Some Like It Hot* (Billy Wilder, 1959), as it is true of more recent films with transgender characters, such as *Boys Don't Cry* (Kimberly Peirce, 1999). Yet critics and scholars classify most films about gender transgression under the sign of queer cinema, no matter that sexual relationships in the films often resolve in normative terms. When erotic ambiguity becomes visible through gender representation, the study of sexual representation subordinates gender transgression as an identification in its own right. Taking gender transgression as a symptom of sexual non-normativity reduces its critical potential and denies it disruptive power through its own terms.

The expansive classifications of queer cinema now formalize this nullification of gender transgression. For example, *The Bent Lens: A World Guide to Gay and Lesbian*

Film,[9] presents an annotated index of more than 1,700 movies. The editors define their criteria for selection as "films that offer direct representations of gay men and lesbians as well as films that explore cross-dressing, sexual confusion, and transgender issues."[10] The irony of the assumption of gender presentation into what is variously named LGBTQ, gay and lesbian, or queer cinema is that the very means through which sexuality is so often made visible—gender performance, still rarely articulated in terms of transgenderism—then becomes the *in*visible, or unnamed element in the terminology and classification of such films.

Lastly, the expansive use of queer cinema to indicate the full range of LGBTQ content reflects a wider market for LGBTQ-themed films, but not a significantly wider range of representation. Thus, we have a paradoxically broad term and narrow range of representation. And what the mainstream, hegemonic conception of queer cinema misses is the political rejection of normativity for which American activists and theorists commandeered the term "queer" in the 1980s. Queer, as a reclaimed epithet distinct from gay and lesbian, represents a theoretical and practical position against heteronormativity; an anti-assimilationist perspective that resignifies the stigma and outsider status of sexual minorities, and resists submission to identitarian sexual classifications. The terminology of "queer cinema" derives from this era of confrontational, anti-assimilationist activism, but has since taken on a less specific and less culturally rooted connotation through its fusion with gay and lesbian in the realm of film.

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[9] Claire Jackson and Peter Tapp, eds., *The Bent Lens: A World Guide to Gay and Lesbian Film* (Victoria, Australia: Australian Catalogue Company, 1997).
[10] Jackson and Tapp, *The Bent Lens*, 4.

The construction of film history is integral to understanding how two divergent approaches to representation have come to be yoked under the same terminology. It was through the New Queer Cinema, that wave of independent films from the 1980s and 1990s, that anti-heteronormative, activist perspectives were brought into mainstream distribution. Conceptually, it is also through the New Queer Cinema that the two approaches to representation, Hollywood and avant-garde, are brought together, forming a cultural node where politics, sexuality, film, and activism conjoin in an incoherent and unsustainable trend. And although the name "queer cinema" derives from that specific trend in recent film history, we cannot answer the question "what is 'queer cinema?'" simply by tracing its terminology.

Further, I argue that the few volumes devoted to addressing the question work together to produce a coherent narrative of historical progress. They do so in the implicit service of present day films and politics, which are not only skewed toward commercial, hegemonic, and mainstream representations, but actively annex avant-garde works into a history of progressive visibility. In the process, narratives of queer cinema's history also distort the significance of gender performance, and soften the edge of defiance that "queer" is resignified to connote.

New Queer Cinema

The New Queer Cinema continues to impact perceptions of what constitutes queer cinema today, and its history of crossing from the realm of independent film into mainstream awareness fuels the notion that queer cinema has emerged from the cultural margins once and for all. I take the New Queer Cinema, a specific historical trend, as a

starting point for the exploration of queer cinema in general, and as the introduction for the argument that follows in this dissertation. The two competing approaches to representations of sexuality that I detail above—distinguished as the Hollywood and avant-garde approaches—intersect most explosively in the films, filmmakers, and themes we designate as New Queer Cinema.

By definition, the New Queer Cinema is composed of independent films with strong queer themes, which met critical acclaim and popular success in the late 1980s through 1990s. Feminist film theorist B. Ruby Rich coined the term "New Queer Cinema" in a 1992 *Sight and Sound* article. Her original denotation explicitly connects queer activism with the brash films and videos by relatively new filmmakers, including Gregg Araki, Sadie Benning, Todd Haynes, and Jennie Livingston, to name a few.[11] Rich focuses on films that garnered acclaim at the Sundance Film Festival in 1991 and 1992. Her analysis of queer-themed works from lesser-known film festivals radiates out from there, offering not only the first, but one of the most diverse definitions of New Queer Cinema.

Unlike other irreverent, independent films entering the mainstream through the film festival circuit in the late twentieth century, the New Queer Cinema takes the positive existence of homosexuality for granted. That supposition enables the exploration of multifaceted representations of sexuality without subordinating complexity to an overarching appeal for mainstream acceptance. Instead, New Queer Cinema films displace heteronormative culture and its preexisting modes of thematizing homosexuality

[11] Surprisingly few of the essays published about the New Queer Cinema refer to Rich's other suggested names for the exciting milieu of films, despite their appeal: "Homo Pomo" was one, and the "Queer New Wave" was another; it is from the latter that I derive "Lesbian New Wave" in my fourth chapter.

within pathology, narrative conflict, or mainstream sexual liberation. The New Queer Cinema portrays homosexuality as a stylish and vital source of pleasure and politics, and presents stories of queer communities, cultures, and activism that mock aspirations of assimilation. New Queer Cinema filmmakers combine vibrant storylines with experimental flourishes to represent sexual content, relationships, homophobia, mortality, and history. In so doing, they collectively eschew prior gay liberationist methods of advancing positive homosexual imagery, in favor of more difficult representations. The New Queer Cinema posits richly complex antiheroes, and indelibly makes strange the traditional ways in which homosexuality has been represented on screen.

The confrontational ethos of the New Queer Cinema defines it, since it is not a genre, and it blends multiple modes of filmmaking. There is not a standardized list of the films that comprise it, although partial lists abound. In effect, the wave's ambiguous membership reflects original contradictions in its invention, namely the volatile convergence of two different approaches to representation, and two different modes of filmmaking. Rich's original definition unites the films through their approach to content. She also argues that the range of films shares a very contemporary theoretical identification with postmodernism:

> Call it 'Homo Pomo': there are traces in all of them of appropriation and pastiche, irony, as well as a reworking of history with social constructionism very much in mind. Definitely breaking with older humanist approaches and the films and tapes that accompanied identity politics, these works are irreverent, energetic, alternately minimalist and excessive. Above all, they're full of pleasure.[12]

[12] B. Ruby Rich, "New Queer Cinema" (1992), in *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader*, ed. Michele Aaron (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 16.

Not so much a commentary on the forms that unite them, Rich's definition highlights the devices of representation that unite the films, bringing together the New Queer Cinema through their theoretical approach to sexuality and representation. She emphasizes their distinction from the identitarian representations from past gay liberation projects. Overall, she forges their commonality as a matter of style rather than technique. That manner of definition keeps the group membership somewhat open to interpretation.

The works that remain best known from that period are generally the feature-length, primarily narrative ones. They are not the most experimental films, but they are the most notorious. Two of the most famous New Queer Cinema films, *Poison* (Todd Haynes, 1991) and *Swoon* (Tom Kalin, 1992), are known for their rejection of positive imagery, the traditional perspective espoused by gay liberationists to correct past representations. For example, *Poison* follows three distinct narratives of very different film styles: one, a documentary about a missing boy, wanted for killing his father; another, inspired by science fiction films, about the spread of a sexual contagion; the third, based on the writings of Jean Genet, about a prisoner's aggressive pursuit of another inmate, driven by his romantic memories of the man. *Swoon*, in contrast, follows a single narrative. It is a re-telling of the history of Leopold and Loeb, lovers found guilty of murdering a boy, that foregrounds the relationship between them and the role it plays in their trial. Rather than frame their stories in normative terms, *Poison* and *Swoon* both take a critical stance on the heteronormative culture that aligns homosexuality with criminality.

In contrast, one of the best-known lesbian-themed independent films of the 1990s, *Go Fish* (Rose Troche, 1994), probes representations of sexuality by cultivating a

spectrum of sexual identification rather than developing spectacular anti-heroines. However, in its re-imagination of the present from within a lesbian community, *Go Fish* is no less critical of the heteronormative institutions that shape and exclude its characters' experiences of sexuality. Rather than render female homosexuality as criminality, however, *Go Fish* establishes the cultural presence of lesbianism while resisting its codification into a one-dimensional identification, one single "type" of lesbian. Overall, these films exemplify the New Queer Cinema's deployment of distinctly artistic perspectives that enrich the exploration of their subject matter. They blend narrative with experimental elements and non-narrative vignettes. They subordinate neither aesthetics nor politics in order to visualize queer sexualities from within queer subcultures. Above all, they refuse to cultivate exclusively positive representations of homosexuality.

In spite of what are, in many cases, its significantly challenging experimental films and videos, the New Queer Cinema is a relatively wide-reaching component of queer cultural activism in the 1990s. The political relevance and narrative coherence of many of its films help to break the New Queer Cinema out of the potential marginality of high art affiliations, unleashing the films into the very culture they critique. Rich acknowledges the filmmakers' aesthetic savvy in terms of their proximity to the avant-garde, but, she argues, "This time, it's art for *our* sake."[13] Film scholar Michele Aaron concurs, noting the sense of promise encapsulated by the shift away from positive imagery in the critically acclaimed works. In her introduction to *The New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader*, she writes, "No longer burdened by the approval-seeking sackcloth of positive imagery, or the relative obscurity of marginal production, films could be both

[13] Rich, "New Queer Cinema," 17. Emphasis added.

radical and popular, stylish and economically viable."[14] The prevalence of narrative forms contributes to the films' intelligibility within the mainstream paradigm, yet their formal experimentation offers a level of stylishness within narrative that strikes a uniquely marketable balance between conventional and unconventional forms, and between independent and industrial film cultures. Thus, the New Queer Cinema is a radical cultural innovation because it is edgy without being alienating; it has mainstream appeal without appealing for mainstream acceptance.

However, as I mention above, the partial lists that define the New Queer Cinema in scholarly and popular work produces a strange ambiguity. In contemporary studies of homosexuality in film, attempts at a roll call of New Queer Cinema films and filmmakers are frequently open-ended, enabling authors to project the influence of New Queer Cinema forward and backward in time, based on their interpretation and the argument at hand. As a result, a core canon forms through queer film scholarship, but it always gestures toward its own exclusions. For example, in the introduction to her edited volume, *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader*, Michele Aaron presents a body of work with permeable boundaries, a preface for the wide range of films to be covered in her edited volume:

> The wave, or movement, consisted of the surprise hits of Sundance 1991 and 1992 – *Paris Is Burning* (Jennie Livingston, 1990), *Poison* (Todd Haynes, 1991), and *Swoon* (Tom Kalin, 1992) – and many other films. The larger crop is generally noted to include *Tongues Untied* (Marlon Riggs, 1990), *My Own Private Idaho* (Gus Van Sant, 1991), *Young Soul Rebels* (Isaac Julien, 1991), *R.S.V.P.* (Laurie Lynd, 1991), *Edward II* (Derek Jarman, 1991), *Khush* (Pratibha Parmar, 1991), *The Hours and Times* (Christopher Münch, 1991) and *The Living*

[14] Michele Aaron, "New Queer Cinema: An Introduction," in *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader*, ed. Michele Aaron (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 3.

> *End* (Gregg Araki, 1992) as well as work by filmmakers Sadie Benning, Cecilia Doherty, Su Friedrich, John Greyson and Monica Treut.[15]

Even in list form, definitional ambiguity emerges. Aaron begins as if she is going to produce two separate lists, one specific to Sundance and one general, yet both lists begin specifically and end generally. After naming several successes from Sundance, she refers to the "many other films" that earned acclaim at the festival. Then she cites specific films that comprise the "larger crop," including Canadian and European works alongside American films, before that longer list, too, unfolds into an indefinite list of filmmakers instead of particular works. Granted, she seeks to describe the factors that unite the films rather than list all the works that generate the description. But in the essays that follow her introduction, a similar and sometimes contradictory method of description produces uncertainty about the exact constituents of this cinematic wave.

That definitional ambiguity around the New Queer Cinema manifests in the contradictory accounts of what currently constitutes "queer cinema" in general. No longer rooted in a specific body of work or a specific time period, definitions of queer cinema merge the avant-garde and mainstream elements that make New Queer Cinema unique, inheriting its diverse lineage without reflexivity about the volatility of combining two different modes of filmmaking and two different approaches to the function of representation. Aaron notes the ultimate untenability of a union between queer, independent film and the mainstream: "a new and enduring sector of popular radical work failed to materialise. In many ways this is hardly surprising, for how can a marriage between the popular and the radical be sustained when such an association erodes the

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[15] Aaron, "New Queer Cinema: An Introduction," 3.

very meaning of each?"[16] Aaron's close focus on the New Queer Cinema enables her to dismiss the decades of queer-themed work that follows, sometimes in its name (which Aaron characterizes as "fairly innocuous and often unremarkable"[17]). But the boundaries of the New Queer Cinema are too permeable, and its influence on film culture is too wide-reaching to limit an analysis of the wave to its decade of original film production. Queer cinema now operates as a concept in its own right, unbound from its paradoxically "New" past, but retaining a nominal link to it. As I outline in the beginning, queer cinema now signifies across mainstream, independent, and avant-garde film, designating homosexual content liberated into the field of visual representation. Indeed, there is little that queer cinema cannot be made to signify though scholarship, historical revision, or queer reception practices.[18]

The definitional ambiguity that occupies the historical, cultural node of queer cinema stems directly from the grid of incoherence in which contradictory explanations of homosexuality and gender coexist. As a point of connection between multiple conceptions of sexuality and its visible forms, queer cinema now constitutes one of the major modes through which sexual minorities access cultural visibility, and it is a persistent source of dissonance between the mainstream and avant-garde approaches to queer sexual representation. The New Queer Cinema marks the beginning of queer cinema as a concept legible within the mainstream, the first popular discourse on "out" homosexuality in film. Its incorporation into the standard progress narrative of visibility

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[16] Aaron, "New Queer Cinema: An Introduction," 8.
[17] Aaron, "New Queer Cinema: An Introduction," 8.
[18] The foundational account of queer reading practices is the aforementioned Alexander Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

casts the New Queer Cinema as a liberated cinema, and reshapes film history according to that telos. However, the progress narrative does not fully capture the effects of the New Queer Cinema, nor the conditions of its possibility.

I take the New Queer Cinema, and the many incongruities through which we define it, as the proper starting point for a larger inquiry into the meaning and status of queer cinema today. In order to do so, however, I focus on the divergent approaches to homosexual representation in American film history, before and after the advent of New Queer Cinema binds them together.[19] Each of the following chapters relates back to the New Queer Cinema, not simply as a body of films, but as a major cultural node in which divergent discourses crystallize. First, I examine the development of the mainstream paradigm of visibility through Hollywood film history. Then, turning to two avant-garde trends in the mid-twentieth century, I posit an alternative genealogy of queer cinema that contests the standard progress narrative of visibility. Finally, I refocus my analysis of the New Queer Cinema on the lesser-known works from that era, namely lesbian-feminist experimental films that re-imagine film history through an avant-garde lens, but elude incorporation into mainstream, commercial channels of distribution.

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[19] Any investigation of queer film has to contend with the fact that the American film industry, a set of commercial, aesthetic, and historical practices generalized as "Hollywood," will likely serve as the hegemonic center of film history. This is not only because the breakthrough New Queer Cinema films were primarily American works, but also because the specificity of the anti-normative reclamation of "queer" captures a precise movement in the American activist and theoretical landscape. Although it is admittedly an imposition of a national framework on a cinema that has affiliations with and influences from other countries, I limit this project to an exploration of American films. That limit also reflects the particularity of the genealogy I trace, for which I take the advent of the New Queer Cinema as a starting point for a historical as well as a present day inquiry.

Rewriting the Story of Queer Cinema

In the first chapter, "Queer Cinema and the Repressive Hypothesis," I describe the process of the scholarly and activist construction of the mainstream, Hollywood-centered narrative of gay visibility. I reconstruct the standard narrative of progress out of film histories and documentaries, and isolate that narrative's dependence on the repressive force of the Hollywood Production Code. I draw on Foucault's critique of the "repressive hypothesis," from the first volume of the *History of Sexuality*, to highlight the productive aspects of the Production Code, and to argue for an understanding of the relationship between repression and representation that transcends their conception as a bipolar dualism. Finally, I revisit the primary signifying practices through which we understand the Production Code to regulate film content: connotation and denotation. I examine how that dualism informs the contemporary categories of "good" versus "bad" representations of homosexuality, and also how the dualism breaks down in relation to sexual visibility.

As a field, queer film studies has brought queer theory to bear on film culture for decades, but commonly operates within the paradigm of mainstream visibility. Scholars continue to respond to Hollywood representations long after the deterioration of the Production Code changed the conventions through which homosexuality is made visible, and their critical studies demonstrate the persistent influence of damaging stereotypes. However, queer film studies contributes to a conception of representation that takes it as a corrective for past repression. That is, liberation is figured through visibility, and representation corrects repression. In film, that paradigm privileges a realist aesthetic. As a result, queer film studies reinscribes the link between film representation and political representation, but in terms that construct the temporality of a progress narrative. They

reveal past queer images to have been repressed, part of the historical, social repression of homosexuality, and hail the liberation of contemporary images through realistic representations. Following Foucault, I consider this the "repressive hypothesis" of queer cinema, a belief that motivates scholarship and activism in LGBTQ visibility. The major effect of the repressive hypothesis of queer cinema is that the movement to improve representations of homosexuality in film binds creative images to a standard of presentist, demographic accuracy. Further, the repressive hypothesis implies that once a proper intervention exposes bad representations, they are effectively liberated from the repressive closet: present representation redresses past repression.

Inquiries into mainstream film culture are invaluable, and stand to have wide-reaching influence on popular conceptions of homosexual representation. But the problem arises when the same theoretical paradigms are imported into an analysis of the avant-garde, which has historic affiliations with a different conception of visibility, and has not been subject to the same content regulations as Hollywood cinema. The Hollywood model of visibility binds queer images to a bipolar dynamic of repression and liberation. Only by unraveling the avant-garde from the Hollywood approach can we consider the radical commentary produced from within that realm. Yet queer film studies operates within a Hollywood-centric paradigm, often overlooking the avant-garde. In my second and third chapters, "The Psycho-Drama" and "The Queer Underground," I revise the story of queer cinema's past by reviewing history through an alternative lens, that of the American avant-garde.

Subsequent to the New Queer Cinema's ascendance into mainstream awareness, queer film studies has largely mischaracterized the New Queer Cinema's more avant-

garde influences as a form of proto-queer cinema, made before its liberation into the mainstream. On the contrary, I argue that the avant-garde influences on New Queer Cinema reflect an altogether different paradigm of visibility, the avant-garde approach. In the place of a competing historical narrative that would parallel the mainstream story of queer cinema, I forge a queer genealogy through the avant-garde. By putting avant-garde film at the center of the historical inquiry, "what is queer cinema," I construct a new story, focusing in particular on two clusters of film activity around the representations of homosexuality, psycho-dramas and the gay underground. These sub-movements within the post-war American avant-garde can often be found in the marginal historical references to contemporary accounts of queer cinema, but they produce unique conceptions of homosexuality in their own terms. I argue against their incorporation into the progress narrative of LGBTQ visibility. I seek to disrupt the over-application of the Hollywood approach to representation into the avant-garde, but I also aim to introduce a more integrative reading of past homosexual representations into the implicitly minoritizing progress narrative. Therefore, I also interrogate the historiography of LGBTQ representation, examining the very terms and categories through which we construct film history.

In the fourth chapter, "The Lesbian New Wave," I return to the conditions of the New Queer Cinema's success to argue that the marginal incorporation of lesbian-feminist experimental film and video art from the 1990s functions to exclude them *within* the zeitgeist of New Queer Cinema. Not only does that incorporation obscure their aesthetic affiliations with the avant-garde, it also limits their distinct feminist critiques within a discourse of visibility for sexual minorities that often foregrounds gay male sexuality.

The incorporation of the Lesbian New Wave into the constituency of the New Queer Cinema effaces the uneven distribution of publicity, resources, and acclaim to experimental, lesbian and feminist-themed works. A pernicious and ongoing effect of their confinement within the discourse of the New Queer Cinema is that it truncates their contribution to the concept of an "out," or liberated, queer cinema—what issues it explores, what it looks like, and what approach it takes to sexual representation.

As B. Ruby Rich observes at the outset of her 1992 essay, lesbian filmmakers were behind many of the short, political, avant-garde works from the era of the New Queer Cinema. She notes that systemic power differentials were already undermining the promise of marginal cinemas moving into mainstream awareness, effacing work along all too predictable lines of difference and privilege even as the New Queer Cinema continued to rise in popularity:

> When the ghetto goes mainstream, malaise and paranoia set in. It can be ideological, or generational, or genderational. Consider the issues that might disturb the peace. What will happen to the lesbian and gay film-makers who have been making independent films, often in avant-garde traditions, for decades already? Surprise, all the new movies being snatched up by distributors, shown in mainstream festivals, booked into theaters, are by the boys. Surprise, the amazing new lesbian videos that are redefining the whole dyke relationship to popular culture remain hard to find… Amsterdam's Gay and Lesbian Film Festival made these discrepancies plain as day. The festival was staged last November, wedged between Toronto and Sundance. It should have been the most exciting place to be, but wasn't, not at all. And yet, that's where the girls were. Where the videos were. Where the films by people of colour and ex-Iron Curtain denizens were. But the power brokers were missing.[20]

In the construction of the New Queer Cinema relative to the commercial film industry, those who secure distributors, exhibitions, and more material support overall are more competitive within the mainstream paradigm. As a result, their place in hegemonic film

[20] Rich, "New Queer Cinema," 16-17.

history is more secure. As the history of the New Queer Cinema was being made, that competition was playing out behind the curtain of success that celebrated the liberation of queer images. Thus, although Rich cites lesbian filmmakers in her original definition of New Queer Cinema, she presciently critiques their exclusion from the mainstream distribution deals, noting their invisibility to the "power brokers." From the series of fault-lines that Rich cites above, I focus my fourth chapter on the construction of an alternative lesbian cinema that resists and critiques the incorporation of queer images—ironically, occurring through the New Queer Cinema at that time—into mainstream film history. In the films and videos I consider most closely, consisting of works by Sadie Benning, Cheryl Dunye, Su Friedrich, and Barbara Hammer, I also locate another node of activity in my queer genealogy through the avant-garde.

In the conclusion, I briefly consider Lisa Cholodenko's *The Kids Are All Right* (2010), a recent film with lesbian protagonists. Cholodenko is a filmmaker whose independent work from the 1990s is on the periphery of the New Queer Cinema, made after its temporal peak but following a similar model of independent production. In *The Kids Are All Right*, Cholodenko reprises her engagement with lesbian representation in a very different cultural context from her early film, *High Art* (1998). My consideration of the present moment through an independent, yet mainstream, example is integral to understanding the costs of assimilating all representations into the Hollywood, mainstream, progress narrative of LGBTQ visibility. As I show, decades after the New Queer Cinema supposedly ushered in the mainstream liberation of queer images, the depiction of homosexuality in *The Kids Are All Right* remains subtly bound to the Hollywood approach to representation. My ambivalent analysis of *The Kids Are All Right*

concludes the alternative story of queer images I construct throughout the dissertation. It is a story with a strong historical presence, but one that eschews an overarching historical narrative; a story of filmmakers who critique the cultural and industrial structures that marginalize them, not only within American society, but within hegemonic film culture; and a story of ostensibly repressed films and images that challenge dominant conceptions of the relationship between sexuality and visibility in the modern age.

Chapter 1: Queer Cinema and the Repressive Hypothesis

The Hollywood Approach to Queer Cinema

In the Introduction, I argue that the advent of the New Queer Cinema marks the beginning of a mainstream conception of queer film and queer film history, but obscures avant-garde representations of queer sexualities that long pre-date queer activism in the 1990s. Before turning to avant-garde film in the next chapter, I now establish how the trope of "the closet" operates within mainstream film history. I argue that a vigorous critique of the discourse of repression changes the lens through which sexuality is thematized and theorized in film history. As I will show, narratives of gay and lesbian, or more broadly, LGBTQ film take that history to be a record of the effects of repression. Authors, documentarians, and even so-called queer filmmakers thematize homosexual repression through the figure and operations of the closet—as in the idiom, "to come out of the closet." While it is undoubtedly true that state and commercial censorship forces have acted upon film content within and outside of the major motion picture industry, I argue that the effects of the pervasive discourse of repression are both more productive and far more diverse than narratives of queer film history currently allow.

In the realm of film studies and criticism, the closet has long been a figure of the repression of sexuality, and it corresponds to industry prohibitions imposed on mainstream film content for a large portion of the twentieth century. The first major purveyor of the closet metaphor in gay film history is one of the earliest authors of that history, Vito Russo, whose 1981 *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies*,

epitomizes the metaphor of the closet that conceals homosexuality in film history.[21] In Russo's encyclopedic account of gay representations, the closet is the grand figure of repression in American cultural history, and its repressive operations in film are emblematic of a homophobic and sexually repressive culture. Referencing the structuring effects of various censorship codes and conventions of Hollywood cinema, *The Celluloid Closet* follows a standard progress narrative, hopeful about the future of gay representation to combat repression, but training its analytical lens on the unjust and offensive representations from the past. As the dominant model for concealed sexuality, the closet functions here as a threshold for representations of gays and lesbians—either they are "in" or "out" of the closet, and during much of film history, they are "in."

Russo's famous book follows up the work of film critic Parker Tyler, whose 1972 *Screening the Sexes: Homosexuality in the Movies* is the first monograph on gays in film, penned amidst the activism and inspiration of the Stonewall riots in late June, 1969.[22] Tyler subtly frames the first narrative of the relationship between homosexuality and film in terms of visibility, arguing that gay characters and themes become more visible in film as they become more visible in culture. Since the publication of Tyler's original narrative, visibility has served as the yardstick for the progress of LGBTQ film in America. Visibility through screen representation is a prevailing symbol of the cultural triumph of gay liberation, and the quality of representation—essentially, whether it is

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[21] Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies*, rev. ed. (New York: Quality Paperback Book Club, 1995). "Celluloid" is a reference to an old film stock, nitrocellulose, no longer in use.

[22] Parker Tyler, *Screening the Sexes: Homosexuality in the Movies*, 2nd ed. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1993). Charles Boultenhouse, Tyler's partner, explains in his Afterword to the 1993 edition that the Stonewall Riots immediately preceded Tyler's quick and exuberant writing of *Screening the Sexes*. Also noteworthy is the fact that Russo's later text shares the subtitle of Tyler's book: *Homosexuality in the Movies.*

good or bad—is a popular measurement of the progress of homosexual rights. Though Tyler could not predict, in the early 1970s, the massive campaign for LGBTQ rights that would follow in the 1980s and 1990s, in his classifications of gay themes and characters across film history, he establishes a system for evaluating representations based on their depth, quality, and ability to reflect gay subcultures as he knew them. In short, *Screening the Sexes* measures the textures and context of gay representations from the perspective of a long-time film critic just beginning to thematize a topic that was still widely considered to be taboo. Compared to *The Celluloid Closet*, what Tyler's readings lack in the force of gay activism they make up for in their carefulness and attention to tone.

Narrative films and documentaries bolster the link between LGBTQ film and queer—predominantly gay male—visibility. American documentaries from the decade following Stonewall, such as *Word Is Out: Stories of Some of Our Lives* (1977), approach gay representation with an assimilationist and liberationist agenda, taking an educational approach to the subject of homosexuality. Thus, films also forge the connection between visibility and liberation, developing and sustaining the link that gives rise to print studies on homosexuality in film. After all, it was nearly a decade between the publication of *Screening the Sexes* and *The Celluloid Closet*. Throughout the 1970s, films and film criticism shaped the conception of cinema as a tool for creating better representations of homosexuality, and for presenting a case for understanding sexual minorities and promoting equality. The conjoined discourses of LGBTQ-themed films and early film criticism posit a unified formulation in the decade following Stonewall: visibility on screen, in narrative as well as documentary forms, is a vital component of cultural and political representations of homosexuality. In this formulation, it is imperative that

LGBTQ representations, alongside sexual minorities themselves, are identified in the past, enunciated in the present, and endowed with rights to representation that will allow them to flourish in the future. The story of queer film history that we read, again and again, across films and scholarship, now follows a trajectory from repression to liberation. That story conceives of liberation in terms of visibility, in culture as in film, binding the proliferation of queer representations to the liberation of queer lives. That logic forms the standard progress narrative of queer visibility in relation to film history.

Since the 1970s, the quantity of queer representations continues to increase, and scholarship in queer film studies meets the increase in representation with an increase of classification and analysis.[23] In addition to *The Celluloid Closet*, many more works now link visibility in film with social and political liberation. The development of the progress narrative, which I describe above, works on a large scale in the construction of queer film history. In that field, film historians and filmmakers participate in efforts to counteract repression through the production of more and better representations of sexual minorities. Production is the task projected for the future, and the present is usually devoted to the recuperation of queer figures from the past. Other early work that helped establish a history and define the parameters of gay and lesbian representation during the 1980s and 1990s includes Alexander Doty's *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass*

[23] I use the acronym LGBTQ primarily in discussions of the early scholarship on queer film because it was not until after the resignification of the word "queer" in the 1980s, and the timely invention of the phrase "New Queer Cinema," that those historical representations come to be known as "queer." Now, however, the term applies to those films and characters long since annexed for queer cinema's past, which have come to form the kind of queer historical canon detailed in such encyclopedic volumes as *The Bent Lens*. In contemporary parlance, it is just as common to hear "queer" or "gay and lesbian" as an umbrella term that implies a greater spectrum of sexual minorities. Unspoken implication, however, is sometimes the source of controversy and exclusion.

Culture, Richard Dyer's *Now You See It: Studies on Lesbian and Gay Film*, anthologies such as *Gays and Film* and *Out Takes: Essays on Queer Theory and Film*, essays such as D.A. Miller's "Anal *Rope*," biographical studies of Hollywood stars (including Kenneth Anger's *Hollywood Babylon* volumes), and filmographies such as Jenni Olson's *The Ultimate Guide to Lesbian and Gay Film and Video*.[24] As the mainstream movement for LGBTQ liberation now clusters around specific, discrete rights claims for gay men and lesbians (e.g. marriage, military service, domestic partnership benefits), so too does the scholarship on LGBTQ representation adhere to new advances in visibility to liberation. Yet it does so through more specific analyses, often creating typologies of discrete negative representation, in the style of *The Celluloid Closet* or even *Screening the Sexes*. Although Tyler's history is a playful and nuanced account of gay representations, his study takes an essentially taxonomic approach to visual representation. Russo organizes his text more explicitly by typology and chronology. The subsequent forty years of scholarship on LGBTQ representation generally reproduces that approach, categorizing and classifying the dispositions and sexual proclivities of characters across film history.

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[24] Alexander Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Richard Dyer, *Now You See It: Studies on Lesbian and Gay Film* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Richard Dyer, ed., *Gays and Film* (New York: Zoetrope, 1984); Ellis Hanson, ed., *Out Takes: Essays on Queer Theory and Film* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999); D.A. Miller, "Anal *Rope*," in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1991); Kenneth Anger, *Hollywood Babylon* (San Francisco: Strait Arrow Books, 1975); Jenni Olson, *The Ultimate Guide to Lesbian and Gay Film and Video* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1996).

Ironically, *The Celluloid Closet* has not only become the most famous, but also the most notorious of the few early accounts of queer film.[25] It is the first book to take an explicitly enumerative approach to the presence of homosexuality on screen, and, unlike Tyler, Russo seems more concerned with the classification of representations (and the offensive frequency of their repetition) than with a theoretical analysis of their depth or context. In Russo's characterizations of "the celluloid closet," film is the medium through which homosexuality is both repressed and expressed. He explains that representations of homosexuality began as oblique caricatures, the products of compromise between filmmakers and Hollywood film censors. Censors, in Russo's narrative, are the arbiters of the film industry's Production Code, but they form a major and generalized homophobic force within his narrative of gay film history.[26]

For almost a century, the content of Hollywood films has been shaped by industry-developed, internal regulations, designed to avoid the economic impact of censorship trouble once a film is made. Today, the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) grants most domestic releases a content rating, currently a range from G (guidance) to NC-17 (no viewers under 17), which classifies the overall suitability of the film for audiences of different ages. Film ratings have a very practical commercial effect in that they determine who is admitted into a film screening, but also determine where a film will play, since many major theater chains will not exhibit films with an

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[25] Michael Schiavi, "Looking for Vito," *Cinema Journal* 49, no. 1 (Fall 2009). Schiavi's work examines the conflicted contemporary status of *The Celluloid Closet* in the field of queer film studies.

[26] Unfortunately, during Russo's original research and at the publication time of the first edition of *The Celluloid Closet*, the Production Code files were not yet archived. For a brief account of the decision to archive the Production Code files, see Thomas Doherty, *Hollywood's Censor: Joseph I. Breen and the Production Code Administration* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 344-345.

NC-17 rating. But before the MPAA instituted the ratings system in 1968, film content was subject to the intervention and approval of the Production Code Administration (PCA). The Production Code, known variously as the Hays Office (named for its longstanding director, Will Hays), the Hays Code, or simply, the Code, was a system of industry self-regulation that the studios put into operation in 1930 to avoid locally organized censorship efforts against individual films. The invention of the Production Code was the studios' way of regulating their own content, so that local censors would not stifle their profits by boycotting films after their production. The true reign of the Code was from 1935 to 1954, under the leadership of Joseph Breen and coincident with the era of classical Hollywood cinema.[27] Matthew Bernstein summarizes the general operations of the Code in *Controlling Hollywood: Censorship and Regulation in the Studio Era*, explaining that the PCA "intervened in the writing of script drafts and the shooting and editing of finished films from the major Hollywood studios, indicating what might provoke local censorship… and trying to shape films to avoid such consequences."[28] Thus, although it is commonly understood as a censorship body (albeit internal to the industry), the actual manner in which the PCA "intervened" is not restricted to the power to prohibit, ban, or redact, but instead demonstrates its shaping influence as a *productive* code.[29]

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[27] Thomas Doherty, *Hollywood's Censor: Joseph I. Breen and the Production Code Administration*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007.
[28] Matthew Bernstein, ed., introduction to *Controlling Hollywood: Censorship and Regulation in the Studio Era* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999), 2.
[29] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995); Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990). I base my analysis of the productive effects of the Hollywood Production Code on Foucault's theory of power, primarily drawn from arguments he advances in *Discipline and Punish*

The relationship between the PCA and representations of homosexuality is the central problematic in LGBTQ film history. The document purportedly serves as guidelines, rather than specific requirements, for the operations and recommendations of the PCA. The actual document known as the Production Code underwent multiple revisions during its period of influence, and I quote the last major revision here, but as others have noted, the word "homosexual" does not appear at all in the language of the Code. Yet the prohibition against homosexual content is unequivocal. It falls within the category of perversion in the list of Particular Applications: "*Sex perversion* or any inference of it is forbidden."[30] From Russo's account, the Production Code looms in gay film history as the primary agent of repression, one that alternately keeps gay representations in "the celluloid closet" and distorts their expression. By that, I mean that despite the Code's additional prohibition against the inference of sex perversion, filmmakers were known to develop clever means through which to imply homosexuality (and other taboo topics, including pre-marital sex) to worldly viewers, but their distortions of direct communication intentionally fell short of a clarity of expression that would get them into trouble with the PCA. Consequently, the Production Code is not just a list of prohibitions, but guidelines that administer representations. As such, it is a

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and the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*. In modernity, the operations of power are not essentially repressive. Rather, Foucault redefines the conception of power through studies of its positive effects. In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, for example, he demonstrates that prohibition is a form of management that has critical productive effects. The theory of repression, in relation to sex, is a red herring; at best, repression is an aspect of a much larger apparatus of power-knowledge that installs and refines sex, wherein interdictions primarily function to produce increasingly specified knowledge.

[30] Doherty, *Hollywood's Censor*, 353. The version of the Code that I quote is, according to Doherty, "the last major revision… taken from the 1956 edition of Motion Picture Almanac." Reprinted in Doherty, 351-363.

shaping agent in the historical "coding" of homosexuality, wherein coding is a mechanism of repression.

The early monographs relate to the Code differently. *The Celluloid Closet* is practically an encyclopedia of such "coded" representations, although Russo understands them as evidence of Hollywood's long history of homosexual repression. In *Screening the Sexes*, Tyler presents a more fluid understanding of the effects of the Production Code, but his object of study is less restricted to Hollywood film. Tyler, an early critic of American avant-garde cinema, passes his analysis through Hollywood, European, and avant-garde films of interest, rather than seeking to produce exhaustive documentation of recognizable Hollywood types. In a sense, the diversity of his corpus allows him to avoid the trap of reading films exclusively in relation to the Code. In comparison, Russo over-attributes repressive power to the Production Code, asserting a model of the Code that would prove hard to shake for subsequent studies of LGBTQ representation. Russo reads the Code as "the celluloid closet," the industrial agent of a cultural interdiction against homosexual representation. His perspective on the Code as a repressive force reproduces the conceptual link between the closet, repression, and invisibility.

In critiquing the parameters that Russo sets, I do not want to erase one of the major contributions he makes in writing *The Celluloid Closet*. Like Tyler before him, Russo moves away from promoting the revelation of "actual" homosexuals in Hollywood, and pushes the study of LGBTQ film history toward the analysis of representation.[31] By the early 1980s, still so little had been published to document and evaluate the representations of sexual minorities in film, least of all from a pro-gay

[31] It is also a move away from volumes such as Anger's *Hollywood Babylon*, which is more of a tabloid-style exposé of celebrities.

perspective.[32] But rather than purport to seek the truth of homosexuality, for example, by examining the demographic representation of gays and lesbians working in the film industry, Russo pushes gay characters to the forefront of the study of film. He catalogs images and narratives of homosexuality, putting them under examination as evidence of a homophobic industry within a homophobic culture.

Still, Russo was energetically committed to gay activism and the betterment of lived experiences of homosexuality, so he refused to let "actual" visibility drop out of his call for visibility on screen. Thus, *The Celluloid Closet* cannot be divorced from political efforts to better the lives of gays and lesbians. Russo's premise is that representation is a critical part of the lives of sexual minorities. He claims that representations are not only part of the societal treatment of gays and lesbians, but also a reflection of how they are perceived by the heterosexual mainstream. He writes, "The story of the ways in which gayness has been defined in American film is the story of the ways in which we have been defined in America."[33] Russo's connection of filmic representation with the social status of gays and lesbians parlays his demand for less insulting representations into a call for respect and acceptance of homosexuality. In that move, he generates the ethos for an entire field of study.

But there are drawbacks to seeking visibility within a framework of repression, despite the Western cultural logic that invests vision and sight with the authority of irrefutable evidence. Seeking visibility in film images in order to counteract repression

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[32] Around the publication date of *The Celluloid Closet*, other film scholars were also beginning to study homosexuality at the level of representation. This includes Richard Dyer, whose first anthology, *Gays and Film,* was published in 1977. But where *Gays and Film* tends to be densely theoretical, Russo's study is, first and foremost, a chronological inventory of the caricatures, stereotypes, and subtle insults to gays in the film closet.

[33] Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet*, xii.

(in film and in society) exemplifies the trap Michel Foucault deems "the repressive hypothesis." Additionally, as Foucault puts it succinctly in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*: "Visibility is a trap."[34] Paradoxically, work in queer film studies that seeks to enumerate queer films and evaluate queer representations as a corrective to repression thoroughly participates in the productive effects of repression. In a logic I explain more fully in the next section, "repression" becomes such a productive concept, in fact, that it ceases to be an accurate characterization of gay and lesbian film history. In other words, thinking of repression as *purely* repressive obscures its actual functioning—so well captured by Foucault and elaborated by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick with the figure of the closet—which is the production and proliferation of the very types, codes, and caricatures that Russo and other authors endlessly detail in their accounts of film history.

Before examining these theoretical operations in detail, I want to posit the schema for my critique of queer film studies in terms that refuse to prioritize queer theory over queer film and queer film studies. They operate in tandem, and the assertion of a pure field of queer theory apart from its application or instantiation in queer film studies would be disingenuous. Although Russo's text has been virtually renounced in subsequent studies, most queer film and queer film scholarship continues to engage in the discourse of repression, prioritizing the study of prohibition and its effects. To say that the field of queer film studies, by and large, participates in the "repressive hypothesis" generally means that (1) it establishes or revises taxonomies of sexual minority representation, with increasing specification, sometimes in advance of proportionately specific prohibitions; (2) it performs the work of classifying films, characters, actors, directors, and

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[34] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 200.

screenwriters according to categories of sexual orientation; (3) in its systems of taxonomy and classification, it extends the management of sexual minorities within the larger cultural system of sexuality; (4) individual authors and filmmakers capitalize on the benefits of aligning their work with the liberation of repressed subjects (so they are in the righteous position of "speaking truth to power," reaping what Foucault bluntly refers to as "the speaker's benefit;"[35] and (5) queer film studies is not exclusively devoted to correcting repression because it also participates in the classification and management of representations. Queer scholarship may cast itself in opposition to censorship campaigns, but it is nonetheless part of the massive cultural project of identification and classification of sexualities that censorship appears to perform alone.

In its broadest definition, queer cinema encompasses a wide range of films across genres, time periods, and national cinemas. A quick look at the queer cinema classifications in mainstream accounts shows that "queer" currently functions as an umbrella term for films that have lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer creators, characters, and/or themes. But tensions and ambiguity haunt current definitions of queer cinema. Twenty years after the crossover success of such films as *Poison* (Todd Haynes, 1991) and *The Living End* (Gregg Araki, 1992), definitions of queer cinema still invoke its namesake: the New Queer Cinema. As I describe in the Introduction, the New Queer Cinema entails an independent, confrontational cinema that incorporates formally experimental and non-narrative elements. Expanded use of the term in subsequent decades has loosened the connection with the New Queer Cinema's defiant aspects, in particular that cinema's original and unconventional forms. Thus, "queer cinema" now

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[35] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 6.

functions to describe the content and anti-homophobic orientation of a film rather than strictly referring to the New Queer Cinema from the late 1980s and 1990s. Since that time, the number of films representing sexual minorities has increased, expanding queer cinema's definition into an umbrella term for films across genre and industrial boundaries.

Introduction to the Closet

The closet is the prevailing figure of the discourse of homosexual repression, and its characteristics deeply structure the way we think about modern sexual identity. The closet not only demonstrates the dynamic between silence (in the closet) and speech (coming out). As a spatial metaphor, the closet also describes the deeply embedded position of sexuality with respect to subjectivity, and the position of homosexuality as interior to a population or culture: a minority that is excluded within. So too at the individual level, the closet represents the modern conception of sexual orientation as internal to the subject, as the deepest and truest aspect of individual identity.

In his first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault describes the development of the modern sexual subject in the West: sexuality was made "consubstantial with him," both internal to and integral to subjectivity.[36] Since the eighteenth century, patterns of desire and sexual practices have come under the ruling and structuring discourses of religion, law, and medicine and, as Foucault writes, homosexuality came to be understood "less as a habitual sin than as a singular nature,"[37] a part of the fabric of the person rather than an effect of one's chosen behavior. As

[36] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 43.
[37] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 43.

sexuality became integral to identity, rules and conventions of secrecy and privacy established not a totalizing silence around the subject of sexuality, but distinct and detailed channels through which the information pertaining to individual sexuality—still under the jurisdiction of medical, legal, and religious discourses—was to be articulated.

At the cultural level, the closet is the primary figure for repressed aspects of homosexuality in particular, and a range of non-normative sexualities in general. The closet characterizes homosexuality as internal to the general population but distinct within it; making repression figurative is a way of bringing into representation—linguistic and visual—aspects of the relations between what is repressed and what is expressed. The closet is the symbolic receptacle for sexuality and sexual expressions that either antagonize or pose a threat to the condoned, public, and normative manifestations of sexuality.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick issues the most provocative and productive explanation of the ubiquity of the closet. In the opening lines of *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), she writes, "many of the major nodes of thought and knowledge in twentieth-century Western culture as a whole are structured—indeed, fractured—by a chronic, now endemic crisis of homo-heterosexual definition, indicatively male, dating from the end of the nineteenth century."[38] Sedgwick's analysis asserts the closet as a prevailing figure through a time period that begins in the late 1800s and encompasses the entirety of film history. And although her analysis focuses on literature, cinema must also rank among the "major nodes of thought and knowledge in twentieth-century Western culture" to which she refers. Sedgwick goes on to claim that "the closet is the defining structure for

[38] Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 1.

gay oppression in this century," underscoring its critical importance to any study of repression and representation.[39] Later, alluding to the productive effects of the figure of the closet, she explains that "the image of coming out regularly interfaces the image of the closet."[40] According to Sedgwick, coming out—a liberating gesture—couples with the image of the closet, the very specter of gay repression. At the level of representation, I argue that the closet model of repression requires liberation, just as the closet compels "coming out." Queer film studies reveals a particular set of Hollywood's closet conventions, ways that mainstream film produces distortions and displacements of homosexuality that complicate the interplay between "the image of the closet" and "the image of coming out."

Sedgwick proposes that the closet, although appearing to represent a dualism between "in" and "out," actually represents a whole set of relations that trouble the binaries of inside and outside, known and unknown, and private and public. Culturally repressed sexuality, including shades of non-normative behavior but most commonly figured as homosexuality, relies upon a metaphor as dynamic as "the closet" to convey the complexity of the relations between those dualisms. Those culture-structuring dualisms, and the set of relations they imply, offer routes of enunciation through speech acts, as Sedgwick emphasizes, but also often through visual representation—especially in the fields of visual culture.

The closet metaphor is elastic, and applies to different magnitudes of hidden or repressed experience, even those abstracted from a sense of sexuality. The closet characterizes psychic repression, individual repression with respect to society, and the

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[39] Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 71.
[40] Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 71.

systemic repression of groups within populations. The metaphor further expands to include the repression of representations of homosexuality, closeted images and histories that form the partially reclaimed canon of anti-homophobic historical projects. Although the repression of homosexuality is the primary referent, the figure of the closet helps to explain many situations of hidden or unclaimed identification, be it of individuals, groups, or visual representations. That is, the closet metaphor travels; no longer exclusively linked to homosexuality, or sexuality at all, numerous books and films invoke the closet as a sign of psychological repression as well as widespread social repression. Sedgwick acknowledges the commonplace abstractions of the closet from homosexuality. Yet instead of claiming that it has been, in her words, "evacuated of its historical gay specificity," she inverts that assumption, beginning her analysis of the depth to which "the historical specificity of homosocial/homosexual definition" structures Western culture.[41] The metaphor may be abstracted, but it cannot be completely extracted from homosexuality.

The figure of the closet collapses multiple indices of unknowing, including secrecy, privacy, and repression, into one trope of concealment. Those means of unknowing then implicate and reinforce one another. Thus, any secret (or unclaimed identity) now calls for the analysis of its potential repression by external forces, and individual secrecy is bound to collective repression.[42] Again, no example captures the

[41] Sedgwick, *Epistemology*, 72.
[42] Sedgwick, *Epistemology*, 78. As Sedgwick characterizes the multiple and overlapping conceptions of the closet, she observes the bearing that individual and collective closets have on one another, careful not to overstate nor deny the unpredictable effects of individuals "coming out" on the collective movement for gay liberation.

repressive dynamic of the closet across orders of experience better than modern conceptions of homosexuality and its unique relation to visibility.

However, as Sedgwick explores the concept of the closet, it becomes clear that not all of its connotations are so dynamic or flexible. In terms of its more concretized aspects, the closet always implies information that contains the potential for exposure or revelation. That information sometimes consists of secret identifications that are strongly assumed, yet remain unspoken. The closet formalizes "the open secret," describing information that is widely known but that people refuse to admit, acknowledge, or articulate. Thus, even in situations of relative openness, the trope of the closet looms, a generally burdensome figure, and the threat of revelation gives it a paradoxical presence; the open secret both courts and repels acknowledgment.

It follows, then, that as much as the closet represents concealment it also represents the potential for exposure. Although it first appears to be a metaphor with clear dividing boundaries, it is actually more fitting to think of the closet as the figure that animates the relationship between concealment and exposure, always in context, and always contingent upon the discourses intersecting to produce the revelations that emerge from the closet. Therefore, silence and speech are both part of the basic operations of the closet. As Sedgwick writes, "'closetedness' itself is a performance initiated as such by the speech act of a silence—not a particular silence, but a silence that accrues particularity by fits and starts, in relation to the discourse that surrounds and differentially constitutes it."[43] She cites Foucault in order to trouble the interactions between speaking and silence, still frequently assumed to be oppositional: "As Foucault says, 'there is no

[43] Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 3.

binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say… There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses.'"[44] Foucault and Sedgwick's observations about the interplay between representation and repression are the underpinnings of my own project.

The Foucauldian and Sedgwickian analyses of the closet have implications for LGBTQ activism, as well. In the modern era, and most recently after the success of the new social movements in raising awareness of the collective power of identity-based groups, the closet nearly equates with the imperative for exposure. Articulating one's affiliation with an identity-based group turns exposure alone into a political act, claiming an identity around which to organize social and political positions. In this way, personal identification is articulated in terms of collective liberation. We understand the knowledge of sexual identity as liberating to the individual (where heterosexuality is widely assumed, coming out still tends to be a matter of revealing that one is gay), but we also understand sexual orientation as an axis of group identification.

Similarly, the closet is also the figure through which people structure homosexual repression as a temporal experience, inscribing a "before" and "after" of "coming out." Liberation is a modern cultural imperative, so the framing of liberation in opposition to repression will always compel the trajectory toward a future liberation as "out," after, and against repression. The imperative for liberation, as if it is a stable state that one enters into, makes the closet a structure that always threatens to propel its own secrets into representation.

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[44] Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 3; Sedgwick quotes Foucault from *The History of Sexuality*, 27.

The figure of the closet appears in film, literature, and social narratives in the West, but it obviously exceeds the boundaries of cinematic, literary, and political history. In film history, we use the closet to describe the relationship between queer images and repression, commonly making the argument that queer images have, in general, been repressed. In post-Stonewall American culture, the closet stands in for the historically censored past of homosexual existence, whether operating as a sort of invisibility cloak for homosexuality in a heterosexist culture, or representing an individual life before "coming out." But, as Sedgwick explains, it also serves as the conceptual reference that underwrites culture-structuring dualisms.

The Subject of Repression

Beyond its structuring grammar and connotations, Sedgwick traces the trope of the closet alongside Foucault's narrative of *The History of Sexuality*. As I mention above, Foucault links the development of sexuality to changing cultural conventions around knowledge and concealment (also speaking and silence). More specifically, he outlines the evolution of the will to knowledge surrounding sexual behavior that was first refined through the Christian confession, wherein desire is compelled to verbal articulation. Of course, articulation follows a set of conventions about how and in what language desire is articulated (and Foucault concedes that such a system of codes emerges and grows sophisticated). But, as Sedgwick reiterates, it is the relationship between speaking and silence—both of which constitute aspects of discourse in Foucault's formulation, as well—through which we have come to articulate sexuality not simply into language, but into multiple forms of representation.

Foucault's observations about the bringing-into-representation of sexuality (in particular putting-into-speech) run counter to the reigning paradigm of a repressive closet. To insist that sex and sexuality are silenced, or repressed, and people must announce their sexuality, especially if it diverges from the norm, reflects just how strongly the compulsion to polarize "speaking and silence" still operates within our culture. The enunciation of sexuality, which may be public or private, singular or repeated, and so on to endless particularity, functions as a liberating speech act that is supposed to free the enunciator from the closet of compelled silence, coerced shame, and social obscurity. While the figure of the closet suggests that there is a boundary between silence and speaking that can (and must) be transgressed, Foucault devotes much of *The History of Sexuality* to tracing the interplay of silence and speech, and to countering the idea that repression (underwritten by the trope of the closet) is the primary structuring force of the history of sexuality.

Foucault argues that as the binarization of speech and silence became ever more important to the incorporation of sexuality into regulatory institutional discourses (at the intersection of law, medicine, religion, and later, psychology), the language of repression actually sprang to facilitate the production of knowledge around sexuality. In fact, the essence of what would become the *dispositif* of sexuality—the entire productive and regulatory apparatus that both installs and manages it at the levels of the person and the population—is the articulation of sexuality, or the production and organization of knowledge about sexual proclivities. Desires and behaviors were organized into systems of classification that spurred their articulation in the first place. Excitements of the flesh, once only confessed to priests, came to determine a primary aspect of the individual

person. For Foucault, that determination is continuous with a kind of subjectivating installation. In the eighteenth century, "sex became something to say, and to say exhaustively in accordance with deployments that were varied, but all, in their own way, compelling. Whether in the form of a subtle confession in confidence or an authoritarian interrogation, sex… had to be put into words."[45] Just beyond that, he writes: "Sex was driven out of hiding and constrained to lead a discursive existence."[46] So regarding repression, Foucault establishes a continuum between means of articulation that seem to originate from different, even opposing, sources: the willingly confided secret and the compelled confession of the "authoritarian interrogation." Both poles of confession, Foucault argues, are part of the same "generalized discursive erethism," a continuous movement toward representation that encompasses not one bipolar discourse but numerous, proliferating "discourses on sex" that compel its articulation in multiple realms.[47]

The fact that this observation poses an alternative to our understanding of a bipolar closet is evidence of what Foucault calls "the repressive hypothesis." The hypothesis has multiple parts, which I have already cited indirectly. It entails first, the widespread notion that sex is repressed, second, that repression takes the form of prohibition and extends from major institutions such as the law, and third, that we must liberate ourselves from forces of repression. Yet the repressive hypothesis functions as more than merely a belief because it compels action; the normative response to the

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[45] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 32.
[46] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 33.
[47] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 32-33. On this point about the proliferation of discourses on sex, part of the "generalized discursive erethism" cited above, Foucault writes, "we are dealing less with *a* discourse on sex than with a multiplicity of discourses produced by a whole series of mechanisms operating in different institutions."

identification of repression is the movement away from it, always toward liberation. In fact, that is exactly the closet dynamic that still compels so much speech, broadly defined, about sexuality.

Consequently, the major challenge of Foucault's historical inquiry into sexuality is to consider an alternative to the repression/liberation dualism, in spite of what seems to be overwhelming cultural and historical evidence of the systematic repression of homosexuality in particular. To follow the text, one need not commit to the idea that sex is not repressed, but to engage the question, "Why do we say… that we are repressed?"[48] In *History of Sexuality*, the question of repression shifts almost immediately away from proving or disproving the status of repression (that is, whether we are or are not) as Foucault's attention turns instead to the act of articulation. He jettisons the polarizing "Why are we repressed?" for "Why do we say… that we are repressed?" It is not for ease of persuasion that he shifts the scope of his inquiry to why "we say… we are repressed," but because to counter repression directly is to participate in the incorporation of sex into discourse that he sets out to critique. The logic of the closet teaches us that the only way to address repression is to expose those subjects we perceive as repressed, through identification, speech, writing, and other forms of representation. Foucault's intervention shimmers with the suggestion that there are means through which to bypass the "whether we are or are not" dualism of repression.

In Sedgwick's later characterization of her own *Epistemology of the Closet*, from the introduction to *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, she contextualizes her work as emerging from some dissatisfaction with the first volume of

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[48] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 8-9.

Foucault's *History of Sexuality*. She admits inspiration but disappointment with Foucault's critique of the repressive hypothesis, reflecting in particular on

> his suggestion that there might be ways of thinking around it... some ways of understanding human desire that might be quite to the side of prohibition and repression, that might hence be structured quite differently from the heroic, 'liberatory,' inescapably dualistic righteousness of hunting down and attacking prohibition/repression in all its chameleonic disguises.[49]

Foucault's critique of the repressive hypothesis redirects inquiries into sexuality and subjectivity from questions of repression and liberation, and develops into a method of historical investigation that examines how sexuality itself is a regime of power. Still, Sedgwick argues, his text does not deliver "ways of thinking around" the repressive paradigm it critiques. The distance between them is helpful in thinking through my own project. As such a *dispositif*, sexuality is productive of its own character taxonomies and hierarchies, however much they seem imposed by juridical frameworks. Work in queer film studies that categorizes representations of homosexuality participates in the overall production and administration of those categories; queer film studies does not merely observe the emergence of stereotypes, but contributes to their organization into typologies of homosexual representation. Although Sedgwick does not find a satisfying alternative in Foucault's text, her own work advances a model of "nonce taxonomy," bound to immediate and local relations in a way that hinders its transmission across texts as a functional system of classification. In contrast to the large-scale sexual taxonomies that operate in tandem with the discourses that manage them, Sedgwick develops a mode of mapping difference that posits an alternative to the trap of the seeking out and addressing repression. Nonce taxonomies explore the textures of proximate relations that

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[49] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 9-10.

comprise the "human social landscape," functioning obliquely against the production of systematic taxonomies that characterize only the broadest axes of difference. Additionally, Sedgwick argues, nonce taxonomies are truer to the finely tuned classifications through which most of us ("probably everybody who survives at all") imagine "all the kinds it may take to make up a world."[50] Large-scale taxonomies continue to structure the history of LGBTQ representation in film; the closet is the figure that cues the "dualistic righteousness of hunting down and attacking prohibition/repression." Foucault offers the critique of the repressive hypothesis, asserting a model of power that counters our outdated investment in prohibitionary power, and Sedgwick articulates a mode of working around the dualism of repression—which she herself describes as inescapable—through analyses of proximate relations.

Speaking and Silence in Moving Images

Now, I want to consider what kind of intervention *The History of Sexuality* can perform on the historical narrative of queer cinema. Foucault's admission that "it may indeed be true that a whole rhetoric of allusion and metaphor was codified…"[51] developed around the contours of the closet, and although his attention is not diverted to that "whole rhetoric," in retrospect, it appears that this is where much of the scholarly attention to queer cinema has consistently gone. Queer film studies continues to set up a dynamic between repression/invisibility and liberation/visibility that draws Foucault and Sedgwick into the problematic of queer visibility in film.

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[50] Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 23.
[51] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 17.

To generalize Foucault's critique of the discourse of repression as it might apply specifically to cinema: queer images have been relegated to the margins of popular culture or are practically unknown outside of queer arts communities. At worst, they have been despised, degraded, ripped from a projector and set on fire, as was the fate that befell Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures* (1963). At best, they are criticized or censored for being too sexually explicit, denied wide theatrical release, or labeled pornographic and perverse. Yet it would seem from this historical discourse that over the years the emergence of a queer cinema has been marked by a progressive increase in visual representations of queer characters and themes, an overall movement away from repression and toward liberation through visual representation. And all along, as contemporary scholarship on LGBTQ-themed film suggests, film representations advance the fight for social acceptance. If representation is the corrective to repression, as the field of queer film studies implies, the rising number and demographic accuracy of films with queer content are political triumphs. In short, queer images have been charged with an important political function: efforts to collect, study, and archive them, to distribute, promote, or otherwise bring them into mainstream representation are perceived as acts of liberation. They free the images, and they also have an effect on the meaning and status of "queer" as a social identity, whether it functions as an umbrella term for sexual diversity or an irreverent identification against normative classification. The widely accepted premise of repression clearly guides the actions of activists and critics who take it as their mission to designate "good" or "bad" representations of queer sexuality. Following Foucault, it is a short step to calling this the repressive hypothesis of queer cinema.

Queer film studies deepens the study of representation by thematizing sexuality from an anti-homophobic perspective. Texts such as *The Celluloid Closet*, Alexander Doty's *Making Things Perfectly Queer*, and Richard Dyer's *Now You See It* each reveal sexuality in film, detailing the myriad roles it plays—especially when it is not given representation in fixed or explicit terms—and extending the gaze of pleasure as well as power for viewers whose experiences range from fleeting titillation to formative identification. Further, work in queer film and queer film studies also rigorously politicizes the representation of sexuality in mainstream film by declaring outright the industry's continued contributions to reproducing heteronormative culture. Ultimately, by thematizing (homo)sexuality, the field of queer film brings itself into visibility, literally making itself more easily locatable for fans and detractors alike.

But the Production Code exemplifies the fact that censorship of Hollywood film is less a project of complete prohibition than a project of content management. The Code set boundaries as to what could be represented on screen, and filmmakers responded in accordance with the logic of the closet by negotiating their intended subjects, often displacing and distorting the concept of homosexuality, in order to reach a compromise with the so-called censors. A notorious example of the sort of compromise struck between filmmakers and the Hays Office is *Suddenly, Last Summer* (1959), a film based on the play by Tennessee Williams, in which a young woman recovers the traumatic (and repressed) memory of her cousin's death. Her memory unfolds into the story of a predatory homosexual man, Sebastian Venable, who used his beautiful cousin to lure young men to serve his own literally unspeakable desires. What his cousin has repressed, the viewer finally experiences through her flashback: the young men retaliate against

Sebastian, infamously "devouring" him. The narrative, based on an event that has already traumatized the beautiful protagonist, justifies Sebastian's death by constructing a homosexuality that is actively traumatizing to others; the story frames his murder as retribution. Already pushing the very limits of the Code, just a few years before its own degeneration in the mid-1960s, the film achieved the PCA's Seal of Approval by showing Sebastian in visual fragments and flashbacks, never by face, and by contextualizing homosexuality as punishable by death. Russo describes the twisted achievement that *Suddenly, Last Summer* represents in the context of the Production Code, writing, "Sebastian Venable, it was decided, would not appear in the flesh. According to [screenwriter Gore] Vidal, he was to be 'a glimmer, an occasion for memory.' With this decision, Hollywood achieved the impossible; it put an invisible homosexual on the screen."[52] The price exacted by the PCA for the fragmented, menacing "glimmer" of homosexuality was that Sebastian Venable be predatory, pathological, and punished.

Today, critical work and scholarship on films also participate in a kind of management of the films' representations of homosexuality, though not so scandalously. The increased visibility of homosexuality is, in part, an effect of the evaluative and typifying work that critics, scholars, and filmmakers perform on filmic representations. In their critiques, representations of homosexuality are revealed to be insulting caricatures, but they are also the fodder from which those very critiques form their specific taxonomies. In that sense, work in queer film studies that organizes representations into typologies of LGBTQ characters and themes fully participate in the administration of representations. That theoretical position of productive administration over queer images

[52] Russo, *The Celluloid Closet*, 116.

brings together censors with gay liberationists, who both engage the movement toward further classification and management of those representations. For example, as Russo catalogs stereotypes and caricatures of homosexuality, he brings them into representation in new terms, the terms of gay liberation and, later, the terms of queer activism. And although his work parallels the Code's administration over queer images, Russo inverts the meaning of the stereotypes from an anti-homophobic perspective. His scholarship reifies the stereotypes that it seeks to dismantle, perpetuating them in a new era of film and activism, but in so doing he also brings them into visibility as types to be appropriated, re-cast, and re-claimed.

Current tensions in queer film studies are echoes of discomfort with Russo's catalog. His analysis of the relationship between Hollywood film, the Production Code, and gay liberation has come under critique for a number of reasons (inconsistent theoretical positions, loose use of terminology, comparisons of sexual minorities to racial minorities, and chronic oversight of lesbianism), but also for reasons that change over time as the field of study becomes codified. In an essay about Russo's influence on contemporary scholarship, "Looking for Vito," Michael Schiavi describes the ongoing citation of *The Celluloid Closet* as a compulsory move that authors make to situate their work in queer film studies against Russo. He writes,

> A quick glance at criticism of the past dozen years illustrates [*The Celluloid Closet*'s] prominence in current queer film theory. Russo's name and book are fetishistically invoked in most recent major texts—albeit mainly as an exemplar of how not to write film criticism, or, in a few cases, with the condescension one might show an ancient aunt and her quaint teachings… Yet the endless invocation of Russo's work suggests dependency on it; film theory today still needs *Closet*, much as audiences today still need lessons in the decoding of gendered images.[53]

[53] Michael Schiavi, "Looking for Vito," *Cinema Journal* 49, no. 1 (Fall 2009): 41.

According to Schiavi, the very dismissal of Russo in the field of queer film studies, repeated over time, produces him as a foundational figure. More than a simple dependency on Russo's work, what Schiavi describes is a fixing of Russo's work in the past, a fundamental text with which updated studies refuse to reconcile themselves. Critiques of *The Celluloid Closet* staged by subsequent generations of film scholars reveal the need to revisit Russo's book only to reject it. While I concur with Schiavi's observation of the negative citations of Russo, I argue that what film theory today needs is not "*Closet*," nor the figure of the closet, but to begin asking itself, "Why do we say… we need *Closet*?" Rejections of Russo's text, and subsequently his explicit paradigm of repression, do not escape the parameters of his argument, they simply negate it. And negation of repression, from a Foucauldian perspective, reinscribes the apparatus of sexual subjectivation and the repressive hypothesis.

In simpler terms, texts that seek to dismiss or simply update *The Celluloid Closet* end up reproducing the very framework of repression and liberation that the book details. For example, Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin's 2006 book, *Queer Images: A History of Gay and Lesbian Film in America*, is organized chronologically and primarily documents, in their words, "the cinematic representation of homosexuality."[54] Benshoff and Griffin propose to pick up where *The Celluloid Closet* left off in history (the late 1980s), but from a perspective that integrates the development of queer theory. The result is a work that documents (to a similar annotated-filmography effect) many of the same films that Russo identifies in *The Celluloid Closet*, but with a broader conception of

[54] Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin, *Queer Images: A History of Gay and Lesbian Film in America* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006), 2.

sexuality and its relation to gender and racial variance than in Russo's text. Benshoff and Griffin also employ a more coherent theoretical framework for the study of sexuality. Although *Queer Images* covers the post-*Closet* developments in film, such as the New Queer Cinema, the authors still foreground mainstream, narrative films in their overall "history of gay and lesbian film in America," framing the increase in mainstream, direct representation as a corrective to repression.

Queer Film History Beyond the Celluloid Closet

The widespread emphasis on repression in queer film history shapes the way that contemporary scholarship seeks to redress the offense of that history. In queer film studies, these operations enact the repressive hypothesis. But the dynamic also plays out powerfully in the visual field of film, in documentaries that explore past representations in their original medium. These sources reproduce and specify new, and sometimes more taboo, taxonomies. Two documentary works on LGBTQ representations in film history, formally dissimilar but constructing parallel arguments, paradoxically use the repetition of representations to build evidence of the historical repression of homosexuality. Barbara Hammer's experimental documentary, *Nitrate Kisses* (1992), and Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman's adaptation of *The Celluloid Closet* (1995), demonstrate the fabric of the repressive hypothesis in the composition of queer cinema's history.[55]

In the midst of queer activism in the early 1990s, experimental filmmaker Barbara Hammer constructed a story of queer representation in film. In her documentary,

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[55] Barbara Hammer, *Nitrate Kisses* (1992), VHS (San Francisco: Wolfe Video and Frameline, 1994); Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman, *The Celluloid Closet* (1995), DVD (Culver City, CA: Columbia TriStar Home Video, 2001).

Hammer attempts to counter the historical exclusion of homosexuality from film by staging sexually-explicit tableaux, weaving them together with old, industry film footage, and black and white shots of decaying buildings. She tells a story of censorship, invisibility, and repression of sexual minorities in film history, drawing parallels to Nazi Germany and suggesting that film history is rife with homosexual undertones. Her response to the systematic cultural repression she identifies in film history is two-fold: she brings those historical representations to light, and she creates new queer images in an attempt to re-populate the film archives with records of sexual minorities.

Beyond her production of *Nitrate Kisses*, Hammer is a major figure motivating my study of queer cinema. She is a prolific, lesbian-feminist filmmaker who has made approximately eighty films since the late 1960s. Despite her productivity, however, she remains a relatively obscure reference outside of specialized film communities, having forged her career as an avant-garde and activist filmmaker on the margins of popular culture. *Nitrate Kisses* remains her most well-known film. Its activist ethos and the centrality of film in her story of queer repression parallels Russo's sense of political urgency in *The Celluloid Closet.* Hammer, too, situates her film as a direct challenge to repression. For these reasons, *Nitrate Kisses* works alongside *The Celluloid Closet* and makes Hammer and Russo trailblazers in queer film and queer film studies, respectively, both emblematic and antagonistic cornerstones for the study of queer cinema.

Not coincidentally, Hammer cites Foucault as one of her scholarly authorities in *Nitrate Kisses*. Ironically, however, she invokes his words to argue that homosexuality has, historically, been repressed. About 40 minutes into *Nitrate Kisses* (1992), an inter-title, one of many within the film, appears on screen. The meaning takes shape as text

becomes visible line by line, and when the full quotation is displayed, the white writing on a black background reads:

> …IF REPRESSION HAS INDEED BEEN THE FUNDAMENTAL LINK BETWEEN POWER, KNOWLEDGE, AND SEXUALITY SINCE THE CLASSICAL AGE, IT STANDS TO REASON THAT WE WILL NOT BE ABLE TO FREE OURSELVES FROM IT EXCEPT AT A CONSIDERABLE COST: NOTHING LESS THAN A TRANSGRESSION OF LAWS, A LIFTING OF PROHIBITIONS, AN IRRUPTION OF SPEECH, A REINSTATING OF PLEASURE WITHIN REALITY, AND A WHOLE NEW ECONOMY IN THE MECHANISMS OF POWER WILL BE REQUIRED.
>
> Michel Foucault

The quotation stands out after a brief period of blank screen, and differs from other inter-titles simply because of its length and formal complexity. The text is taken from the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, and by the time Hammer made the film, the book was making formative contributions to the consolidation of gay and lesbian studies into the field of queer theory. That Hammer cites Foucault indicates her participation in the milieu of gay and lesbian activism—political, artistic, and intellectual—that took shape in the 1980s and 1990s. In the context of her experimental documentary, Foucault's quotation bolsters her call to action. She uses Foucault to suggest that revolution could be on the horizon, but the political struggle will be totalizing and difficult. Through him, Hammer asserts that an entirely new socio-political system must be forged through transgression, so that law and taboo cease to inhibit expressions of sexual desire. Only then, the quotation suggests, will society be free from the repressive regime, and pleasure "reinstat[ed]… within reality." From this perspective, systematic repression is undone through a forcible explosion of voices against it, a widespread effort to lift bans and break laws.

Unfortunately, an omission produced through Hammer's excerpt of Foucault reverses the quotation's original meaning as a critique of this very model of repression and liberation. In the English translation by Robert Hurley, the passage begins, "*We are informed that* if repression has indeed been the fundamental link between power, knowledge, and sexuality…."[56] As the prefacing phrase of indirect discourse, "we are informed that" casts doubt on the phrase that follows, destabilizing its status as the truth of repression. Quoted by Hammer without its clear designation as reported speech, the passage becomes an imperative, contributing to the dynamic Foucault seeks to destabilize rather than to advocate. Unlike Hammer and Russo, Foucault's project does not earnestly position itself against the repression of homosexuality, but, rather, produces doubt through its framing as a discursive report ("We are informed that") on a conditional statement ("if repression has indeed been the fundamental link…"). A Foucauldian perspective would consider the proliferation of representations of sexuality as an extension of, rather than a corrective to, the *dispositif* of sexuality.

And yet the 1995 film adaptation of Russo's text reproduces the same argument, which is essentially the repressive hypothesis, by amassing a visual archive of evidence of bad representations in order to demonstrate that homosexuality was repressed. Distilling the contents of Russo's extensive records into a feature-length film just strengthens its pat progress narrative. The documentary schematically describes the movement of gay representation throughout history from mournful invisibility and compromised stereotypes to a post-Russo diversity of representations in the New Queer Cinema. Besides the compendium of clips documenting presumed-gay characters in old

[56] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 5. Emphasis added.

films, there are interviews with Hollywood actors, directors, and screenwriters. The interviews combine to present a progressive, insider's view of gay film history, emphasizing their break from the repressed past. Famous Hollywood figures express regret over not pushing more boundaries in the service of gay liberation, which they seem to regard as a successfully completed movement. From the perspective of the seemingly more liberal, contemporary era, some just express befuddlement, or perhaps it is liberal amnesia, over why people used to be so afraid of homosexuality. Occasionally, interviewees express completely contradictory positions, but the fragments of conversations work together structurally because all the talking heads come out in favor of progress, visibility, and liberation. Although they manifest critical differences of opinion, Lily Tomlin's overarching narrative contextualizes the interview segments in a forceful presentation of positive progress toward gay visibility *as* liberation.

Espousing a similar narrative of historical repression, *Nitrate Kisses* records Hammer's mission to expose, document, and preserve evidence of the existence of gays and lesbians. As in the film version of *The Celluloid Closet*, the archival images Hammer incorporates into *Nitrate Kisses* are framed as if they are liberated through their re-contextualization as part of a queer activist film. Despite their raciness, her images are somewhat neutralized by their re-incorporation into the narrative of historical progress that she constructs in the film. As an experimental documentary, *Nitrate Kisses* challenges audiences with potentially unsettling imagery, including sexually explicit material that eventually caused the National Endowment for the Arts, facing political

pressure, to renounce their grant to Hammer.[57] The most controversial scenes feature taboo sexual couplings, their scandalous qualities revealing normative, racist, and ageist tendencies in popular culture. That contemporary footage is intercut with forgotten historical outtakes from an early experimental film, *Lot in Sodom*, and shots of city buildings that have been left to decay. The urban ruins suggest the state of historical ruin for artifacts of non-normative sexualities, abandoned and effaced by the lack of a supporting infrastructure. Moreover, the sexually explicit scenes in *Nitrate Kisses* indicate the level of exposure that Hammer idealizes for queer subjects on film. The film suggests that if sexuality is represented in its most literal instantiations, and if it is brought into definition through documentation and exhibition, then it cannot be denied its place in history. *Nitrate Kisses* serves contemporary political urgencies but rests on the idea of a homophobic historical erasure, evidence of which is the censorship and persecution of gays and lesbians. The film addresses that erasure with a seemingly rectifying gesture: the production of images.

In general, both *The Celluloid Closet* and *Nitrate Kisses* are exemplary texts for the revelation and reconstruction of queer content from film history, bringing past representations to light for contemporary audiences. However, both of their histories reinforce the structure of the repressive hypothesis, linking visibility to liberation and challenging repression by extending the classifying gaze backward in time. Both historical narratives emphasize the mainstream film industry and, as a result, rely on the presence of the Production Code for its role as a regulatory (and thus repressive) body. In this pattern, the discourse of repression motivates both studies' articulation of non-

[57] Barbara Hammer, *Hammer! Making Movies Out of Sex and Life* (New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2010), 225-226.

normative sexualities. The dynamic of repression-liberation, in which the perceived prohibition of queer representations acts to spur on the production and proliferation of those representations, is at work in both documentaries. But while *The Celluloid Closet* catalogs the various compromised representations of homosexuality manufactured under the Production Code, *Nitrate Kisses* fails to examine the inherently generative aspects of "repressed" homosexuality, instead telling a story of systematic erasure despite featuring many images of queerness.

In technical terms, the effects of the repressive hypothesis in relation to visual representation are multiple. First, in anti-homophobic media that frames itself as answering a call for representation (such as *The Celluloid Closet* and *Nitrate Kisses*), the critical, methodological voice emphasizes textual analysis and the evaluation of representations. Thus, work in queer film studies has long been preoccupied with evaluating representations and narratives from anti-homophobic perspectives. They measure images against reality, which sometimes prevents them from analyzing how sexuality operates within and across texts. Second, scholarship and creative work that follows the injunction to identify and order such representations become entrenched in the production of large-scale taxonomies of sexuality. Those taxonomies may facilitate the pleasure of some interested viewers or readers who seek annotated filmographies, but they also contribute to the erroneous conception of Hollywood films as reflections of reality. Lastly, the classification of representations is just one effect of queer film studies' investment in the repressive hypothesis. More abstract effects of that collusion implicate queer film studies within the *dispositif* of sexuality, as another means through which people are managed as sexual subjects. Although texts that try to work around the

repressive hypothesis cannot undo the tandem work of repression and production of the modern sexual subject, there are instances where the production of a coherent progress narrative cracks. As I argue in the following chapter, there are periods of activity in twentieth century avant-garde cinema that critically disrupt the presumed opposing relationship between repression and representation. But first, small tears in the story of queer cinema's past often occur in the fabric of its most forceful narratives.

The Medium of Film

Another major connection between *Nitrate Kisses* and *The Celluloid Closet* is the way that they draw out queer representations from the very fabric of Hollywood film history. They argue that queer representations are internal, in the dual sense of being *inside of* as well as *inseparable from* the concept of the film medium, the topic of film history as a field, and the literal stuff of film material. As their titles literally indicate, the content of their work is the very *material* of film history. Both nitrate and celluloid refer to substances formerly used to compose motion picture film, nitrocellulose. As British film conservationists Paul Read and Mark Paul-Meyer explain in *Restoration of Motion Picture Film*, nitrocellulose is the camphorized version of cellulose nitrate, first used in 1846 as the highly explosive base of earliest film stock (it was actually used to make explosives). By the 1920s, acetate was shown to form a more stable base than nitrate, but Celluloid manufacturing (Celluloid is the patented name for nitrocellulose) continued though the late 1940s, when the stable compound, cellulose triacetate, replaced it. Polyester film stock was also invented during the 1940s and spread in use, eventually

becoming the current standard film stock due to its strength, stability, and longevity.[58] Thus, "celluloid" or "nitrate films" technically refer to the films made before 1950, from early film experiments into the era of Classical Hollywood.

The subtlety of the references to nitrate and celluloid lie not in their allusion to past films (the titles clearly do that), but in their implicit break from the past by incorporating "those distorted representations" into the material of film, and by casting past representations as if they are inseparable from film itself. Citing the former material of film, the break from history is contiguous with the argument that bad representations are internal and integral to film—as a material, as a thing in culture, and as a historically-located industry. As the literal material of film stock, their internality and integrity were the first physical representation of images before they were projected on screen. The titles suggest the integral nature or necessity of such material, as if they are saying that the industry ran on the division between prohibited and condoned representations.

The particularities of their chosen "fabrics" are integral to the argument each artist makes about queer representations at the core of film history. Named after the highly combustible base of film stock, *Nitrate Kisses* alludes to all the dangerous and precarious properties of nitrate film. Highly flammable and challenging to store, the film stock's survival over time is quite unstable. As Read matter-of-factly explains the bleak reality of it, "Thousands of 'nitrate' films have already been lost forever as the result of fires or decay, and all film stock of this type will eventually self-destruct."[59] Hammer's film emphasizes the poor historic preservation of images of homosexuality, which already

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[58] Paul Read and Mark-Paul Meyer, eds., *Restoration of Motion Picture Film* (Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2000), 14-16.
[59] Read and Meyer, *Restoration of Motion Picture Film*, 15.

occupy such a politically tenuous place in film history, as Russo also argues. In line with that reality, incendiary and controversial images run throughout her film, some fabricated and some from aged stock footage. Because nitrate has not been used as a film base for several decades, it symbolizes a vast archive of discarded images, explosive yet decaying.

Nitrate's flammability and vulnerability to sparks parallels the controversial nature of queer images in film history, as well as in a larger social order that condemns homosexuality. Sparks work metaphorically as agents of ignition, paralleling the language of social revolution, where one revolutionary act is often described as the "spark" of a larger movement. As the Stonewall riots are to gay liberation in America, volatile images in the fabric of film history have the potential to spread. A single spark on the filmstrip could set a projection booth ablaze before spreading into the theater. Images were prohibited by the industry, portrayed obliquely by writers, actors, and directors, poorly preserved, intentionally or unintentionally, and then critiqued by anti-homophobic film enthusiasts.

However, the combustible properties of nitrate film also cause it to burn up entirely, suggesting the potential of such ignitions to actually result in the erasure of queer artifacts from film history. These literal and figurative brief illuminations, "nitrate kisses" that leave only scorch marks behind, connote the gains and the losses that haunt Hammer's historical project. The medium becomes the very mechanism of erasure, either through the neglect of filmstrips that require close maintenance, or through intentional destruction, as famously occurred during a screening of Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures* (1963).

Representing the intersection of film's medium, history, and content, Hammer's invocation of nitrate also undermines her own fabrication of a sustainable lesbian and gay lineage in film history, yet another uncertainty her film produces. As the film seeks to document and re-collect queer historical artifacts, it crystallizes its collection by featuring them in the same medium (albeit composed of more stable elements) that failed to preserve them thoroughly in the past, or in what Hammer might argue is their proper context of an archive of queer images. Nearly impossible to preserve, as Read indicates, nitrate film is not a medium that persists through time. Neither does the life of film last very long in cultural memory. By using old archival footage, Hammer renews the lifespan of antique images with contemporary film materials, longer lasting and more stable—but for audiences that have long since forgotten them. In so doing, she breathes new life into old representations, reframing and projecting volatile images in a different era.

Her controversial topics transgress the rules of the past and of the film present, containing the threat of explosion as well as disappearance. They still provoke the threat of modern censorship alongside analysis of past censorship. As a commentary on the history of queer images, *Nitrate Kisses* establishes continuity between the film industry at the time of *Nitrate Kisses*' construction (circa 1990) and the repressive past by staging sexually explicit scenes that would not, even in 1991, have passed through industrial regulations of content without controversy.

Within the parameters of queer film studies' engagement with Hollywood, film history must be reconciled with the presence of the Hollywood Production Code, and Hammer engages the code directly in her film. In one notorious scene, the text of

Hollywood's guidelines for sexual content regulation is superimposed on the joined bodies of an interracial gay couple. Homosexuality and miscegenation have been legally regulated, rendering all of Hammer's couples historically illegal. Simultaneously, she celebrates their distinctly contemporary survival, cautioning viewers that what evidence is not preserved will be irretrievably lost. But the subtext is that the evidence, likened to nitrate film stock, is nearly impossible to preserve.

Additionally, there is a promise of excitement embedded in the sudden flash of nitrate, and the "kisses" from a flaming, queer past are imbued with redemptive potential. The simultaneous danger and possibility of explosion connoted by "nitrate kisses" is conveyed through the sexual couplings in Hammer's film. With just one spark, or one kiss, each one of Hammer's couples has the potential to incite the public controversy, racist offense, homophobic outrage and outright ageism that her film actively provokes. Citing the past gives Hammer a way to challenge the present political and artistic terrain, namely, the AIDS epidemic and the rise of queer activism on the far left side of the culture wars. And when she constructs her scandalous scenes, literally, when she puts film together through superimposition, the history of regulation and repression fleetingly brushes against the present: a "nitrate kiss." Finally, as commentary on sexuality itself, the explosive spark and forgetting of nitrate kisses suggests the fleeting nature of desire, flaring up only to burn out.

The ample resonances of Hammer's title with her highly textured film points to the potential for further exploration in the realm of alternative, experimental cinema. There are significant ways in which avant-garde cinema is arguably better suited to diverse representations of sexuality than mainstream film. Outside the economy and

corporate structure of major film studios, fringe cinemas are not subject to mass-market demands or ratings codes that delimit the matter and manner of on-screen sexuality. Unfortunately, they are not generally granted the financing, widespread promotion and distribution, and historical preservation received by more mainstream films.[60] Turning to an analysis of the avant-garde also allows a temporary bracketing of the questions of censorship and evaluation that Hammer and Russo engage so vigorously in their work. In the following chapter, I turn to the history of queer, avant-garde film in order to re-examine the relationship between repression and representation on screen.

[60] Wheeler Winston Dixon and Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, eds., *Experimental Cinema: The Film Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

Chapter 2: The Psycho-Drama

Reimagining the Early American Avant-Garde

In *Nitrate Kisses*, Barbara Hammer incorporates footage from an early experimental film, quoting the images in a queer-activist context to argue that homosexuality has always been part of the fabric of film history. The film she quotes, *Lot in Sodom* (1933), is based on the Biblical narrative, yet its representation of homosexuality was too scandalous for commercial exhibition. Although the two male co-directors, James Sibley Watson and Melville Webber, draw on symbolism and abstraction to tell the story of God's destruction of Sodom, the expression of homoeroticism is clear.[61] The film subsequently enjoyed a second and much longer life as part of an avant-garde film series at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1947, solidifying its place in early American avant-garde history.[62] Due to its content, the work also appears in LGBTQ film histories more frequently than the filmmakers' first project, *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1928), which employs a number of the same formal techniques. Film historian David Curtis calls the filmmaking duo "the first truly avant-

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[61] David Curtis, *Experimental Cinema: A Fifty-Year Evolution* (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1971), 54. Curtis makes this claim because Sibley and Watson were not "amateur" filmmakers working within the film industry and making experimental films on the side; they set out to make distinctly artistic, abstract films. Curtis considers amateur filmmakers to be separate from the American avant-garde, but for more on the distinction between "amateurs" working within the burgeoning film industry and the development of the American avant-garde, see Jan-Christopher Horak, "The First American Film Avant-garde, 1919-1945," in *Experimental Cinema: The Film Reader*, eds. Wheeler Winston Dixon and Gwendolyn Audrey Foster (New York: Routledge, 2002), 19-51. Debates over the origins and exclusions of the avant-garde are part of the ongoing definition of the term; Horak counter-argues that amateur filmmakers were the foundations of the American avant-garde.

[62] Frank Stauffacher, ed., *Art in Cinema: A Symposium on the Avantgarde Film* (New York: Arno Press, 1968), 70.

garde American filmmakers" for their artistic use of formal experimentation.[63] Hammer's use of the film in *Nitrate Kisses*, an experimental work that reimagines homosexuality's relationship to film history, raises pressing questions about representations of homosexuality in relation to signifying practices, exhibition contexts, modes of historical inquiry, and how one might begin to construct a queer film genealogy through the avant-garde.

In the brief sequences from *Lot in Sodom* that Hammer cites, a snake slithers forward and backward through a man's grip, and the camera lingers before the dark shadow of a male dancer's muscular body. The townsmen gaze desirously upon a young stranger whose beauty, slight build, and angular features mark his femininity as well as his holiness. In Watson and Webber's film, the tempting visitor is an angel sent by God to warn Lot before the cities' destruction. The Sodomites convey desire for one another through lascivious looks and the celebration of the masculine physique—long before the angel appears to them. The major difference between the original film's context and Hammer's quotation is that in the former, the plot follows the traditional story in a violent condemnation of homosexuality. The original film's fidelity to the outcome of the Christian religious narrative communicates the threat posed by homosexual desire, whereas Hammer excerpts homoerotic sequences to celebrate them without condemnation.

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[63] Curtis, *Experimental Cinema*, 54. Curtis writes that *Lot in Sodom* "was considered too much in advance of popular taste," despite the "more overt treatment of similar themes by Kenneth Anger, Curtis Harrington, and Gregory Markopoulos in the forties." The similar themes referred to here are sexual: specifically, homoerotic exchanges between men. On *Lot in Sodom*'s inclusion in the Art in Cinema program, see Richard Dyer, *Now You See It*, 107-109.

Besides excerpting, Hammer runs some of the film in reverse, emphasizing the film's imagery over its narrative. Her expansion and manipulation of the footage is a resignification of its erotic imagery into the explicitly queer context of *Nitrate Kisses*.[64] She threads *Lot in Sodom* into queer cinematic history—queer in the demographic sense, which I also refer to as LGBTQ, as well as in the non-normative, or specifically anti-normative sense. Resignification is essential here because much of the writing and filmmaking that constructs LGBTQ film history involves a process of re-telling, re-imaging, and overall reimagining historic source material and the circumstances of its production. In that sense, Hammer has chosen exemplary source material, for *Lot in Sodom* demonstrates the way that denotation,[65] or the production of explicit homosexuality, is historically bound to narratives of condemnation. The film relies on extensive visual symbolism and viewer familiarity with the narrative amidst significant abstraction. As a result, its homoeroticism is more blatant than the plot. Albeit obscure, for a story-driven film that also has extensive non-narrative sequences, *Lot in Sodom* marks an early intersection between a "queer" cinema and the avant-garde.

Authors in LGBTQ film history make additional suggestions that *Lot in Sodom* be read as a queer film. Going beyond the content of its narrative, writers often make a supporting argument to "out" one of the filmmakers, as if the film imagery were too

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[64] Barbara Hammer, *Hammer! Making Movies Out of Sex and Life*, 225. Hammer was so inspired by the potential of Watson and Webber's footage that she began *Nitrate Kisses* under the working title *Sodom's Lot*. By extension, *Lot in Sodom* was part of the inspiration for her Invisible Histories trilogy. Hammer came across the footage, which she says are outtakes, while researching James Sibley Watson. She had previously featured Watson's moving X-rays in her film, *Sanctus*. She also asserts (without substantiation) that Melville Webber was gay (204).

[65] As I note in the previous chapter, I use connotation and denotation in reference to the definitions put forth by D.A. Miller in his famous essay on homosexual representation in classical Hollywood cinema, "Anal *Rope*."

genuinely homoerotic to have been made by two straight men. In her collected writings, Barbara Hammer claims outright that Melville Webber was gay. Richard Dyer is more ambiguous, writing in *Now You See It*, "Whether either or both of [the filmmakers] were gay is not known, but it is hard not to assume one at least of them was on the evidence of *Lot in Sodom*.[66] By contrast, David Curtis's comment on the film, in his foundational *Experimental Cinema*, is that "its handling of sexuality now seems painfully obscure."[67] That sort of disparity in judgment represents a pervasive split between LGBTQ film history and avant-garde history—and also between clearly designated categories of information that authors deem evidential for their claims.

A Queer Genealogy

Now turning to a different canon of film history, I will assert an altogether different paradigm of visibility from the one I examine in relation to Hollywood in the preceding chapter. At first glance, the hegemony of American industrial film uniquely fissures our national cinema into two realms, commercial and non-commercial. In the realm of commerce is the all-pervasive Hollywood film culture, and in the non-commercial realm are the smaller worlds of independent and avant-garde film. Yet the split between commercial and non-commercial cinema does not necessarily imply differences in form or content. This is especially true in the contemporary moment, now that independent films have formal channels for acquiring major studio distribution.

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[66] Dyer, *Now You See It*, 109. The awkward phrasing of Dyer's suggestion, that at least one of the directors was a gay man, seems to betray a level of discomfort with the conjecture, although the same suggestion will be echoed in subsequent queer film scholarship on *Lot in Sodom*, as I show later.

[67] Curtis, *Experimental Cinema*, 54.

Thus, independent film is linked to Hollywood distribution models, and as a result, operates on the periphery of the major, commercial studio system.[68] Historically, however, the difference between studio filmmaking and the avant-garde has implied a much greater distance in form and subject matter, and there has not been a persistent channel through which avant-garde filmmakers have gained access to mass audiences.[69] Therefore, the American avant-garde remains in unique tension with the Hollywood system, even when there is a flow of citation between them.

In light of that historical difference, the distinctions I draw upon in this chapter are more than commercial versus non-commercial, although they do not transcend film economics. The avant-garde is a longstanding, non-commercial, and experimental cinema, and it is neither coextensive with the category of independent film, nor reducible to independent filmmaking practices. And so, from a contemporary perspective, the cinematic split I am working with is more along the lines of an opposition between, on one side, Hollywood and independent feature-length, primarily narrative films that follow the general editing conventions and three-act structure of classical Hollywood cinema; on the other side are self-named avant-garde and experimental films (and later, videos), largely non-narrative, usually significantly shorter (though sometimes significantly longer) than feature length, which innovate subject matter, filming, and editing techniques to diverge from conventional cinemas and call attention to the medium.

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[68] Chris Holmlund and Justin Wyatt, eds., *Contemporary American Independent Film: From the Margins to the Mainstream* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

[69] On the other hand, the rise of the internet is changing the channels of legitimate and illegitimate access through which mass audiences can seek out and screen avant-garde films. One website in particular, Ubuweb.com, expanded throughout the 2000s to become the biggest internet archive of experimental and avant-garde film, video, and sound recordings.

The paradigm of visibility that structures Hollywood film and history with respect to homosexuality stems from a binary practice of signification: connotation versus denotation, or the difference between coded innuendo and explicit representation. Put forth by D.A. Miller in his foundational essay on homosexuality in film, "Anal *Rope*," the categories describe the polarity between the explicitly forbidden mode of signification, denotation, and the vast realm of clever compromises through which filmmakers alluded to homosexuality, connotation. Connotation is traditionally, in Miller's terms, an axis of homophobic expression. However, as the only means through which homosexuality could achieve expression, it also occupies an important place in the history of LGBTQ film. The categories of connotation and denotation do sometimes bleed into one another, and moments of dissonance crop up in LGBTQ film history as filmmakers, viewers, and critics disagree over their preferred strategies for gay representation. However, because the Production Code formally banned the denotation of homosexuality, inquiries into queer cinema's past revive the binary, putting it into practice as a theoretical distinction between repressed representations—those bad, backwards, forbidden, and closeted queers in film history—and "out" representations—better, modern, and liberated queer subjects and subject matter. Industry filmmakers, barred by the Production Code Administration from denoting certain topics, instead exploited the art of oblique expression to develop an entire typology of connoted traits and behaviors. By way of silence, distortion, and displacement, those connotations contour the history of film representations of homosexuality. Yet it is through the differentiation and naming efforts of scholarship on LGBTQ film history, constructing what I call "the closet model" of gay liberation through visibility, that the typology is organized as such. Ultimately, within that

paradigm, connotation becomes the corrupt signifying practice. Correspondingly, scholars looking backward on film history assign denotation the status of the unattainable goal, an ideal that is barred from use.

In the preceding chapter, I expose the logic that structures homosexual representation in Hollywood film. Here, I return to film history, but forge an alternate genealogy of queer cinema through the avant-garde, undermining the hegemonic force of the Hollywood paradigm in queer cinema studies. In so doing, I make three major claims. First, I show how the division between connotation and denotation that defines LGBTQ Hollywood history fails as a way of understanding representation in the context of the avant-garde. I argue that although scholars of queer cinema's history may address the avant-garde, they do so from within a Hollywood-centric paradigm of visibility that effaces major differences in the cinema worlds. The purpose and methods of avant-garde filmmaking are in such opposition to commercial cinema forms and practices, it stands to reason that the two cinemas would produce different paradigms of visibility—and not exclusively related to their differing representations of sexuality, either.[70] For my argument, it is not useful to impose the same questions and historical methods that drive the textual analysis of classical Hollywood film upon the study of the American avant-garde.

Second, and building on that first point, I examine the effects of contemporary histories of queer cinema that misrepresent—or miss altogether—the avant-garde. Following Foucault, I critique the emphasis on repression in queer film history for guiding scholars to simultaneously incorporate and overlook the innovations and

[70] That is, the avant-garde is not simply a haven for the explicit sexual representations that Hollywood disallowed.

instruction offered by avant-garde cinema, reinforcing the very typologies scholars seek to correct. I propose an alternate genealogy, for which I then trace patterns of representation in two major nodes of postwar, avant-garde filmmaking, the psycho-drama and the queer underground, the latter of which I explore in the following chapter. By challenging the conventional film logic of visibility, avant-garde engagements with the concepts of sexuality, identity, and desire are in a position to bypass the repressive hypothesis. They operate not to make sexual demographics or subcultures known with increasing precision, I argue, but to question the very precepts by and through which sexuality comes to be known through cinema at all. Through the construction of a genealogy, a term I explicate below, I also challenge the narrative logic of historical progress that adds a temporal dimension to the push for queer visibility in film.

I make my third major point from a historiographical perspective. I argue that distinct histories of American avant-garde film, even when they go so far as to thematize representations of sexuality within the avant-garde, are simply not anti-homophobic to the standard of contemporary queer theory. Further, they rarely abstract from representations of non-normative sexualities in order to consider the possibility of critique or commentary on social systems. That plain difference of interest between avant-garde film historians and queer film scholars would not be so remarkable but for the fact that information about historical avant-garde film and the films themselves are not in wide circulation. For some films, in fact, the most information we have is in preserved accounts by early critics and the published descriptions of film historians. As a result, film scholars working on the avant-garde are forced by circumstance to rely on archival trips and deteriorating film reproductions alongside synopses written by mid-

century critics. Thus, the film scholars whose work has defined queer cinema history—including those such as Richard Dyer—are discouraged by very practical concerns from including fuller first-hand considerations of non-hegemonic film in their work. This barrier comes in addition to the traditional, general skepticism about the importance of studying non-normative sexualities in the first place. Thus, as the dominant approach to avant-garde film history cannot be considered "pro-queer," those histories themselves become an object of critical study for those of us working to forge a genealogy of queer cinema outside of established narratives.

I use the term genealogy here to distinguish my argument from the existing body of work that constructs a narrative of historical progress for LGBTQ-themed films. In that narrative, the broadly construed constituents of queer cinema—characters, themes, and entire films—have been repressed and are, or will be, brought to light through the liberating power of visibility. Visibility equates with presence on screen, especially if the representation involves some passable level of demographic accuracy. But a genealogy, even in the process of its construction, works apart from that mode of historical inquiry. More specifically, I follow the Foucauldian practice of "genealogy," which opposes the standard construction of historical narrative as one that cannot help but be teleological in its aim. In contrast to the construction of a continuous historical narrative, genealogy is not a model of "linear development" of society or thought over time.[71] Hammer's aesthetic quotation of *Lot in Sodom* within *Nitrate Kisses* actually reminds me of Foucault's guidelines for genealogical inquiry, as she shifts between contemporary

[71] Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," trans. Donald F. Brouchard and Sherry Simon, in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. James D. Faubion (New York: The New Press, 1998), 369.

footage and antique footage, at points superimposing the dated, black and white images over her own. In "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," Foucault describes the qualities of genealogy as textured and archival, seeming to promise historical instances, or events, over historical generalizations: "Genealogy is gray, meticulous, and patiently documentary. It operates on a field of entangled and confused parchments, on documents that have been scratched over and recopied many times."[72] Other aspects of Hammer's excerpting, however, run counter to Foucault's guidelines. As I describe, her film resignifies *Lot in Sodom*'s footage into an explicit activist context, embedding it within her argument for the urgency of LGBTQ visibility in film. Genealogy, Foucault goes on, "rejects the metahistorical deployment of ideal significations and indefinite teleologies. It opposes itself to the search for 'origins.'"[73] For my genealogy, if part of Hammer's argument in *Nitrate Kisses* is that LGBTQ sexualities are part of the very fabric of film history, we must consider her origins to be provisional, and the destination of the footage she quotes to not be deployed teleologically. But that is more than we can assume, which is ultimately why I include *Nitrate Kisses* as part of the historical progress narrative, but, in its formal experimentation, also a film that undermines the authority of its own narrative.

In that spirit, I critique the hegemonic historical narrative of "queer cinema," and seek to tell a different story, acknowledging at the outset that it is one of multiple accounts that could be crafted from my chosen body of historical evidence. However, in the practice of genealogy, I have sought not to re-trace a purer lineage of queer cinema, or attempt to better separate its origin from commercial filmmaking, but to sew together

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[72] Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," 369.
[73] Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," 369.

an alternative series of sub-movements, ones that I see as knots of activity, or cultural nodes, around representations of non- and anti-normative sexualities, which bring together lines of thought in avant-garde film.

It is my intention that putting avant-garde film at the center of the inquiry, "what is queer cinema?" restructures our current conception of queer film, from its signifying practices to its historical and aesthetic relationship to repression. I would be remiss not to admit up front that restructuring the history of queer cinema also relocates, or *dis*locates, certain historical figures and filmmaking communities from their entrenched positions. Thus, not simply scholarly genealogies are at stake in retelling the story of queer cinema through the bent lens of the avant-garde, but so too are the artistic legacies of films and filmmakers. Lastly, for me, taking the avant-garde as the center of queer cinematic history has involved developing a new practice for reading the films. In line with a famous theorization of avant-garde filmmaker Maya Deren, made at the 1953 Poetry and the Film Symposium at the Cinema 16 film society in New York, I found myself "prob[ing]… the moment," expounding on the depth of images and sequences in the films until particular instances were exhausted—and I was, too. It is with that new experience of reception that I begin my analysis.[74]

The Ramifications of the Moment

Certain shots from early avant-garde films, such as *Un Chien Andalou*'s sliced eye, are part of a small cultural repository of iconic, experimental images that circulate

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[74] "Poetry and the Film: A Symposium with Maya Deren, Arthur Miller, Dylan Thomas, Parker Tyler. Chairman, Willard Maas. Organized by Amos Vogel" (1953), in *Film Culture Reader*, ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970).

almost separately from the films themselves. Perhaps the most famous scene from Maya Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943), arguably one of the most famous American avant-garde films in history, is the filmmaker standing before a closed door, gently pulling a key, which was once in her purse, now out of her mouth. The key seemingly moves through time and space to present itself to Deren in multiple iterations of herself throughout the film. For me, the most exciting instance of the key's appearance is when Deren sits at a table with the other iterations of herself and unfolds her palm, revealing the key inside. Suddenly, however, the key becomes a knife, and her palm is stained black under the blade. Having already established the threatening animation of the knife—it drops from a loaf of bread, seemingly of its own accord—and the felicitousness of the key's appearance, its transformation into the knife is a shock, and a foreboding symbol of the escalation of danger in Deren's waking dream. A different sort of switch occurs in the opening of Kenneth Anger's 1947 film, *Fireworks*, also famous in American avant-garde history. The protagonist, played by the filmmaker, appears to be waking from a homoerotic dream with a massive erection. He reaches under the sheets toward the bulge and pulls out a statuette, absurdly misplaced beneath the covers, and restores it to its nearby stand. The sexual intrigue dissipates into comic relief, but the viewer learns quickly that although images in the film are suggestive, they will collapse at the moment when their connoted meaning is to become explicit.

The examples from both films show that the filmmakers reserve the right to authorial displacement of symbolism, and that the viewing experience is subject to their active construction and manipulation of objects and events in time and space. That is a fact of filmmaking, but one that classical Hollywood conventions are designed to erase. I

emphasize these moments of transparency, wherein the filmmaker-protagonists' subjective constructions shock, disrupt, or calibrate the viewer's experience as instances that expand almost endlessly under textual analysis. In these and other avant-garde films, I found that producing brief sketches of the work was nearly impossible, and with each attempt I would uncover another five potentially meaningful connections to explore. Incessantly generative, the films were proving irreducible to adequate summaries. Like the instances I mention above, the films are full of suggestive imagery, relevant to diegetic as well as extradiegetic systems of meaning. My attempts to write about them as one might write about a mainstream, narrative film became an ongoing task of tracing tangential ideas. Schematic outlines, or abstractions of the events into some kind of "story" were unsatisfying; the multifaceted sequences, such as with the key or the statuette, that convey meaning about the film would become, under analysis, like descriptions of a personal dream—endless, confusing, full of juxtaposition, and likely only relevant to the dreamer.

In reality, the images cannot be pursued as if their meanings are exhaustible, or as though one will eventually set upon the proper path of interpretation. Endless film analysis in the avant-garde mostly fails to turn up a singular, proper truth, no matter how ardently it is sought. Further, the sequences are already part of an inquiry; the filmmakers construct a sequence through their own examination of "its feeling and depth," through a filmic "investigation," insofar as "it probes the ramifications of the moment," to further quote Deren's description of poetic cinema.[75] Viewing them becomes an experience of depth rather than narrative logic, and so it follows that a synopsis practically disintegrates

[75] "Poetry and the Film: A Symposium," Maya Deren, 174.

into a series of deeply textured explorations of a notable sequence, image, or, as above, substitution.

However, the challenge I faced in writing about these and other films I explore in this chapter was more than a viewer's calibration to different filmmaking conventions. It also has an ethical dimension. Performing close textual analysis, developing or *blowing up*[76] instances within each film toward the point of incoherence brings the threat of reinscribing the closet model of visibility. In the search for truth, one implants it. I risked structuring my analysis as though, through an extension of the gaze of knowledge, I would uncover new truths about the sexual rhetorics of the American avant-garde. Within a Foucauldian framework, we see that the extension of power-knowledge into the discovery and naming of sexual types works in tandem with the project to install them. I worried that, parallel with the LGBTQ history of Hollywood cinema, I would produce a new taxonomy of queer figures and deformed representations, the ironic culmination of a project in which I am trying to work around the ubiquitous visibility-as-liberation paradigm. However, I came to see that the expansion and contraction of my attention produces more than just a deepened investigation of the subject. Like the difference between a close up and a long shot, not only do different objects come into view, but the perspective on the image can change so significantly that it becomes something else

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[76] I draw this terminology partly from my analysis of the title of Barbara Hammer's *Nitrate Kisses* in the first chapter, in which the "blow up" would present an exciting and bright expansion, but the lifetime of the image—so volatile because it is shot on delicate stock—could disappear without a trace after its brief illumination. I am also drawing on memories of the theme of Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow-Up* (1966), in which a photographer fervently seeks the truth of an obscured image that he inadvertently caught on film through developing increasing enlargements of the photograph. In the end, however, his image is blown up beyond recognition, and the event he captured remains unclear.

altogether. Reading these films, I take the irony of the image somewhat literally. Rather than allow the second image to supplant the first through some clarifying process, or coming-into-focus, we can think of both potentially incompatible images existing at once—just one of the techniques that alters vision in the avant-garde.

Obscuring Visibility

The drastically different histories of avant-garde and Hollywood film change the function of signifying practices that develop in each field of cinema. In the history of Hollywood film, the Production Code Administration is a reigning force of industry self-regulation, a system of internal content monitoring intended to stave off regional censorship. Studio filmmakers had a set of moral guidelines to adhere to, and that commitment undoubtedly shaped the content of their films. Yet, as I argue in the first chapter, the Production Code was both prohibitive and productive of representations of homosexuality, and the fact of its existence remains a major theme in LGBTQ film history. In fact, representations of homosexuality in Hollywood's history are still such a quagmire because the very distinction upon which their prohibition rests, as D.A. Miller points out, is the faulty binary opposition between connotation and denotation. As signifying practices, these two poles of representation fail to fully repress information; they differ, instead, in how it comes to light. While connotation, as Miller argues, is the signifying practice of homophobia, it was the only permissible method for signifying any taboo material under the Code—a document that forbids mere inference of "sex perversion," so representations of homosexuality were necessarily oblique, and homosexuality routes into stereotype and one-dimensional gay figures. Additionally,

although the signifying binary clearly generates loopholes, the PCA instantiated it as a functional opposition for three decades. During that time, the Administration's Seal of Approval would only go to films that adequately avoided the denotation of homosexuality. Thus, even though we can see how the fields of connotation and denotation bleed into one another, the binary has operated as a hinge between a practical opposition: approval and disapproval.

But beyond Hollywood, the avant-garde is a cinema committed to exploring conventions of visibility and the methods of constructing meaning through film, in which signifying practices and images themselves are not bound to industrial or moral codes. Avant-garde filmmakers have long innovated signifying practices that illuminate their subjects through means outside of literal representation and narrative development. A genealogy of queer film through the avant-garde attends to those differences in how meaning is produced, just as the avant-garde itself often thematizes its own materials and methods. Questioning visibility in the process of making-visible, the avant-garde is reflexive and critical of its own resources.[77] If there is a mainstay of the avant-garde position, the use of the medium to question the nature and limits of its representation is it.

Shifting, contentious definitions of the avant-garde, by artists and critics alike, have always contributed to the edginess of the variously named movements. During the postwar era, when the first group of films I examine were made, "avant-garde" had

[77] Although my terminology shifts toward "experimental" and "new wave" in the next chapter, for the time period covered here I find avant-garde to be a broader and more appropriate term than "experimental," in particular because the origins of all filmmaking was experimental and it still connotes an element of accident, whereas these filmmakers were actively intending, and theorizing their innovations. But in the 1970s and 1980s, the terms become more politicized, and I shift toward using "experimental" as the broader designation.

recently come under new contestation in the art world. Art critic Clement Greenberg published his 1939 essay, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," in *Partisan Review*, proposing a definition of avant-garde art from within the larger political context of capitalism and socialist revolution.[78] Greenberg delineates "avant-garde" in opposition to commercial art, which he terms "kitsch." While the avant-garde is "the superior consciousness of history," an art form driven by a highly cultivated and erudite ethos of cultural critique, kitsch is mass-produced art, made to satisfy the pursuit of culture by the less-educated working class. In terms of artistic contribution, he puts them in stark and hierarchical opposition, literally referring to kitsch as the "rear-guard."[79] He diminishes any possibility of positive cultural contributions from the realm of commercial art; kitsch is devoid of political potential, a cultural dead-end. Although Greenberg wrote in advocacy of socialism, the legacy of his distinction is its elitism. Follow up work in *Partisan Review* quickly interpreted the dualism he establishes as a distinction between high and low art, a binary that has since become a theoretical receptacle for shifting but ongoing debates about the study and value of popular culture.[80]

Yet for the purposes of settling upon a broad definition of the avant-garde here, some residual elements of Greenberg's distinction are useful. He observes in the avant-garde the tendency to pass commentary on its medium, to reflect on the relationship

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[78] Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" (1939), in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961).
[79] Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," 9.
[80] For clarification about the influence of Greenberg's distinction on the development of a theory of high art in Partisan Review, see Rochelle Gurstein, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch Revisited," *Raritan* 22, no. 3 (Winter 2003): 139-140. Greenberg does align the avant-garde with high culture and artistic innovation, though he does not himself use the term "high art." As Gurstein points out, that distinction was kneaded from Greenberg's original essay by a fellow leftist cultural critic, Dwight MacDonald.

between form and the production of meaning. He champions abstract art in particular, writing of the avant-garde artist: “In turning his attention away from subject matter of common experience, the poet or artist turns it in upon the medium of his own craft,” thus stepping away from the dueling ideologies of bourgeois and revolutionary society to critique both cultural poles. Even if the performance of cultural critique is not fully realized by art movements (Greenberg was growing dissatisfied with the hedging of the so-called avant-garde of his time), his ideal remains that art movements perform political and economic critique. However, what Greenberg also misses is the avant-garde approach to recasting the “subject matter of common experience” in new light, a fantastic innovation of the film medium that drives avant-garde cinema and underscores, rather than undermines, its cultural critique.

Greenberg is primarily concerned with the avant-garde potential for reflexivity and critique, but historical perspectives specific to the film medium define avant-garde cinema not only in relation to the art world. Avant-garde cinema also defines itself through its formal and ideological differences from commercial filmmaking. Lines of influence link the American avant-garde with domestic, amateur cinema as well as with European art movements. Granted, those specific movements, such as Surrealism and Dada, and the work of Sergei Eisenstein and the Russian montage theorists, are forebears of American experimental film practice. However, instead of viewing the American avant-garde as a secondary or derivative experimental cinema (a perspective that diminishes its very avant-garde qualities), it is important to note that the ongoing practice of the American avant-garde is what imbues that relationship of influence with relevance long after the death of European avant-garde movements. As Rudolph Kuenzli argues in

Dada and Surrealist Film, cinematic references to Dada and Surrealism take many forms, stylistic as well as theoretical, rather than strictly following their respective dogma. And that influence is paradoxically reciprocal. Kuenzli begins, "Interest in Dada and Surrealist cinema has been primarily kept alive by experimental filmmakers in America and Europe after 1945. They have found a cinematic vocabulary in these early films as well as useful strategies for their own practice of anti-commercial, art/anti-art cinema."[81] Particularly in the postwar era as the United States emerges as a world superpower, avant-garde cinema emerges from a line of influence to develop the meaning of "anti-commercial, art/anti-art cinema" in the new American context.

Postwar, avant-garde filmmakers dislocate signifying practices from their relations under the Production Code, comparatively free to denote and connote, to clearly express, suggest, or imply meaning as they please. Because the denotation of taboo topics has some permissible space in the avant-garde, the practice of connotation is likewise made to work differently from Hollywood film conventions. Specifically in terms of representing sexuality, filmmakers do not exclusively convey homophobia through the connotation of LGBTQ characters or relations. On the contrary, they unmoor connotation from homophobia, instead guiding the power of suggestion to communicate pleasures of same-sex desire. As became the overall effect of *Lot in Sodom*, several postwar films deploy connotation as a signifying practice of homoeroticism, implicating their subject matter as "queer" in the sense that it diverges from normal conventions as well as from heteronormative regulation. In some films, such as the early work of Kenneth Anger, James Broughton, Curtis Harrington, Gregory Markopoulos, and beginning, arguably,

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[81] Rudolf E. Kuenzli, ed., *Dada and Surrealist Film*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996), 1.

with Maya Deren in the 1940s, connotation operates fluidly with denotation, as the chosen signifying practice of same-sex desire. In the introspective explorations that unite their work, suggestion, implication, and association provide the communicative methods of an avant-garde engagement with visibility.

Ironically, these filmmakers also discuss their work, as it ranges from association, symbolism, abstraction, and expression, in terms of visibility. While the Production Code Administration gives rise to "coded" homosexuality in Hollywood, avant-garde films also create their own codes, symbols, and abstractions—not in order to obscure homoeroticism, but to illuminate it. That difference marks the major cleft between Hollywood cinema and the avant-garde, from the 1930s through 1960s. Where Hollywood seeks to hide or diminish homosexuality through practices ranging from omission, coding, and allusion, the avant-garde employs similar conceptual methods—symbolism, allusion, dream and fantasy sequences—to draw out meaning obliquely from the subject of homosexuality. Yet rather than cast obliquity as a lesser quality of representation, avant-garde filmmakers embrace its suggestive potential, playing on the polysemy of their images, often invoking the language of visibility, illumination, and other metaphors of enlightenment that we tend to associate with direct expression rather than artistic transformation.

In a context that runs counter to hegemonic conventions, visibility does not require the development of a narrative across causal plot points, but, in Deren's words, the visual "probes the ramifications of the moment," exploring the textures and resonance of a feeling, tableau, or situation.[82] Instructively, other filmmakers theorize similar

[82] "Poetry and the Film: A Symposium," Maya Deren, 174.

challenges to the mainstream paradigm of visibility. They are aware of Hollywood conventions, and they self-consciously construct their own ways of seeing, pushing the capacity of the medium, and knowingly producing meaning through practices and materials outside of industrial fare. Not surprisingly, they are keen observers of the benefits of ambiguity that signifying methods such as connotation produce on screen.

In James Broughton's reflections on filmmaking, *Seeing the Light*, he plays heavily on the notions of visibility and illumination, and his understanding of the concepts is both poetic and literal.[83] His autobiographical coming-of-age story, *Adventures of Jimmy* (1950), is one of a group of introspective avant-garde films that historian P. Adams Sitney has dubbed "psycho-dramas."[84] Broughton's film stands out for its comic juxtaposition of image and voiceover, which seems to tell two coming-of-age stories at once—one explicitly normative, the other richly suggestive of sexual experimentation. *Adventures of Jimmy* is from the early postwar phase of the avant-garde, but Broughton's filmmaking career spans the next several decades, and it is actually to his filmmaking students that he addresses much of *Seeing the Light*. He asks, for instance, "Will you promise to make visible the invisible, express the inexpressible, speak of the unspeakable?"[85] As an avant-garde filmmaker, his request troubles the false binary between connotation as concealment and denotation as exposure; he articulates that there are forms of filmic expression that illuminate that which is unrepresented, but he does not bind them to any method of mass exposure. Instead, he asks his students to commit to visibility and expression his philosophical standpoint, a queer approach to

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[83] James Broughton, *Seeing the Light* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986).
[84] P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde, 1943-2000*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 14.
[85] Broughton, *Seeing the Light*, 15.

visibility. His "speak the unspeakable" reads as a request to confess, confide, and reveal, but he seeks the illumination of expression and personal interpretation, not of truth. The "truth" of confession does not play into his request that they attempt to "express the inexpressible." Instead, Broughton suggests, once illuminated, "visionary film" basks in the glory of its ambiguities, challenging the viewer to be changed by the aesthetic experience, as the filmmaker is perhaps changed through its production.[86] The illumination that his own work offers is set far apart from the order of illumination we could equate with the extension of medical, legal, or religious knowledge, and the comic irony of *Adventures of Jimmy* undermines its own literal interpretation. The film narration's straightforward, declarative statements are made forcefully ironic through the disjunction between sound and image. But the opposite process is also true. In the field of the avant-garde, literal representation does not solely signify its literal referent, but can suggest the symbolic and abstract capacities of the sign. As some of the most famous films from Broughton's long career suggest, such as *This Is It* (1971) and *Hermes Bird* (1979), even his seemingly direct messages are made strange through the playful manipulation of time, and the production of a simple sentiment so repetitive that it becomes profound.[87]

Before I expand on the classification of "psycho-dramas" in the next section, the filmmakers implicated by that name functionally set the parameters for the American avant-garde's first major inquiry into the nature of visibility, as well as into the nature of

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[86] "Visionary film" is both Broughton's term and P. Adams Sitney's; it is a term for avant-garde/experimental film that was used predominantly in the 1950s-70s.

[87] I am thinking of three specific films: *Adventures of Jimmy*—the early psycho-drama that is giddy with irony; *Hermes Bird*, a slow-motion steady shot of a penis becoming erect; and *This Is It*, of a young boy playing outdoors while Broughton reads his famous poem of the same name.

sexuality. As a result, their commentary on visibility is spectacularly illuminating, and as I have indicated, they often spoke about their work in terms of an alternate model of visibility. Following Maya Deren slightly in time, Kenneth Anger and Curtis Harrington are two more filmmakers associated with this milieu. Harrington's *Fragment of Seeking* (1946) echoes Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon*, a "psycho-drama" par excellence. The film has a haunted quality that plagues the filmmaker-protagonist's introspection. In a short documentary on his career, *House of Harrington* (Tyler Hubby and Jeffrey Schwarz, 2009), Harrington explains what he sees as an overarching sensibility in his work, saying, "I'm interested in the unseen, the secret behind appearances."[88] Although such a statement resonates with Broughton's commitment to "make visible the invisible," and the two filmmakers' early work shares the theme of autobiographical reflection, the difference between their sensibilities is apparent when one consults the films themselves. The action in Harrington's *Fragment of Seeking* is much more puzzling and meditative than Broughton's early work, and its homoeroticism (more like homoerotic suggestion, in this case) is not quite embraced. His dreamlike expressions of the mind without censorship yield the poetic portrait of a young man whose pursuit of a woman through a house's complex interior culminates in his dizzying self-confrontation. It is telling that in the documentary interview a half-century later, Harrington's authorial comments resist confirming or denying the homoeroticism alleged in his early work. His interest in "the unseen, the secret behind appearances," implies commitment to exploration, but not to making those secrets "visible." Instead, I read his claim as a veritable citation of the

[88] Tyler Hubby and Jeffrey Schwarz, *House of Harrington*, (Los Angeles: Automat Pictures, 2009), http://vimeo.com/12090059 (accessed April 10, 2012).

closet model of homosexuality, hidden behind closed doors, where he seems content to let it remain.

From that perspective, Harrington's work adds another dimension to the concept of visibility in relation to sexual identity. He does not use film to discover or reveal his (filmmaker-protagonist's) erotic life, but to explore its aspects in a way that obscures its coherence from clear view. He produces an abundance of signifiers that prevent the discernment of a single true meaning. Amidst the introspection in *Fragment of Seeking*, a teenage Harrington stares apprehensively into the face of a young blonde woman, confronting the ambivalence and confusion of his desire. As the blonde's face slowly apprehensively approaches the camera-eye, she suddenly becomes a skeleton in his arms. The shock of the grotesque is almost farcical—the skeleton wears a blonde wig—but its proximity to mortality and sensuality sends Harrington stumbling through a hallway of doors that recalls Cocteau's *Le Sang d'un Poète*. Describing his early films, Harrington articulates many characteristics of poetic cinema from that time: "All of my short films are just intuitive expressions," he says. "In a sense, they're very abstract because they don't deal with any given reality; they create a poetic reality. The best thing I could say would be rather dreamlike, or out of the unconscious mind without any censorship."[89] These dreamlike, interior explorations mark the first node in my queer genealogy through the avant-garde, the first knot of activity that repeatedly addresses and enacts cultural discourses on sexuality.

Harrington's citation of the unconscious mind, and an explicit reference to psychoanalysis that occurs in Broughton's film, point toward the variety of ways that

[89] *House of Harrington* (2009).

hegemonic cultural discourses are woven into this decade of films, from the late 1940s to the late 1950s. Harrington's statement, though it was made decades later, invokes the popular usage of censorship that implies censorship is a process of imposing limitation, prohibition, or regulation on some pure or raw content. However, the unconscious mind is a concept already installed within a grid of psychoanalytic theory (albeit more popular than technical in common usage) that skews Harrington's imagery toward the investigation of internal drives and sexual identity. In the era of McCarthyism and the Production Code Administration, censorship is also conceptually proximate to homosexuality, and to explicit sexual expression in general. The action in Harrington's *Fragment of Seeking* lends itself to an interpretation of homosexual themes because of the cultural associations already in place to suggest those interpretations. Thus, even his process of creation, the construction of a poetic reality, follows certain guidelines for legibility that, in effect, enact an oblique mode, like Broughton, of speaking the unspeakable.

However, in the face of the film's ambiguity, which is integral to Harrington's aesthetic sensibility, scholars have been reluctant to assign Harrington a place in LGBTQ film history. Those who seek to construct a narrative of progress out of LGBTQ film history have had to define their parameters, and as we see with *Lot in Sodom*, often their criteria hinge on extra-filmic evidence or an admission that the filmmaker is gay. Richard Dyer, who is forthcoming about his criteria that the films be made primarily by, for, and about gays and lesbians, writes in *Now You See It*: "It is not clear that Harrington belongs in this book, but his best known film, *Fragment of Seeking* 1946-7, has often been

interpreted as a gay one."[90] Few filmmakers remain persistently "unconfirmed" like this, with respect to the hetero- or homosexual binary, even when their biographies reflect the limitations of sexual binaries. But the disruption that sexual ambiguity poses to the historical narrative of LGBTQ film lays bare a major unresolved question: what is the status of the filmmakers' sexuality in relation to their work, particularly if they are (or identify as) a sexual minority? Melville Webber poses one such disruption; Harrington poses another.

An affiliate of Kenneth Anger, Curtis Harrington helped with the filming of some of Anger's earliest shorts, and acted in his *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome* (1954). By that time, Anger, too, had been making poetic, dreamlike films. *Fireworks* (1947), as I have described, establishes the filmmaker's deft use of symbolism, but the homoeroticism he explores in the course of the film's events is ambiguous only at the level of commentary. That is, if, by any interpretation, Anger's film is short of being explicitly homo*sexual*, it is still a masterpiece of homoeroticism. Unlike the haunted Harrington, Anger's filmmaker-protagonist admires men's muscular physiques, imagines himself in the arms of a sailor, and wakes up in bed with a faceless young man. It is not unequivocally romantic, however; his admiration of the sailors precedes a group bashing at the sailors' hands. The violence threatens to condemn his lust to the realm of impossible, or impossibly *dangerous*, passion. But when the filmmaker-protagonist "awakens" he is unmarked. The beating, then, exists somewhere in the realm of dream, memory, or fantasy, and provokes no horror in the waking Anger, although his burning of

[90] Dyer, *Now You See It*, 117. Dyer does not offer citations of specific critics and scholars who have interpreted Harrington's work.

the sailor's photograph implies a similar combination of desire alongside obliteration and destruction.

Reflecting on his work, Anger makes characteristically deadpan, evasive authorial comments. He often describes the literal imagery of his films rather than expanding on their symbolism or describing their meanings. Heavily influenced by occult theorist Alastair Crowley, those are the themes Anger seems more likely to explain or cite in his work. And this technique of explication, albeit evasive, allows him to resist fixing the meaning of his films through his authority as the filmmaker. Consequently, it also allows him to forestall a more probing analysis of the interplay between homoerotic themes and his formal techniques. For example, after the scene in *Fireworks* in which the protagonist is pummeled by the sailors he gazed upon so desirously, he is pictured in a medium shot as a tide of milk, poured from off-screen, soaks his face and runs down his shoulders. The scene is well-known, and commonly considered a reference to baptism and cleansing, but it is more specifically read as a thinly disguised reference to the orgiastic quality of the beating, which culminates, symbolically, in the sailors ejaculating all over the protagonist. The symbolic meaning seems so blatant that scholars refer to it in a sort of shorthand, as I will show. Yet Anger himself offers no such "direct" translation. Instead, he dryly observes, "This is milk being poured over me in slow motion." In contrast to Broughton, Anger's commentary passively eschews the act of speaking the unspeakable. Rather, his description of the image, which is so suggestive of sexual symbolism, buries what is visible under his formal commentary. He *unspeaks* what is speakable, preserving the ambiguity of the image.

Astonishingly, in *Queer Images: A History of Gay and Lesbian Film in America*, Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin fix the images with tongue-in-cheek dissatisfaction, but their complaint is instructive. They write, "actual homosexual acts are displaced onto outlandish visual metaphors, such as a Roman candle held at crotch level, a blazing faggot of sticks, and a milk-bath orgasm."[91] The authors ostensibly provide an accurate description of the images, referring, for the most part, to exactly what the viewer sees, but their description splits at the end. While *Fireworks* presents the viewers with images of a Roman candle, and later with a bundle of burning sticks, the fact of those images is of a different order from the "fact" of the image of orgasm that Benshoff and Griffin seem to read so plainly. They describe Anger's film in terms of displacement, and yet their reading of the first two images displaces symbolism, and their reading of the latter image displaces its literal visual referent. The Roman candle is an "outlandish visual metaphor" for the sailor's penis. The burning "faggot" is a visual metaphor for male homosexuality, or further, for homosexual lust as well as punishment. The milk may stand in for semen, but "milk-bath orgasm" betrays their reading of metaphor by substituting its symbolic referent, an orgasm. What is it about "milk being poured over me in slow motion" that fails to constitute an "actual homosexual act," but is likewise indescribable at the literal level? There is no literal orgasm on display in *Fireworks*, which seems to be their complaint in the first place.

Although Benshoff and Griffin's complaint with *Fireworks* is not severe, the accusation of displacement has pejorative undertones, especially in the context of a historical narrative that affords privileged status to "actual homosexual acts" over

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[91] Benshoff and Griffin, *Queer Images*, 117-118.

metaphoric displacement. Their perspective unfairly reduces metaphor and symbolism to metonymic displacement, rather than permitting that Anger's images expand or deepen the investigation of meaning. Again, the insistence on seeing "actual homosexual acts" derives from the Hollywood model of visibility, the closet model, in which only "actual," or denoted acts work in accordance with gay liberation. The emphasis of LGBTQ film history on displacement of "actual gay acts" hinders the analysis of avant-garde film in general, and it reinscribes connotation as the hierarchically inferior signifying practice of homosexuality. It implies, as well, that there exists a taxonomy of "actual homosexual acts"—actual in the sense of demographically proven and denotable—that are being avoided, displaced, or repressed through abstraction. But if we continue to reduce metaphor to displacement, we not only obliterate the innovations of the avant-garde images and ways of seeing, we also end up selling Hollywood filmmakers short in their ability to work within the Code's limitation and still produce rich, multivalent representations of sexuality. And yet again, if one is seeking information about sexuality, a poetic cinema and its commentators still resist the crystallization of the image and the scene—that is, they refuse to manufacture a suitable, or satisfactory, confession of the meaning of the image. But sometimes, we see, it is the LGBTQ film historians who request such an articulation of the text.

Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon* and Anger's *Fireworks* are exemplary psycho-dramas, both for their abstraction of desire as well as their intensely personal perspectives. Although Deren's film is driven by pursuit and iteration and Anger's takes the form of a single instance of fantasy or reflection, the two expand their internal inquiry deep into the sensations they investigate. In general, Maya Deren, Curtis Harrington,

James Broughton, Sidney Peterson, Gregory Markoupolos, and the early films of Anger and Stan Brakhage all dramatize the exploration of identity and desire at the level of the individual psyche, a trend that sets them apart from European and Surrealist films as well as from the American trance films they resemble. Based on their intricate, introspective constructions of desire and identity, I consider psycho-dramas as the first node in my queer genealogy through the avant-garde.

By settling on that particular classification, and reflecting briefly on their influences, my goal is not to place them better in a historical lineage but to reconstruct their difference, and their innovation, from the films around them. The search for historical progress implants an artificial teleology that culminates in the present, and I do not propose psycho-dramas as the root from which queer cinema has grown. On the contrary, I see it as one node in the genealogy. As Foucault writes, "if the genealogist… listens to history, he finds that there is 'something altogether different' behind things: not a timeless and essential secret but the secret that they have no essence, or that their essence was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms."[92] Thus, it is against that piecemeal reconstruction of a false progress narrative that I attempt to produce a queer genealogy through the avant-garde, and in which I enlist the participation of the following two groupings, psycho-dramas and, in the following chapter, the queer underground.

The Psycho-Drama

Of what are these young films dreaming? Do they dream with mirrored surfaces reflecting only the torpor of life? Is art merely the reflection of life? At what level does

[92] Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," 371.

art begin to transmogrify life? …Where we seek reflection only, there we find the red herring. [93]

- Henry Miller (1947)

Although the designation "psycho-drama," formally a portmanteau of psychological drama, is not universal, its invention and use performs a taxonomical distinction of particular interest for queer film studies. The function of the category stems directly from the films' preoccupation with the production of sexual and homoerotic subject matter, a focus that helps distinguish them from the larger category of dreamlike, atmospheric "trance" films. As I mentioned earlier, this trend of introspective filmmaking sets itself apart from European and Surrealist films, but also from the American trance films that borrow more heavily from surreal and somnambulistic dreamscapes. In distinction, as Sitney argues, psycho-drama filmmakers forge an avant-garde inquiry into subjectivity which, though not comprising a major movement, moves away from the more obvious thematic and aesthetic influences of the time.[94] Additionally, I argue, psycho-dramas in particular construct innovative representations of sexuality and erotic experience that challenge hegemonic conventions of visibility and ways of knowing or understanding sexual experience.

The films' innovations emerge through an investigation of their difference from their influences. Curtis identifies the films' production of a new, "personal" cinema,

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[93] Henry Miller, "Introduction: The Red Herring and the Diamond-backed Terrapin," in *Art in Cinema: A Symposium on the Avantgarde Film*, ed. Frank Stauffacher (New York: Arno Press, 1968), 4.

[94] Although Sitney cites some influences for the ideas behind their recognition, the categories of "trance" and "psycho-drama" films, and specifically the major distinctions between them, are ones that he develops fully within his own argument in *Visionary Film*.

commenting on their break from earlier films that pursued allegory the way that these films pursue the details of individual experience:

> The early films of Kenneth Anger, Curtis Harrington, Gregory Markopoulos and Stan Brakhage provided the first manifestation of a new sensibility that arose during the late forties and early fifties and probably constitutes America's first completely original contribution to the avant-garde film. No film-makers in the past had been prepared to probe as deeply or as specifically into the workings of their own subconscious; 'personal' subjects had been dealt with in the acceptable terms of 'universal experience', or were clothed in the redeeming guise of allegory and symbolic action (*Le Sang d'un Poète*, *Lot in Sodom*, etc.).[95]

Curtis, too, observes the uniqueness of this group of films and filmmakers, noting that they also follow Deren's work (not only in time, by a few years, but in effect). And, like Deren's description of the poetic cinema that "probes," Curtis conveys his sense of the way these films establish depth of mind as well as depth of "personal" subjects. Although I am speculating about the specific meanings of "personal" that Curtis means to imply, it is likely that he is using the term with a touch of euphemism, since the subject matter of these early films deals with sexual, erotic, and fraught relational situations. Additionally, the protagonists spend significant time in domestic spaces, homes, and complex interiors. The subject matter is also personal in the sense that the viewer observes action around one individual, and often, though not always, experiences the surroundings through the protagonist's point of view. Curtis also points out that what their European predecessors explored in a non-subjective manner, the Americans investigated as subjective experience, turning their inquiry inward to scrutinize individual experience.

I have already discussed the use of symbolism and abstraction that allows *Lot in Sodom* to glorify the very homoeroticism its own narrative condemns, but the other predecessor Curtis cites is an important one for poetic cinema in general. French

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[95] Curtis, *Experimental Cinema*, 81.

filmmaker Jean Cocteau's *Le Sang d'un Poète* (1930) anticipates several aspects of the later American films. In it, a male protagonist enters an alternate realm by falling through a mirror, ending up in a hallway of doors, behind which take place a number of surreal tableaux. In general, the scenes distress the protagonist, whose sharp agitation at encountering these memories, or perhaps fantasies, provoke him to attempt suicide. Throughout the troubling vignettes and in relation to a more extended sequence in which one street boy kills another—one he seems to admire with deep conflict—in a snowball fight, desire is a disturbance to the adult protagonist, an impulse with confusing and unpredictable referents, and a source of fear and violence.

Postwar, American avant-garde films invoke many similar elements without, as Curtis notes, coherently allegorizing the protagonist's experience. Neither do they trade in the same level of absurdity in their object-symbolism as the more Surrealist-inflected *Le Sang*. That is, I see the psycho-dramas constructing more coherent symbolic objects, but more heavily manipulated temporalities, to more of an overall ephemeral effect, even more like a dream than the dream sequences of *Le Sang*. And yet they diverge significantly from the trance films in how the filmmakers manifest internal experience. As Sitney characterizes the avant-garde before psycho-dramas: "the explosion of erotic and irrational imagery… evokes the raw quality of the dream itself, not the mediation of the dreamer."[96] While trance films produce a dreamscape for the viewer, in a sense a sort of psychosexual playground for a curious and savvy audience, psycho-dramas reproduce the dreamscape of the filmmaker-protagonist, and are possibly even critical of the

[96] Sitney, *Visionary Film*, 14.

relations between symbolic objects that characterize their personal experience. The viewer, then, is subject to the filmmaker-protagonist's subconscious experience.

The development of a subjective, dreamlike cinema in particular resonates with Henry Miller's introductory lines for the *Art in Cinema* print volume, "Of what are these young films dreaming?" "Art in Cinema" was a film series at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, ten film programs organized around different themes and featuring cutting-edge, artistic, and experimental works from the first half of the twentieth century. The *Art in Cinema* program I reference above, to which Miller contributed the introductory essay, is a print guide to the programs with interpretive essays from authors and filmmakers of that era. Miller's appreciation of avant-garde work is palpable; he goes on to rank the films that "transmogrify life" over those that "merely" reflect it, a hierarchy reminiscent of Greenberg's praise for the avant-garde. Miller argues that what the viewer experiences as realism, or realistic interpretation, is a red herring in film. Evidential realism is a distraction from a potentially strange experience, in which the viewer is open to receiving a radically different interpretation of life. His use of "transmogrify" ultimately invokes a quality of magic to the process of transformation, apt for describing the American avant-garde trends of the late 1940s and 1950s, during the "Art in Cinema" film programs. Miller prefaces the volume with praise for the avant-garde's potential to elicit an aesthetic experience, advocating that artistic transformation supercede the experience of "reflection only" in film.

It is a simple irony of Miller's emphasis on the concepts of reflection and mirrored surfaced that the psycho-dramas actually annex these symbols for their filmmaker-protagonists' own self explorations. Especially apt for the psycho-dramas,

Miller's words apply to many experimental films in the Art in Cinema programs. The American psycho-dramas include *Meshes of the Afternoon* (credited to Maya Deren and her husband at the time, Alexander Hammid, 1943), and *The Potted Psalm* (1946), a collaborative effort by James Broughton and Sidney Peterson. Other films generally classified as or alongside psycho-dramas include Gregory Markopoulos' *Swain* (1950), Stan Brakhage's *Flesh of Morning* (1956), and the aforementioned Kenneth Anger's *Fireworks*. Broughton's *Adventures of Jimmy* is troublesome not for its subject matter or narrative, but for its comic irony. [97] I read it as a psycho-drama, per the definition of the filmmaker-protagonist undertaking a filmic examination of his or her desire and the erotic textures of their interior dreamscapes. Yet even Sitney allows the boundaries of the psycho-drama to be porous, and acknowledges that as the filmmakers' careers developed, the context changes for their early work; thus, he traces a number of psycho-drama contributors into the realm of "mythopoeic" film in his literary-influenced taxonomy of the avant-garde.[98] What the above films share, however, is both the production of a dream or fantasy sequence in which the filmmaker-protagonist appears to pursue his or her own identity through an exploration, or encounter, with what appear to be his or her desires. For Sitney, the singular distinction of the psycho-drama is that the exploration of sexual identity animates the subjective experience (which often takes the form of a quest or pursuit) that dominates and unites the genre. Introspective and trippy, the dreamscapes of psycho-dramas are poetic reflections on sexual identity. And yet the mirrors in which they seek reflection—literally, the mirrors in the films—do not merely reflect back

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[97] That is, Sitney compels himself to the distinction in *Visionary Film*, because he defines psycho-dramas as foregrounding the protagonist's "quest for sexual self-discovery" (58).
[98] Sitney, *Visionary Film*, 27.

reality, but foreground, distort, and suggest the production of meaning and the texture of desire on an altogether different plane. What Sitney picks up on and reads as the protagonist coming into awareness of her specific desires, conflicts, interests and psycho-sexual associations, can also be (should be) understood as a critique of those conventions of psycho-sexual dreamscapes and in some cases a satire of the boundaries of sexual identity. Desire mingles with fear, pleasures with threat, pursuit with destruction, and meaningful symbols mingle with sometimes-comic red herrings.

What is most powerful and most enduring about the psycho-dramas, even as an admittedly porous genre, is that they trace the dreamscapes of filmmakers who refuse to capitulate to literal models of visibility to enact or visualize the co-mingling of desire and identity. Through the filmmaker's construction of an interior landscape, be it dream or fantasy, the viewer's perspective likewise moves through a personal and subjective world detached from normative reality and normative consciousness. The instances from *Meshes of the Afternoon* and *Fireworks* that I expand above are instances of this technique; so too are moments from less well-known avant-garde films such as *Adventures of Jimmy*, in which Broughton's verbal articulations are wholly undermined by his shimmering visual ironies.

Insofar as the relationship between images produces an internal grammar or logic, psycho-dramas begin to reflect psychoanalytic assumptions. Yet the films reveal a tight control over the construction of symbolism and objects on the part of the filmmaker, and so should not be read as unconscious missives, but conscious, artistic constructions that play on popular conceptions of sexuality and interiority. They may shun basic film and narrative conventions, but they do not embrace irrationality—a major distinction between

them and Surrealist influences. Part of the strength of the psycho-drama in producing a sense of interior exploration is no doubt an effect of the filmmakers acting as the protagonists in their own films. While the decision to act in one's own films is often a financial one, Sitney theorizes that it is also because the filmmakers use the medium for self-exploration, an important aspect of the "true psycho-dramas."[99] To Sitney, the camera practically functions as the analyst, urging the filmmakers to explore their interiority. I disagree on his point, however. Even as the film diary became more pronounced decades later, filmmakers are never ignorant of their hand in constructing the filmic version of their interiority, as the argument that they are exploring unconscious trends would suggest. I concede that the individualized and confessional aspects of the films resonate with the popularization of psychoanalytic theories and symbols, but I read their films as explorations of sexuality and identity amidst a field or theoretical terrain, which they are well aware is colonized by popular psychoanalytic theories and symbols. Navigating that terrain without visualizing confessions of the unconscious involves deft art, satire, and the very transmogrification of life that eschews the red herring of the psychoanalytic confession.

The two most famous psycho-dramas produce wide ranging critiques of sexual normativity, investigating the tandem operations of pleasure and danger in the protagonists' erotic experience. *Fireworks*, for its relatively lengthy examinations of the masculine physique and sexual imagery, engages in the more intelligible exploration of homosexuality, but Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon* also draws on and satirizes psychosexual symbolism, often in ways that appear sexually multivalent. The presence of

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[99] Sitney, *Visionary Film*, 14.

a single blooming flower, first placed (or implanted) by the inert mannequin arm of the robed and mirror-faced figure, is picked up by the first animate Deren and dropped in her lap before she drifts off to sleep, caressing her belly. Like the key and knife, the flower recurs in each of Deren's dream iterations, once being carried upstairs and placed on the bed by her husband, who then caresses her side as she had earlier. Thus, the first object placed by the mirror face is the flower, and ostensibly her pursuit of the flower, easily readable as a sign of feminine sexuality, is the first, original object she pursues in her dream state.

For Anger, whose spoken preface to *Fireworks* situates the film in psychoanalytic terms, the dalliance with unconscious confession, as in Harrington's work, is strong, and part of the authorial intent. Regardless, even the strength of direct engagement with psychoanalytic references does not foreclose the production of satire. On the contrary, it strengthens Anger's satire, instantiating his critique from within the psychoanalytic discourse. Before the opening images of *Fireworks*, Anger's smooth voice frames the context of the film, in what strikes me as an uncharacteristically direct articulation of intent: "In *Fireworks*, I released all the explosive pyrotechnics of a dream. The inflammable desires dampened by day under the cold water of consciousness… burst forth in showers of shimmering incandescence."[100] Indeed, the imagery of *Fireworks* imagines an erotic experience so intense that it manifests as the shocking and brutal beating of the protagonist at the hands of a group of sailors—in uniform, and in unison swinging the chains they use to beat him. But, as with the erection/statue that represents

[100] Anger's prologue is included on Fantoma Films' restored 2010 release: Kenneth Anger, *The Complete Magick Lantern Cycle*, DVD (San Francisco: Fantoma Films, 2010).

his potent desire, when Anger suggests that he is about to reveal something real, he uses the opportunity instead to give the viewer an image far more shimmering and incandescent than the 'true' object. The orgasm is made figural through the "milk-bath," but Anger's body is literally penetrated—from off screen, two fingers stick up into his nostrils, and when they pull out, blood gushes onto his face. The penetration (nasal) triggers the expulsion of blood. The later "milk-bath" mingles with the blood running down his chest. Anger is briefly pictured slightly sitting up, as if waking up, under a row of urinals, naked but for a sailor's cap cocked to the side of his head. The sailors' violent and sexually motivated attack literally reaches into Anger's core; they use their hands to dig into the gore of his open chest, ostensibly to tear out his heart. In the place of the heart, however, is a ticking metronome. Buried deep inside him is not a "real" heart at all, but a mechanical "ticker," smeared with blood but ticking away. In contrast to the more definitive destruction of Deren's protagonist—whose husband finds her dead on a chair in her sitting room, presumably cut by the knife and mirror shards that so disturbed her dream state—Anger's protagonist survives his engagement with the dream world. Although the fates revealed through each films' deep (and sometimes literal) probing of the protagonists' inner worlds differ, both representations dramatically cut short the promise of full exposure that such a psychological probing suggests. Both filmmakers ultimately shun the literal confession that an exploration of their protagonists' interiority suggests as a natural conclusion. They do so in part by preventing their protagonists' explicit identifications, exploring their fantasies within dreamlike, alternate realities. Most importantly, they both stage a jarring collision of fantasy with reality: Anger's "ticker" confronts the viewer with punning humor, revealing the *un*reality of the beating;

Deren, in contrast, shows her dark fantasy ultimately overcoming the protagonist's reality. Though the films suggest different outcomes to violent imagery, neither one subjects the protagonist to direct articulation of the relationship between erotic and violent imagery, or the pleasures and dangers of their interior experience.

Broughton navigates satire differently from Deren and Anger, in a sense producing the most direct and scathing indictment of psychoanalytic sexual types. In his narrated search to find his place in the city, the naïve Broughton takes up psychoanalysis to have the analyst restore him to his true self. The end of the film finds him very ironically happy, restored to the reproductive family in the country, surrounded by women in the form of, presumably, his wife and daughters. Given the larger context of Broughton's sexual experience, which LGBTQ historians explain would locate him as a bisexual in the limited typology of legible sexual identities, *Adventures of Jimmy* becomes quite an overlooked early film, as if the element of satire were too risky to consider when constructing a narrative of queer cinema coming out of the closet.

Like Cocteau's *Le Sang* before them, the psycho-dramas also rely heavily on object symbolism. Sexuality is figured as agitation, a dispersed sense of arousal that is not poetic but sharply incurred through the protagonists' encounters with (or creations of) various surreal or distorted scenes. Yet the psycho-dramas break from European and American predecessors, and take a different orientation toward the citation of popular psychoanalytic theories and symbols. They are part of my genealogy because they challenge visibility, and in so doing they yield new constructions, and critiques, of sexual identity that avant-garde and LGBTQ historical narratives overlook. They invert the closet model of visibility by producing a visibility that is opaque but richly descriptive.

Also, they satirize psychoanalytic symbolism but, even more, they satirize the logic of displacement, negation, and repression that issue from the closet model of visibility, and imply the existence of a buried truth. Overall, I argue that psycho-dramas break the illusion that visibility yields truth, and, in particular, that sexual visibility yields sexual truth. It is the oblique, distorted, and anti-normative relationship between visibility and truth that I trace through plot points in American avant-garde history along the primary axis of homosexuality.

My reading of psycho-dramas also anticipates a group of films and filmmakers that emerge in the early 1960s, widely known as the "Underground." Representations of sexuality in the Underground differ significantly, but articulate a sort of debt to the psycho-dramas for establishing a depth of experience that the Underground shuns. Not all of the underground films intersect with the histories of LGBTQ film, but the imbrication of the two again makes for an interesting node in my historical inquiry. Structured as a genealogy, I ask not how or through what means the psycho-dramas led to the underground, but in what ways they produce each other as nearly opposing poles of sexual representation. In the process, I focus specifically on the films that have received the most "queer" attention, and have encountered censorship and prohibition forces that exceed the transgressions of Hollywood and the psycho-dramas. These films, although very different from one another, form a slightly more coherent group, which I dub the queer underground.

Chapter 3: The Queer Underground

Sexuality Comes to the Surface

The next node of my queer genealogy through the avant-garde forms a more cohesive subculture than the psycho-dramas. The 1960s Underground scene is emblematic of a particular aspect of the Sixties counter-culture, during the beginning of a decade marked by social unrest and cultural upheaval. Several forms of radical cinema developed during this era and used the medium for direct political engagement, such as Newsreel and educational documentaries, but the Underground has stronger connections with the avant-garde film world. Underground films also occupy a major point in LGBTQ film histories because of their frank representations of queer sexualities.

Where psycho-dramas thwart the revelation of the "true" reality of the protagonist by foregrounding the construction of visibility as an aspect of camera perspective and formal technique, Underground films foreground the performance of visibility. In so doing, their works suggest that depth, particularly in relation to sexuality, is an effect of performance and perspective. Thus, not only does the Underground foreground its own performance, it also works against the films of the previous decade, which seemed to offer insight into the depths of the modern sexual subject.

The Underground primarily refers to films being made in New York City, but the Northern California Beatnik contingent, itself emulating jazz culture, shows a notable influence in the Underground's celebration of ensemble casts and improvisation. Additionally, Kenneth Anger returned from some time spent in France to take up residence in New York, effectively relocating from his West Coast and psycho-drama-

defined past. The first film he made in New York, *Scorpio Rising* (1963), has become an exemplar of the Underground, just as *Fireworks* (1947) is for psycho-dramas. Meanwhile, as avant-garde film culture was developing in New York, the location of both Maya Deren, until her death in 1961, and the major film society, Cinema 16. Underground filmmakers and artists overlapped with other emergent avant-garde classifications—the New American Cinema, for example, is a filmmaking collective organized by several avant-gardists with the idea of supporting each other's independent filmmaking practices—but the Underground implies transgressions specific to the urban, bohemian lifestyle and its subcultural aspects, both gritty and glamorous, that encompass residents of the Chelsea Hotel, members of Andy Warhol's Factory, and others in their milieu.[101] Artists mingled with hustlers, actresses with junkies, rock stars with drag queens, and the artistic scene produced a distinctly blasé approach to sexual context, drug use, and prostitution as well as wealth and celebrity.

While one line of avant-garde filmmaking—if one could be construed as such—continued after the psycho-dramas to pursue a tradition of poetic, introspective cinema, and another line of radical cinema emerged in the 1960s from minority political groups seeking to gain control over their own representations, the Underground straddles a line between political engagement and disavowal, neither creating films as part of an educational or consciousness-raising endeavor, nor embracing a concept of art cinema that is timeless and avowedly apolitical. Even the title, the Underground, reflects a self-

[101] Formed in 1960, the New American Cinema group consisted of over twenty avant-garde filmmakers, led by Jonas Mekas, who sought to support and distribute their own indepently made films. For Mekas' narrative of the founding of The Film-makers' Co-op, see Jonas Mekas, "The Film-Maker's Cooperative: A Brief History," The Film Maker's Cooperative | The New American Cinema Group, http://filmmakerscoop.com/about/history (accessed April 10, 2012).

aware milieu: a hip group of artists who shunned self-exploration in order to document their observations of the alternative world they inhabited.[102] In *Allegories of Cinema*, David James offers a specific schema for the Underground. According to his timeline, *Pull My Daisy* (Robert Frank and Alfred Leslie, 1959) marks the beginning of the Underground as a film wave, *The Chelsea Girls* (Andy Warhol, 1966) marks the end, and Michael Snow's ground-breaking *Wavelength* (1967) confirms the end of the Underground as it inaugurates the next movement in avant-garde cinema, "structural film."[103] The filmmakers whose works are best known as part of the specifically queer milieu that helps give the Underground its sense of sexual transgression are Kenneth Anger, Jack Smith, and Andy Warhol. They form the core filmmakers of what I call "the queer underground" in order to highlight its role in my alternative genealogy. Film scholar Juan Suárez also encapsulates the work of these three filmmakers together in one of very few monographs on gay sexuality in the underground, *Bike Boys, Drag Queens, and Superstars: Avant-Garde, Mass Culture, and Gay Identities in the 1960s Underground Cinema*.[104] Other filmmakers whose work is often drawn into this queer sub-group, although the incorporation of sexual content into their films was not always

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[102] Broad definitions of underground film also reach back into the late 1950s to claim some films and filmmakers generally after the wave of psycho-dramas. The designation sometimes even extends into the 1940s to include Maya Deren, essentially honoring her influence while obscuring the psycho-dramas; hence her legacy as the "mother of underground film." As is often the beauty of these marginal film taxonomies (including "queer cinema"), the term underground, like avant-garde, experimental, and independent (all of which overlap) means something particular in a specific time and place, but grows exponentially from its original usage, and gets resignified in different eras and film contexts.

[103] David E. James, *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 94.

[104] Juan A. Suárez, *Bike Boys, Drag Queens, and Superstars: Avant-Garde, Mass Culture, and Gay Identities in the 1960s Underground Cinema* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996).

coherently homosexual, are Shirley Clarke, in particular for her work about a black, gay, hustler, *Portrait of Jason*; George Kuchar, the prolific filmmaker whose *Hold Me While I'm Naked* (1966) explores sexuality, alienation, and comic despair in the postwar era, stand out among the more comic and absurdity-oriented films of the era; and Ron Rice, a Beatnik filmmaker whose *Chumlum* (1964) is a brightly colored, textured short film portrait of the making of one of Jack Smith's films, *Normal Love* (1963).

The cultural tumult of the 1960s brought about changes in filmic representations of sexuality, and homosexuality was among the first topics to begin arousing controversy in relation to the Production Code. While the Hollywood Production Code was deteriorating, it was underground filmmakers who incurred frequent obscenity charges and municipal-led censorship efforts. Thus, representations of homosexuality in particular are roped into performing for anti-censorship efforts outside the film industry, and that is the primary aspect of my investigation of the queer underground.

In contrast with the films of the previous decade, the queer underground brought explicit sexual content, nudity, gender ambiguity, and bohemian subject matter to the visual surface of their films. If psycho-dramas invert the model of Hollywood visibility by obscuring definitive meanings in the depths of connotation, the underground offers up all the queer images, figures, and dialogue that the psycho-dramas only dream about. And, in the midst of visualizing a number of the taboos from which Hollywood films still shied away, the underground also demonstrates that its subjects resist full articulation and complete confession. Instead, they flaunt and tease the anticipated interest of the viewer, in particular through the self-aware performances of the actors. Underground filmmakers only occasionally appear in their own work, and rarely as the protagonist, further

breaking the link between the avant-garde camera and the personal perspective that so marks the psycho-drama.

Warhol's *My Hustler* (1965), among his other films from the mid-1960s, follows a loose narrative, but that makes it more narrative than a number of other Warhol films from this period. Paul America plays the beautiful young friend of a wealthy man, openly homosexual, who brings him to his beach house with hopes of eliciting his services—America is apparently the coyest of hustlers. His performance revolves around an extended sequence of his preening in front of a mirror after a shower, during which time multiple other visitors to the beach house, men and women, attempt to enlist his talents, openly competing with each other in front of America. Throughout, America continues to comb his hair and dress as though he is politely ignoring the sexual subtext of their conversation. He evades direct questioning about his sexuality or the services he provides, coyly hiding behind a thin façade of innocence and naiveté as he performs his desirability not just for the characters, but for the camera. Ultimately, it is to the camera that the hustler is truly committed, or for whom he is enlisted to perform. While evading the advances of everyone visiting the beach house (and most neighbors), America puts his stylized appearance, and his vanity, on full display for the camera, whose steady gaze is trained on America for the entire ambiguous conversation and preening sequence that takes place in the tight space of a bathroom.

Stylization of appearance and performance for the camera mark the performances in the queer underground, even when the theatrical players are not actors in Warhol's Factory. Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising* (1963) is iconic of the gay underground and remains one of the most widely screened experimental films. His oeuvre has an internal

coherence that is not best conveyed through a simple comparison of *Fireworks* and *Scorpio Rising*; as his only "psycho-drama," *Fireworks* is really the outlier. As Anger's career progressed after his first film, his use of rich colors, religious/occult iconography, ensemble casts of queers, artists, and musicians, and his invocation of fascism-fringed, occult subcultures are increasingly distanced from the more linear narrative of *Fireworks*' dreamscape. *Scorpio Rising* features a similarly extended sequence of male vanity and preparation, though not nearly occupying the length or centrality of *My Hustler*. The main character from the biker subculture that Anger documents in the film, who calls himself Scorpio, is filmed preparing for the bikers' annual party before the last race of the season. Five full minutes of *Scorpio Rising* are spent on Scorpio's preparation for the bikers' Halloween party, beginning by pulling leather boots over his bare feet, buckling three buckles on an intricate wrist cuff, putting on sunglasses, snorting pure methamphetamine powder, changing his sunglasses, posing for the camera with a handgun, and finally kissing his scorpion medallion for good luck before tucking it into his leather jacket.

Scorpio Rising also tells a story, but the relation of events and causality are looser and more fragmented than in *Fireworks* or *My Hustler*. The film presents largely un-staged footage of a biker community, but includes no interviews or conversation, no diegetic dialogue at all. The tone oscillates between celebratory and ominous without ruling out either interpretation; the dialogue is produced through the juxtaposition of film footage of the subculture, incorporated images from popular culture, and a pop music soundtrack. Anger's documentation is a steady, observational view of the subjects, but reveals the vanity and artifice of the bikers' aesthetic, their autoeroticism at times

bleeding into homoeroticism as the young male subjects preen themselves into Brando-inspired specimens of stylized masculinity. Anger's camera elicits and encourages their performance, its (homo)erotic gaze documenting their muscled arms, torsos, and tight pants. As the lilting voices of several female singers provide musical accompaniment, the soundtrack continues to ironically illuminate the film action. Willie Nelson's "He Walks with Me," for example, becomes the ironic audio track juxtaposed with images of the bikers arriving at an old church for their annual Halloween party; the candid images are intercut with Hollywood film images of Jesus walking with his disciples. The kitschy country tune extends the visual parallel Anger establishes between Scorpio and the bikers, and Jesus and his disciples. By observing Scorpio's extended preparation and recording the other bikers mugging for the camera, Anger foregrounds the investment in surface appearance that their hyper-masculine, aggressive biker subculture involves.

The construction of masculinity is made most plain through the elaborate costumes and exaggerated gestures of Anger's subjects. The young men's personal vanity is just one aspect of their meticulous and ritualistic investment in appearances, in this case, the aesthetics of their subculture. They customize and groom their motorcycles, then attend to their bodies with a similar care and detail. They appear to take a vain pleasure in being filmed as they adorn themselves and their motorcycles, and during their Halloween party they perform grandly for one another and for the camera. The party marks the end of the racing season, which will culminate the next day in the very last race of the year, during which one of the anonymous motorcyclists actually crashes and dies.

Anger's choice to adorn the film with a soundtrack of popular music also displaces the meaning of diegetic noise; his focus on the ritualistic production of façade

does not rely on what the characters say or what they might "think"—that is, the film cares not about their opinions, nor does it probe the depths of their identities. Anger just focuses on what they do with their subcultural decorations and ornaments, and how they perform for the camera. In a sense, their studied, aesthetic performance is the real object of inquiry, the real thing of interest in *Scorpio Rising*. Meanwhile, Scorpio delivers a methamphetamine-driven sermon on the dark and abandoned pulpit, seemingly for no other spectators than Anger and his camera. The content of the sermon is apparently of no real interest to Anger, as the scene plays without diegetic sound. The interest is on the images, their irony drawn out through a pop music soundtrack, and the emphasis is on how the characters perform, not on what the subjects of this quasi-documentary have to say. The construction of their identity appears not in the depths of their psyches, but on their bodily surfaces. Their identities are not made visible through introspection, but through adornment and decoration. Sexualized identity is not simply brought to the surface through the filmmaker's skillful construction, it originates on the surface, and the camera just watches the performance of subcultural identities as they are made to materialize. After the film began screening, *Scorpio Rising* met censorship trouble and was involved in an obscenity trial for its alleged homosexual content.[105] However, Anger won the case and the film was approved by the state, unlike the impending fate of another underground film by New York performance artist and filmmaker, Jack Smith.

The materialization and production of subcultural identity is far stranger in Smith's *Flaming Creatures*, but only because its referents are so particular to the

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[105] Kenneth Anger, "Commentary on Scorpio Rising," in *The Complete Magick Lantern Cycle*, DVD (San Francisco: Fantoma Films 2010). See also J. Hoberman, *On Jack Smith's* Flaming Creatures *(and Other Secret-Flix of Cinemaroc)* (New York: Granary Books and Hips Road, 2001), 43-44.

aesthetic world of Smith's creation. The adornment and stylization of Smith's characters, "creatures" in the form of old Hollywood actresses, vampires, and other exotic figures from the second tier of film studio productions, largely takes place off screen, and the action of the film is comprised of sequences of their festive interactions. In the first minute of *Flaming Creatures*, characters pose sensually in front of the camera, one stepping in front of the other for a more prominent position; the impending arrival of "Ali Baba" is announced by a man's off-screen whisper, audio borrowed from *Ali Baba and the 40 Thieves* (1944); and the film's title and cast list are displayed on handwritten placards, partially obscured by a long-haired brunette and a man with an oversized white fez.[106] In the second minute, the grainy black and white images lose their context as an assortment of body parts are filmed like a fast-paced farce of Willard Maas's *Geography of the Body* (1943), an un-ironic examination of sexuality and relational intimacy in an earlier era. A character pulls off her underwear from beneath her dress; a man, apparently lying on the ground, briefly wags his penis; and a woman with Cleopatra-inspired eyeliner purses her lips in close-up. The Middle Eastern music on the soundtrack accentuates the exotic set and histrionic performances as it references schlocky, Orientalist sets of Hollywood B-films. The credit sequence leisurely progresses, and more characters arrive at what is swiftly becoming a cramped party. This slow beginning, lingering on the credit placards, parallels the preparation and preening sequences in other underground films.

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[106] Hoberman, *On Jack Smith's* Flaming Creatures, 11. The beginning dialog and music are audio from *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* (Arthur Lubin, 1944), a Hollywood B-film starring Smith's favored actress, Maria Montez. Montez's drag incarnation, Mario Montez (a favorite of Underground filmmakers Smith and Warhol), is prominent in *Flaming Creatures*.

The lengthy credit sequence is also important in establishing the construction of the film's very particular aesthetic, locating it within Smith's creative control and done to his satisfaction. Shot on a rooftop but set as if within a crumbling marble ballroom, the film achieves Smith's preferred look, "moldy." It is his designation for Hollywood-inspired glamour, past its prime, but still seriously devoted to itself. According to J. Hoberman, the grainy images were shot on "grossly outdated black-and-white film stock," adding to the film's sense of frenzy and the overall lack of clarity about what exactly is being featured on screen.[107] The "creatures" spend the film mugging for the camera, performing theatrically with each other in various groupings, and following Smith's organization into ensemble shots that look like portrait sittings. Although the action seems very loose, the sequences follow Smith's production notes closely, suggesting the level of control that the images actually reflect. Their fidelity to his notes also demonstrates that it is Smith's aesthetic that is constructed and manifest by the campy performers on screen, Smith's intricate construction of heavily stylized appearances, like Paul America or Scorpio, although he is not in front of the camera.

In spite of the film's loving Hollywood citations and farcical representations of gender and sexuality, *Flaming Creatures*, a series of loosely-associated segments of Hollywood decadence, would go on to incite censorship battles and minor riots throughout the 1960s. Politicians and other self-appointed moral authorities hotly criticized the film's nudity, sexual activity, and rampant cross-dressing. The film was first shown to the acclaim of early underground critics and audiences, but went on to become the object of years of litigation, ultimately reaching the United States Supreme

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[107] Hoberman, *On Jack Smith's* Flaming Creatures, 10.

Court. The Supreme Court decision to uphold the state ban of *Flaming Creatures* was a continued source of tension between conservative politicians and the justices who unsuccessfully supported repealing the ban. Through the court battles and the critical support that *Flaming Creatures* aroused from avant-garde advocates and theorists such as Susan Sontag, Smith's underground film became the symbol of a national anti-censorship campaign.

The ascendance of *Flaming Creatures* from the underground scene to the Supreme Court is an event that not only alienated Smith from filmmaking, but represents divergent forces within the avant-garde cinema subculture. By the early 1960s, a group of avant-garde filmmakers, including the legendary filmmaker, critic, and patron of the avant-garde, Jonas Mekas, formed Film-Maker's Cooperative (which has since developed into Anthology Film Archives) to house, support, and screen American avant-garde films. Mekas, still a fierce advocate of avant-garde cinema was, at that time, using avant-garde cinema as a part of his countercultural struggle against censorship laws, which were, at a practical level, interfering with the exhibition of some avant-garde films that he and other supporters and critics deemed artistically relevant. The 1960s were a controversial time for film content in general: Hollywood films had not been protected under the First Amendment since 1915, but a case in 1952 involving a European art film eventually brought the matter back to the Supreme Court, which reversed the ruling and contributed to the weakening of the Production Code.[108] Obscenity law, however, was the sticking point in the *Flaming Creatures* decision (Smith's film, of course, was made entirely outside of the Hollywood film industry), and the court reserved the right for states and

[108] Doherty, *Hollywood's Censor*, 301-303.

municipalities to limit or ban exhibition of films deemed obscene. In the name of the avant-garde, Mekas challenged censorship in order to provoke civic attention to the obscenity controversies and statutes that could potentially limit the reach of avant-garde and art cinemas. He imbued them with a righteous and poetic power, granting them the holiness of great works of art, and argued on their behalf.

Although he was once critical of films representing non-normative sexualities, Mekas had come full circle by 1963, publicly recanting earlier remarks and asserting the importance of representing homosexuality, citing its noble persistence throughout the ages and its fundamental relationship with the arts. By the time the Film-Maker's Cooperative began distributing *Flaming Creatures*, Mekas had primed himself as a fierce advocate for avant-garde works that endeavored to represent homosexuality, which he perceived as the frontline of the cultural war for sexual liberation and freedom from censorship.[109] Thus, *Flaming Creatures* was made to speak for political movements and became representative of a collective liberation movement, the meaning of its content publicly debated by judges and senators.

However, Mekas' patronage got *Flaming Creatures*, to name one example, into a mess of litigation that immediately drew the film out of filmmaker Jack Smith's control, much to his subsequent chagrin. Further, his framing of the film betrays a perspective outside that of the filmmaker, and reveals an almost coercive impulse toward assimilation that Jack Smith ended up critiquing, to no avail. Smith's perspective on Mekas is far

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[109] Jack Smith has published multiple editorials and film reviews criticizing Mekas for what Smith sees as his political deployment of *Flaming Creatures*. See, for example, Jack Smith, "Uncle Fishook and the Sacred Baby Poo-Poo of Art," in *Wait for Me at the Bottom of the Pool: The Writings of Jack Smith*, eds. J. Hoberman and Edward Leffingwell (London: Serpent's Tail, 1997).

more critical; to Smith, the story of Mekas' advocacy is not simply that he labored in service of the avant-garde, but that he advanced his agenda for avant-garde cinema at the expense of the spirit—and the commercial viability—of *Flaming Creatures*. Regardless of the debate that resulted between Smith and Mekas, it was through his advocacy in the avant-garde cinema world that Mekas entered into mainstream cultural debates over art and censorship. It was likely not that Mekas sought mainstream assimilation for the film, but that he sought to secure the right to exhibit such work. Yet in so doing, he exploited the film's potential to arouse controversy in order to engage in mainstream debates over censorship. During a screening of *Flaming Creatures* at The New Bowery Theater in 1963, there was a police raid to shut down the film. Mekas was arrested, along with Florence Karpf, the person taking tickets that night, and filmmaker Ken Jacobs, who was managing the theater. The three became defendants in The People of the State of New York vs. Kenneth Jacobs, Florence Karpf, and Jonas Mekas.[110] The state brought no charges against Smith, although it was his film, and he was not permitted to attend the trial.[111] Meanwhile, Mekas continued to ascend in anti-censorship, countercultural status as the film's public defender. He organized screenings through student and anti-censorship groups across the country throughout the 1960s, and the film became an emblem of social change, with the specific support of anti-censorship, sexual liberation, and generalized anti-establishment campaigns.

The incorporation of *Flaming Creatures* into the mainstream paradigm of visibility represents an unusually spectacular transformation of an avant-garde work into a political tool. In subsequent decades, many more films have become lightning rods for

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[110] Hoberman, *On Jack Smith's* Flaming Creatures, 42-45.
[111] Smith, "Uncle Fishook and the Sacred Baby Poo-Poo of Art," 107.

censorship controversies, but debates are staged over the use of government funding, rather than the specific obscenities produced in the works. For example, both Barbara Hammer's *Nitrate Kisses* (1991) and Todd Haynes' *Poison* (1991) were criticized for receiving grants from the National Endowment for the Arts; neither work, however, has had its content inflated into polarizing political debates between conservative and progressive government forces. Additionally, neither has galvanized alternative film worlds, avant-garde or independent, to the extent of *Flaming Creatures* through Jonas Mekas' involvement. In recent years, as queer visibility has become an issue of mainstream awareness, queer sexual content is no longer the cause of controversy that it once was. However, the history of that shift is still being constructed through films and scholarship, and it is to the contemporary production of queer film history that I now turn.

Historiographical Reflections on the Queer Genealogy

The next level of my intervention into the history of LGBTQ film is historiographical, relating to the construction of history through archival materials and secondary resources. Throughout this project, I have been particularly interested in wresting psycho-dramas and the queer underground from their full incorporation into the standard progress narrative of visibility. By analyzing these two knots of activity in the avant-garde, apart from that mainstream narrative from historical repression to mainstream liberation, I have not only drawn out their untimely contributions—untimely, that is, from the perspective of the progress narrative—but the astute commentary they produce against the hegemonic discourses of sexuality and visibility. Part of my project,

seeking to write a genealogy of the queer avant-garde that presents the material differently from the dominant histories of LGBTQ film as well as histories of the avant-garde, has been conducting a side-project on the study of historical writing: a study of the story of history as it constructs the core films in my genealogy. Historiography pays attention not only to contemporaneous accounts of the films, their reviews, production notes, exhibition files, and so on, seeking to represent them as they were, but also to the manner in which contemporaneous accounts enter into the larger historical narrative, into which the films themselves are folded.

Addressing the general challenge to doing scholarship on "alternative cinemas," i.e., movies that readers cannot easily obtain or screen, David James prefaces *Allegories of Cinema* in 1986:

> the number of these invisible films is unknown even to those who most vigorously pursue them. That invisibility is an institutional event whose ramifications are political. The collusion of the film critical establishment with corporate industries in resisting the propagation of the work discussed here is the mark of its threat and also of its importance.[112]

Casting alternative cinemas as an invisible cinema, often ignored by film scholarship and the film industry, he argues that the virtue in the study of non-commercial film is in part due to the commercial and political challenge it poses to the mainstream. We could construe reverence of the avant-garde, or any "invisible cinema," as overly general and romanticizing. In order to avoid romanticizing obscurity and marginality, I want to remind the reader that scholarship on commercial cinema, like commercial cinema itself, is a political and economic matter. Scholarship conducted on mainstream cinema and within the mainstream paradigm of visibility reproduces the status quo even where it

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[112] James, *Allegories of Cinema*, ix.

seeks to challenge it. But the link between non-commercial cinema, invisibility, and politics is also subject to reproduction through film scholarship—and this is where I conclude my analyses of psycho-dramas and the queer underground, by revisiting the difference between genealogy and history, and beginning to produce a revisionist historiography of these two genealogical nodes.

In the first three chapters, I have focused on the framing of Hollywood and avant-garde histories with respect to notions of societal repression of homosexuality, and the specific influence of the Production Code. However, the histories out of which I construct my own critique do not commonly thematize sexual representation. Obviously, the theoretical perspectives that film scholars espouse will affect their attention to sexuality, implicitly or explicitly; it follows that the biases of both avant-garde and LGBTQ film historians contour their decisions about the importance of non-normative sexual representation, including questions of whether or not queer sexualities warrant thematization distinct from a general discourse of sexual representation. Further, the decisions that historians make about how to acknowledge sexuality in general help to determine the extent to which sexuality is incorporated into film history at all. The construction of film history in relation to sexuality forms the subject matter of the lesbian-feminist films and videos that I review in the following chapter.

But first, major avant-garde historians are generally forthcoming about their criteria for classifying historical movements, though that does not exempt them from overlooking others. David James details his materialist approach in the brilliant *Allegories of Cinema*; P. Adams Sitney clearly posits that his major theoretical influences for *Visionary Film* stem from literary studies, and that the unifying aspect of his history

of the American avant-garde is its relationship with Romanticism. In *Bike Boys, Hustlers, and Superstars*, Juan Suárez performs a rare move in arguing for the emphasis on representations of sexuality in the New York underground. However, he also takes an overarching materialist approach in his study of *how* sexuality matters. The historical perspective of gay liberationist authors such as Vito Russo shape their inquiry, as well, as I argued in the first chapter. Even the stance that Jonas Mekas and other supporters take with respect to *Flaming Creatures* can be shown to shape their advocacy, defining the terms through which they deem the film worthy of support. The theoretical framework for my distinct genealogy seeks films that undermine the repressive hypothesis and manage, however partial or marginal their intervention into mainstream culture, to resist the full reinscription of the closet paradigm, disrupting the conception of visibility as a direct expression of truth. In so doing, they refuse to denote sexuality within the conventions of visibility prescribed by the progress narrative.

Past historians of the avant-garde, for the most part, do not thematize sexuality unless they sense they are unable to analyze the films without considering the role of sexual themes. Even then, however, their thematization of sexual content ironically risks abstracting it from its literal signification. *Flaming Creatures* is a case in point; Jonas Mekas and other film critics inspired readings of the film that potentially inflated the filmmaker's concerns to epic proportions. And, later, we find LGBTQ film historians reframing the works for not being literal enough in their signification of sexuality, as we see Benshoff and Griffin arguing about Anger's *Fireworks*. In other, perhaps less intentional cases, the scope of the author's historical narrative does not accommodate information about the non-normative subject matter. If the scholarship does permit a

conversation about sexuality, the theoretical perspective of the historical account will no doubt color the manner in which the information is explained, or how its presence and absences are characterized. And all of that may strike most as perfectly fine. Under the laissez faire assumption that scholarship can be about whatever it wants to be, we might just make note of the difference in my own project and move on. But there are politics at stake in the question of how history is constructed, and the decisions to include or not include—even the ability to see homoerotic, or homosexual, or in other ways "queer" content shatters the allusion of neutral and unbiased scholarship. Not only is the genealogy I construct biased—I hope I have been forthcoming in explaining what I am looking for in history, and what I have found—but it is also an effect of present circumstances, both contemporary ways of seeing or reading sexuality that comes from being schooled in feminist, gender, and queer theory, but also stemming from a dissonance I observe between different "types" of queer cinema, namely, those that seek typologies and assimilation into them, and those that resist, refuse, or satirize the construction of sexual typologies through visual culture. But constructing an alternative genealogy also requires reading historiography carefully, attentive to patterns of silence and evasion in the histories of the avant-garde.

For example, decades before Parker Tyler's and Vito Russo's first endeavors to thematize "homosexuality in the movies," avant-garde historians had the task of reflecting the content of marginal film with some accuracy. Designations such as "personal" and "homosexual themes" are incorporated into histories with little expansion on the effects of those recurrent themes, and allusions to homosexuality may be suspiciously brief. Thus, we read for homosexuality in the subtext of hegemonic

histories, based on what we know of the film content and cohorts of filmmakers. In some cases, the film groupings and classifications seem to be made in relation to sexual themes. For example, James considers *Fireworks* an underground film; Curtis perhaps lingers on the designation of the "personal" films of the psycho-dramatists; and even Sitney's relatively progressive attention to the psycho-dramas' pursuit of sexual identity comes shrouded in more abstract and Romantic classifications.

Hegemonic histories simply are not anti-homophobic to the extent that contemporary queer theory projects are designed to be. As a result, part of the work of the LGBTQ film historian is to perform anti-homophobic analyses of existing historical scholarship. Thus, in this era, a queer, avant-garde genealogy involves an element of historiographical work that attends to the perspectives animating all narratives of film history, avant-garde and Hollywood alike, even as it forges its own ground amidst their teleological constructions of repression to representation.

Concrete examples are helpful in the reexamination of historiography. As I note in the previous chapter, film scholars and filmmakers such as David Curtis, Richard Dyer, and Barbara Hammer each give accounts of the sexual content of *Lot in Sodom*, producing a slight discrepancy in the status of Watson and Webber's sexuality. Curtis does not address it, Dyer suggests that evidence is inconclusive, and Hammer claims that one of the filmmakers was gay. Further readings of *Lot in Sodom* illustrate the ambiguity of how to treat the film's sexual content in a scholarly way. Contemporary critics generally agree that the visual stimulation of male homoeroticism and debauchery subordinates the plot of the biblical tale. Parker Tyler argues that the film is simply too homoerotic to successfully condemn the homosexuality it represents across its imagery

and narrative, writing that the filmmakers devoted their most "creative accents to depict the sensual responses of the male homosexuals of Sodom."[113] The pleasures offered by *Lot in Sodom* were too obvious, despite narrative circumscription, but the narrative proved unable to sufficiently contain (or condemn) homoerotic imagery. Decades later, reports from queer film scholars Harry Benshoff, Sean Griffin, and Richard Dyer echo Tyler's impression, adding their analyses of *Lot in Sodom* to their own constructions of queer film history. Benshoff and Griffin simply take it for one of the first queer films, and Dyer, in an admittedly personal response, writes that the film "feels like a celebration of gayness" rather than the condemnation compelled by the original tale—and the cultural context of the film. As we can see, this element of historiographical revision is also a place for the authors of a new queer history to locate their own investments in queer film.

Part of my intervention in using a new theoretical approach is to be able to construct a genealogy of the queer avant-garde without falling into the teleological trap of the progress narrative of queer film history. In short, I hope the queer genealogy through the avant-garde that I have traced in this and the previous chapter posits an alternative frame for the history of queer cinema, one that resists the determination of current LGBTQ-themed films within existing taxonomical structures, and refuses to measure them against the yardstick of mainstream visibility.

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[113] Tyler, *Screening the Sexes*, 128.

Chapter 4: The Lesbian New Wave

Lesbian-Feminist Film on the Margins

The final node I will explore in the genealogy of queer cinema is a group of films made during the 1990s, linked in their mutual concern for lesbian, feminist representations in cinema, as well as by their refusal or inability to be incorporated into mainstream commercial channels. Through this cluster of films, I renew concerns about dueling paradigms of visibility and the construction of a teleological historical narrative from the previous three chapters, and propose another dimension to the success of the New Queer Cinema in the 1990s. Here, I examine a cinema that is anti-normative but does not romanticize the margins; postmodern but politically engaged; and queer activist but not dismissive of lesbianism. Further, the films that make up this corpus of lesbian-feminist work offers evidence of the diverse lesbian-feminist praxis, now often overlooked, that underwrites the surge of artistic queer activism in the early 1990s. After distinguishing them from the New Queer Cinema, I preface my readings of several films with brief analyses of the major sightlines—feminist, avant-garde, and sexual—that come together in the advent of a distinct wave of lesbian-feminist cinema.

As I argue in the introduction, my perspective emphasizes the impact on film history of the New Queer Cinema's success within more mainstream commercial cinema. Here, I continue to explore the effect of that success, not only for how it influences the historical narrative of queer cinema as a loose genre, but also for how it has helped embed gay male subject matter at the center of that genre. Here, I forge the next node of a queer genealogy through the avant-garde by restoring scholarly attention to a wave of

lesbian experimental filmmaking that knowingly problematizes each of the following factors: film history, commercial filmmaking, representations of gender, and the construction of sexual identity. Lesbian experimental filmmakers from this wave each address the scarcity of lesbian representation in history without reinscribing its repression through the totalizing discourse of lesbian invisibility. Further, they produce representations of lesbianism but resist positing those representations as unequivocal means to liberation. The films I review in this chapter form the backbone of a new conception of sexual representation, one that takes other aspects of difference into account and refuses to cast its representations as redress for historical repression. Consequently, these films are on the margins of the New Queer Cinema: anti-normative and experimental, but not subject to assimilation into the mainstream paradigm of LGBTQ visibility.

The films I have chosen to examine most closely in this chapter hail from the 1990s, and sometimes come together, in various pairings or groupings, in scholarly investigations of lesbian experimental film works from that time period. Yet the films address lesbian invisibility from diverse perspectives, and the filmmakers' relationships with film history are also major dividing points in some cases. What unites them is not simply their time period, or a demographic commonality among the filmmakers. Doubtless, their relationships and identifications to the category of "lesbian" or category of "woman" are different in unpredictable ways. But what unites them is their explicit address of invisibility in a visual medium; and their turning of their own cameras, the personal perspective in each film, onto the entirety of film history.

That said, the films share particular technical devices that certainly are not limited to lesbian feminist filmmaking but do offer some opportunities for comparison of film aesthetics. Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman* (1996), Su Friedrich's *Hide and Seek* (1996), Barbara Hammer's *The Female Closet* (1998), and Sadie Benning's *If Every Girl Had a Diary* (1990) each weave documentary and archival footage with fictional narratives and autobiography. The filmmakers appear in their films, some with small, scripted parts, and others as the only figure on screen, but beside a comparison of their formal similarities, it is the way they each thematize lesbianism that stages a productive intervention into the discourse of lesbian invisibility. They have a number of surface (not superficial) similarities, or aesthetic, technical, practical, formal similarities. Here, I curate several lesbian-themed films and videos of the 1990 into a theoretical conversation with one another. The films offer divergent perspectives on what it means to represent lesbianism, and some outwardly appear more in line with the "repressive hypothesis" than others. I unite them not to present a coherent perspective, but to display the multiplicity of perspectives, and to restage their dramatic interplay from the viewpoint of my alternative genealogy through the avant-garde. Now intercut with feminist and queer sexual discourses, the avant-garde perspective represents one of multiple lines of sight I trace throughout the chapter.

It was during the same general period as the New Queer Cinema that a number of lesbian, feminist experimental filmmakers and video artists made their first and, in some cases, their most popular and influential works. Filmmakers Sadie Benning, Cheryl Dunye, Su Friedrich, and Barbara Hammer, artists still working today, each draw from documentary film styles, forms of montage, autobiographical material, and a background

in queer activism. They represent a range of perspectives, but there are major lines of commonality running through their work in the 1990s. Moreover, their representations of lesbianism critically disrupt the discourse of lesbian invisibility (even as they explore its realities). The means through which they renegotiate the terms of lesbianism and visibility, in most cases through constructions of lesbian history or lesbian past, and the overlap of fiction and autobiography destabilizes the very ground—that is, the visible—on which the argument of lesbian invisibility is made.

I refer to these lesbian, feminist avant-garde films and videos, broadly, as the Lesbian New Wave. I do so namely to distinguish them from the margins of the New Queer Cinema, where they are relegated by the progress narrative that aligns mainstream success with visibility. I also invoke the terminology of the New Wave to cite one of B. Ruby Rich's forgotten suggestions for the New Queer Cinema, the "queer new wave." While that extends to an invocation of the French New Wave that is perhaps more apt with the inclusion of films such as Gregg Araki's *The Living End* (whose citations of famous French New Wave director Jean-Luc Godard are direct), I intend the term also as a lesbian reclamation of principles of French New Wave filmmaking with the added dimensions of self-conscious gender and sexual critique. Finally, I cite the terminology made famous by the French New Wave, to demonstrate how entrenched the films and video works of the Lesbian New Wave are in cinema's history, coupled with how newly self-reflexive and critical of film conventions they are, and to formally divorce them from the pejoratively trendy resonance of the term "lesbian chic" that took hold in the mid-1990s. In short, they deserve a term outside of New Queer Cinema's periphery, to honor

their unique contribution to history amidst narratives that seek to fold them into other, more mainstream, movements.

The films I chose for this chapter bring together multiple paradigms of visibility—experimental, feminist, and queer—into a historically unique cinema. The films emerge from the intersection of multiple lines of thought; among the histories they touch are avant-garde film in the 1970s, defined by the aesthetic trend in "structural film;" feminist film theory and practice, often separate and sometimes antagonistic fields; psychoanalytic theories that challenge the very possibility of representing Woman, and feminine sexuality in particular; lesbian filmmaking, its affinities with feminist filmmaking communities, and the backlash against both amidst claims of essentializing and naturalizing female sexuality through their attempts to represent it; the feminist movement, and a distinct line of black feminist thought within it; Stonewall and gay liberation; the culture wars, the sex wars, and the AIDS epidemic. Major changes in the film industry, including the deterioration of the Production Code, and the development of new film technologies, such as the advent of video, accompanies this list of what are, in many ways, intertwined histories of American culture. Similarly, histories of film, gay and lesbian film, and avant-garde film each shade the period of change from the 1970s through 1990s with their distinct perspectives.[114] And yet it is at the nexus of female sexuality that they make their most daring contribution to a queer genealogy through the avant-garde, addressing head on the impossibility of representation, but enacting their own attempts to assert the process of visibility in constructing one's own history. They

[114] During that time period, for example, independent filmmaking, gay and lesbian-themed filmmaking, structural film, and video art were each on the rise. And although these movements have distinct histories, they necessarily developed in relation to one another, with points of antagonism as well as points of overlap.

meet theoretical claims of universal impossibility and archival evidence of a history of repression with an abundance of representations, each partial, each located in a particular time and aware of itself at a point in history, and all critical, or at least weary, of the empty promise of visibility to liberate the Lesbian New Wave.

Instead of being stifled by their proximity to all those potential fault lines, theoretical as well as practical—for these fault lines also marked divisions between people and resources, not "merely" ideas—the filmmakers I consider to be forerunners of the Lesbian New Wave asserted their own histories, rather than settling for (or even, in some cases, fighting for) marginal positions in History. And the impulse to produce one's "own" history, be it individual, collective, sub-cultural, multicultural, and so on, forms a large part of the subject matter of each of diverse Lesbian New Wave films and videos. Instead of detailing the competing histories that inform them, as I briefly sketch them below, the filmmakers weave materials together from the histories they cite, re-"writing" those histories in a new form of cinema. Overall, I argue that the lesbian, feminist, avant-garde cinema of the 1990s re-imagines queer representation, reinvigorating the queer avant-garde paradigm of visibility.

The Lesbian New Wave films and videos articulate a relationship between sexuality and visibility that draws on the concept of repression but also distances itself from complete incorporation into a progress narrative of LGBTQ visibility. As a cinema foremost concerned with lesbian representation, the Lesbian New Wave attends to multiple discourses of repression and oppression and their relationships to one another. For example, lesbian-feminist filmmaking is enabled in part by the feminist film movement, but it also responds to exclusions of lesbianism from that movement.

Similarly, the acronym LGBTQ purports to include lesbians among the spectrum of sexuality, but the Lesbian New Wave contends that specific lesbian histories are subordinated within broad inquiries into sexual representation that primarily document gay male representation. Therefore, the discourse of lesbian visibility in film history actually makes itself intelligible through the language of lesbian invisibility, underscoring its exclusion from specified discourses that seek to represent it—namely, feminist and homosexual film history—as well as from general film history.

Barbara Hammer's *The Female Closet* represents the repression of lesbians as compounded by their gender and sexuality, and she traces a history of erasure of lesbian relationships and themes from the work of women artists. She emphasizes sexuality and gender to posit a "female closet" wherein the contributions of women artists are already dismissed on the basis of their gender. Any contribution they might make *as lesbians*, Hammer argues, is erased. In contrast, Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman* explicitly names racial difference, tracing the effects of Hollywood's exclusionary history on Black women, rather than assuming a racially unmarked (read white) lesbian to be the center of her study. In so doing, she performs a subtle dislocation of sexuality as the primary identity that is effaced by Hollywood film history, arguing that African American actresses have been systematically excluded from mainstream film, and neither have the histories of their labor and representation been recuperated. So while Hammer seems to be saying that exclusion is based on shades of gender and sexuality, Dunye suggests in her film that exclusion from so-called dominant history is an effect of racial difference from the white norm, that trumps (and thus, obscures) opportunities and erasures that stem from sexuality, or sexual identity. Between those two films alone, there

is a renegotiation of the limitations to materializing a universal model of lesbian identity, repression, or experience. Yet the films were not made in comparison or simple conversation with one another; they are all part of the field of lesbian film and video in the 1990s. Their commonalities and irreconcilable aspects should be considered within the same wave of filmmaking and theory, rather than clustered together under the dismissive and faddish designation, "lesbian chic."

Su Friedrich's *Hide and Seek* merges documentary interviews with a fictional narrative of a schoolgirl on the cusp of puberty. Friedrich challenges the epistemology of lesbianism, as well as the ontology, or origin, of lesbian identity. The title, citing the children's game "hide and seek," describes her—and the viewers'—pursuit of its elusive "truth." And although *If Every Girl Had a Diary* is the oldest of this group of films, it was made by the youngest filmmaker, Sadie Benning, who adopts the confessional tone associated with girls' diaries, delivers an experimental monologue about coming of age—and coming out—in a world hostile to young, queer women. Through the tools of girlhood and Benning's precocious sense of irony, she resignifies the diary confession.

The Lesbian New Wave manifests a new point in the genealogy, along with psycho-dramas and the gay underground, of queer avant-garde cinema. Yet even as the filmmakers take up the task of perverting the visibility of sexuality that has been a defining aspect of my queer avant-garde genealogy, they also change the terms through which particular subjects are voiced and imaged. Further, in their exploration of the problematics of visibility, they also invoke multiple feminist discourses that displace and "queer" the visibility of sexual difference. They enact critiques of visibility and invisibility, primarily at the nexus of female sexuality, in the medium of their thematized

repression, bringing those poles together for the pleasures of their own constructed self-representations. They put the filmmaker back in the act of constructing her own image, but without the play of probing and obfuscation that we see in psycho-dramas. Instead, they assert partial perspectives, arguing that history is unreliable, so they will make their own representations. Sometimes they enlarge their voices, ironically imagining their perspectives as the universal voice, as in Sadie Benning's *If Every Girl Had a Diary*, but sometimes they directly address the camera, confiding to the viewer that the best they can do is make history up, as in the conclusion of Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman*. In general, they dislocate lesbian representation from the doubly marginal position that mainstream narratives condemn it to occupy.

The Lesbian New Wave represents the most overt film 'genre' to combine feminist critiques of film form with the assertion that queer subjects require queer (*qua* unconventional) forms.[115] Despite their identitarian markers, which even I reiterate to describe the films—lesbian, feminist, and experimental—little to no scholarship from within feminist and queer theory has considered this a crucial site for seeing how theories of gender and sexuality might, and might not, work together. Nor has much been written on these films as the primary site of collision between feminist and queer film aesthetics, practices, and politics. The lack of mainstream attention is partly an effect of the cinema's formal experimentation, which changes the viewing experience significantly. Consequently, it has been relatively difficult to access a lot of the films and videos of the Lesbian New Wave since the 1990s. Thus, a seemingly marginal cinema, unique in the

[115] This is a consistent point of theorization in the film and writing of Barbara Hammer. See Barbara Hammer, "The Politics of Abstraction," in *Queer Looks: Perspectives on Lesbian and Gay Film and Video*, ed. Martha Gever, John Greyson, and Pratibha Parmar (New York: Routledge, 1993).

field of representations of sexuality, identity, desire, and history, is ripe for critical intervention. Further, the mainstream gay rights movement has consolidated around a few issues of national attention, namely marriage and military service, since the surge of queer cultural activism from the 1990s; the intervention staged by the Lesbian New Wave itself into the standard narrative of visibility calls for revisitation in the contemporary moment.

In different ways, all of the films both issue and resist the call to materialize lesbian subjects, by which I mean to conjure a more fully realized lesbian representation, and to restore that representation to history through conventional means. However, the films do produce more and diverse representations of lesbian identity, directly addressing the dearth of representations with the production of lesbian images. They keep lesbian history, experience, and identification open to redefinition, instead of naming and typifying categories of lesbian representation. Ultimately, the films communicate detailed, multiple, and personal constructions of sexuality that prevent taxonomical classification at the most basic level, in terms of "good or bad" representations. They engage questions of unrepresentability, but insist upon their right to attempt, however impossible the task, their own partial representations. Politically savvy, intellectually savvy, and culturally savvy, the filmmakers together form a feminist, experimental cinema that picks up and renews the avant-garde paradigm of visibility after the avant-garde cinema world, overwhelmed by a decade of structural filmmaking, essentially closed its doors to contemporary explorations of identity, desire, and politics.[116] Not only

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[116] Manohla Dargis, "Beyond Brakhage: Avant-Garde Film and Feminism," *A Passage Illuminated: The American Avant-Garde Film 1980-1990* (Amsterdam: Foundation Mecano, 1991).

does the Lesbian New Wave enter and change the avant-garde (really, all of film culture) in the present, it also changes its historical relationship with gender, sexuality, and race.

In line with the majority of LGBTQ film histories, much of the work on lesbian representation in film focuses in the history and prominence of Hollywood cinematic conventions. Frequently, the perspectives of studies in lesbian film such as Andrea Weiss' *Vampires and Violets: Lesbians in the Cinema*, Patricia White's *unInvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability*, and Tamsin Wilton's anthology *Immortal Invisible: Lesbians and the Moving Image* prioritize commercial cinema and generally organize their histories of lesbian representation into typologies.[117] When it comes to considerations of the 1990s, however, even Hollywood-centric histories incorporate lesbian independent filmmaking, even if it only forms the fringe of their analyses. More often, however, they take the rise of the lesbian independent film as ushering in a new age of liberated representation within commercial cinema.

Patricia White, for example, in her study of lesbian representation in classical Hollywood cinema, cites videos in the same general milieu as the ones I examine in this chapter but, writing from the perspective of Hollywood-centrism, she labels them all "independent," rather than avant-garde or experimental; she also reproduces the progress

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[117] Andrea Weiss, *Vampires and Violets: Lesbians in the Cinema* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1992); Patricia White, *unInvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999); and Tamsin Wilton, ed., *Immortal, Invisible: Lesbians and the Moving Image* (New York: Routledge, 1995). There are also studies that focus less on the construction of a typology and more on the meta-narratives of lesbian representation and representability, for example: Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); Annamarie Jagose, *Inconsequence: Lesbian Representation and the Logic of Sexual Sequence* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002); and Amy Villarejo, *Lesbian Rule: Cultural Criticism and the Value of Desire* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

narrative in which queer cinema "comes out" of the repressive film history. Yet regardless of the difference in our perspectives, White's analysis of the time period stands as a uniquely thorough investigation of lesbian independent film precisely because she examines the film content through its explicit relationship with Hollywood cinema. The videos that White cites, including *Dry Kisses Only* (Kaucyila Brooke and Jane Cottis, 1990), *Meeting of Two Queens* (Cecilia Barriga, 1991), and *It Wasn't Love* (Sadie Benning, 1992), all reprise and revise tropes of Hollywood femininity through the staged interactions of lesbian viewers with iconic Hollywood actresses. "Lesbian cinephilia came out of the closet in what can be seen as a genuine genre of lesbian independent video in the early 1990s," she writes, citing the standard narrative of visibility *as* liberation.[118] Although our bodies of work only overlap in the analysis of Sadie Benning, White's argument about the lesbian revisions of classical Hollywood texts is an important structuring point for my own argument; film history—popular, documentary, and experimental—figures prominently into the multifaceted, polysemic histories that the Lesbian New Wave reconstructs. Herself writing within the decade of the Lesbian New Wave, White offers an invaluable contemporaneous perspective on lesbian video art that stages an explicit talk-back with commercial film footage: "By generating and in essence theorizing audience affect, these tapes construct new terms of lesbian visibility—intertextual and social, spectatorial and authorial… these independent works, programmed in lesbian and gay film festivals, begin to shape a counterpublic from an audience."[119] White reads the films as constructing a vocal, lesbian-identified viewing position literally, often through the filmmaker's own likeness and persona, who is

[118] White, *unInvited*, 30.
[119] White, *unInvited*, 31.

empowered to critique and take pleasure in classical Hollywood images. A similar sort of revision takes place in the films that I read, but although the filmmaker's persona plays a prominent role, Hollywood cinema is displaced, and lesbian spectatorial positions are not so neatly prescribed.

Lesbian New Wave Versus New Queer Cinema

As I argue in the preceding chapters, many artists working within the film avant-garde and against the conventions of mainstream film use aesthetic explorations and formal innovations to challenge the notion that visibility is—or should be—a straightforward virtue of cinema, attainable through artistic fidelity to shared reality.[120] Lesbian New Wave filmmakers renew the impossibility of any straightforward notion of visibility, not simply by working outside of formal conventions but through their invocation of multiple feminist analyses of gender oppression. Putting gender representation and other aspects of embodied difference at the center of their critique of visibility, the Lesbian New Wave brings another dimension to the demonstration that presence in film history does equate with action or agency, on or off screen.

New Queer Cinema and the string of independent, gay or lesbian-themed films that followed during the 1990s mark a cultural and commercial turning point for the history of queer cinema. But as I outline in the introduction, their ascension into mainstream distribution demonstrates a facility to their incorporation. Beyond their brash and confrontational tone, a defining aspect of the New Queer Cinema films is their

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[120] I use "avant-garde" broadly here, to encompass experimental and non-commercial cinemas. I use "independent" strictly in opposition to studio-funded production; for my purposes, independent is not synonymous with non-commercial.

thematization of gay film history; in that aspect, the New Queer Cinema shares a major thematic link with the experimental and short film and video works that constitute the Lesbian New Wave node of my queer genealogy. The insistence on revising film history through multiple strategies of visibility unites them in the late twentieth century expansion of queer filmmaking. Yet, as I argued in the Introduction, while the New Queer Cinema brings some experimental techniques for representing queer sexualities into a popular culture context, their acclaim obscures those queer films in the avant-garde that resisted—or were denied—assimilation into mainstream channels of distribution and exhibition.

It is not the New Queer Cinema that marks the resurgence of the genealogy of a queer avant-garde, but the corpus I distinguish as the Lesbian New Wave. Rather, New Queer Cinema is the independent movement that brought LGBTQ characters and themes into cultural awareness and popular distribution. Although New Queer Cinema films often contain experimental elements, they are predominantly narrative-driven films, contain fictional characters (though some are works of historical fiction, such as in Tom Kalin's *Swoon*), and clearly situate their elements of formal experimentation in relation to their dominant narrative sequences. In a basic description, we can say that they are films about gay characters that challenge hegemonic conceptions and representations of homosexuality. Part of their being able to do that is the incorporation of visual and audio experimental flourishes. But overall, these are films that tell stories and develop characters through narrative events.

However, in the Lesbian New Wave works I examine in this chapter, the relationships between narrative and non-narrative, fact and fiction, history and present

interweave without the determination of a totalizing narrative. Therefore, I argue that it is the lesbian experimentalists who formed a new guard of filmmakers re-presenting contemporary debates around sexuality, identity, and representation in a marginal cinema. The Lesbian New Wave, as I call these filmmakers and the larger cohort of lesbian independent cinema to which they contribute, often do not make films that produce a unified, coherent meaning or effect. In some cases, as I later show, that effect does not always come across as simply an authorial decision, but as a kind of over-production or generation of meaning that cannot be contained. It is not the same as lesbian excess because it does not over-spill a container, text, or medium, nor does it cause strife; except in regard to mainstream assimilation, which has already codified means of representing lesbianism that do well to contain it. Instead, the queer avant-garde work of the 1990s is a proliferation of lesbian representations, not the advent of edgy, gay male-themed films that comprise the New Queer Cinema.

The stardom of many high profile independent filmmakers also gives the false impression that there is a uniform trajectory from the margins to the mainstream, obviously not true for all independent filmmakers, much less for those whose work is not only noncommercial but better rooted in the art world. As Joan Hawkins observes in an essay on the avant-garde during the commercial rise of independent filmmaking in the 1980s-90s, "In terms of general film history… the impression all too often is that the avant-garde somehow died after Warhol… avant-garde cinema of the 1980s and 1990s exists as almost a repressed term within the larger cultural-film history of the *fin-de-*

siècle."[121] Like the assumption of the most famous and notorious queer avant-garde films into the mainstream history of gay and lesbian film (that we now see written and listed under the sign of "queer cinema"), the 1980s-1990s avant-garde is either folded into histories of independent cinema or, as Hawkins details, simply dropped out of film history. While it is true that some independent filmmakers began their work with experimental short films (Hawkins cites David Lynch and Todd Haynes as having roots "as downtown [Manhattan] filmmakers"[122]), the notion that they all passed through the same trajectory into feature-length filmmaking is not true of the careers of many avant-garde filmmakers.

With the notable exception of the works of the young Sadie Benning, whose videos screened everywhere from the Museum of Modern Art to the Sundance Film Festival, the films I examine in this chapter were not primarily featured in museums, but in film festivals; in their fragmentation, they were perhaps too narrative for art museums, but too experimental for the mainstream. Queer film festivals and experimental film festivals gave them a forum for exhibition, and video archives and feminist film archives continue to house their work to this day (not exclusively avant-garde archives).[123] Lesbian experimental filmmakers who did not achieve crossover stardom for their independent and experimental film and video work remained, as it were, in museums, academic institutions, and other art spaces, producing another new and separate wave of

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[121] Joan Hawkins, "Dark, Disturbing, Intelligent, Provocative, and Quirky: Avant-garde Cinema of the 1980s and 1990s," in *Contemporary American Independent Film: From the Margins to the Mainstream*, ed. Chris Holmlund and Justin Wyatt (New York: Routledge, 2005), 89-90.
[122] Hawkins, "Dark, Disturbing, Intelligent, Provocative, and Quirky," 90.
[123] Many of the lesbian-feminist films and videos I examine are archived and/or distributed by Women Make Movies in New York City, or Video Data Bank, affiliated with the Art Institute of Chicago.

experimental inquiries into film, sexuality, and representation. Confronting the gendered conventions in mainstream cinema and in the avant-garde old (and new), lesbian feminist experimental filmmakers also forged explicitly feminist spaces and texts in the queer avant-garde, not only manifesting the first and next true wave of queer underground cinema after the crossover split-off of the New Queer Cinema, but the first politically engaged, postmodern feminist cinema that was attentive to categories of difference beyond and outside of the binary model of gender difference within heterosexuality.

Feminist Sightlines

While the avant-garde cinema world was struggling to define the place of politics in relation to art, the world of film theory was reconsolidating after a decade of theoretical rigor and fissures. Film theory deriving from British scholar Laura Mulvey's critique of formal patriarchal agency in classical cinema forges an association between feminist projects and experimental form. Mulvey targets what she terms the "monolithic accumulation of traditional film conventions." In "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Mulvey's famous 1975 essay, she attacks the gendered, voyeuristic looking relations in film, identifying the singularly masculine, heterosexual mode of film spectatorship as an effect of the film apparatus.[124] After interrogating the structures through which power is produced along gendered lines, Mulvey argues that the means for disrupting the reproduction of patriarchal power in film is through radical changes in camera work.

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[124] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), in *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*, ed. Sue Thornham (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 69.

Obviously, the decades since Mulvey's essay was published have brought numerous critiques and revisions of her theory, but her analysis put forth the framework of feminist film theory's attention to looking relations. Additionally, Mulvey's call for formal experimentation set a precedent for feminist films to challenge aesthetic codes. Besides feminism, among the trends in place that helped her work catch on was the rising continental academic investment in psychoanalytic film theory, and the authority that "theory" seemed to offer burgeoning film studies programs in the academy. But through Mulvey's extensive use of psychoanalytic concepts to examine the possibility of a female spectator position, her article constitutes a polemic against dominant filmmaking styles. Although Mulvey issues a bleak prognosis for women's experience on screen and in the theater, the essay also drew an enormous amount of scholarly attention to a study of the film apparatus in relation to gender politics. She inspired a widespread renewal, for feminist and non-feminist filmmakers alike, of the sense that the mechanism through which film is shot, through which images were captured, is integral to the filmic manipulation of gender and (hetero)sexual politics. One need not rely on any single account of film and feminism in the 1970s to argue the importance of Laura Mulvey's essay for galvanizing and beginning to codify feminist activism around film and media images of women into the academic study of film. Yet B. Ruby Rich characterizes the moment so succinctly, and without romanticism, as to warrant quotation here. In *Chick Flicks*, Rich's combined anthology and memoir of the emergence of feminist film and film theory, she writes this of the 1970s:

> It was one singular contribution that set in motion the sea change of realignment: the appearance in *Screen* magazine in the autumn of 1975 of an article by Laura Mulvey… The thousands of subsequent articles that footnoted Mulvey soon constituted a veritable cottage industry and effectively transformed the nature of

> the field [a field Rich calls "cinefeminism"], once so varied, into one concerned with the controlling power of the male gaze, the fetishization of the female body, and the collusion of narrative cinema with gender subordination.[125]

Rich captures the event-like quality of Mulvey's essay, but demonstrates in her own memoir that the impact of the work also obscures other feminist engagements with film during the decade.

Mulvey's work also steers film studies toward an examination of women's visibility in film as a form of hypervisibility—women are strictly "to be looked at" in Mulvey's analysis, their visibility so confining and determinate as to confer upon them the status of spectacle in narrative film. While some feminist film theorists sought new techniques to challenge the gendered conventions of classical Hollywood cinema, other theorists, particularly in the Lacanian tradition, extended currents in psychoanalysis to claim female sexuality as unrepresentable within the symbolic—and semiotic—order.

Avant-Garde Sightlines

It is a somewhat transgressive move to relocate the Lesbian New Wave from the general classification of independent or noncommercial cinema, where it is on the periphery of New Queer Cinema (the "lesbian chic" trend), to the terminology of the avant-garde, which had slipped in popular usage by the 1990s. From the late 1960s through the 1970s, avant-garde cinema was dominated by a trend called structural film.

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[125] B. Ruby Rich, *Chick Flicks: Theories and Memories of the Feminist Film Movement* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 2. In her memoir, Rich tries to contextualize Mulvey's essay for the contemporary reader, who is likely already biased by knowledge of the status of Mulvey's essay, if not by experience with the essay itself. Rich explains that there were already women working in ways that attempted to disrupt or disavow the popular, masculinist, and individualist models of filmmaking that were popular across mainstream and avant-garde film cultures; in short, she argues that Mulvey's essay was not the starting point of feminist film culture.

Kicked off by Michael Snow's *Wavelength* (1967), the avant-garde became overwhelmingly concerned with the structure of the apparatus—just at the time when feminist filmmaking and feminist film theory were also bringing leveling critiques to narrative filmmaking.[126] Often resulting in films that bore no human characters or even peripheral explorations of subjectivity that had fueled earlier decades of avant-garde filmmaking, the structural film movement became so dryly deconstructive of the film apparatus that by the 1980s, critics and scholars alike were pronouncing the death of the avant-garde—as if it had nowhere to go from there.

The rise and fall of structural film officially marks avant-garde cinema's passage through the 1970s. Yet as Manohla Dargis argues in an essay that accompanies a 1991 Dutch film and video exhibit, *A Passage Illuminated*, there were other reasons for the shift in the avant-garde—the shift that precipitated so many death knells after structural film. Namely, not only were women making films and videos more than ever, but they were deliberately changing the representational codes associated with both dominant cinema and the avant-garde. From Dargis' account, a great example of feminist film criticism that looked at conditions and contexts of production alongside the formal innovations and changes in content in the avant-garde, the feminist experimental film and video that erupted in the 1970s and 1980s has suffered from lack of attention on two fronts.[127] First, feminist film theory, largely erupting in the academy out of Mulvey's

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[126] Patricia Mellencamp, "Receivable Texts: U.S. Avant-Garde Cinema, 1960-1980," *Wide Angle* 7, no. 1-2 (1985): 78-79.

[127] Of the critics to contribute to the exhibition book for *A Passage Illuminated*, in fact, Dargis is the only woman, and also the only one who devotes the majority of her discussion of avant-garde film and video, 1980-1990, to its feminist influences and feminist filmmakers. Other contributors overlook feminism almost completely, apparently undeterred by Dargis' critique. Paul Arthur identifies feminism as one of the

critique, became codified and fixed quickly around its psychoanalytic framework--at the expense, perhaps, of more practical engagement with Mulvey's call for changes in film production methods.[128] Second, and just as blatant, the decrees of the end of the avant-garde were made largely by men, with more than a hint of nostalgia for the mythopoetic past that gave way to the sheering down of the avant-garde into experiments in film structuralism during the 1970s. Dargis makes her claim of sexism explicit:

> Certainly, by the mid-eighties—or so we were told—the writing was on the wall: They don't make them like they used to. Despite an occasional nod, it seemed to pass unnoticed that there was new work engaged in reimagining and reimaging the cinematic avant-garde. […] Much of this nostalgia serves as a convenient smokescreen for critics (again, usually male) to avoid feminism and the feminist implications of contemporary avant-garde films.[129]

That resistance to feminism in theory and film in the avant-garde is one aspect of the context into which lesbian feminist filmmakers of the 1980s and 90s were producing their experimental works. Dargis argues that, as evidenced by the vibrant new entries in the New York Lesbian and Gay Experimental Film Festival, it is women (lesbian) filmmakers and female sexuality that continues to "test the limits of representation" in avant-garde work.[130]

Another major distinction that comes out of changes in the avant-garde is that, as art, it was not only imagined to be, but required to be apolitical. And yet the 1960s was a decade of minority groups gaining access to the materials to represent themselves for the

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vectors of change. However, Tom Gunning not only produces a history of the decade in film and video without a feminist presence, but does so by extolling the continued great works of the "old masters" of the avant-garde. Gunning evaluates the new work of established filmmakers, arguing that the avant-garde is not dead—not because of the influx of new or feminist work, but on the grounds that *the old guard had adapted to new times*.

[128] Dargis, "Beyond Brakhage," 58.

[129] Dargis, "Beyond Brakhage," 57-58.

[130] Dargis, "Beyond Brakhage," 63.

first time, and politics and control over representation were, for many, closely tied together. Thus the very political engagement and cultural critique openly performed in many feminist and LGBTQ-themed films in the 1980s and 1990s were the aspects of the films that, for some, disqualified them from pure avant-garde participation. Politics, the old guard worried, was masquerading as art. Yet the politically engaged film and video-makers charged that the reigning "avant-garde" were masking or ignorant of the politics that underwrote the privilege of their positions as the old guard. Not surprisingly, part of the critique of the new cinema was in showing the processes through which history is actively constructed, not given.

The conflict between older and more contemporary work in the avant-garde publicly culminated in the controversy around the 1989 Toronto International Film Congress, where an avant-garde program had been put together that widely ignored works from the decade of the 1980s. The program appeared so defiantly retrospective to a group of contemporary film and video makers that they wrote an open letter of protest against the conference organizers alleging their favoritism for the "old guard," and their refusal to acknowledge contemporary work done by a more diverse group of filmmakers. In addition to publicly renouncing the congress for its emphasis on older avant-garde work, the group of mostly New York-based artists and filmmakers who penned the letter decried the organizers' perceived resistance to feminist film theory, and accused them of organizing the program around the concept of the nation-state, a tactic that the letter-signers claimed would prioritize the most cosmopolitan or "international" of those works, better positioning them for international commercial distribution. There were over 100 letter signers, including a number of feminist filmmakers whose work critically defines

the new guard of 1980s experimental film, such as Peggy Ahwesh, Abigail Child, Su Friedrich, and Leslie Thornton. To the signers, who drew attention to practical and commercial effects of the Film Congress program, those very programming decisions, shrouded in an apolitical stance, were enacting political positions. The letter alleged that the older avant-garde world was not only stuck in the past, but practically denying the explosion of new avant-garde work. As the established avant-garde film culture became increasingly institutionalized, new filmmakers and video artists were crowding the margins. As the following excerpt shows, the concerns of the letter signers reflect the themes of many of their contemporary works, including, but not limited to, a focus on the construction of history and the displacement of a dominant and exclusionary historical narrative. William C. Wees quotes the Open Letter to the film congress in "The Changing of the Garde(s);" it is with that excerpted declaration of change that I conclude this section on the avant-garde sightlines leading into the 1980s and 1990s:

> The time is long overdue to unwrite the Institutional Canon of Masterworks of the Avant-Garde. It is time to shift focus from the History of Film to the position of film within the construction of history… The revolutionary frame of mind pervading activity in film in the Teens and Twenties and again in the Fifties and Sixties-which seemed to die in the Seventies-continues to thrive, but only where it has shifted and migrated according to changing historical conditions… The Avant-Garde is dead; long live the avant-garde.[131]

Sexual Sightlines

The 1970s brought a new level of attention to film forms and apparatus from feminists exploring the medium for their own artistic, personal, and, of course, political

[131] Open Letter to the Experimental Film Congress, May 1989, quoted in William C. Wees, "The Changing of the Garde(s)," *Public*, no. 25 (2002): 11-12.

applications.[132] As more women sought access (and forged channels of access) to filmmaking means in the 1960s and 1970s, they developed forms of feminist documentary and lesbian experimental film as well as innovating conditions of production to reflect their collectivist and egalitarian feminist goals. Feminist and lesbian film experiments were not en vogue with the reigning avant-garde, however, beyond the experiments deriving from Mulvey's line of feminist film theory. It is out of groundbreaking and field-changing developments in feminist film theory, and innovations and channels of production and distribution forged by feminist filmmakers working since the 1970s, that lesbian feminist experimental filmmakers in the 1990s engaged critique of conventional film forms, looking relations, and the potential enactment of gendered power dynamics that the camera apparatus invokes.

Lesbian representation in the 1990s briefly brought together feminism and sexuality in ways to move beyond the "sex wars," contentious cultural debates that threatened to formalize fissures between gender politics and sexual politics. The politicization of gender representation and the politicization of homosexual representation are two separate struggles over visibility, forged through separate, but overlapping, social movements through the 1960s through 1980s. Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," for example, is notoriously blind to the possibility of a lesbian spectator position. With such an aporia at the center of the burgeoning theoretical field, feminist film accounts of lesbian sexuality were marginalized and deferred. The

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[132] I have found several memoirs and essay collections invaluable for detailing the shifts in film culture and queer activism from the 1970s-1990s, including Barbara Hammer's aforementioned *Hammer! Making Movies out of Sex and Life*; B. Ruby Rich, *Chick Flicks: Theories and Memories of the Feminist Film Movement* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998); and Thomas Waugh, *The Fruit Machine: Twenty Years of Writings on Queer Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000).

increasing theoretical split between theoretical accounts of female spectatorship and possibilities for lesbian representation and viewing pleasure motivated the *Jump Cut* special section on "Lesbians and Film" in 1981, the first major attempt to address the oversight of lesbianism within feminist film theory.

As echoed in film studies, there is a theoretical precedent for linking feminist and lesbian concerns through the concept of female sexuality. Feminist texts such as Adrienne Rich's "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" establish a continuum (hers most explicitly) between lesbian relationships and a range of female homosocial practices. That continuum is reflected at the level of representation, a link that has primarily been forged by lesbian- or queer-identified women artists. But it is also reflected at the level of erasure of representation, around a concept of gender oppression and sexual repression that meet at the nexus of lesbian invisibility. We see this major point reiterated in feminist and lesbian works (and lesbian feminist work): representation is the only defense against the threat of historical erasure leveled by persistent and compounded forces of sexism and homophobia. It is a point reiterated literally, as well, in the work of lesbian cultural producers of this era. For example, in the epigraph to her essay "In the Name of Feminist Film Criticism," B. Ruby Rich cites the same lines from Adrienne Rich's 1976 Modern Language Association presentation that Barbara Hammer later cites in *Nitrate Kisses*, undoubtedly now axiomatic lines in lesbian-feminist theorizing: "Whatever is unnamed, undepicted in images… will become not merely unspoken, but unspeakable."[133] However, the conceptual link forged between lesbian and

[133] B. Ruby Rich, "In the Name of Feminist Film Criticism," in *Chick Flicks*, 62. B. Ruby Rich cites the quotation from Adrienne Rich's 1976 MLA presentation, an "Evening Event sponsored by the Women's Commission and the Gay Caucus…" for more on the

feminist concerns, especially in the field of film, was not always a given; this divergence goes back to the grid of incoherence that Sedgwick maps at the center of cultural conceptions of gender and sexuality. Sedgwick's schema, which I explain in the Introduction, details the incompatible but coexisting conceptions of homosexuality and corresponding tropes of gender that structure our understanding of both categories in the West. Thus, affiliations forged between gender politics and sexual politics do not always come in prescribed or logical forms; lesbian, feminist, queer, and homosexual representations splinter affiliations as well as bring them together. It just so happens that the avant-garde cinema world of the early 1990s reflects a flourish of politically and culturally engaged lesbian-feminist-themed work.

However, our current histories of this time period may not adequately reflect the flourishing convergence of queer and feminist concerns, which makes the interventions of the Lesbian New Wave Lesbian into feminist, queer, and film history even more crucial to clarify and foreground. Lesbian and feminist theorists have charged the hegemonic histories of both queer theory and queer filmmaking with the erasure of their lesbian and feminist roots. Theorist Sue-Ellen Case is blunt about the institutionalization of gay and lesbian studies into queer theory, reflecting on the effacement of lesbian studies that she began to observe in the early 1990s: "The new queer theorists quoted primarily male European philosophers, with little or no mention of the feminist and lesbian work that had gone before. This violent break made a community disappear… The alliance we had sought with gay male critics turned out to be a one-way street to

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citation of Adrienne Rich, see endnote 1 of B. Ruby Rich, "The Crisis of Naming in Feminist Film Criticism," *Jump Cut*, no. 19 (December 1978), http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/ onlinessays/JC19folder/RichCrisisOfNaming.html#1n (accessed April 11, 2012).

studies of masculinity."[134] Case's account of the anti-identitarian turn in the early years of academic queer theory, 1990 to 1992, and in the publication history of foundational queer theory texts details the alienation that she and other authors experienced working with feminist-lesbian-materialist theories. According to Case, the anti-identitarian turn mapped onto an anti-essentialism campaign that "brought down a lot of people," including those whose academic work was animated by, for example, the study of feminist and lesbian performance.

Linda Garber constructs a related argument in *Identity Poetics: Race, Class, and the Lesbian-Feminist Roots of Queer Theory*, in which she traces lines of feminist and lesbian theorizing, often having taken the form of poetry, that predate and inform the development of queer theory. The affiliations of academic queer theory with discourses entrenched in Western philosophical and psychoanalytic traditions, however, obscure the critical and original contributions of "lesbian-feminist/working-class/women of color," she writes.[135] In the legacy that hegemonic queer theory effaces, Garber argues,

> Insurgent, activist feminisms—including lesbian feminism and the poetry that constitutes some of its key early political theory—played as important a role in recent U.S. feminist and queer academic trends as did European developments in linguistics, psychoanalysis, and the like.[136]

As an aspect of establishing the Lesbian New Wave, in the following film readings I draw out their theoretical contributions to these debates. The Lesbian New Wave is comprised of films and videos that actively theorize their subjects, mainly lesbian existence, both within and beyond the context of film history. Like the psycho-dramas

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[134] Sue-Ellen Case, *Feminist and Queer Performance: Critical Strategies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 9.
[135] Linda Garber, *Identity Poetics: Race, Class, and the Lesbian-Feminist Roots of Queer Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 176-177.
[136] Garber, *Identity Poetics*, 177.

and queer underground before them, these films do more than produce queer images; they theorize sexuality in relation to visibility, critiquing the normative relationship that issues from the mainstream.

As Barbara Hammer's perspective demonstrates, the surge in queer cultural activism renewed the sense of film as a political medium for protest of the status quo as well as the construction of alternative images. That Hammer expressly articulates the 'new' union of politics and form along the axis of sexuality and not only gender (or another minority identification), resonates with the conception of radical experimental cinema as a political tool that dates back to the radical activist cinema of the 1960s.[137] Thus feminist and queer perspectives converge at the nexus of politics, visibility, and form. This chapter brings attention to that intersection of feminist, queer, and avant-garde cinemas by examining the political and aesthetic boundaries of sexuality and gender, and the limits of their representation.

A discourse of remarkable strength that pervades studies of lesbian representation, in print and in film, reduplicates the repressive hypothesis with a more specific sexual subjectivity at its center. It is the theory of lesbian invisibility, which constructs a self-aware paradox of an immaterial lesbian subject through absence, abstraction, or displacement. Although it is strongest in literary studies, it dates to early feminist film analyses of lesbian representation, and the whole discourse has a particularly cinematic tone and arsenal of examples. That is, the immateriality versus materiality of the lesbian subject or theme is an effect of the reader, viewer, or critic's ability to see or not see her,

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[137] James, *Allegories of Cinema*. In particular, see James' chapter on "Political Film/Radical Cinema: From Dissent to Revolution."

and not the more active (or realistic) effect, which is that the lesbian subject materializes through critical intervention and construction.

Whether through scholarship or subcultural, in-group savvy, reading the immaterial lesbian relies upon instructed ways of knowing. Through some proponents and practitioners, lesbian invisibility becomes essentially a political and recuperative reading practice. The theory makes lesbianism, or 'the lesbian' specifically, an effect of knowledge—which it already is.

Hide and Seek

Friedrich's *Hide and Seek* alternates between a scripted narrative about the life of Lou, a middle school tomboy who is ambivalent about growing up in the 1960s, and contemporary (1990s) interviews conducted by the filmmaker. Throughout, Friedrich uses archival footage from post-war-era social hygiene films and children's school portraits to draw out the subtext of the interviews. Because Lou's storyline is intercut with the documentary-style "talking heads" interviews, her story comes across as a fictional account abstracted from the experiences of the interviewed women. The shuttling back and forth between fiction and interview occurs with relative ease, suggesting the overlap between history and theory that occurs in the process of narrating one's childhood. The film also creates the sense, echoed by the others, that the only available history is fictionalized, implicitly suggesting that history *is* a fiction. Although we all ostensibly have access to history, the film argues that lesbians have to read between the lines, often against the grain of normative, social hygiene messages, in order

to construct their particular history, or access the oblique inclusions of lesbianism in mainstream representation.

Hide and Seek begins with Lou observing a woman dropping off her female teacher at school, framing the film with a sense of general curiosity and confusion about same-sex relationships. A classmate explains, "she's a lezzie!" revealing to Lou and her friend, Betsy, that their teacher's "roommate" is also her lover. The girls seem more confused than scandalized by this foray into the mature world of social relations. Again, they do not have direct access to lesbianism or an understanding of it; it is part of another temporal world, the adult world, deferred to later in their lives. Later in the film, lesbianism will be part of that other temporal world, lesbian history; and when asked to reflect on their lesbian childhoods, again the interviewees demonstrate a lack of access to the "lesbian truth" of their experience. In another scene from the fictional narrative, Lou looks on with affection and intrigue as girls caress Betsy's arms during a school assembly. The magic of Betsy's ability to conjure up this casual, sensual experience in the middle of a communal event intrigues Lou, but her attention is eventually distracted by the excitement of the assembly. Her shift in attention implies that sexuality is mysterious, but perhaps not a pressing concern. Meanwhile, the interviewees describe formative sexual experiences in terms of similarly fleeting, seemingly unimportant sensations. Without a name or other organizational framework for what they were feeling, the women Friedrich interviews put together fragments of memories, of genital and non-genital erogenous pleasure, and speculate about their potentially "sexual" behaviors. Ultimately, though, the women interviewed do not put much stock in those early experiences. Throughout the film, the dramatizations of a potential lesbian

childhood are made without the literal psychological drama that defines the genre of, for example, the psycho-drama.

A primary, ongoing conflict in the film is between girls' knowledge of sexuality—represented only in retrospect as partial, speculative, and distanced from the women's contemporary understanding of themselves—and adult reconstructions of sexual identity. In a sequence where the interviewees are reflecting on their gender performance as children, one remarks, "I think a lot of lesbians do 'the tomboy thing,' you know, we figure out whether we played with dolls or we played with trucks… that type of reconstructive memory that fits nicely into how we think lesbians are supposed to be." The astute critique that the interviewee offers challenges the reliability of adult recollections, suggesting that women's experiences of childhood change when viewed through the lens of their current sexual identifications. The interviewee also points out that sexual identifications mingle with cultural theories of sexual identity development, both guiding women to revise their childhood narratives. The conflict between childhood experience and retrospective narration is the same juxtaposition that structures the film between fiction and documentary, and the film does not resolve the fractured perspective. Instead, the meaning of childhood experience is upheld as only knowable through self-conscious, lesbian "reconstruction." For example, after she claims that "a lot of lesbians do 'the tomboy thing,'" the young interviewee goes on to conclude that she does not know what a distinctly lesbian childhood is or would be, "but I think I had one." Her simultaneous critique and assertion of lesbian childhood remain side by side, both equal aspects of the experience that the interviewee reports. Self-conscious of the way that lesbians attempt to offer proof of childhood lesbianism, probably an effort to underscore

the authenticity of their sexual identities by reading the past through the present, the woman ironically asserts that her childhood experience was a lesbian one—not that she knows what that would be. Other interviewees echo her self-aware sentiment. Asked about childhood lesbian memories, one woman addresses the question rather than answering it directly: "I know I went through a period when I tried to pick out the lesbian bits," she responds. She self-consciously references the desire to construct a narrative account of her sexual identity, but seems to have abandoned trying to parse "the lesbian bits" from other bits of life. And what would they be, her doubt suggests, if she could parse them out? Would they be recognizably "lesbian," and would they be visual? Are they representable in and of themselves, the "lesbian bits" *as such*?

A later interview scene similarly foregrounds the process of construction of personal narratives, but also captures the film's construction, calling attention to the technical apparatus that mediates the delivery of said narratives. Again, Friedrich allows the conflict to remain between her participants' desire to present conclusive evidence of a typical lesbian childhood, and their open recognition that their memories are diverse and often inconclusive. Although the structure of the interviews, in particular the personal questions that Friedrich asks her participants, compels a form of confession, the participants consistently demonstrate self-awareness of how they are constructing "truth" in conversation and in front of the camera. In the scene that best foregrounds the technical and confessional scenario, Friedrich films the interviewee affixing the small microphone to her shirt, capturing their interaction as they transition from candid to formal interaction. The interviewee laughs and says, "I just have to figure out if I'm going to lie to you or not!" Off camera, Friedrich's voice playfully urges her, "No, don't

lie!" and the woman responds, "No, no, I won't. I'll tell you the truth… just might keep some of that truth to myself." The woman is resistant to full disclosure, yet forthcoming about the possibility that she will withhold information during the interview. Friedrich's inclusion of this footage breaks documentary conventions, not only drawing attention to the fact that there is a technical apparatus mediating their conversation, but implying the friendship between the woman behind the camera and the woman in front of the camera. Further, Friedrich records the suggestion of her interviewee that she may openly resist the confessional apparatus that the recorded interview installs between them. The inclusion of this exchange suggests that each of the interviewees might be playing a similar game, choosing how to represent their past in light of their current lesbian identification.

The girls who act out the narrative portion of the film do not correspond directly to the women being interviewed or the anecdotes they tell, but overall represent an oblique correspondence to the range of voices. The juxtaposition of the narrative with the interviews helps to construct the girls as composites of the feelings and experiences that the adult women report; some are tomboys, some are feminine and have crushes on boys, others have crushes on girls, but not one of them yet seems to form a primary identification around her own desire or object choice. There is a time period, Friedrich suggests, even for those women who claim to have had lesbian childhoods or lesbian childhood experiences, where sexual identity is perhaps not the most pressing concern. And even bringing attention to that period feels like it can dislocate the primacy of adult sexual identity in defining the self. Instead, it is up to the viewer to determine the relationship between the fictional narrative, historical narrative, and the interview portions of the film.

Hide and Seek concludes without presenting definitive answers to the questions about memory and experience that Friedrich poses. The final scene of the fictional narrative finds all the girls at a slumber party, a scene of traditional homosociality that openly displays, rather than masks, the conflicts and affections between them. Yet in spite of the arguments and jealousy moving between them, all the girls playfully dance together to The Supremes' "You Can't Hurry Love." That soundtrack forms the film's concluding but inconclusive statement about sexuality and homosociality, and the suspended construction of lesbian identity, at least within the film's limits. The deferral suggested by the song's lyrics, "you can't hurry love, no, you just have to wait," provides a tentative resolution to the film's central problematic, the elusive, "hide and seek" quality of sexual identity development.

The Watermelon Woman

In contrast to Friedrich's collection of lesbian childhood memories, Cheryl Dunye's 1996 film, *The Watermelon Woman*, presents a fictional world of "out" adult lesbians who are never pressed to reconstruct a narrative of sexual identity development. Like *Hide and Seek*, the film world created in *The Watermelon Woman* is female-centric and lesbian-dominated. Dunye constructs a complexly self-referential world, with multiple films folded into it, including video footage of a straight wedding that reminds the viewer what sort of narrative is constantly reiterated, even in the background of other films. The main character, Cheryl (played by Dunye) embarks on a historical reclamation project as an amateur filmmaker. She traces past images of an uncredited African American actress from an old, *Gone with the Wind*-style film. The "Watermelon

Woman," as the character was known during the classical Hollywood era, is to be the intriguing subject of Cheryl's first documentary. Cheryl's reconstruction of her story, an attempt to bring into visibility her life as an African American lesbian, forms the narrative within the narrative; *The Watermelon Woman* also follows Cheryl's relationships as they parallel that of her documentary subject. As she researches the life of the "Watermelon Woman," she is thrilled to find that the woman was also a lesbian and was, like Cheryl, briefly engaged in an interracial relationship with a woman who had the power to advance her career. Adding yet another layer of complexity, Dunye does not reveal until the end of the closing credits that "Watermelon Woman" is a fictional character, constructed extra-diegetically for the purposes of being discovered in her film-within-a-film. Thus, the documentary section of Dunye's film is actually another fictional narrative, embedded within the larger story of Cheryl's reconstruction of and relationship with black lesbian history.

Dunye frames her film with direct-address monologues, supposedly revealing her authorial intentions directly and honestly to the viewer. Cheryl (slash Dunye) introduces herself through a video diary, which she uses at various points throughout the film to apprise the viewer of off-screen developments in the present-tense fictional narrative. In her introduction, she poses as an amateur filmmaker and performs a subtle de-centering of lesbianism. She adjusts her microphone and begins, "…so I'm working on being a filmmaker. The problem is that I don't know what I want to make a film on. I know it has to be about Black women, because our stories have never been told." She explains that she has been scouring Hollywood film history for Black actresses but finding few traces of their lives. She goes on, "in some of these films, the black actresses weren't even cited

in the credits, and I was just totally shocked by that." Through this monologue, Dunye introduces the central erasure that she seeks to address: not *lesbians* from film history, but Black actresses. The story she ends up telling has much to do with the relationships between segregated lesbian histories, but her inquiry displaces the primary focus on sexuality. Bringing lesbianism into her narrative as a more incidental theme reinforces the idea of lesbian invisibility, since her historical inquiry is initially motivated by a visible identity marker, race. Yet Dunye also reveals one of the major exclusions of the discourse of lesbian invisibility: all other aspects of embodied identity. In so doing, she critiques the exclusions performed by perspectives that emphasize sexuality without taking into account race and other visible markers of identity.

Early in the film, Cheryl shows the viewer the scene in which she first encountered "Watermelon Woman," excerpted from a film called *Plantation Memories*. Instead of Dunye presenting the film to viewers by editing it into her video, Cheryl turns the video camera to face her television, controlling the viewer's access to the images by routing our sight through her video camera. Only through similar camera work are images of Watermelon Woman ever made visible to the viewer, as Dunye maintains the distance between the viewer, Cheryl's perception, and her subject. The viewer can only access Watermelon Woman's performance through Dunye's satirization of it. Similarly, when Cheryl visits archives and conducts interviews, she is either behind the camera or conversing with the friend who operates it, clearly demarcating the parts of the film that can only be experienced through Cheryl's camera; information about Watermelon Woman will only be accessed through her video camera perspective.

There are signs throughout that Dunye's Watermelon Woman—who she (as the character, Cheryl) determines is a woman named Fae Richards—is a fictional construction, before Dunye confirms it with her closing note. The film makes knowing references, for example, to the extra-textual work of its cast members. Guinevere Turner plays Cheryl's white love interest, Diana, but the actress and screenwriter is also cited as herself earlier in the video, when Cheryl tells Tamara about a book on lesbian filmmaking, written by "Rose and Guin." That is, Rose Troche and Guin Turner, the makers of the lesbian independent film, *Go Fish*. Finally, after the credits, Dunye addresses the viewer directly—as Dunye this time, not Cheryl. Her note appears on the screen: "Sometimes you have to create your own history. The Watermelon Woman is fiction. Cheryl Dunye, 1996." By embedding cues to an extra-diegetic reality within the film's fictional narrative, Dunye creates a text to be read differently by viewers with subcultural knowledge. She, too, weaves fact and fiction together into an unstable, multilayered performance of self-referentiality, enlisting producers as actresses, actresses as themselves, and herself as a character.

Dunye's take on lesbian invisibility in film is not to find "real" lesbians in history, but to construct her own. However, she also reads the lesbian Fae Richards into a history of African-American women in Hollywood. Thus, she produces "Watermelon Woman" as an archetypal black actress from Hollywood's history, and then uncovers her relationships with women, highlighting the different modes of exclusion based on marked and unmarked identities, in the form of racial differences and differences in sexuality. If racial discrimination has kept "Watermelon Woman" oppressed in Hollywood in spite of her visibility, as Cheryl explains, her sexuality is invisible to the public, simply un-

knowable without the private photograph collections that Cheryl finds in small, obscure archives. Yet Dunye does not construct a woman actress whose sexuality has necessarily held her back. On the contrary, Dunye's film suggests (and her *film within a film* suggests) that the Watermelon Woman benefits from an interracial lesbian relationship. So although her lesbianism is suppressed by her lover's relatives and invisible within film history, there are still archival traces of their relationship. In fact, there is evidence that Fae stood to gain status in the film industry by cavorting with the white, masculine director, Martha White. The racist power differential in the relationship between Watermelon Woman and her director puts Cheryl at unease in her relationship with her white lover, Diana; Dunye, as the director of *The Watermelon Woman*, reads historical relationships into the contemporary context, and vice versa, orchestrating a complex criss-crossing of people, time, and place that questions the very similarities it puts forth. After all, Dunye/Cheryl is the central figure of the film, and the story told from her perspective is a form of redress for the Watermelon Woman being officially denied her own perspective in film history. In a strong mark of authorial presence, reflecting a complete inversion of the Watermelon Woman herself, who has received no real-name credit for her work in the industry, Dunye names her own form of pseudo-documentary, the "Dunyementary."

If Every Girl Had a Diary

Sadie Benning's *If Every Girl Had a Diary* (1990) begins with a disorienting, grainy shot of what appear to be filing cabinets, after which her hand-held camera passes by the slats of blinds across a window. The least narrative of the films I examine in this

chapter, Benning's early work is also the most individual and personal cinema of the Lesbian New Wave. She does not conduct interviews or incorporate found footage; her subject matter is herself, her bedroom, her world. The setting could be an office building in daytime, until Benning's own face passes through the frame in extreme close up before the view returns to the blinds across a window.[138] Traffic sounds outside indicate an urban area, but the tightness of each shot produces a sense of confinement. *If Every Girl Had a Diary* feels, at times, like a video diary from prison, as if Benning is spending her teen years locked in her room. Sixteen when she made the film, Benning could have just been documenting the common symptoms of teen angst in the early 1990s, as so many young people have since the advent of YouTube. But the title of her film, the hypothetical proposition, "If every girl had a diary…" establishes a certain amount of irony that lends truth to the commonality as well as the uniqueness of Benning's confessional record or moving images.

Extreme close-ups of Benning's face become a trademark shot in her early videos, which she made with a Fisher-Price Pixel Vision camera given to her by her father, experimental filmmaker, James Benning. Her early and quick success is partly due to her strong connection with avant-garde cinema through him, but the content of her confessional video work is quite different from her father's, even if their forms are alike. In these early works, she puts herself under very close inspection—uncomfortably close, as the viewer loses sight of her mouth when she talks—the camera can only capture her eyes and nose, sometimes only her eyes, or one eye, dwelling on the fragmentation, or partiality, of her appearance as well as her perspective. She creates short film scenes of

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[138] Melissa Rigney, "Sadie Benning," Senses of Cinema, http://www.sensesofcinema.com/2003/great-directors/benning/ (accessed 6/6/2011).

introspection and inspection of her surroundings, intrusion as well as confinement, and the occasional sense of confrontation. But just as soon as her confessional style seems to be revealing her secrets with sincerity, Benning fabricates a fantasy that pulls the viewer back into awareness of the unreliability of her narration and self-conscious performance she is editing together in a camcorder designed for children's use.

Benning's video work produces a strong sense of raw, confessional-style self-documentation, a kind of video diary that would bridge the avant-garde world with the burgeoning world of MTV. In one scene, Benning's eyes wander as if she is glancing around the room, trying to formulate what to say. She begins with short, stilted sentences, each of which feels like it is meant to address an un-articulated question, or an imagined off-camera interviewer: "I was born here. I'm not kidding you. Don't look at me like that. You always think it's so funny, like it's a big joke or something. But I'm not kidding you." Unable to see her mouth as she speaks, the viewer observes Benning almost as if her voice is in voiceover, even though she looks right into the camera lens. Her direct address adds to the sense that she is talking to the viewer, but her answers seem to issue from a separate context, so it is hard to imagine being her interlocutor. Who is the "I" who speaks, "I was born here?" And who is the "you" who never takes the "I" seriously, in their pre-established relationship of doubt? Benning looks around again after speaking; there is a brief shot of an overhead light, which is off, giving the sense that the momentary address is completed, final. More tightly-framed shots of a cube-shaped image enhance the sense of closeness, not simply in terms of proximity, but in terms of claustrophobia. Closeness, in the video, is a closing-in, different from closeness as a getting-to-know. Close, but not intimate, the viewer is practically inside her face, but not

inside her mind. Other shots feel more exploratory, as Benning's hand appears in front of the camera as if itself under inspection. Then she runs a wide-tooth comb vertically through the frame, perhaps simply for the linear pattern it produces through the distinct lens of her camera. The comb is reminiscent of the strange animation of everyday objects in Maya Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon*, but it seems like an unnecessary decoration for another reason as well: Benning's hairstyle is so closely cropped to her head, so short that the comb feels like it must be left over from a longer, more feminine hairstyle, or perhaps the comb of a friend, or mother, that was absent-mindedly left in Sadie's room. Then again, are we in Sadie's room? The décor is incoherent. And then again, the comb may have just produced an interesting pattern; speculation brings the viewer no closer to insight.

The Pixel Vision camera records black and white images in high contrast, an aesthetic that Benning exploits, even turning the high contrast on her own likeness. In the early shot of a window, the light coming into the room is exceedingly bright white; practically any light overexposes the image. So when she records her face under an incandescent light, her pale skin becomes otherworldly, and her irises look translucent. She herself seems "overexposed," as if the viewer can see through her image, or behind her eyelids. Overexposure also gives the impression of intense proximity, but Benning holds the image in tight control. She puts herself under the light, subjecting her image to the simultaneous effect of a medical examination, an interrogation, and a stage spotlight. Benning's overall production of intimacy, through tight frames, shots of her face, and the home video aesthetic of the Pixel Vision camera produces the sense that knowledge

through proximity is illusory. One can get as close as possible through the camera, but the subject will still feel capricious, not determined or truly known to the spectator.

Benning bites and chews as she mentions, drolly, "Last week I almost laughed." What follows is her most traditionally or normatively "confessional" monologue in the diary film. She relates a fantasy to the camera in the first person voice, musing about an impending public confrontation as she walks down the street: "people would look at me and say, 'that's a *dyke'*... and if they didn't like it, they'd fall into the center of the Earth and deal with themselves." In the course of her explanation of how she is looking forward to the interpellation, a sign of her visibility as a lesbian, Benning incidentally comes out to the viewer, but in such a way that she makes clear the terms on which it will be received. Challenging the viewer as she anticipates challenging the people on the street, she wants the world to know she's a dyke, and if they don't like it, that is—or will be—*their problem*. She continues, addressing the viewer with a strange familiarity, "You know, I suppose it's not so incredible, not so amazing, that I find myself sitting next to you, wanting to laugh." Confessions of this sort are not usually made in public, to audiences. But at that point in time, in 1990, coming out was a very political act, a sign of queer solidarity against a very openly homophobic culture and criminally neglectful government. Her comment captures the intimacy of the coming-out moment with a friend, as well as capturing the irony of revealing a potentially very private thing on a potentially very public record.

She relates the fantasy as if it is her own, but as the monologue develops into the description of a restaurant, the setting rings false and calls attention to Benning's performance. Is the viewer also to question her coming-out as the performance of yet

another monologue? A close-up of her hand appears brightly lit against a black background as she describes being in a crowded restaurant, none of the patrons paying attention to anyone but themselves. The disconnection between each person is represented by the relative proximity of each separate finger on her hand. “Eight-hundred million faces,” she narrates, “all of us concerned about what concerns us.” In this and other videos, Benning portrays society as a realm of individual isolation, distracted self-absorption, bland mass culture, and violence. She claims that she looks forward to the day when her lesbian identity is visible, the day when she is “out,” but the confrontation she describes is a fantasy in which she is safe from the leering masses and other realities. Masking and courting the vulnerability of being recognized *as* a lesbian on the street, Benning banishes onlookers to the center of the Earth like punished children, to think about what they have done, just as a child might think to punish another child. By reversing the heteronormative value structure through which sexual identities are commonly made visible (and invisible) in film, Benning posits retribution for those who would dare to criticize her sexuality. After fabricating confrontations with anonymous masses, Benning concludes by reflecting on the nature of being alone: “I guess to be alone is to know yourself for you… and I like that.” On her own, in her bedroom, Benning negotiates the very public and very private aspects of a queer sexual identity in the early 1990s, oscillating between crowds and isolation, between a posture of direct challenge and moments of tender, almost naïve, observation.

The Female Closet

Barbara Hammer's extensive body of work is rich with ever-shifting representations of feminist, lesbian, and queer history. Since becoming a filmmaker at the age of thirty, she has sought to document her own life, the life of a vibrant, lesbian-feminist history of activism, and whatever traces of gay and lesbian history she can uncover or create. Additionally, she has made videos that are abstract and technical, as well as more standard or traditional documentaries, always centered on a subject that catches her interest. Her work on gay and lesbian representation, as I showed in my discussion of *Nitrate Kisses* in the first chapter, revolves around her impulse to reveal a subject layer by layer, and her own subject's counter response to remain somewhat elusive, even under the scrutiny of the camera eye.

The Female Closet is a more traditional documentary than some of Hammer's other works on queer film history from the 1990s, but it contains her signature compulsion to deconstruct her own subject and perform within her own work. The film is a study of three female artists: a nineteenth-century American photographer, Alice Austen; a twentieth-century German collage artist, Hannah Höch; and a late twentieth-century painter, still alive and working, Nicole Eisenman. Through archival materials and interviews, Hammer constructs the complexity of the relationships between each woman's lesbian sexuality and her art, and the means through which the artists and others see their lesbianism reflected or represented in their work.

The ambiguity of the title persists throughout the film, never settling on a single reason or relationship between lesbianism and the creation of art: Is the closet female, feminized, or feminizing? Is there a distinct, female closet for lesbians? Are all females, in a sense, in "the closet," at least in terms of cultural production? And what distinct

aesthetic, if any, stems from the female closet? The imagery compounds the ambiguity of the title. Each of the three sequences, one documenting each figure, begins with a shot of cabinet doors opening hesitantly—glass knobs parting from the center of a wood armoire, revealing only the void of darkness inside before the doors come together again. They part and come together multiple times, suggesting a surprising permeability alongside hesitation (the fluidity with which people move in and out of it, and the impermanence of either position, inside or outside). The title appears in the dark space between the open doors: *The Female Closet*. The title does not simply feminize the closet, indicating that this will be a documentary about gay women, but turns the closet metaphor itself into a double entendre: the pulsing, parting doors, opening to darkness; the legs and vaginal lips as signifying the "female closet," also drawing on the idea that secrets and truth can be found in the "sex" of the female genitals. But Hammer is no stranger to visual puns exploring female anatomy: her films from the 1970s are full of fruit and flower dissections that practically got her blacklisted in the 1980s for producing such essentializing, naturalizing imagery of female sexuality. But here it is a more mechanical structure that parts and closes, pulsing but constructed, suggesting man-made artifice alongside parting legs or lips. The opening and closing doors also describe a tempered path to visibility or liberation, demonstrating cycles of gain and setback.

The doors part again, and the name of Hammer's first subject appears: Alice Austen. Austen is the subject of a dispute surrounding the Staten Island Alice Austen House, which is trying to conceal evidence and discourage research that intended to document Austen's 55-year relationship with another woman. Scholars and local activists, including a group from the Lesbian Avengers, seek more information about the

artist's sexuality, including access to the work of hers that actively destabilizes her representations of gender and sexuality. Austen's private life is hotly defended and protected, but at the expense of a range of scholarly interest in her. As Hammer documents the controversy, historical documents are potentially being destroyed, and historians are being denied access to Austen's public archive due to their cautiously stated, carefully researched suggestion that she was a lesbian. Local historians and supporters of the Alice Austen House, ironically arguing that her sexuality is not important to her photography, nor is it a matter for research, claim that they fear potential defamation and exploitation of their local artistic legend. Adding fury to the requests of the scholars, the Lesbian Avengers demand that Austen's lesbianism be included as part of her personal history in order for her to be properly recognized as part of a larger gay and lesbian history. The archive itself might even be altered to conceal evidence of Austen's sexuality, so the debates Hammer enters into are literally over the erasure or preservation of materials that suggest the historical presence of lesbianism. Through Hammer's camera, evidence of Austen's long-term relationship and photographs of her cohort of unmarried women unfold as the objects of a local controversy. Hammer documents Austen's work, preserving it amidst the conflict as its status remains unstable. If the historians at the Staten Island Alice Austen House prevail, documentation of Austen's more controversial photographs will be suppressed, perhaps destroyed. Local censorship forces demonstrate that homosexuality is only viewed as a private secret that should not be articulated when the institutions of power-knowledge stand to lose status through the diagnosis, or even more threatening, the reclamation of homosexuality. That push and pull—between sexuality's historical and contemporary significance and

insignificance, importance and irrelevance—becomes the underlying theme in *The Female Closet*. Hammer catches the controversy but also initiates the preservation of the unstable—volatile—materials.

Hammer's second subject is a similar case of the institutional refusal or resistance to publicize. From Hammer's perspective, however, the artist's sexuality has much to do with her work, and should be a subject of interest for art history as well as gay and lesbian history. Hammer sets up her camera outside the Museum of Modern Art on the opening night of an exhibition of the work of German collage artist Hannah Höch. Disallowed from filming inside the museum, Hammer films patrons outside the reception and those who are passing by, questioning them about their knowledge of the artist, her bisexuality, and how MoMA should feature her biographical information. "Is the museum a closet?" Hammer muses, catching her reflection with the camera in the revolving doors to MoMA. Compared to the opening and closing of the closet doors in Hammer's title screen, the revolving door appears as another sign of the unsteady and unreliable opening and closing of access to information about the historical existence of lesbian relationships.

Hammer's third subject, Nicole Eisenman, is unique because she is a contemporary painter, and able to interact with Hammer, speaking for herself where the other artists have been the subjects of debate. Eisenman challenges some of Hammer's assumptions about the meaningful relationship between her art and her sexuality. Having met success during the "lesbian chic" era, as Eisenman refers to it, she hedges when asked to speak about the influence that her sexuality might have on her art, concerned that her success will not endure if it is bound to her status as a lesbian painter.

Eisenman's risqué murals incorporate cartoonishly sexual images of women or gender-ambiguous caricatures, building giant orgy scenes and sexual pageants that spread across walls. Yet Hammer questions her more conservative selection for inclusion in the 1995 Whitney Biennial, suggesting that Eisenman herself might be discouraging other people from reading her work in relation to her sexuality. The stakes of her ongoing career are rather different from Hammer's historical subjects, so Hammer eases up on the slight heavy-handedness with which she explores the other subjects. Presumably, to have a live person considering the importance and the effects of her own sexuality in her work and on her career would seemingly—should seemingly, we think after the first two segments—clear up some issues. But instead of resolving issues posed in the first two segments, Eisenman's own tentativeness and openness to the possibilities of there being multiple, dynamic relationships between her lesbianism and her art culminates in an exploration of the impossibility of fixing the relationship. Still in the process of constructing her art, much less her artistic persona, Eisenman resists positing a definite answer from the perspective of 'lesbian artist' that Hammer has sought to document. The two lesbian artists, Eisenman and Hammer, then work together on a painting, Hammer becoming the implicit fourth artist in *The Female Closet*, whose perspective has developed throughout the making of the film.

In addition to sharing a time frame and a position outside of the dominant historical narrative of lesbians in film, there are similarities across all these films I look at that, taken together, produce a critical mass of contestation to previous studies—popular, scholarly, cultural, filmic, and so on—on lesbianism as well as lesbian invisibility. By collecting a range of voices through interviews and fictional characters, they present a

diverse group of women's perspectives on their own sexual identity that precludes abstraction or division into types. Alternately, by citing their personal experiences and incorporating autobiographical elements in multiple forms, they restrain from constructing a monolithic lesbian position. The filmmakers' use of their own voices and likenesses in their work establishes a range of sexual identifications, so meaning is produced through individual, particular claims and embodied perspectives. In this way, each filmmaker contributes to the film and video record of "lesbian representation" without addressing themselves to, or conclusively correcting, the history of lesbian absence. Although the filmmakers make a study out of various historical representations of women and lesbians, they either refrain from fixing their subjects, or create fictional historical objects to control. In general, they provide us with a model of meaning-making around lesbianism and representation that takes up the theory of lesbian invisibility but does not offer up lesbianism as a specimen for study.

Queer and Feminist Lines of Sight: Re-imaging and Re-imagining the Lesbian

The Lesbian New Wave updates and reimagines the relationships between sexuality and visibility, narrative and experiment, a history of repression and contemporary representations. And the works address those problematics exactly as relationships rather than fixed binaries. Moving beyond conceptions of closed circuit dualisms, they change the field of representation through considerations of lesbian sexuality that, while personal, are not bound to individual introspection, but incorporate multiple voices. Similarly, while addressing inequality and injustice, they do not uniformly prescribe the increase in number, specificity, or precision of representation as

proper redress to a history of repression. Instead, they propose the construction of their own stories, alternative narratives, and continued engagement with art over accuracy in order to explore the textures of sexuality without resorting to normalizing medical, psychological, or sociological narratives of lesbian existence.

Beyond the circuit of in/visibility, lesbian experimental filmmakers have created images, figures, and controversies that produce a multiplicity of meanings, changing the history (and future) of lesbian representation. In their own way, each film addresses the concept of lesbian invisibility, yet the filmmakers largely bypass the paradigm of repression and liberation. Within the alternate signifying practices of the avant-garde, they renegotiate irresolvable binaries of presence and absence, in and out, visible and invisible. And in place of posing corrections to past lesbian representations, they resist posing pat answers. Instead, they urge viewers to "make up [their] own history," encouraging production, but not through conventional or confessional means. Their films and videos posit creative techniques that range from fantasy, imagination, and projection to brash and blatant revision, all of which are transformative exercises to filmmakers as well as viewers; we know this from their foregrounding of the process of filmmaking.

Conclusion

What I have shown by looking at various aspects of the films is textural evidence that provides the foundation for a counter-narrative to the story of queer theory's origins. As Linda Garber says in *Identity Poetics*, there were some women working in queer theory, but they were not theorizing women. She argues that the rich theorizations of lesbianism had blossomed in the decade earlier, by lesbian poets, whose work was

effaced by the rise of queer theory in the academy in the late 1980s and early 1990s. But, while Garber cites the work of lesbian poets to claim they predate, or even constitute, the origins of queer theory, I cite the above lesbian feminist experimental filmmakers to demonstrate their on-going contributions not only to the avant-garde, but to lesbian theory, and to queer theory more generally. The theoretical and documentary work done by the filmmakers I examine in this chapter demonstrates important contributions to theorizing visibility, sexuality, and history, as well as the use of visual culture in relation to constructions and performances of sexuality, yet they are often overlooked because they are women, lesbians, filmmakers, experimental filmmakers, and feminists—compounded, marginal identifications for cultural producers to explore. If queer theory is to embrace multiple, competing origin stories, indeed, if queer theory can accommodate multiple media and attempt to account for the contributions particular to different media as part of its multifaceted history, practitioners will have to reconsider the role of film. The anti-normative undercurrent in queer theory—though it has perhaps always been more theoretical than practical—would have us believe that a turn to experimental film, and a group of effaced filmmakers within that alternative cinema world, is a possible task.

The filmmakers whose work I have read in this chapter all eschew conventional representational codes for sexuality, and invoke a multiplicity of personal constructions of sexuality that have the effect of preventing taxonomical classification. In a sense, they overwhelm generality with the texture of individual experience, producing an overabundance of cues, deconstructions, and explanations for lesbian sexuality that threatens to break down, or eventually do break down into a collective, incoherent

account of the lesbian experience. They produce contextual and contingent lesbian "nonce taxonomies"[139] of their own sexual and activist milieus. With respect to the historical trends in the avant-garde, the Lesbian New Wave posits "new paradigms of difference," to quote Dargis, disrupting the drama of binary sexual difference, but also bringing a savvy feminist critique to bear on the avant-garde cinema tradition that did not accept them as peers.

The Lesbian New Wave filmmakers plague the concept of visibility, exposing its intensely fraught spectrum. They bring a feminist critique to bear on visibility as well, making ironic the relationship between sexuality, visibility, and social justice (via liberation). Finally, they subordinate the question of whether or not they can represent lesbian experience to their efforts of addressing it in diverse, contextualized, and partial terms. Ultimately, they displace the question of whether or not we are repressed with the question of how we can create history in the face of past, impending, or projected erasure. Their meta-narratives of film history now constitute film history itself.

[139] Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 23.

Conclusion

The Universal Queer

As I have argued throughout this dissertation, the Hollywood hegemony in queer film studies annexes the avant-garde into mainstream history and, subsequently, into the mainstream paradigm of visibility. That incorporation leads not only to the misrecognition of past trends and representations, but to multiple exclusions of films and filmmakers whose legibility within the progress narrative is too minimal to permit the realization of their early, radical representations of, and commentary upon, non-normative sexual representation in film and in culture at large. As a result of that focus on hegemonic film, the queer avant-garde has been folded into Hollywood histories time and again. And not just Hollywood histories, against which the more experimental, non-narrative, or non-commercial works are cast as peripheral players, but folded into the hegemonic paradigm of visibility that stems from Hollywood's particular history of content regulation, which still looms over queer film studies. In the construction of an inclusive historical narrative, scholarship on queer cinema and queer cinema history end up producing exclusions that variously obscure or erase the wealth of potential—for film and queer theory—that I see in the avant-garde at multiple points in history.

But the Hollywood hegemony in queer film studies also critically shapes the methods for reading mainstream queer cinema today. Beginning the resolution of Lisa Cholodenko's *The Kids Are All Right* (2010), Julianne Moore's character, Jules, hangs up the phone on Paul (Mark Ruffalo), saying "I'm a lesbian!" At the time, Jules is outside her house. She is alienated from her wife, Nic (Annette Bening), and their two teenagers,

conceived 15 and 18 years earlier with the use of a then-anonymous sperm donor, Paul. Through the teenagers' curiosity, the family becomes acquainted with Paul, and he and Jules enter into a surprising affair. With the affair now out in the open, each member of the family—teenage son, teenage daughter, and the "moms," as their kids call them, is upset about the unique transgression represented by one of their lesbian mothers having a sexual relationship with their biological father.

Cholodenko is one of very few women directors associated, even peripherally, with the New Queer Cinema. Her 1998 film, *High Art*, misses the temporal peak of the New Queer Cinema but follows in the model of independent filmmaking. Cholodenko also made *The Kids Are All Right* independently of domestic studio support; Focus Features bought the distribution rights only after the film showed success at Sundance.

The Kids Are All Right is one of several recent films with gay protagonists to garner mainstream distribution and acclaim, joining the ranks of Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), Gus Van Sant's bio-pic of Harvey Milk, *Milk* (2008), and Tom Ford's *A Single Man* (2009). The films have brought mainstream attention back to LGBTQ-themed movies after a decade of small-budget films with relatively low cultural impact followed up the New Queer Cinema. During that time, the gay rights discourse in America changed considerably, and I want to consider briefly the parameters for mainstream success in a new era of queer filmmaking.

When Jules declares, "I'm a *lesbian*," and hangs up on Paul in exasperation, it is because he is insisting that he is ready to form a family with her. Paul's suggestion implies the potential for a heteronormative resolution, but in the context of the film, he is actually the outlier to the functional, nuclear family structure that the moms already have

with their kids. The fact that Jules hangs up on Paul with minimal explanation—after all, her being a lesbian did not prevent their affair, but she cites it now as a self-evident reason why they will never form a family—stages a rare event in the mainstream representation of lesbian relationships. Historically, lesbian relationships in mainstream film have a high incidence rate of being dissolved through heterosexual intervention; the lesbianism-as-phase model of films from *Personal Best* (Robert Towne, 1982) to *Kissing Jessica Stein* (Charles Herman-Wurmfeld, 2001) even dominates independent films. Yet for Jules, the affair with Paul is a brief transgression, not a change or correction to her sexual orientation. And although Jules' sexuality has porous boundaries, like so many "lesbian" protagonists from the past, *The Kids Are All Right* embeds her affair in levels of complication that make it much more than a story about female sexual fluidity. For instance, Paul reminds Jules of her kids, and she takes his uncanny familiarity as a comfort during a time of emotional staleness in her marriage. In their affair she also seeks a narcissistic reprieve to the threat of abandonment posed by her growing children. While it seems obvious that she is going through "a phase," it is not a lesbian one.

The film is also a product of the contemporary moment, in which the mainstream gay rights movement once more galvanizes support through campaigns that normalize homosexuality. The contemporary movement eschews the more radical, anti-assimilationist positions of the early 1990s in favor of organized political claims for liberal rights. Although the history of homosexual representation in film is well known, at least enough that savvy critics sense the focus on positive representations may be passé, the new progressive method of representing homosexuality appears to follow within the assimilationist paradigm. The result is that queer relationships, anchored by the

normalizing cultural framework of love, commitment, and child-rearing, ascend into the category of universality.

Charges of universality in LGBTQ-themed films take the form of praise as well as critique; director Ang Lee makes the claim explicit about his successful 2005 film, *Brokeback Mountain*. He explains its appeal as an epic love story, one that accesses universal themes, which overwhelm the sexual particularity of his male protagonists. Although *The Kids Are All Right* and *Brokeback Mountain* present the perspective that homosexual relationships are normal, universal, and transcendent of, for example, controversial politics, viewers seeking a more specific representation of homosexuality may be disappointed. *The Kids Are All Right* exists in a world of seemingly universal gay rights, and follows the resilience of a love relationship through the complexities of motherhood, a long-term relationship, and adultery. The "moms," whose sexuality is apparently subordinate to their maternal status, only socialize with heterosexuals. Further, the few, brief allusions to the particularity of their lesbianism are cut short as quickly as they are raised. If theirs is a universal relationship, might they be the only lesbians in the universe?

Although I devote much of this dissertation to forging a different story of queer cinema, I know my intervention does not curtail the contemporary operations of the Hollywood approach to representation. But now, I hope, we can read current films within their context, aware of the paradigm of visibility in which they are made and their effect of reinforcement on the approach in which they participate. Films made within the mainstream paradigm, no matter how universal or liberal they appear, will still participate in the standard progress narrative, casting repression in the past as it simultaneously re-

stages the production of its own place in the progress narrative. Homosexuality is still made visible through representations, though it is perhaps more subtle, or less stereotypical, than in the past. But, once trained in the mainstream paradigm for representing homosexuality, it should be easy for critics to see the ways in which sexuality is still embedded in visual representations, signified through connotation even as it is also denoted in contemporary films. After all, those are the conventions through which sexuality is made visible in the mainstream paradigm, and it is difficult to completely renounce the original signifying practices.

If, as I have argued throughout, the Hollywood paradigm of visibility has reigned in queer film studies and persisted in setting the parameters for queer visibility in film, we will need to be even more aware of the manner in which that particular paradigm—now practically a legacy, or a haunting—will continue to manifest in the mainstream body of queer cinema. In *The Kids Are All Right*, the evidence that reveals Jules' affair to Nic is the discovery of her hair in a sink drain and hairbrush at Paul's house. The family is visiting him for dinner, and Nic notices Jules' telltale red hair in the drain in his bathroom. The actress Julianne Moore is a famous redhead, fair-skinned and freckled, the former spokeswoman for a hair color company. Jules is thus implicated by the discovery of her telltale hair; she wears the evidence of the affair, her sexual transgression against her normative, nuclear family, in plain sight; it is a sort of scarlet letter donned before the fact of discovery. Not quite a stereotype, Jules' sexual transgression still manifests in the form of a visual connotation, the absolute essence of the hegemonic approach to homosexual representation, now marking the transgression of normative *homo*sexuality.

For years now, queer film historians have worked within the paradigm of foundational queer theory and film history texts, bringing queer theory, in many forms, to bear on film. Doing so within the mainstream, closet model of visibility, however, has not been quite the liberating paradigm it advertises. My intervention into the mainstream story of queer cinema stands to change the way we set about reading and critiquing films within queer film studies. Firstly, taking representation to correct repression, as I show in the first chapter, engages queer film studies in the repressive hypothesis, and compels it into the service of projected liberation. By outlining an alternate genealogy of queer cinema through the avant-garde in the subsequent chapters, I redirect our attention to the critical commentary on the discourse of sexuality issuing from the avant-garde, which remains relatively unexamined, since that history has always been folded into the Hollywood-centric paradigm of film history. After reading the psycho-dramas and the queer underground as uniquely productive nodes of queer cinema, I assert the existence of what I call the Lesbian New Wave in the fourth chapter, challenging the idea that the New Queer Cinema is the most radical investigation of non-normative sexuality in the 1990s. Finally, I conclude this dissertation with the suggestion that, although the Hollywood paradigm continues to dominate the corpus and approach of queer film studies, there are methods of working around its dominance.

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